

Changelings

Into the Mist



Katie Sullivan

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For Thomas

Never stop following your dreams.



“ . . . And I say to my people’s masters: Beware.
Beware of the thing that is coming.
Beware of the risen people.”
Patrick Pearse, *The Rebel*

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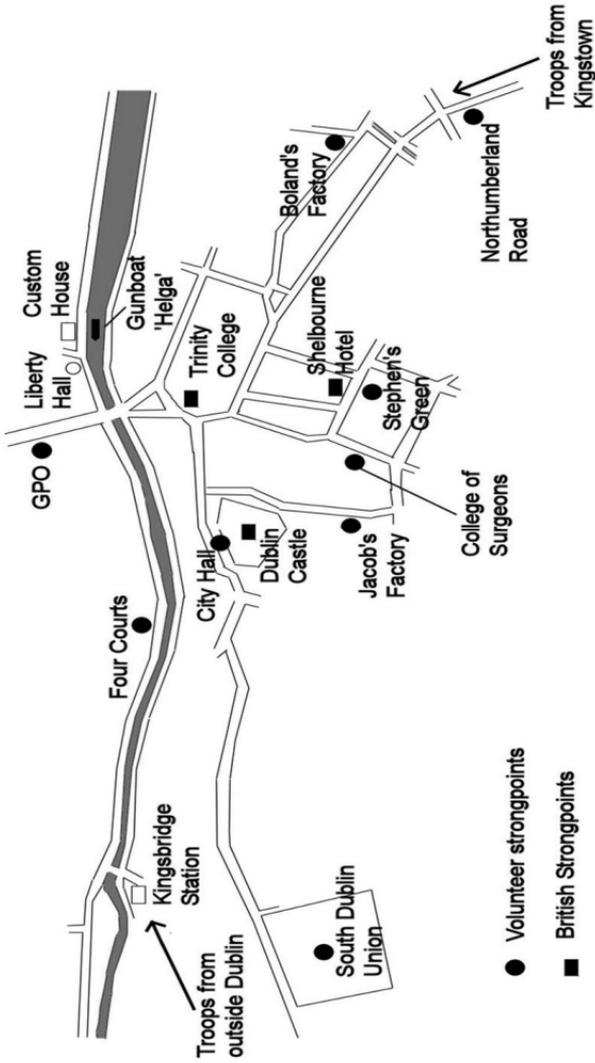
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Getting Around

Carrickahowley, 1958



Dublin, 1916



Part One: Pirate

One

I sat in the grove of my own creation and stared out at a world and a people descended of mine own. As I watched, trees gave way to stone and the Many lost their claim to the priests of the One.

Then the wheel turned. The sacred trees grew around my effigy of stone and the Many came out of hiding. I sat in my grove and watched a world outside my imagination, willing it to see.

She saw. She saw me with uncanny green eyes – the green eyes of my mother and her mother before her: witch’s eyes.

Joy rose in me. It was time – time to join the world after years of solitude, time to act after centuries of stillness.

I closed my eyes and reached across the barrier, to touch my future and my past.



Maureen O'Malley's eyes snapped open. The grove of ancient trees with their twisted branches disappeared.

Daydreaming. She took a shaky breath. It had just been a daydream.

Slowly – too slowly – her senses acknowledged the church, the hard pew beneath her, and the drone of Father's voice as he said the Epistle.

She was not stranded on a hilltop mired by mist.

There was no stand of oaks, and their gnarled branches were not creaking and groaning in the breeze.

There was no breeze, and the curls that had escaped her veil were not brushing her cheek; no, they were plastered against it. The late August heat, trapped amid the dusty black skirts of the nuns surrounding her, pressed in on her and stole her breath.

She gave her head a slight shake, as if the movement would free her from the grip of that dream world.

Sr. Theresa, her dorm mother, must have caught the movement because the nun turned from the mass to stare directly at Maureen, and for the briefest moment, Maureen thought she saw something canny and knowing in the woman's steely gaze.

Did Sr. Theresa know? Had Maureen cried out against the empty grotto at the grove's centre, looking as it did, like a forlorn prison? Had she flailed against the encroaching mist, which seemed to have a mind of its own as it wended its way around her feet and legs? Daydreaming during mass was one thing – she did it all the time – but if Sr. Theresa knew—

Stop.

She ground her teeth into the soft flesh of her cheek and mustered a grin for the nun.

This was ridiculous. There was no shrine of any sort in Carrickahowley – no matter how familiar that cracked and mossy stone hut had seemed. And Sr. Theresa couldn't know anything, since nothing was wrong. Maureen's hands were still clasped around her open prayer book, and her knees and ankles were primly together as she sat, just as the

nuns had instructed – over and over – for the last nine years.

Sr. Theresa cocked her head at Maureen's smile, stared at her for a few agonizing moments and then turned back to mass. Maureen followed the nun's gaze and caught the eye of one of the servers. Sean McAndrew – her best friend and fellow orphan – smiled at her so quickly she would have missed it if she had not known it was coming.

That must have been why Sr. Theresa was looking at her. She never could resist the urge to distract Sean from across the guardrail, and the nun was ever vigilant.

It was the obedience that did it. He mouthed the Latin without question, as if his 'mea culpa' meant something. What could two fifteen-year-old wards of the Catholic Church get up to in the backwater of Ireland's west coast? They were about as far away from anything that mattered as they could be.

She watched Sean as he studiously went about his duties. Part of her envied him his quiet devotion, but the other part – the louder, more insistent part – knew: this was not real life. Real life was out there, away from the nuns and their rules, and away from the tiny village below, where nothing ever changed.

What was worse was Sean never complained – not outwardly. Piety aside, he wanted to be away to University almost as badly as she did, but he said it was pointless to wish – it just made the waiting harder. He had a point, but she preferred to believe escaping into the wish made the waiting go by faster.

Beside her, Sr. Theresa shifted. The nun was still watching her from the corner of her eye, still waiting for her to do . . . what? Giggle, cry out, or

make some sort of scene? She was tempted.

A horrible restlessness crawled over her skin, and the memory of the daydream settled on her unbidden. She itched to pluck at her wool tights or the pulled thread in her skirt. She wanted to scratch her nose, tear at the lace veil covering her hair – anything to break the vision’s grip on her mind. She could feel it there, lingering with the mists, as if it was waiting to claim her.

“Stop it,” she whispered. She no longer cared if Sr. Theresa heard her, or not. The nun’s punishment was nothing compared to the buzzing in her head.

Except, the buzzing was not in her head.

It was all around her.

It surrounded her.

She clenched her teeth and fists as the sound filled her ears until they popped.

The silence that followed was absolute and Maureen blinked to make sure she had not slipped back into dreaming.

The air was dry and heavy with ozone that scorched her nose. Tiny flashes of light burst at the edges of her sight, and threads of mist slithered across the marble floor.

The mist rose. It whispered secrets in an unknown tongue as it gathered force. It obliterated the altar, the nuns and the priest. The servers vanished – all but one. There was no one left – no one but her and Sean.

And the man.

He stood proud in a tattered cloak, his raven head unbowed. His arms were bare but etched with tattoos that reached down to his hands, and a sheathed sword hung at his waist. The mist – the all too familiar mist – snaked up his legs and body.

It was dark with menace, but he ignored it.

His eyes searched the church. He was looking for something.

Or someone.

Maureen's breath caught in her throat as his gaze found her. Her body was screaming for her to move – to run, to do something – but all she could do was stare back into his bright blue eyes until she feared the mist would reach out to swallow her whole.

She blinked.

The image vanished.

She was at the edge of the pew – nearly on her feet – but caught herself and slid back, even as she searched the church for signs that the man was still there.

There was nothing.

Father's voice continued to rise and fall in a familiar cadence; his sermon was almost over. Sr. Theresa was beside her, silent and still. No one seemed aware that anything had happened.

Except Sean.

He was aware.

His eyes darted from her to the altar and back again. Like her, his hands had turned to claws, the knuckles white as his fingers clenched the edge of his seat.

Her heart hammered in her ears. She had no idea what they had just seen, but it had been no daydream. That man had been looking for her, and she knew, without any hesitation, she would answer his unspoken call.