

Chapter Six
Beings Not of This World
A Cottage In The Wood
By Stacey L. Gray

Randione carefully followed the path that led through the wood in the English countryside. It twisted this way and that with no rhyme or reason. Her feet were bare, and though the leaves and branches were many on the forest floor, her footsteps did not disturb them. Her hair was a silvery white, and her halter hung just past her breast; the faint silver threads in the Milanese lace caught the sun rays as they peered through the treetops. The matching skirt skimmed her hips, highlighting the tattoo jewels on her body that also seemed to catch the sun. She turned around the tall elm and walked on, finally coming to a clearing in the middle of the forest, where she found herself no longer in the English woods. Instead, she saw Lake Lough Gur. Her toe touched the soft bloom of the crocus. Flowers of tiny purple and pink blanketed the grass in the pathway to a small, wooden, two-story cottage by the lake. Again, she walked, not disturbing the ground beneath her.

Jensina opened the door to Randione, sensing her presence before she knocked, "Late as usual."

She smiled as she stepped to the side, inviting Randione into the house. It seemed bigger inside. The furniture was an eclectic collection of antiques from the last four centuries, a sixteenth-century Louis XIII chair next to a Victorian couch. Both were upholstered in an ornate floral print, damask fabric. Jensina appeared more relaxed in her home. Her hair was down and seemed to sway around her as she moved. Her gown was a light, pale rose with long, bell sleeves and tied with a tasseled rope belt.

Randione looked around the house as she passed through. "I have never been here," she said, looking at the kitchen of spices, bowls of leaves, and potted plants.

"There is more in this world and the next than you can explore in just a short period of time. Do not be in such a rush to know everything, be everywhere." Jensina pushed her hand toward the French doors, her hair curled and twisted forward with the movement. Suddenly, the doors opened, and the two women glided outdoors.

Frank was leaning against the railing. He was even taller, broader than he was in the city. His hair was a rich, deep brown, and he carried a cane that was more like a tree branch. He obviously didn't need it to steady his gait as he walked. He turned as they passed him and said, "I see she finally made it."

"Oh, Father," Randione said.

"Have you seen what she's done this time, Randione?" Frank pointed around with his cane. "As if Herbertstown and Bruff won't miss their lake?"

"Simmer down, Frank," Jensina said. "It is not as if it is actually missing from Ireland. Let us just say we have shared custody at this time, and leave it at that, shall we?"

Randione and Frank both raised their eyebrows and folded their arms.

Jensina turned toward the lake. She stared for a moment, and then said, "I always come here around this time. But you know that, Frank."

He just nodded and said, "I know." But his voice had lost his jovial tone from earlier. He now sounded more like the wiser, somber, older Frank that Siena would know.

The stark contrast did not go unnoticed by his daughter. Randione looked over to her father and then to Jensina. "What is it about this place that draws you here?" The tenderness in

her voice, her recognition of Jensina's pain, perhaps also was evidence of Randione's age and why Jensina chose her to help with Siena.

Also recognizing pain in an old heart, Frank did not permit Jensina to answer his daughter's question. He simply said, "Gearold Iarla. He rides on a white horse every seven years."

"Who is he?" Randione asked.

Jensina, unable to allow anyone to tell the full story of someone who meant the world to her, took a staggered breath and answered Randione's question, "He is my son. He rides on a white horse around this lake. Sometimes I ride with him. There was a time when everyone thought he was dead. I suppose some still do, but the Gods were too kind. They would not take him away from me completely." For a moment, she seemed like she wasn't talking to anyone but herself. Jensina bowed her head when she finished. A tear hit the railing and splashed to the ground below.

Frank inched over just enough so that he could slide his fingers on top of her hand unnoticed. "Of course, they would grant the wish of the one who has given so much love."

Jensina turned her head and smiled at Frank for a moment. The mention of love reminded her of the task that still needed to be done. She closed her eyes and inhaled the air of the lake so it could fill her lungs for just a moment, before she exhaled and turned to Randione and Frank. "Have you done what I asked of you?"

Randione nodded. "Siena is wearing the necklace. It was hard, though. She really did not want to put that on again. I didn't want to cause her pain that way."

Frank walked over to his daughter and gently took her hand. "It's for the best, my dear. Trust that we know what we're doing."

"Okay, Father. I will."

Frank turned to Jensina. "Matt put up an argument at first. But don't worry, Jensina. I know how to get him to do what he's told. Or at least not to know that he's doing what he's told."

Jensina smirked and played with one of the tassels of her rope belt, weaving it in and out of her fingers as she paced back and forth on the terrace. "That is the point, isn't it? In doing as he asks, you will not be doing as he asks. He just has to see it."

Randione stepped forward. "Is it not possible to prevent them from breaking up altogether?"

Jensina rested her hand on Randione's shoulder, "We cannot un-break what has been broken. Imagine if Siena never had her heart broken by Matthew. She would never have become a publisher. All those authors would never have been discovered. And all those books would never have been read. Lives would be left unchanged. It is a domino effect when you change an event such as that in time."

"Then why did you allow Matt to come back? He could prevent them from falling in love. Doesn't that have consequences?"

"You are correct, Randione. It was a risk to allow Matthew James Grant to come back. If they do not fall in love, both will have a hole in their heart. He will still go on and be with Julia and cheat on her, but he will never leave her. He is doomed to unhappiness."

"And Siena? What about her?"

"Her career path would stay the same. Her loneliness would cause her to lose hope and give up on her own dreams. Emptiness will do that to a person, Randione. Siena will have a life

with a successful career making other people's dreams come true, but never hers. It is an unfulfilling existence, I know."

Randione's eyes began to fill with tears for the human she had spent so much time with already.

Jensina brushed a silver lock behind Randione's tiny, pointy ear and quietly said, "That is why you must do as I ask, so Siena does not suffer such a dismal existence."

Frank calmly said, "We will. I know how important this girl-child is to you, A—" Jensina coughed, cutting off the end of Frank's sentence.

"Jensina!" Frank said quickly. "I mean Jensina. I know how she's important to you—like they are all important to you. Because that's your—our—main goal. You know, happiness and love—for all. I mean—for obvious reasons that don't need explanations to anybody. So, of course, Jensina, we will do whatever you want us to do."

Randione's left eyebrow raised as her head tilted. "What was that about?"

"Nothing, dear. Just pay attention." Frank put his arm around Randione's shoulders.

Jensina smiled at Frank, leaned over and whispered, "This is why you did not do well in Elizabeth's Court. If we did not get you out of the Tower before your questioning, you would have spilled all our secrets centuries ago."

"Why not just tell her?"

"Because I don't want to," Jensina answered quietly.

What they underestimated was Randione's heightened gift of hearing that those tiny, elfish looking ears had given her. She understood that her father had almost let a secret of Jensina's slip. It had something to do with where she came from, or perhaps something even deeper than that. But she also knew that some truths you just cannot reveal before their time. So, instead of rushing to the answer, Randione decided to heed Jensina's advice. She decided she would follow the path through all its twists and turns, being careful not to disturb anything that may lie on the floor beneath her feet.

As Randione pondered her decision, Jensina closed the French doors with a sweep of her hand through the air. The breeze kicked up leaves and petals that glided across the terrace boards, stirring the attention of father and daughter.

"Good, now that you hear me," Jensina said. "I'm sorry to cut this short. But you're not my only visitors today. I'm going to have to ask you to go." And with that, Jensina waved her hand in their direction, sending Frank and Randione back to London.

The lake became dark, and the chirping of the birds seemed to stop all at once. Jensina sat down on the porch swing, watching a blackbird circle in the sky, drawing figure eights. After some time, the bird grew weary and landed on the post at the end of Jensina's back porch. It was a raven, but not just any raven. It was one of the Dubh Sidhe, or dark faeries.

"Go on, I know what you are," Jensina said while looking straight into the black, little eyes.

It arched its wings, jumped like it was ready to take flight, and then its black legs grew until they touched the floor. The head and torso took on the shape of a man. And the wings became a cape that did not entirely give up the look of the black, stiff feathers of its raven form. He stood still like a stone-cold statue in front of her. His hair was jet black and dripped from his head in long, coarse tendrils that hung to his chest. His face was thin and pale, but not grotesque. No, instead he had a porcelain symmetry to his cupid's bow. But what made his features most dangerous were his eyes. From far away, they were jet black, surrounded by white glass. But

closer, they were a spell in the making. Under the shade of his brow were long lashes, just wisps of feather, black strands to entice a woman to stare into the eyes within, which held the deepest irises creation had ever given a creature; blue-black circles floating on pools of white ice. A human could become hypnotized, lose all sense of time, forget everyone she ever loved. In essence, she would belong to him. But such things were not permitted. Every magical being has its purpose according to the Gods' plans. The tall, slim creature was not even to show a human female his true form.

"Falen, why have you come to my home?" Jensina would not be intimidated. She rose instantly to meet his stare, her feet not touching the boards beneath her.

He laughed at such a simple display of magic. Falen was in black from head to toe, though his garb seemed as it was from another time. The suit jacket and pants appeared weathered and torn attire from the eighteen-hundreds. His riding boots were scuffed.

He scowled at Jensina. "I could ask why your home has come to where I am."

"Don't play semantics with me," The strands of Jensina's hair began to lift and curl as her voice raised. "I know you have been following Siena and Matthew!"

Falen became agitated and began to pace. "I have only followed that which you have dangled in front of me like a prize I can never win." He stopped and looked right at her. "Why have you allowed them to come back here?"

Jensina's hair moved in unison as her voice softened. "And when is here?" she said with a half-smile as she floated in a circle around him. She drifted back to where she began, and gracefully landed on the floor.

Falen glided at full speed toward Jensina until he was within an inch of her face. "Don't tell me 'when is here!' You know what I'm talking about. Why have you gotten involved? It is not your place! You know we are not to meddle with mortals!"

Jensina summoned the wind, which pushed him away from her to the other side of the terrace. Don't you tell me what my place is, Falen of the Dubh Sidhe. I may be called Jensina now, but you know who I am, and you serve me! Do not allow your petty jealousy over a mortal to make you forget your place. She belongs with Matthew."

Falen rose and brushed the dirt from his mantle. "And you can see what he has done with that chance in the past! Maybe he won't be so lucky this time."

Jensina was an inch away from Falen before a hummingbird could flap its wings. She held out one finger and, without touching him, she lifted his chin until he was staring straight into her eyes. "You listen to me, my dark one. You were not allowed to intervene then, and you are not allowed to intervene now. You have but one purpose, Falen. You carry the messages of the Gods. That is your place."

She released him, and he fell the short distance to the floor, shaking his head while he glared at her.

Falen clenched his jaw a bit, biting his lip until a drop of blood stained his pale chin. He looked out at the lake, bowed his head, and combed his hand through his hair. He glanced back at Jensina and said, "Maybe I've grown tired of my place." He turned back, stretched out his arms and jumped, changing his form back into the raven.

"That is what I have been afraid of," Jensina said as she watched the dark, majestic bird fly into the sky until he disappeared into the clouds out of her sight.

