

Rebel's
Knot



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CHAPTER 1



AN GALLBHAILLE, County Limerick
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ÁINE CALLAGHAN ENCOUNTERED A SINGLE MAGPIE ON HER WAY TO the byre in the early morning. The creature, a large devil, claimed the centre of the pathway, bold as he pleased. He puffed out his white breast, then spread black wings shot with violet, as though to warn her away.

An ill omen.

She looked around to see if she had missed a second magpie, for a second promised joy. Only one. *Sorrow will come this day.*

A sudden chill pierced deep in her bones, and she drew her mantle close about herself. Cold gusts of wind swept across the path, snatching at her loose tendrils of hair. The magpie gave no intention of flying away. Instead, he lowered himself close to the ground, settling on a wet mat of rotting leaves.

Áine glanced around at the strengthening dawn. She did not have the luxury of dawdling. Her mistress expected the cows to be milked, and they would be lowing soon, full of their own distress. She

considered skirting around the path to give the harbinger a wide berth but steeled herself instead. She had tasted enough sorrow in her life and never with a warning delivered by a magpie.

“Away with you now,” Áine called out to the bird as she continued forward, trying to keep her pace steady and without flinching. She knew well enough that all creatures could detect fear and feast on it.

The magpie gave a shrill cry and lifted into the air before veering towards the manor house.

As Áine approached the byre, she heard a tune coming from inside, a sweet song yet decidedly melancholy. The master’s niece, Mairead O’Coneill, was once again playing her fiddle. Most mornings at dawn, before people stirred, the young miss practised her music in the privacy of the byre. She hadn’t come down this past week, and Áine found she’d missed it more than she expected.

Instead of rushing into the byre, Áine seated herself on a log behind a drying stack of peat to listen to the song. She never interrupted Mistress O’Coneill for fear that she’d find another place to play, and then this gift of each new morning would be lost to her.

In time with the melody, stories unfolded in Áine’s head. Stories of heroes and quests and impossible sacrifices. The notes allowed her to feel the tremors of heartbreak and longing.

Finally, the song ended, but Áine still remained seated on her log until the postern door opened and shut. She waited until the soft crunching of footsteps headed back to the manor.

Now her day could start.

She hurried to the front doors of the byre and lifted the bar. Hinges creaked as the doors swung open and the dawn flooded in. Warmth and the earthy scent of straw and manure enveloped her.

“Rise and shine, my dears,” she greeted the small herd before grabbing a tin bucket and her milking stool. “Mab, always the first to be awake, there’s a sharp girl. And how’s our Clover this day? Did you enjoy the young mistress’s fiddle playing? What story do you want to hear this frosty morn?” Before Áine led the first cow out of its stall she caressed its wide forehead. “The obvious choice is the tale of Cúchulainn and the Great Cattle Raid of Cúailnge; I haven’t

recited that for some time.” She settled herself on her milking stool and canted her head in thought, remembering the story that the fiddle had conjured for her. “Perhaps not. You’ll simply have to be satisfied with the great outlaw warrior, Fionn mac Cumhaill, and his hounds.”

While she worked, she spun the story to the rapt interest of the herd, and since she wished she *had* seen a pair of magpies, she told the part about how Fionn found his enchanted bride. She even gifted the maid with the same bright red hair as her own. A vain thought, but the cows wouldn’t give her away.

Lately, she found herself focusing on Fionn mac Cumhaill and his outlaw warriors, the Fianna, for they reminded her of their own Irish soldiers, the Tóraidhe, who had been fighting against the English invaders to keep them from conquering Munster and the rest of Ireland. These old stories had always been a comfort to her since learning them on her nan’s knee. Even with times being so unsettled, she reminded herself that they had been so before, and men who did not lack courage still prevailed.

Áine settled into the rhythm of milking. The disquiet that had burrowed into her with the magpie’s visit began to fade. A bird was a bird, and a single one was not an unusual sight. Such a common occurrence could not possibly mean sorrow to everyone who ran across a single magpie. Most of the country would be afflicted.

But are we not . . . ?

The thought trailed. After a decade of strife between the Irish Catholic and Protestant settlers, the English had landed in force on their shores a couple of years ago, determined to sever any Royalist support that King Charles the Second might have relied on. In the first year, the English overran the port towns, but over time English troops spread across Munster like the plague. At first, they were a distant threat, nothing of concern for a dairymaid so far away from a major town and cradled in the lee of the Galtee Mountains. But recently the carrion birds flocked closer.

An icy shiver traced down her spine.

The cow nudged her with its flank, breaking her maudlin

thoughts. Áine laughed out loud. “Another story, Clover? As you wish—”

At the sound of footsteps, Áine silenced immediately. She looked over her shoulder and found the two housemaids, Roisin and Orla, carrying an empty jug between them.

“She’s talking to herself again,” Roisin said to the other maid, not bothering to lower her voice. “Touched by the Faerie Folk, I tell you.”

Áine averted her face so they wouldn’t see the flush of her cheeks.

“Good morning, Áine,” Orla called out a bit too brightly. “We’re here for the milk.”

“Cook must be anxious if she couldn’t wait until I brought it down,” Áine said, focusing once more on her work.

“Didn’t trust you not to spill it. She needs every drop this morn,” Roisin said, scuffling the straw with the toe of her shoe. “I assured her that you knew your business, but she wouldn’t listen.” Roisin speaking a word in Áine’s defence was as likely as the magpie transforming itself into a mourning dove.

“I’m always careful,” Áine said sharply. Roisin blew hot and cold, one day overly affectionate, the next caustic. Today showed signs of being a poor day, she thought wearily.

When Áine had first arrived at the Mulrianes’ estate, Roisin had fussed over her, shamelessly attempting to pry into Áine’s former life in Cork. But Áine was as wary of warm words freely given as she was alert to the signs of brewing anger. Her cautious nature had stood her well, for it had soon become apparent that Roisin’s tongue was a sharp blade wielded against the unsuspecting and naive.

“Since you’re eager, could you hand me that spare bucket on the hook?” Áine asked Orla. She passed the half-full bucket for a fresh one.

As Orla strained the milk into the jug, Roisin draped herself over a stall gate and propped her chin on her clasped hands. “Diarmuid has set off on his adventure,” she said archly. It annoyed Áine when Roisin called the master’s son by his Christian name. “I’ve never seen such

pinched and dour faces from the manor folk since he left. No one believes the long tale of him going off to visit a relation with only a single friend as a travelling companion. Where do you suppose he truly went?"

Áine glanced up, relieved to find that Roisin directed her question to Orla.

"Before he left, there had been much traipsing back and forth between the manor and the byre," Orla said. "Perhaps Áine knows more since she practically lives out here?"

Áine focused on her work. "I'm sure I don't."

Knowing when to hold your silence showed signs of wisdom, her nan had always said. Áine watched and listened, aware of the comings and goings of the manor folk, and she knew very well that the Mulrianes' only son, Diarmuid, had set off with a friend to join the Tóraidhe. But she'd cut off her tongue before telling Roisin so. The girl could hardly be trusted with dangerous information.

Áine had served the family for the last four years, and she was grateful for every day, no matter how dull. Rise with the sun, milk the cows, clean out the stalls, see to their needs. Her life would have been very different had she remained in Cork. The Mulrianes had had no obligation to take her under their protection. She had arrived with nothing more than a prayer that Mistress Mulriane would remember Áine's nan kindly. There had been no time to engage a scribe to petition the Mulrianes for a place in their household, nor could Áine have risked the wrong ears hearing of her plans until she was well and gone.

Mistress Mulriane's kindness was like spring's sun warming the ground. Roisin's thirst for gossip would not find a functioning well with Áine. To gain attention for herself, she'd be sure to spread the news on the next market day, giving no thought as to who might wish the Mulrianes ill. Admitting any knowledge of the Tóraidhe, or worse, admitting to a connection, had been known to draw the English like wasps to honey. Reprisals against Tóraidhe sympathisers and collaborators had been vicious and swift.

Áine would never betray the mistress and the safety of her family, especially not to curry favour with a shrew.

“Mistress will, no doubt, be missing her only son fiercely. Have some respect for her sorrow,” Áine said.

Roisin lifted her nose in the air. “Áine knows precious little, at least about anything useful. If we want to know about the toing and froing of the Faerie Folk, we’ll be sure to ask Áine Callaghan, Mistress Fae herself.”

Áine sighed. This again — Roisin’s favourite taunt. “Then why do you bother to ask me anything?”

“Isn’t our Áine bold today?” Roisin said with a cold smile.

“Leave it be, Roisin,” Orla huffed. “She only minds the cows — she’s nothing. Now come help me with this jug.”

Áine lowered her head and pretended to adjust the tin bucket at her feet. Orla’s words stung more than they should have. It could be worse. It could always be worse. She didn’t need to be liked. Safety was far more preferable. She laid a hand on the nervous cow until they both settled.

A sound caught Áine’s attention, and she looked up to find Mairead O’Connell returned, standing at the open doorway with her attention focused on Roisin and Orla. Her disapproving frown made Áine wonder how much of their chatter she had overheard.

“Miss, did you need something?” Áine asked, rising to her feet. Orla whirled around and nudged Roisin with her elbow.

The young miss’s expression softened when she turned to Áine. “Nothing from yourself, Áine, thank you. I’ve come to fetch these two.” Facing Roisin, she said, “Cook is wondering what is taking you so long.”

Roisin’s sly gaze slid to Áine, and she opened her mouth to speak. Áine braced herself to be blamed for their tardiness, but Orla clearly thought better of it and headed Roisin off. “We’re coming, miss.”

The two maids hurriedly departed the byre with the milk jug, leaving Áine alone with the master’s niece. She rarely had cause to speak with her, so she was at a loss as to what was expected.

The young miss smiled. “Instead of hovering outside in the morning, you’re welcome to come inside and listen to me play. If you like.”

Áine looked up, startled. Mairead gave her an encouraging smile, and Áine answered it shyly. “I’d enjoy that. If you wouldn’t mind.”

“Not at all,” she said with a pleased smile. “It’s settled, then. I’ll see you at dawn.”

ÁINE WENT THROUGH HER MORNING WORK SIX FEET ABOVE THE ground. The master’s niece would welcome her in the byre while she played! Mairead O’Coneill trusted Áine Callaghan with her music. She knew how precious this was—Áine wasn’t sure she could ever trust anyone with her stories.

But then Roisin scooted into the byre with no other intent than to pester Áine, and the rest of her day deteriorated. Although Áine knew the housemaid was lashing out at her for being caught gossiping and dawdling, it didn’t soften the blows. Áine tried to ignore her, but Roisin would not be put off.

“Mistress Far . . . simpleminded chit . . .” Roisin danced around her as though *she* were touched by madness.

Áine closed her ears and retreated into herself, anything to block out the taunts. Had it not been for the housekeeper rushing out to find where Roisin had gotten to, Áine would have been pushed past her breaking point. Though the housekeeper hauled Roisin back to the manor by the ear, the damage to Áine’s day was complete. Her nerves were as brittle as dry twigs, and even the herd remained unsettled.

She desperately needed solitude.

Managing to winnow an hour for herself, she wrapped her mantle firmly around her and headed into the forest. She kept to the main path until it splintered off into a narrow tract that plunged into a gorge with a rushing stream.

She followed the water upstream, careful to mind her footing. The musty scent of decaying leaves mingled with the bracing wind. She breathed deeply, filling her lungs and clearing her mind.

A silvery mist drifted over the shallows. The sound of the stream tumbling over mossy rocks grew louder as she continued, its source a small waterfall at the top of a ridge. Beyond the ridge was the main road and a wooden bridge that spanned the tumbling stream.

Áine picked her way from rock to rock to reach the other side.

She stepped on a loose stone and teetered, sticking her arms out to steady herself. Then she darted to the next flat rock and leapt to the bank. She made her way to a fallen tree trunk and perched on it, staring at the glade she often sought alone.

Here in this enchanted dale, she might forget the world for a space, forget the state of anxiety that gripped everyone. Welcome the solitude on her own terms.

But not today.

Either from Roisin's taunts, the early morning magpie or something else entirely, Áine felt on edge, like the air after a lightning storm. Closing her eyes, she concentrated on the waterfall, but her mind refused to be quieted. With a sigh, she picked at the bark beneath her and watched as the pieces dropped to the ground at her feet.

The glade was worthy of the Faerie Folk and the old stories. Any moment, Fionn mac Cumhaill and his hounds would burst from the trail with his men in his wake. Running ahead in the shallows were the dread host of the Otherworld on their horses, faerie trumpets blaring a warning—*the Wild Hunt is on and no mortal soul is safe*. Only a true hero could defeat them. Áine imagined their steeds galloping in the stream, spraying droplets into the air like glittering stars.

For a moment, Áine was lost to her imagination, and it became so real that she heard the drumming of hooves, like thunder rolling across the hills.

But the sound persisted. This was not her imagination. Horsemen—many, by the sound of it—were coming closer.

Áine scrambled down from the log and backed into the trees, covering her distinctive red hair with her mantle. She peered through the evergreen fronds to watch the wooden bridge, waiting to see if the riders who passed were friend or foe.

Then she saw the foremost horsemen in their red coats and steel-grey helmets.

English.

The rest of the troop swept across the bridge, the sound of a hundred drums under the horses' hooves. And they were heading for the Mulriane estate.

She had to warn her master.

Áine backed away, half sliding down the hill, rock and shale shifting under her feet. When she reached the waterfall, she straightened and dashed down the gorge as fast as she dared.

The main road followed a wide sweep along the bogs to reach the Mulriane estate. If she spared no speed and cut through the forest, she might make it back in time to warn everyone.

Áine slid along the slippery rocks and riverbank, falling and scraping her knees and hands. She reached the pathway out of the gorge, and as she climbed the steep hillside, her chest burned and a stitch bit into her side.

Finally, she reached even ground and flew along the forest path, leaping over fallen logs and avoiding the upthrust of roots. Through the thinning trees, she saw the roofline of the byre and, beyond that, the manor.

“English!” she yelled, hoping someone might be close enough to hear her. “English soldiers!”

She reached the byre, then pulled up short. *Too late.* Enemy troopers barrelled into the courtyard. Áine dove behind the stacked peat. Panting, she took big gulps of air and cautiously peered around the pile.

“Brian Mulriane. Show yourself,” the English commander called out in such a loud voice that Áine had no trouble hearing him.

Her master strode into the courtyard carrying a sword, the male servants running behind him. Áine squinted to get a better look, but the horsemen closed in and cut off her view. She detected only snatches of their argument, but her master’s rage came across clear.

The English commander barked an order, and several soldiers dismounted. The men fanned out, some heading for the manor and the others coming towards the byre.

Áine gasped—she had to hide.

She darted inside and, without considering options, hurried up the ladder to the loft. Below, the soldiers were swarming the main level. Careful not to make a sound, she hid in a small nook in the corner.

“Seize the cattle—leave nothing behind.”

Gates slammed, and men shouted. Someone started clanging metal against metal. The herd grew distressed, crashing into their stalls and bawling fearfully. Áine cringed, helpless to stop the madness.

High-pitched shrieks came from the courtyard. The soldiers were dragging the women from the manor outside. Áine hugged herself to still her uncontrollable shaking.

Then Áine heard what she most dreaded—the sound of someone climbing the ladder. She shrank into a ball and looked around the loft. No weapons—nothing to defend herself.

Helpless.

The old fear seized her. Blood pounded in her ears, and a silent scream built in her throat.

Then below, a woman's shriek pierced the air, followed by the pounding of horses outside the byre. The creak of the ladder halted, then the footsteps descended in a rush.

The woman screamed and pleaded with the soldiers—something about her fiddle. Áine's breath hitched in her throat. It had to be Mairead O'Connell. The shrieking continued but grew fainter, as though someone was carrying her away.

Why would she direct the soldiers to where she hid her treasure?

And the answer to that question came on the smell of burning wood and the roar of flames.

Fire!

Smoke soon filled the loft. Choking, Áine covered her nose and mouth with her mantle and scrambled towards the ladder. The air grew stifling and heavy—she couldn't breathe. Her eyes stung, and tears blurred her vision.

She gripped the top of the ladder and swung her leg over, groping to find the first rung. Fire ran across the beams, and Áine hurried down the ladder. One rung snapped, and she slid the rest of the way down. Thick plumes of smoke made it impossible to see. A blast of hot air, and there—the door. A dark shape suddenly appeared at the entrance—a cow—and it charged back into the byre.

Clover!

Áine screamed at her to get out, but the poor creature was in a

panic, running this way and that, crashing into the stall gates. Áine reached the cow and pushed and prodded the animal to urge it towards the entrance, but the cow refused to budge. The flames were snaking closer to them. In desperation, Áine whispered reassuring words in Clover's ear. Her voice must have cut through the cow's panic, for Clover allowed herself to be manoeuvred back to the entrance. A shower of sparks landed on the cow's shoulder, sending her bolting from the byre.

A pair of overhead timbers crashed across the main entrance in a fiery blaze, blocking Áine's escape. Sparks flew from overhead. The smoke was choking the breath from her, and she swayed on her feet. Remembering the postern door, she retreated deeper into the burning byre and made her way around the flames to reach the side entrance.

Áine gained the door and tried to push it open—it wouldn't budge. Sobbing, she pushed her shoulder to the door and heaved. It moved a fraction. She pushed harder. Her lungs burned; her breath came in desperate gasps. She threw all her strength against the door and managed to open it a little more, enough to squeeze herself through.

She stumbled towards the forest. Her limbs grew weak, and her head spun. She had just passed the stack of drying peat before the blackness enveloped her.

