

Donemere's Music

Thy Path Begins

(Book One in the Series)

Thy Path Begins

*“I am merely a novice, and sometimes a fool,
and am only now learning to wear the cloak of
my destiny.”*

Magic is a lark to Donemere Saunders, something her feline familiar Sylvester believes she will never take seriously enough to meet her destiny. But as Donnie reluctantly embraces the mantle of power that has been thrust upon her, she realizes that she can do wondrous things with her gift and she begins to understand why she has been given it. But there comes the day when her adventures turn heartbreakingly real and Donnie must find her place in her family’s rich magical history to become the Fægre witch she was always meant to be.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, songs, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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This book is dedicated to my beloved mother, lifelong best friend and most ardent fan. You are with me always, angel that you are now.

Look, Mama, I'm finally sending Donnie out into the world!

And to Rex, my real-life Wonder Dog: Thank you for teaching me so much about life and love.

Cast of Main Characters

Donemere (Donnie) Saunders is brought to an ancient land by Catie, an eccentric ancestor, because Catie failed to meet her destiny. This destiny is now passed to Donnie, who understands what it will mean for her and does not like her fast-approaching future one bit.

Rex the Wonder Dog is Donnie's German Shepherd Dog. He is her heart and her love, a piece of home that keeps her sane.

Tanygrisiau yr Eglwys Wen is Donnie's dour familiar, who she immediately renames **Sylvester**. Occasionally, he allows her to see how impressed he is with her magical abilities.

The boombox provides clues to what Donnie should do next in the form of songs and their lyrics. While it will listen to her requests and sometimes her remonstrances, she cannot touch it with her magic, nor can anyone else.

Otis the horse and **Diana** the cow are Donnie's best friends at the Codlebærn valley. Otis loves blues music and Diana has a penchant for romance novels.

The chickens on the Codlebærn farm are Donnie's affectionate prognosticators for expected visitors.

Brindle is the leader of the six magical trees Donnie uses to expand her house. He is also used for the stirrups on her cotton saddle, so he is able to travel with Donnie on her adventures.

Parry, another house tree, is in love with Brindle.

Carly, the youngest of the house trees, is great friends with Rex and oftentimes plays word games with him in the bathroom.

Fine Fellow is a curious, very talkative house tree who loves nothing more than to learn. Brindle is the only one who can reliably get him to shut up.

Mournful Jack is a very quiet house tree and seldom speaks. He is apparently quite depressed, as evidenced by the forlorn sigh he emits whenever he converses with anyone.

Sophie is the oldest of the house trees and has known Brindle for thousands of years. She is tired, always very tired.

Mecholætera, who Donnie renames **Mickey T**, is a venerable Noctule bat who is good friends with Sylvester. He loves to play board games with his friends at the farm.

Mynydd Uchaf, King of the Free Wolves, who Donnie renames **Warren**, is usually the first to reprimand Donnie whenever she is being unhelpful.

Falwaïn, Prince of Faen Eárna, is a widower who has been traveling the northern lands in search of adventure and death. Instead he finds Catie, who gives him her amulet and begs him to take it to Donemere at the Codlebærn farm.

Don **Diego**, known in Medregai as the Black Rider, has also been stolen away from his world, but by whom is a mystery. One thing he does know, he was rescued from certain death by Valledai...or was he?

Cyllwyn Mérd is an old willow tree who gives his life, and his life essence, to Donnie when she requests it.

Ungól is a Badûran Vírat who Donnie mischievously renames **Uncle** after he unceremoniously grabs her off her comfy saddle and drags her through several miles of filthy marsh water to his den.

Valledai is an evil sorcerer who wants to exact his revenge on his enemies of old in Medregai. Donnie renames him **Valley Guy**. He is successful in shattering Donnie's heart, but has he also broken her resolve?

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Prologue

In the office at the back of the Drake Manor sat its current owner, Mr. Franklin Vale, deeply ensconced in what had recently become his favorite armchair; a red Corinthian leather wingback to be precise. All other residents of the cavernous domicile were in their beds, soundly asleep.

Behind Franklin's chair stood a diminutive young woman, most bizarrely and colorfully dressed. She had blended herself into the shadows there with a lazily set cloaking charm the moment she'd arrived through her magical portal a few minutes earlier. Her small face was obscured by the wide-brimmed, ridiculously ostentatious hat that was skewed jauntily atop her head, its red feathers swaying with her every movement as she bent over Franklin's shoulder, reading with avid interest the open book in his hands. Periodically, she wagged her left hand to turn the enchanted pages of the book. Unnoticed by her, a small, vermillion feather fluttered to the man's shirtfront after one of her more vigorous wags.

Franklin was slumped down in the chair, his head nestled snugly against the right wing of smooth leather. Although the antique reading lamp to his right shone brightly onto the book's pages, his eyes were closed and his mouth opened wide. He was snoring loudly. He'd nearly finished reading the book, had only the last couple of chapters to go, in fact, when his tired eyelids had drooped a few minutes before midnight and he'd fallen fast asleep in the quiet of the night.

The sole evidence of the little witch's presence was the feather, which had seemed to pop out of nowhere above Franklin's head before drifting lazily to its white silken perch. For a while the room was silent; the only movement was of pages turning seemingly by themselves upon Franklin's lap. This was because, of course, to the nonmagical eye, the single being in the room appeared to be the sleeping man.

But there was another magical entity hovering a few feet above the polished wooden floor, who had positioned himself in the opposite corner of the room from the chair. More shadow than creature of substance, this necromantic spirit, after much difficulty, finally achieved a somewhat clouded view of the little witch through her sight charm as she leaned over the back of the red chair.

Catie is a fool, he thought to himself contemptuously. She must know that he, Valledai, as he had decided to call himself in this incarnation, had traveled with her once again and that he was here now, in this very

room; yet she clearly was unconcerned by his presence. His soul burned with envy. Exhausted and weak though she was from controlling her portion of the Magic of the Nine, the little witch still had more than enough power left to defeat him as he was now. They both knew this. But not for long, not after tonight.

Valledai glided through the air so that he was now in front of the man, this Franklin Vale, whom Catie had been so determined to visit tonight. In fact, this late-night errand of hers looked to be quite fortuitous for Valledai, for the sleeping man possessed powerful Witch-magic within him; Witch-magic that had never even been accessed by its vacuous owner. For the next few moments, Valledai focused his attention solely on Franklin, exerting his black will onto the man's mind. He delved into Franklin's dreams and searched his soul for what would entice him the most.

Valledai felt only disdain at the ease with which he filled Franklin's mind with visions of exactly the kinds of successes the greedy film director desired and could achieve if he were to join himself with Valledai. All he need do is let Valledai possess his triune; for only a short while, he hastily assured Franklin when the dolt put up a token resistance, obviously wanting to be convinced. With Valledai's solemn promise of brevity crowding his mind, Franklin eagerly offered his triune to Valledai unconditionally.

The strange little witch, Catie, continued to read, skipping ahead several pages excitedly here and there. Her occasional, distracted low murmurs and exclamations of "Ah, so it 'az got ta be her, 'azit?", "Ooh, 'e'z got ta be there as well, eh? Well then, luv, ye shall 'ave ta get 'im too!", and "Me merry saints! I wouldna like to meet 'im, not fer every bit o' magic that be asmolderin' 'neath the soil! Ta! Ye gods can keep it all t'yerselves, izzwat I say!" only slightly disturbed Valledai's concentration from his task.

He reached further and further into Franklin's heart, mind and soul, welcoming their release into his own triune. Not too quickly though; he did not want the man dying while the little witch was still here in the room. Surely even Catie would notice that, and she must not yet know his true purpose in following and remaining with her tonight. But once he had this witch-man's extensive powers absorbed within himself, Valledai was certain he'd be strong enough to take Catie's magic. His mind raced in anticipation of his plans.

But, no, he must content himself to wait a while longer. He needed Catie to get back through the portal, return him to his world. From there, it would take him no more than two days to weave this man's powers into his own, to settle into their depths and discover their limitations.

Once he had them mastered, he could begin his campaign of revenge on his enemies of old. Valledai imagined the upstart king kneeling at his feet, broken and begging for mercy for himself and his people. A mercy Valledai felt no compunction to bestow.

And after that? Valledai felt his heart lift with pleasure. After that, he would take Catie's powers and her "pretty trinket," as she called it. Once he possessed the portal and her knowledge of it, along with her unparalleled powers, combined with those of this witch-man and the other witches before him, then he, Valledai, would change time forever. The future would be his to do with as he pleased. And this time, no one would thwart him.

He had been promised this.

Catie straightened and moved away from Franklin's chair, exclaiming softly, "Catie girl, ye must be on yer way, fer ye canna reed the whole thing naow. 'Tis enuff ta know the bloodline shall be safe in 'er 'ands. Ware it ends is up ta Donnie ta deevine. Ye 'ave seen what ye must do and when ta do it," she proclaimed, adding with satisfaction, "and ye shall play yer part well in this *cynllun drwg*." She lifted a large, blood-red pendant from her breast and began the incantation to open the portal, the words of which, no matter how hard Valledai tried, he could not hear, could not understand.

Knowing he would have but a few seconds, he readied himself, for he would have to seize the remainder of Franklin's triune and quickly follow her through the portal before it closed. It mattered naught to him that this witch-man would die in the process; his only concern was that he reach his objective before the portal closed. His timing must be perfect.

As soon as the portal was called forth, Valledai's triune responded in the now-familiar manner; his heartbeat quickened so that it moved in time with the rhythm of the amulet's magic and his soul felt its snakes' heads calling their song of desire to him.

None of the occupants of the room noticed that the pages of the book in Franklin's hands suddenly cleared, or that the book, disturbed by the mysterious erasure of its contents, slid silently to the floor near the sleeping man's feet. Nor did they note that other books, still nestled into the bookshelf near the chair, quivered faintly.

When Catie stepped toward the portal doorway, Valledai set upon Franklin once more, poised to devour the last of the witch-man's triune.

What was this? He could not reach one small fragment of Franklin's triune! He needed all of the triune, else none of the man's fantastical powers would remain within himself and this he could not let happen!

Nor was there time to unlock the hidden chamber in the man's mind because the portal was soon to close.

Franklin Vale would have to come back with him, Valledai realized, even though this meant his plans must needs change. If, by some strange circumstance, Catie saw Franklin before he, Valledai, had managed to take possession of the man's entire triune, she would certainly recognize the witch-man's countenance, and she would not take kindly to Franklin's arrival in their world. Who knows what she would do then? Catie was a fool, yes, but even in her current state she was still powerful, and she was always unpredictable. She might even call upon the Magic of the Nine once more.

Valledai's shadowy figure shimmered with fear at the thought for he had no desire to face them again, especially as himself. He trusted the goddesses' warning that they would destroy him when next they met. For now they let him live, believing him still to be ensnared in his concrete prison. But if they discovered the true identity of this creature they knew only as Valledai, he would taste their wrath for the final time.

There was nothing else to do; this man must accompany him. At any rate, perhaps it *was* time he sought a corporeal form for himself, and Franklin Vale's body would be as good as any.

Chapter 1

Do You Believe in Magic?

Donemere Saunders was uncomfortable and something was biting her leg. She pulled her knee up and slapped her ankle where the bug had been using her as a pin cushion the moment before. The bed rustled and crackled when she moved. This made her open her eyes with a surprised frown. She sat up and stared at the grey woolen blanket covering her. Where had that come from?

Donnie glanced around, scanning the room curiously, her right eyebrow slowly raising higher and higher. What was she doing in the spare room? No, wait a minute, while the mantle over the fireplace did look like the one in the guest bedroom of her rented cottage, nothing else about the room was familiar to her.

What was going on?

She sat there staring at the gloomy room with growing bewilderment and rubbed her eyes hard. Darn it, everything looked the same, so this couldn't be a dream. But this certainly wasn't her cottage; why, just look at that window! She'd seldom seen anything quite like it except in a cathedral.

Her disbelieving gaze traveled the room again, taking in the shabby furnishings, the dirty, almost indecently bright-colored clothing tossed about willy-nilly, and the varied manner of woodland debris that covered the floorboards. Where was she? And for heaven's sake, how could this have happened? How could she have drifted off to sleep in a perfectly comfortable house one night, only to awaken the next morning in an entirely different one? One that didn't look half so comfortable! This just didn't make sense.

Feeling a rising tide of urgency within her breast, Donnie slipped her feet out from under the covers and to the floor, then she almost ran to the door and grabbed the wooden door handle. The door opened with a creak and she stuck her head out it carefully, calling softly, "Hello?...Anyone here?...Hellooooo?"

A large black and white cat, lying on a bare wooden table in the middle of a spacious, raftered room, lifted his head off his paws and responded with a long series of sharp, staccato meows.

Donnie moved farther into the room and gave the cat a tentative smile. "Hey there, sweetie, whatcha doin'?" Don't suppose you know where we are, do you?" Slowly, she walked over to the table and reached toward the cat, noticing that he wore a silver chain with some sort of

charm or pendant around his neck. "Who are you, I wonder? Hmm? What's your name, little guy? Let me just see what your tag says there—"

The cat stood up and hissed at her, again letting out an angry series of needle-like meows, his ears plastered back to his head throughout this entire tirade.

Donnie's hands flew back as she reassured the cat, "Okay, okay, you don't want me to touch you, I get it. I won't, I promise!" All the while regarding him warily, she added under her breath, "Sheesh, I was just tryin' to be friendly." Backing away carefully, she inspected her new surroundings. Once more she felt an unsettling, vague sense of familiarity for this room. But upon second thought, no, she didn't know this one either, not really.

She turned toward the cat, studying him pensively for several seconds before enquiring, "Where's your owner, kitty? And whyever did they bring me here? Well, golly, how did they bring me here? For that matter, where is here?" She laughed nervously and added, "It seems I've got all the questions, but who's got the answers?"

The cat settled into a sitting position with his tail curled around his front paws and stared at her. He meowed once, a razor-sharp blast of pure displeasure.

Donnie dipped her head in acknowledgement of the cat's attitude and said, "My, that was helpful. I can see you're not much of a morning cat, are you? So," she breathed, "are you crotchety because I woke you up or just crotchety in general? Sorry, but I don't really know much about the ways of cats; I'm more of a dog person, myself." She waited as though for another response, but none came. The cat merely stared at her stonily.

Donnie decided to check outside, so she went over to the front door and wrenched it open. There was a little wooden stoop set before it, roughly built and wobbly, but she gamely stepped onto that and looked around her. The brambles in the front yard stretched out a hundred feet or so and there the ground dropped into a valley. She looked up and saw that the top of the ridge above her was lined with forest. It reminded her uncannily of where her rented cottage was situated.

With a sweeping gaze, she stared around her in ever-deepening confusion. She groaned in anguish, looked back at the cat, and whined, "Why do all the cottages here have to look so damned similar? I can't believe only yesterday I thought that was charming! The thing is, I may not have seen this one before, but then again, it could be any one of twenty I've driven by since I've been in Wales."

The cat did not reply.

The only other building in sight was to her left and it appeared to house some stables and a hayloft. An old-fashioned stone well was placed about halfway between the house and the stables. Beside it were some large apple trees, heavy with fruit, and underneath the farthest of these trees stood a wooden bench.

It struck Donnie suddenly that there were no cars in sight. For that matter, she couldn't even see any tire tracks, only what looked like horse and cart tracks. But wait a second, everybody had cars nowadays, or some sort of automotive. Where in blazes was she?

"Yoo-hoo! Hello?...Is anyone here?...Hellooooo?...Anyone?" she yelled desperately. Waiting a minute or two for an answer that never came, she finally jumped back into the house, her bare feet freezing from the frosty morning air.

Telling herself, "First things first, Donnie, my girl, let's get some heat in here," she began to build a fire in the large fireplace of the main room. She placed some kindling and wood shavings into a pile and struck one of the long wooden matches stored in an iron pot on the hearth. The fire lit easily and she soon stacked a couple of bigger pieces of kindling upon it. She stood up and held first one foot, then the other, near the warmth of the spreading flames. As the fire intensified, she placed two logs in its midst and watched them begin to burn, still warming her feet and hands alternately. Once her appendages were no longer frozen, she sighed and sank down onto a chair at the crudely built table to think.

Okay, what had happened to her? Had she somehow been drugged and carted away by some villainous home invader while she was sleeping? The wine she'd had last night, had that been laced with narcotics? If so, she certainly didn't feel like she'd been under the influence of any drug. She didn't even have cotton mouth from the wine. Perhaps the elusive intruder had gassed her while she slept or had stolen into the house in the middle of the night and injected her with something? She thought about this and began checking herself carefully for any telltale signs of either of these furtive methods of attack. Her breathing was good, she felt no other side effects that might imply an inhalation of a noxious substance, nor could she see any needle marks on her skin anywhere, which pretty much ruled out those two possibilities.

Next she wondered if she'd somehow wandered here in her sleep. But that wasn't very likely as she had never been one to sleepwalk. Besides, her feet would be a mess of cuts from the rough, dried grass and brambles outside, wouldn't they? No, she hadn't sleepwalked here. Not that she could imagine even a halfway decent reason why anyone would *want* to sleepwalk their way to this hovel. It was dirty and crowded with all sorts of junk, including books and papers left carelessly lying

everywhere; bundle after bundle of dried or drying, overpoweringly pungent vegetation hanging from the rafters; stacks of dirty metal dishes; more, even dirtier, yet mostly garish Victorian-style clothing lying or hanging on almost all flat *and* vertical surfaces; and row upon row of cast-iron pots lined up neatly against the wall. These were stacked shoulder-high with thickly padded cloths carefully lain between them.

Strange furnishings for a kidnapper's den, Donnie reflected absently.

Well, if she had indeed been kidnapped, how was that monumental feat accomplished? How was she snatched out of her cozy, warm bed and brought to this little hole in the wall, all without being made aware of that rather singular act? And for that matter, why? Why her? She was just a journalist—nobody special. While she was good at her job and had investigated more than one business and governmental scandal in her time, she was pretty sure she hadn't made the kind of enemies who would go to the extremes of stealing her away from all of civilization just to obtain a little retribution, for heaven's sake!

Thoughtfully, she posited the question to herself if whether, perhaps, her predicament had been engineered by someone close to her. Maybe her mother had something to do with this? Yeah, that must be it—why, the only reason she was even in Wales in the first place was because of her mother's insistence that she take at least a six-month sabbatical from her job at the *SFTimes* to finish writing her book.

Lorraine maintained that while Donnie's study of the Junction Uprising was nearly finished, it had basically consumed her daughter's life for well over two years now, and even Donnie's stories for the newspaper had begun to suffer. They just weren't up to her usual dynamic sparkle anymore.

And she'd been right to give her daughter grief about that. Donnie had been burning the candle at both ends for some time and it had become quite wearing, even to Donnie's editor at the *SFTimes*, who'd gotten fed up with trying to fix the mistakes that seemed to dog Donnie since late last year. Which was around the time she'd really started working at a fantastically frenetic pace on her investigation of the uprising and had let so many other things fall to the wayside. Donnie, as Lorraine must've known she would, had heeded her mother's advice to concentrate on the Junction Uprising project alone, even agreeing to go to her mother's home country of Wales while she worked on the final editing stages of the book.

Could kidnapping Donnie be her mother's way of ensuring her eldest daughter got some peace and quiet? But that would be ridiculous. Not even Lorraine (who was known for her sometimes elaborate pranks) would go to those extremes, especially since she was well aware how

important the book was to Donnie. Besides, her mother would be much more likely to arrange exquisite and impeccably clean accommodations for her daughter, not a filthy pig sty like this place. No, her mother would never send anyone here.

Well then, perhaps her kidnapping did have something to do with her work at the *SFTimes*? What stories had she worked on during the past year or two that could warrant a response such as this?

Regrettably, nothing extraordinary came to mind, no matter how deep she delved into her memory.

As the long minutes passed, a succession of emotions overtook her, naturally beginning with disbelief and denial. Maybe she really was still asleep and dreaming? No, she told herself sternly, she wasn't dreaming; no dream was this detailed. Which meant that she truly was here in this dismal little cottage.

Okay then, maybe she was delusional? Again, not very likely as her family had a long, dull history of being clinically sane. They were sometimes known for unpredictable antics, surely, but were they delusional? Not so much, really.

Still...her mother did have that rather insistent penchant for wearing outlandish hats. "Could it have been a sign, a plea for help, and I missed it?" Donnie muttered under her breath.

And, of course, there was always Dad's Aunt Bella Moira. Aunt Bea had dressed and looked exactly the same since Donnie had been seven, when her aunt had come to visit the family for the first time that Donnie could remember. Donnie had stared wide-eyed at her, looking from her aunt to the TV, where the real "Aunt Bee" had just happened to be holding court over Ferdinand and Farley. As Donnie recalled, this had ticked *her* Aunt Bea off to no end when she'd noticed it, and Donnie had, for the first time ever, witnessed her great-aunt's disconcerting ability to swear a mean blue-streak at the drop of a hat, leaving Donnie with one of the most vivid memories of her early childhood.

But no, there was nothing really that strange about Aunt Bea. After all, didn't every over-eighty inhabitant of Florida habitually drive their particular land ark into the nearest available culvert? Well, except for Aunt Bea, now that her driver's license had finally been revoked after the fourth incident in as many years.

Donnie impatiently dismissed the possibility of an obscure mental condition, latent either in herself or her family, and got up to pace the room and think. She focused on who she thought could've, or would've, engineered her current predicament. After a few moments, she felt a burgeoning sense of giddy elation within her which bordered sharply on hysteria. She became absolutely convinced that a group of her friends

had gotten together to play a hoax on her. The whole thing was probably spearheaded by her best friend, Liz, and Donnie's younger sister, Emily.

Somehow they'd managed to bring Donnie here without her being aware of it and had probably hidden cameras all around the derelict cottage to record her every move. Donnie swung around the room somewhat manically, laughing reflexively and trying not to show her relief because she didn't want her friends to know just how badly they'd scared her.

"Ha ha, very funny, guys!" she exclaimed heartily, going on to add, "Okay, Liz and Emmy, and whoever else you got to help you, you've had your little joke, so come on and get me; the party's over. This isn't really all that funny, you know."

She stood still and glanced around the room with a hopeful expression hanging on her face, waiting silently for several moments until, biting her lip apprehensively now, she finally implored, "Seriously, guys, this isn't funny. Come and get me, I wanna get outta here!"

But nobody came. After five minutes of sitting stalwartly in one of the two roughly hewn chairs placed around the table, with the cat staring at her as though she were a loon, Donnie got up again and began searching the cottage high and low for signs of a camera or other recording devices. During this investigation, which included forays into the darkest corners of the darkest cupboards, she noticed that there were no appliances of any kind, no internet or telephone hookups, no running water, don't even mention electricity, and, just her luck, no bathroom. And her with a bladder the size of a pea!

She decided that if this was a prank, it wasn't going to be funny to her for a long, long, *long* time. In the end, she found no signs whatsoever of recording equipment, even after carefully scrutinizing every inch of the stone walls and each of the knotholes in the timbers of the doors and low ceilings in both rooms of the desolate little house.

When every bit of the place had been thoroughly inspected, Donnie stood in the middle of the main room and deliberated a moment, pulling on her lip distractedly. Maybe she should search the stables, a voice inside her head suggested. Yeah, that was probably her best bet—although it was mighty cold and wet out there, another little voice reminded her, and here's her with no shoes.

Oh, but wait a minute, while inspecting the cottage, she'd found a pair of leather buckled boots she could wear outside, the first little voice retorted. Admittedly, they were rather odd-looking, being both very pointed and very fluorescent green, neither a style nor color she would normally be caught dead wearing. And okay, yes, they were probably a little too small for her, but they were much better than slogging barefoot

through the cold, wet mud that covered the yard between the buildings and ending up with frostbitten toes, weren't they? And so what if they clashed horribly with her pale blue pajamas? She really couldn't afford to be picky about wardrobe at a time like this, could she?

Donnie rolled her eyes at the silent war being waged in her head between her innate common sense and an obviously overdeveloped sense of fashion. Resolutely, she donned the offending boots and trudged out to the other building. Alas, she found no evidence of recording equipment in either the stables or in the workshop she discovered existed at the back of the building. All she found of interest in the workshop, besides a gigantic forge and its related tools and another twenty or so iron cauldrons, were several barrels of what appeared to be table salt and a chalk-drawn circular shape in the center of the room that was mostly covered by the barrels.

As for the stables...well, admittedly, her search of them was perhaps somewhat cursory because of the various farm animals living there, namely the chickens. Donnie was a city girl, born and bred, and had never been around live chickens before in her life. Maybe it was because they reminded her of Blackburn's classic horror movie, *The Day of the Birds*, that Donnie found she had a distinct aversion to them. Dead, plucked ones were fine, especially on the grill. But these just gave her the willies, with their ominous clucking and pecking as they advanced upon her, following closely in her footsteps while she explored the building.

After almost half an hour of searching the stables and workshop without gaining any real enlightenment, Donnie gave up and returned dejectedly to the house, secure in the knowledge that no way was this a hoax perpetrated by her friends because they couldn't do anything without recording it in some fashion.

When she reentered the house, she noticed that the fire was burning low, so she stacked some more logs onto it, and in just a couple of minutes it was roaring brightly once again. She was cold, wet and very disheartened from her fruitless search of the premises. Pulling one of the chairs closer to the fireplace, Donnie sank down upon it, pulled off the muddy boots, and stretched her bare feet toward the fire. Only then did she close her eyes and let the tears fall. As testament to the panic that had been slowly welling up inside her for the last hour or so, she began imagining all sorts of improbable, wild explanations for her predicament, including slave traders, local sexual predators and even political terrorists. All of these she rejected after logic kicked in, especially considering that no one in the area even knew all that much about her

because she'd kept pretty much to herself for the last six weeks, focusing mostly on her work.

Although, come to think of it, there was that handsome stranger with the gorgeous, long blonde locks she'd spotted several times over the last three weeks in the village shops and on the moors, always walking just far enough away so she couldn't get a really good look at him. Wait a minute—had he been following her? After all, she'd seen him on almost all of her local walks lately. ("Bloody unlikely, innit? And aren't you just the paranoid little freak?" was how Donnie dismissed this conjecture aloud). What *was* likely was that he was merely one of her neighbors, a completely innocent bystander. She really should not read more into his appearances than was healthy, regardless of her current situation. Even though her current situation was totally inexplicable and immensely frightening and more than a little creepy and...

"I needn't take that any further, need I?" she asked desperately of the cat, as if he'd been able to read her thoughts and now knew exactly what she was referring to.

The cat stared at her and let out another long burst of short, sharp meows, hesitating for a couple moments before adding a very loud one, as though to punctuate his unfavorable opinion of her hysterical ramblings of the morning.

And so, Donnie forced herself to really and truly calm down this time so she could think rationally. She straightened in her chair, sniffled and sighed a couple of times, then shook her head decisively. "Nope, none of that's gonna help," she remonstrated herself. "For Fortin's sake, woman, think; what the hell is going on here? And what are you going to do?" Taking some deep breaths and staring intently at the fire for a few moments, the answer to her dilemma suddenly came to her. It really was quite simple: someone from the ubiquitous Roamers would soon turn up and then she'd know exactly where she was. Easy peasy.

But the hours turned into days with no sign of other humans in or around the vicinity of the small farm. Whoever her captors were, if they indeed existed, they were definitely making themselves scarce. And at the end of the sixth day, she was brutally forced to give up even that double-edged hope.

A few hours after she arose that first day, she decided her best course was to be proactive about her situation and had therefore saddled the horse in the stables, obviously much against his wishes. When she'd approached him with the bridle, he'd shied away from her and whinnied nervously, but Donnie had persevered and soon had him both bridled and saddled. She had a plan; she was going to ride him out to search for signs

of civilization. Grateful that her mother had insisted she take riding lessons since she was five, Donnie was right at home with the horse.

But the cow was another story. Donnie wasn't even sure if it was the milking kind or not. It just stood there when she'd first come upon it and looked at her with its sad, liquidy eyes. "Are cows always as big as you or are you on steroids?" she'd asked it, nervously stepping away when it seemed to understand the gist of what she'd said and stomped its feet angrily at her.

For the next few days, each dawn saw Donnie riding the horse away from the cottage, starting out the first day on a slightly southwest course. She had hurriedly scratched a notice with a remnant of charcoal upon a piece of thick parchment that read: "If you come here while I'm gone, don't leave! I'll be back in just a few hours. Really, I will!" She'd signed her name to it and affixed it firmly to the front door with a small knife, then hauled herself onto the horse and off they went to begin their search. She turned her steed east at around noon and, after traveling another mile or so, they headed back toward the valley, all the while moving progressively counterclockwise. Logic dictated that if, by chance, she was anywhere near her rented cottage, then the closest village was due south, with another town, extraordinarily similar to the first in many respects, less than three miles beyond that to the east.

She and the horse luncheoned picnic-style on these daily jaunts. Donnie ate the cheese and fruit she packed for herself, and the horse would get the carrots she shoved in the voluminous pockets of the grey woolen cloak she donned each morning that she'd found balled up in a corner of the bedroom and now kept hanging by the front door. Whoever had brought her here had thoughtfully left the little farm well-provisioned for both her and the livestock, so, thankfully, food and drink, or lack thereof, would not present a problem anytime soon. Her dietary needs would be met just jake for the duration of her (with any luck) temporary visit; as long as she didn't die first of lead poisoning from the hand-pounded pewter plates and cups she'd found strewn around the room, with more stacked somewhat haphazardly on a makeshift shelf in the pantry. This "pantry" was really no more than a crowded little closet that was approximately four feet square, situated in the far corner of the cottage's main room. She'd searched high and low again, but unfortunately these were the only dinnerware she could find besides an odd assortment of wickedly sharp knives and a few large metal and wooden spoons.

To her relief though, she'd come upon a stock of fresh vegetables and dried meats and fruits in the underground larder, which was actually more of a cellar than a true larder, as it also contained seeds and bulbs for

a variety of plants and herbs. The cellar was accessed by lifting the trapdoor in the wooden floor of the pantry, as she'd discovered by tripping over its smoothly worn handle when she'd searched the cottage on her first day looking for signs of a hidden camera.

Off this large, beamed, cool and somewhat dank room was a smaller one carved out of the thick, moist earth beneath the house much less carefully than the cellar had been and which was apparently used as a buttery, where bottles of ale were stored along with casks of something called *metheglin*. Donnie hadn't the nerve to open any of these casks for she had no idea what metheglin was, although the word was scrawled across the fronts of all barrels, along with a differing series of obscure abbreviations for each. She had tried some of the ale, a little hesitantly at first, and had decided it was certainly potable. She also decided that it would be an acquired taste, one she was not going to be here long enough to acquire herself.

Oh, and she mustn't forget the vast collection of cast-iron cauldrons. There were easily fifty of them in the house, most of which were stacked neatly along the back wall of the cottage's main room. Donnie found three more in the pantry and, of course, there was the very large pot sitting on the hearth that had apparently seen much use, judging from the numerous scratches on its outer rim. And that was not even counting those she'd found in the stables. Each cauldron appeared to be uniquely and skillfully cast, ranging in size from not much larger than a soup bowl to being big enough for a very large man to take a bath in. And every one of them had different, intricate and sometimes delicate designs cast into their curved sides, handles or feet. They struck her as being really rather quaint.

While she and the horse were out searching the relentless moors for neighboring farms, Donnie began to sense within her a mounting, yet still shadowy and vague familiarity for the countryside, especially the area around the cottage and its valley. Since the moors all looked very similar to one another anyway, perhaps because they were so oddly bereft of human habitation, she firmly thrust the idea away immediately each time it intruded into her head, telling herself it was a useless train of thought. She needed to find something more concrete that would tell her exactly where she was.

Disappointingly, though she looked constantly for it, Donnie found absolutely no signs of other people anywhere, only a couple of worn paths whose few, clearly defined footprints appeared to be equine in nature; probably made by the very horse she was riding now. Even the thin, deep wheel ruts that traversed the little valley surrounding the cottage, forming two trails which split off to travel north and east,

appeared to mostly (although she was certainly no expert at this sort of thing) match the little cart she'd found parked to the right of the stables. Adding to the eeriness of her situation was the unnerving scarcity of wildlife, as if the entire animal world (other than the farm's inhabitants) had decided collectively to avoid her. Only occasionally would she hear the chattering and calls of the forest denizens to each other in the distance, all of which would end abruptly as soon as she drew near.

Try as she might to quell her disturbing suspicions, they grew with each passing day until Donnie finally had to admit that there truly was something familiar about the tiny, crowded cottage and its immediate surroundings. Yet, she just couldn't put her finger on what it was exactly that made her so sure she was not really a stranger to these parts. She was reasonably certain she'd never seen these little buildings before, nor the cobbled stone well positioned strategically between them. And the countryside all around was much wilder than what she'd seen in Wales, or in any of the other British Isles she'd visited to-date. Nonetheless, the worrisome feeling grew.

On the morning of the sixth day, she decided to follow one of the established paths made long ago by the farm's cart instead of, yet again, forging her own way through the dense undergrowth within the forest that surrounded the valley. She chose the trail heading east, in the direction of a mountain range she'd seen the day before, far off in the distance, while on her daily recon trip. Because of the somewhat unnecessarily winding route the trail led at its beginnings, it took almost an hour for the ambling, but nonetheless amiable horse to get close enough for the mountain range to come properly into view, and even then the nearest mountains could only be seen from the summits of those moors not covered with either trees or mist. Whenever Donnie and the horse rounded each successive, bare hilltop, the mountains would again come into view, looming larger and showing greater detail than on the previous glimpses of them.

As they approached closer and closer, Donnie could see that the dense fog blanketing the lower regions between the moors also held a goodly portion of the mountain range in its grip. But the sun was already working hard at banishing the highest reaches of suspended precipitate, driving the thick mist ever-downward. By the time the horse scaled the last moor and emerged into clear air once more, the mountains were still somewhat silhouetted against the late-morning, rising sun. Actually, Donnie and the horse crested this particular moor right as the sun rose above the tip of the closest and biggest of the mountains and bright, glorious light began cascading down its western face.

Upon this beautiful sight, Donnie slumped in the saddle and stared at the mountain with increasing horror as the horse shambled down the descending slope of the moor toward a wide lake, where he stopped and began taking long, unbidden draughts of its cooling waters. Here, the mist had almost totally dissipated, with just wisps of it still hovering over the lake's waters. Only half aware of her actions, Donnie slipped from the horse to fall to her knees in a fluid, though certainly not graceful movement, completely mesmerized by what, to all accounts, appeared to be a perfectly tranquil scene set before her. She then proceeded to groan and curse in a manner that would have made her Aunt Bea proud, while the horse blithely ignored her outburst and continued to drink deeply of the lake water.

Bewilderment, fear, disbelief and abandonment, along with their prerequisite onslaught of tears, eventually overtook her and peace, of a sort, was restored to the land—that is, once her entire repertoire of expletives was thoroughly exhausted. She raised her head after several minutes and wiped her cheeks with trembling fingers, whispering, “This can’t be true. It’s not possible. It’s just not possible.”

Nevertheless, there it was—the unmistakable outline of Treyfal, showing quite clearly against the deep blue of the morning sky. Although, and this was the cause of Donnie’s grief, the huge peak rose a little higher and was noticeably craggier in relief than it had been when she’d hiked here to picnic at *Llyn y Cawr* for the first time two weeks earlier. She knew it was Treyfal for there was the mammoth, jutting stone ledge on the southwestern face of the peak that had been popularized by thousands of hikers, many of whom were surprisingly *not* card-carrying members of the Roamers’ hiking association. Only now it was a whole outcropping of rock slabs. But the two rounded boulders serving as a counterweight to hold down the top slab on one end so the other end could suspend freely over the sharp peak on which it balanced, still reminded her of cartoon mouse ears etched against a backdrop of blue. There was no denying that the placement and unique topography of the ledge were identical to the one she’d watched two hikers skitter around on that day at Treyfal, especially since she was viewing the mountain from almost exactly the same spot on the western edge of the lake.

She let her eyes scan the area, noting other impossibly coincidental landmarks. To the east of the lake was a long, high escarpment running for at least a mile to the south but which, northward, stopped abruptly at the foot of Treyfal. Set into the sheer face of its foreland wall was the enormous entrance to a cave that, according to the guidebook Donnie had purchased when she’d first arrived in this part of Wales, had at some

time most likely reached all the way into Treyfal itself through a large tunnel at its rear. The book also informed its readers that off this main tunnel were two satellite passageways branching in different directions deeper into the mountain range beyond. “An interesting and breathtakingly lovely haven for the hardy, avid spelunker” was how the book had described the cave and its appurtenant tunnels. Seeing the dark outline of the cave’s entrance once again, Donnie noted its perfectly sculpted keystone shape with a shudder.

Next came the same, though larger, neat pile of huge boulders, each rock nearly half the size of a golf cart, that sat to the left of the cave and made her think of great mounds of mashed potatoes with a gravy dip in the middle of each. Only now, the cave entrance was flanked by two such fastidiously stacked piles. She remembered wondering that day at Treyfal whatever could account for the smooth, uniform erosion that had occurred on each and every one of the boulders, even those on the bottom of the pile.

And finally there was the hillock (“Such a grand word for such a little hill,” she’d deadpanned the first time she’d seen it) to the northwest of Treyfal’s base that still looked to her as though it had been shoved into its place unexpectedly, much like a poor excuse for a third breast hunched forlornly between two exquisite ones. It was squeezed between the soaring Treyfal and the next mountain over, whose Welsh name Donnie couldn’t ever hope to be able to pronounce properly. That slightly smaller mountain’s name, *Angel Uchel Dialgar*, meant something like “High Avenging Angel,” or so the guidebook had informed her. Donnie had wanted to know if there was a name for the hillock. If one existed, it hadn’t been given in the guidebook.

Ever so slowly—little by little, because she wasn’t going to rush into this—she allowed herself to more fully comprehend her nebulous recognition over the past week of the myriad similarities in the countryside. It basically looked much the same as when she’d come to Wales a little more than six weeks ago. Once she’d settled into the cottage, whenever she wasn’t working on her book, she’d fallen into the habit of taking long walks or drives, sometimes two or three a day, to clear her head and help herself focus. So she’d gotten to know the general area around the rented cottage quite well, and realized now that there were far too many likenesses between it and the area surrounding the strange, smaller cottage she currently inhabited than could possibly be explained by pure happenstance. But this countryside here was also different in so, so many ways. The moors were steeper and sharper, less weather-beaten and rolling. Some of the same pathways were there, only no cairns or signposts adorned their routes.

The forests she'd seen over the last six days were thickly overgrown and rambling, unlike the well-tended small copses she'd passed on her daily walks back in her own—Donnie stopped herself from completing that thought, not yet able to face its stark ramifications. She glanced about her again and remembered that a forest should be here now, all around this very spot, except for right in front of the lake. She winced, recalling that on her previous visit most of its trees had been huge and obviously quite ancient. It was called the *Fforest yr Anfodlonr*, which the guidebook told her translated (rather whimsically, she thought) to "Forest of the Unwilling."

She stared up at the hillside behind her, noticing with alarm that the big crater on the western face of the moor was also missing. Yet, a mere two weeks ago, there'd been a huge dip cut right out of the moor. Whoa, that was a lot of dirt to move, so how could it be filled in now, with tall, dried grass carpeting the soil? And what's the deal with an entire forest missing? How was that possible?

For a few, desperate moments more, she stubbornly ignored the voice in her head that insisted she knew darned well how it was possible. Deep down, she'd known all along, the obdurate voice continued to chide her, and no amount of denial was going to change the situation, so wasn't it time to face facts?

Donnie steeled herself for what was to come. She reflected on the last few days and, for the first time, allowed herself to deliberately and consciously register the other things that were absent from the countryside which definitely should have been there—all the man-made things like electrical and telephone wires; or the countless, beautiful little stone houses she'd admired so much; or the winding cobblestone and asphalt roads. Tremulously, Donnie admitted to herself that she'd seen no parking lots or cars here. As a matter of fact, there were no cars anywhere, nor had she spied any traces of such modern contraptions during any of her jaunts this past week.

Uh-oh, here it came, plodding relentlessly toward her, the ugly reality she'd avoided long enough. Her conscious mind opened up and let the truth bludgeon its way through her flimsy defenses.

"Face it, girlie," she commanded herself aloud, "this is no joke, no dream, certainly no terrorist plot. You are in the right place, all right, but it's the wrong time!"

Wait, could she be mistaken again? Could she? But...oh jeez, there was the cottage! She now conceded why it seemed so weirdly familiar—that was because it comprised the main entryway, parlor and guest bedroom from the cottage she'd rented in her time! The large front room of the cottage here had obviously, at some point in history, been

partitioned into two rooms and several other rooms had been added by the time Donnie rented it later.

No-no, she had to be wrong again! Donnie stared at Treyfal or whatever this mountain was. There could exist two mountains in the world that looked really, really similar, couldn't there? With almost identical surroundings? Surely that was at least possible, wasn't it?

Besides, she reminded herself, frantically attempting to inject sense into the situation, if she was indeed in another time, then who could've sent her here? No one she knew or had ever heard of had that ability. What she was thinking was absurd—time travel was an impossibility! Okay, okay, even supposing it wasn't, for the umpteenth time Donnie asked herself, why do this to her, of all people? And whyever was she sent to this specific time period—just what was she supposed to do here? A modern woman such as herself had absolutely no business being thrust into the Middle Ages, as Donnie suspected had been done to her.

She sat there with the same questions looping continuously in her mind for some time. Through tear-filled eyes, she stared blankly at first the lake (*Who did this to me?*), the cave (*What am I supposed to do here?*), then up to the mountain (*Why me?*), then back again, hoping one of the landmarks would change and she'd be wrong again. Donnie repeated this circle countless times, fully conscious that her behavior was ridiculous, but unable to stop herself from doing it anyway. Her wide and generous mouth, usually lifted into a joyous, wry or sometimes mischievous grin, now had the pronounced downward curve of what her father deemed her "serious pout." She was desperately unhappy and frightened. While usually up for an adventure, this was a bit much even for her.

She was only vaguely aware that the sun had moved significantly in the sky when the horse began nudging her insistently, his tongue reaching into her pockets, finding and eating every one of the carrots she'd brought with her that day. He finally succeeded in knocking Donnie right over, which broke her out of her trance-like state and into semi-consciousness. She climbed up onto him clumsily and he turned homeward, increasing his normal lumbering pace to a brisk walk on the return trip in his haste to receive his oats and hay. They made it back to the small farm in a little over two hours. Mechanically, Donnie fed him and the cow and the chickens. By the time she was finished with the chores, it was nearly dark as the days were becoming shorter, heralding the approaching winter.

She entered the cold house in a massively depressed haze and stood helplessly in the middle of the main room, hating the fact that she now felt as though she recognized every stone, every floorboard, every beam

in it. Knowing there was really only one way to prove her theories, she reluctantly made herself check the last stone on the far side under the fireplace mantle in the bedroom. She felt around its top edge and her faltering fingers found the small latch there. A foot-long section of the ornately carved wooden mantle swung open, revealing a secret hiding place for important papers and other valuables. At least that's what the land-agent, a very proper and dignified Mr. Humphrey Lambert of Lambert, Lambert and Feldsbury in London, had informed her was its purpose, his pink, kindly face and white tufts of hair and sideburns peeping out at the world from beneath his utterly dignified and spotless, oh-so Englishly dapper bowler.

Donnie had emailed her housing requirements to the agency several weeks earlier, again at her mother's urging. As agreed upon in their ensuing correspondence, Mr. Lambert appeared at Donnie's hotel three days after her arrival in London. He had then driven her all the way to Wales to view the cottage with her before she took occupancy of it. The little niche had been the last feature of the cottage he'd shown her that day.

Horrified by the recess now, Donnie backed up to the bed and sank down upon it slowly, unable to tear her eyes away from the small black cavity less than ten feet away from her. It was as though the little rectangular opening was a physical representation of the metaphorical yawning chasm that lay before her. She stared at it until the sun's light was almost gone, then got up quickly and slammed its door shut, vowing never to open it again.

She curled up on the bed, feeling utterly defeated, where she remained until late the next day. At that point, the animals made an unholy ruckus, squawking, mooing and kicking their hooves repeatedly on the outside of the cottage. "How'd they get out of their stalls?" Donnie murmured listlessly, positive she'd closed the gates to each the night before. She finally had to crawl out of bed and feed them just to get some peace and quiet so she could return to her morose, all-consuming misery and suffering.

The next few days were spent in pretty much the same routine; she would lie in bed until what she judged to be noon, by which time the animals would once again make their demands known. Donnie had no sense of what was real and what was nightmare. After feeding the livestock, she too ate only once a day, and then just barely enough to survive. Whenever she managed to stay out of bed for any length of time, she lit the numerous candles she'd found in the pantry, hoping to banish her fears with the brightest light she could amass, no matter the time of day. In the evenings, she'd sit at the table in the main room, aimlessly

reading one of the huge leather-bound tomes (it didn't matter which one) retrieved from the shelves in the corner or staring at the wall (again, it didn't matter which one), trying desperately to keep her mind blank. It served her no good to think because that just brought on palpitations. Mostly, she would crawl into bed, always curling into the fetal position, and alternate between sleeping and crying, crying and sleeping. She didn't know how she was ever going to be able to grasp the enormity of her situation. She was completely alone, with nothing from her world other than herself and her increasingly pungent pajamas to comfort her.

Nonetheless, as the days wore on, Donnie could feel her brain relentlessly adjusting to her predicament, just as normal, healthy brains are wont to do, with a growing part of her eventually coming to grips with the fact that her life as she knew it was indeed well and truly over, and one day soon she'd have to get on with life here, such as it was going to be. But this too she was not going to rush; she was by no means ready to admit that she'd even partially accepted this abrupt and cruel turn her life had taken. A large part of her stubbornly refused to believe that she'd never experience another rock and roll concert, or sit down with the Sunday *SFTimes* and have an all-day read, or argue politics and religion with complete strangers at the local coffee and bagel shop—gawd, never to have another banana blueberry smoothie? No more tapas? No World Series? No Super Bowl? What kind of life was that going to be?

Then she would inevitably begin thinking about her family and friends and how much she missed them and how she'd never get to see them again, never get to talk to them again because whoever or whatever had brought her here had obviously abandoned her to the horrible fate of becoming a complete recluse in a time that was not her own—it was invariably at this point that the bawling thing would take over again and she'd be reduced to a sniveling heap for hours.

By the end of this most miserable period, Donnie was thoroughly exhausted and more than a little ill. It was, by her best reckoning, her tenth day here. She would've bet her entire life savings that she probably looked the worst she ever had in all her forty-three years. Thankfully, she didn't have a mirror handy, so she was not subjected to that, sure to be, oh-so pretty picture. But at her age, no matter how well preserved one is, this kind of behavior was certain to make you look just terrible, so betting her life savings would not have put it at risk.

Ah, that was better. Her indomitable sense of humor had, at long last, returned.

The cat, who obviously belonged with the house, didn't bother to disguise his growing disgust with her. She was grateful that, from her first day here, he would somehow find his way out of the cottage in the

morning and would only come back to it in the evening. Just after sundown each day, he would jump onto the outer window sill of whichever room she was in and either bat at the pane, making it rattle annoyingly, or caterwaul at the top of his lungs until Donnie would get up, unbolt the door and let him in. He'd then spend the entire evening stalking around her, mewling accusingly in the now-familiar short bursts of staccato meows, driving her nuts with his incessant vocalizations.

No matter how hard she tried to make friends with him, he would simply and inevitably hiss or meow sharply at her if she ventured within four feet of him, usually for no apparent reason other than the fact that she existed. He still clearly did not want her to touch him. Donnie gave up trying to make amends with him for whatever unknown and inadvertent slight she had done him and studiously ignored him thereafter.

But he always did a very curious thing whenever she was in the outer room with him. Every so often he would run to the crudely built bookshelf in the corner and jump to the third shelf. His curious behavior did not end there. He would then push a book to the floor. It was always the same book. Donnie finally left it lying on the floor because she got tired of replacing it on its shelf. So the cat took up the habit of sliding it across the floorboards toward her. Each time Donnie found the book close by, she kicked it back across the room, telling herself that she was not behaving like a spoiled child—no way, not her. And since the cat staunchly refused to give her the time of day, so to speak, Donnie spitefully took a few of the other books off the shelves and feigned perusing them.

While she did not technically read these books, except for the one and that only in parts, for her mind was far too frazzled to concentrate on anything for longer than five minutes at a stretch, she left these books lying open upon any and all available flat surfaces in close proximity to her for a hurried pickup whenever the cat made another of his increasingly fractious demands, just to let him know that she was *not* going to read the book he kept pushing at her, again reassuring herself that she was not being at all immature toward the dour feline.

And so, on Donnie's tenth and eminently fateful evening here, after she'd gained the much-needed return of her humor, the cat became even more insistent than ever and slid the book across the floor until it was at Donnie's feet. He then sat on the book and stared up at her, daring her to kick it, and him, across the room this time.

Donnie let out an exasperated snort and exclaimed, "All right, you obnoxious puss, you win; I'll read your blasted book!" As though he understood her words perfectly, he stepped off the volume and leapt

lightly onto the table. Donnie reached down to pick up the book, untied the leather strings binding it, and set it before her on the table, open to the first page. A thick, silvery metal bookmark, about seven or eight inches long and an inch and a half wide, fell onto the rough wooden boards of the tabletop. This bookmark was curved into a shape reminiscent of a foreshortened “S” and was inscribed with what looked to her untrained eyes to be runes of some sort. It apparently had, at one time, borne a kind of slanted, rectangular jewel with rounded corners set into its one end, but if so, the gem must’ve fallen out because it was nowhere to be seen now. She tucked the bookmark into the leather binding, drew two candles closer, and turned her attention to what was written in the book.

She realized after reading a few handwritten sentences that it was a journal of sorts. The other books, while also handwritten, but each in quite beautiful and distinctive scripts (and not the childish scrawl exhibited in the cat’s book), had pertained in one way or another to historic adventures in some rather strange lands, or so Donnie had gleaned from what little reading she did do of the one and the skimming she’d done in the others. Granted, she hadn’t recognized any of the names of the central characters or even the places in the verbose and oddly familiar intrigues that played out over the one book’s pages, but since it was so dryly written, she figured it was a safe bet that it was mainly non-fiction, albeit with some rather heavy-duty exaggerations on the storyteller’s part.

The cat’s book, though, was different. It was randomly textbookish, giving somewhat deranged instructions on which plants to eat, which to never ever touch under any circumstances, and which to use for medicinal purposes; how to tend or dress animals, depending on whether they were for farm use or were game; how to preserve food with salt; and, oddly enough, it also provided various practical instructions on working with metals and woods and on refining salt brine to make table salt. Mingled within these jumbled directives were the personal ramblings of an obviously lonely woman who appeared to be quite convinced that she was a time-traveling witch.

She gave her name as Caterin of the Codelbærn and called herself “Caat” or “Caatee luf.” It took Donnie a minute to decipher Caterin’s writing code. Apparently, if you doubled up the vowels it gave you a long sound and all single vowels were short. There seemed to be no organized system for consonants though.

Reading the book was not an easy task. Nonetheless, Donnie valiantly plowed through the puerile writing until she came almost to the end. Well, if truth be told, she mostly leafed through the book because the

inventive spelling was giving her a headache. But a quick glance over the final three pages revealed her own name and what might be the reason she was here. She even exclaimed aloud, “Aha! At last!”

The cat immediately leaped onto the open book and meowed a loud, frustrated, “What?”

Donnie glared back at him, retorting, “I suppose you want me to read it to you, is that it? Will that finally make you happy? Will it make you stop griping at me every time you’re within ten feet of me? Will it?”

He climbed off the book and sat down to gaze steadily at her with his green eyes, clearly promising nothing. He curled his white-tipped black tail tightly around his white feet, a pose which exposed most of his white belly to her. Now that she’d gotten this close to him, Donnie realized that he was a really beautiful cat, with luxuriant, thick black fur on his back, while his underside was pure snowy white. The bottom half of his face was also white. He still wore around his neck the thin silver chain she’d noticed the first time she’d seen him. She could see now that it was a small, tilted, sort of parallelogram-looking locket which slid easily upon the chain. This locket gleamed radiantly against his breast and was inscribed in delicate lettering of some sort. She could only think that it was apparently the medieval equivalent of an ID tag.

“Hmm, you remind me of someone, you know that?” she told the cat.

He meowed arrogantly at her.

Donnie shrugged and began reading one of the final passages slowly, stumbling several times over the phonetics. “ ‘Well Caatee luf yee av dun it naow, avint yee just, and wot aa mess yee maad wit yee nowt gooen ta bee arrowend ta cleenn it up, Nuttin for it, yee av ta fiind wun ov yer ahff spriggs an brink er bakk ta saav thu werlld’.”

The next entry read: “ ‘I fowend wun fahr downen thu liin miind yee bott sheez thu oonlee wun wot kumms in kleeer liik, Naow Caat yee av ta giff Dahnnee’—That’s me, I presume,” Donnie added, looking up at the cat to make her point before resuming, “—‘giff Dahnnee thu powers wich shud bilon ta ahll beetwikks uss, bot nun o them will reelee miind az thaa wudint noo it iff thaa wuz born wiffowt em’.”

Feeling a bit chary, Donnie skipped down a page or so, then continued with the final entry. “ ‘Tahniit it must bee. Mii Donnie’—Hey, she spelled my name correctly this time! Oh, okay, okay, I’m reading already!” Donnie exclaimed, waving a hand at the impatient cat, who had just growled at her. “Er, where was I? Oh, yeah—‘Mii Donnie will bee az feersum aa witch az effer thar woz, wunst shee udderz thu furst werdz wich ahll wee Codlebærn musst saa ter kumm intu owr powerz, Tanee will allp her, eez aa reell guud kat’—Aha, so that’s your name, eh?”

Donnie looked up once more at the cat and cocked her head to the side. “Tanny?”

The cat replied by yowling sharply at her and placing an imperious paw on the book.

Donnie stuck her tongue out at him, then shook her head ruefully, asking the room at large, “Can you believe I’m being bullied by a cat?” She returned her attention to the book and continued reading the line, “— ‘aa reell guud kat’.” She couldn’t help herself; she let out a snicker of disbelief when she repeated that part. “ ‘Naow ahllz eez got ta duu is maak her saa ahmii see’.”

It seemed as though the whole world began to rock and shake after Donnie finished speaking and she immediately surged to her feet, moving instinctively toward the front door. A particularly large jolt halted her progress at two steps and her response to this, as she stumbled back toward the table while the floor of the cottage heaved up at her, was a horrified, “Omigod, did I just make myself a witch? Nah, no way—” And then the air around her went funny, kind of dead-like. At first, she thought she’d gone deaf, but suddenly a visible and vibrant, cobalt-hued shock wave, originating within her, expanded around her, hung there for a moment encasing her entire body, then shot outwardly with a muffled percussive burst that returned hearing to her ears. As this wave passed through the furniture, walls, ceiling and floor, it made them shimmer and blaze with light. Even the cat was subjected to this electric phenomenon.

Paralyzed in astonishment, Donnie helplessly watched this shock wave clear the room and, from what she could see through the window, apparently continue on outside the walls of the house. Her eyes widened further as every single thing within and without the shabby little cottage began to glow with this brilliant blue luminescence, not the least of which was her own body.

As a matter of fact, the entire valley shone with it, and almost instantly this power wave rose to the surface outside the valley and again spread outward, looking from above as though it were consuming the very Earth and all things upon it as it raced over the landscape and rose up toward the heavens until it reached the outer atmosphere. The entire planet was engulfed by it in mere seconds. But Donnie knew none of that, of course.

This intense cobalt radiance should have been blinding at its apex, yet somehow Donnie could see perfectly well through the effulgent glare to plainly make out the pages of the scattered books riffling; dust bunnies tumbling to the corners of the room; the small, cast iron cauldron she used for making her teas swaying precariously on the spit above the roaring fire; even the cat’s fur flattening against his body. He smiled

smugly and began to preen his ruffled coat as the magnificent light faded at last and fell to the ground like a curtain. The whole thing probably lasted around ten seconds.

“Wow, that was so Hollywood!” Donnie whispered in awe when it was done and she had plopped down heavily into the chair she had vacated seconds before. Just then, a series of loud thuds could be heard outside. It sounded to her like the heavens were pitching huge boulders around the front and side of the cottage, sending shock tremors through the timbered floor of the structure once more. She jumped to her feet again and shouted, “What the hell was that?”

What happened next caused her to faint. When she returned to consciousness several seconds later, the cat’s face was hanging over the corner of the table, looking down upon her. Stupefied, Donnie cried up at him, “I didn’t really hear you talk, did I, kitty? No-no, that would be crazy and, no matter the evidence to the contrary, I am not crazy!” She swallowed hard and cringed, running her hands over her face. “At least, I’m pretty sure I’m not crazy. But I suppose that’s what every nut case says, isn’t it?” She looked straight up at the ceiling from where she lay and groaned, “I knew I should’ve been more worried about Mom and her hats. And poor Aunt Bea! Oh, dubious DNAs, not from both sides of the family!”

The cat, ignoring this increasingly ambiguous tirade, replied haughtily, “I said, ’tis the cacophony of thy trappings falling to earth. Their presence was insisted upon by thee, as thou shouldst verily recall!” he remonstrated her.

Donnie sat up abruptly and hit her head on the table, nearly knocking herself unconscious again. She screeched in pain, which sent the cat flying from her. Pressing her hand onto the top of her head, she carefully raised herself back into the chair, wincing at the lightning bolt pains mere breathing sent ricocheting through her skull.

She rubbed the knot on her head gingerly and looked at the cat in desperation. “Stop that, will you? Everybody knows cats can’t talk, and even if they could, they’d never, ever sound like someone from a medieval play. Who says *thee* and *thy* anymore, let alone *thou*? Or *cacophony* and *trappings*, for that matter? Now, if you were a dragon or a drunken lord or a damsel in high dudgeon, I could maybe go with the antiquated elocution, but a house cat? Nope, no way! So there, that’s settled; you will stop talking like that! Better yet, you will stop talking altogether, if you please. Oh, hold on, I get it now, this means I must be dreaming—yeah-yeah, no-no, now wait, don’t interrupt me. No, seriously, wait! This really is all a dream, see? And, may I interject at this point, a dang nasty one!”

The cat, after trying to get a word in edgewise, settled back onto the table in front of Donnie, his tail curled tightly around his feet. He appeared ready to let her rant.

And so she did. "Oh, crazed kittens," Donnie crowed with sudden relief, "Why, I'll bet I haven't even left San Francisco for Wales yet! I was probably in some streetcar or city bus accident, because, you know," she informed the cat pedantically, "they happen all the time! And so, wait for it, here it comes...what's really happening is, I'm lying in some hospital bed right now, probably in a coma, havin' one whale of a dream! I'll bet you anything I'll wake up in a moment and when I'm recovered from my injuries I'll return to my oh-so comfortable, real house in my beloved San Fran! And then I'll go to work every day, my sister and I will visit our parents for dinner on Wednesdays, and I'll have lunch with my best friend on Saturdays, just like I always do. And I will forget all about ever wanting to take a trip to Wales, or anywhere else for that matter, and my life will be mine, forever!"

She added a triumphant yell of anticipation to this, declaring loudly, "Silly strumpets of the world unite! I'm gettin' the heck outta here—I'm goin' home! Do you hear me, cruel world? I've figured out what's really going on here, and by this time tomorrow, I'll be awake and everything will be right as rain; no talking cats, no drafty cottages, no having to go potty out in the middle of the friggin' woods anymore! I'll have—why, I'll have civilization again! A real kitchen with electricity and...and indoor plumbing and...oh, and my Heavenly Sleeper mattress! Omigod, my car! I love my car, have I told you that yet, kitty? Why, I have never loved that car more than I do at this very moment! Hoo-boy, will everybody crack up when they hear about this dream! My friends are really gonna think I'm as wacky as—well, as they're always kidding me I am. And you know what, kitty-kitty? I may even agree with them this time!" She looked at him eagerly, obviously expecting him to agree with her.

But the cat merely shook his head before opining in his rich, pompous voice, "Of all Catie's progeny, why must she have been able to call out only to thee? There had to have been plenty of others betwixt you who are not complete imbeciles. Any number of them would have been eminently more suitable than thou!"

Donnie turned a bright red at this insult. "Well, I can't help that I was the only one to hear her call, whenever, whatever that was!" she snapped back at him. "But believe you me, if I'd known this was going to be the result, I would've let my answering machine get it! And no more thee, thou or thy; I mean it!" Her expression suddenly changed to one of disbelief. "Oh, jeepers," she cried in frustration, "I can't believe I'm

actually trading barbs with a cat! Heeeyyy, hold the phone,” she was suddenly wary again, “did I hear you say something about me insisting that Catie send some things along with me? Well now, that’s quite a stretch, don’t ya think, since I’ve never even met her? Where is she, by the way? Off flying her broomstick somewhere, yanking more innocent people out of their perfectly comfortable centuries and stealing them away to this backwater hell-hole? You must know what happened to her, so spill it like the nice little pudgy tat she swears you are in her journal.”

The cat sniffed the air as if it had suddenly turned rancid. “*You* are not amusing. Though I must say you are stupid, foolish, lazy, thoughtless and cowardly.”

“Oh, yeah?” Donnie looked shocked and then blustered angrily, “Oh, yeah? Well...I liked you a whole lot better when I only thought you were bitchin’ at me all the time. Now it seems I’m doomed to knowing exactly what it is you’re bitching at me about! And how dare you call me those horrible things?” she huffed in outrage. “You don’t even know me! Okay, maybe I haven’t been at my best since coming here, but I think I deserve some leeway due to mitigating circumstances.”

The cat eyed her superiorly and sniffed sharply again. “Humph!” he said. “A Coddlebaern you may be, but clearly the bloodline has been severely diluted throughout the centuries!”

Donnie’s jaw dropped and her eyes widened. She glared at the cat, counting to ten under her breath before replying sweetly, “Hey, did anyone ever tell you that you look just like the cartoon cat Sylvester? I have a great idea—now that I’m a witch, I’ll conjure you up a talking mouse sidekick named Lucy, then I’ll work out some comedy routines for us all—you know, where I’m your owner and you constantly try to outwit the oh-so smarter mouse, but fail hilariously each and every time, with increasingly violent results for *you*.”

She leaned forward, warming to her subject, and still keeping her tone sugared. “And once we’ve got our skits honed to perfection, we’ll hook up the horse to the cart and become traveling minstrels...or troubadours...or whatever they’re called around here! Anyway, I’ll bet we take every town we visit by storm. And trust me, I know it’ll work because audiences around the globe fall all over themselves for really brutal comedy, no matter the century. It’ll be an absolute riot and I guarantee we’ll end up becoming unbelievably rich and famous!”

She sat back and her face took on a mock-pained expression while she deadpanned, “Either that or we’ll get burned at the stake. Which, come to think about it, would put a bit of a damper on the whole shebang, wouldn’t it? Oh, well, you mull it over for a while and let me know what you think you can contribute.” She bent forward and glared

once more at the cat. "After all, I gather this is a partnership and having you as my familiar is part and parcel of the package deal, right?"

The cat leapt off the table, stalked to the window and jumped up onto its sill. He sat down stiffly with his back to Donnie, immutable.

Donnie mugged at the cat's back. By golly, it felt good to get back at that annoying feline! But her triumph over the caustic cat was short lived. For the next few minutes, Donnie sat silently at the table, holding her head in her hands, and simply tried to digest what had just occurred. Was she truly a witch now? Was that possible? Well, something otherworldly had certainly happened to her, that much was clear. One doesn't become a Dr. Pennywell on a normal day, does one?

She let the cat sulk for a while, then eventually inquired of him, "Hey, Sylvester? Seriously this time, where's Catie now?"

The cat shot her a sullen glance over his back before deigning to reply to the window. "My name is Tanygrisiau yr Eglwys Wen," he said, "and I do not know where Catie has gone. Were that she was here, she might provide the explanations you have cried aloud for so insistently and so pathetically over the past fortnight."

Donnie scowled at him. "It has not been a fortnight; not yet!" she retorted. "And I'll thank you not to exaggerate that part...but I guess I can give you the other bit," she admitted grudgingly. She sighed heavily, sagged back in her chair and pointedly ignored the cat's previous protest over his new name to bemoan, "Why did she do this to me, Sylvester? And without even asking me if I was okay with it!"

Other than the glance he'd given her a few moments ago, the cat had continued to sit with his backside facing Donnie. He now turned completely around and stared at her in consternation. "She most definitely did ask you that the night she brought you here!"

Thunderstruck, Donnie considered this for a few moments, about to protest until an elusive image of a young woman dressed in bright yellow taffeta floated to the surface of her mind, chasing around in her memory and refusing to stand still. It was sort of a half-memory of a dream she'd had the night before her arrival here, and in it the odd little woman had asked her some decidedly curious questions. Now eyeing the cat with incredulity, Donnie almost shouted at him, "You mean that was Catie in my dream that night?"

" 'Twas no dream!" he informed her impatiently. "I will grant that you were in a dream state when she asked you what was, really, an altogether simple inquiry. Which you then answered exhaustively. She brought everything you requested, although we both felt it excessive and we truly could not see what good most of it would do you here. But you

were insistent and time was running too short to quibble. Why did you answer her queries at all if you did not wish to come?"

Donnie stared at him, shaking her head disbelievingly. "Because I thought they were hypothetical, of course! I mean, who would think something like that was real? A bizarrely dressed young woman appears out of nowhere in the middle of a perfectly good dream and croaks, 'Dearie, if I sent ye back to ancient times to become the most powerful witch that ever was, what would ye want to be bringin' with ye? From yer world, I mean.' Now I ask you, what kind of a question is that, if not hypothetical?" she demanded angrily of the cat.

"You could have told her no!" he argued.

Donnie huffed. "I tell you I thought it was a dream! I had no idea—let me stress that—*no* idea she was real, or that she was serious." Tears were welling up in Donnie's eyes now. "I didn't know she meant it for keeps. How was I supposed to know she meant it for keeps?" she wailed, her voice breaking with emotion.

The cat watched silently as Donnie stood from the chair and began collecting the scattered books. She carried them to the bookshelf and put each away, her movements exaggeratedly deliberate and precise. When finished, she announced in a small, tight voice, "I'm going to bed. I've had enough for one day. No, scratch that and make it one lifetime." She then slipped quietly into the bedroom.

That night Donnie had one of the worst dreams she'd ever experienced in her life. More nightmare than simple dream, it was a vivid, haunting and unsettling thing, with her being chased by all manner of monsters. She ended up flying down several stone passageways blindly and into a cave where she found herself entirely alone. The cave was lit with an eerie, flickering light and was filled with a huge roar of sound, like that of water rushing over a dam during a great flood, which occluded all other noises. She felt trapped and immobilized by her fears there, utterly helpless and unable to free herself.

She awoke from this dream in the early morning, just before sunrise, and, with her cheeks wet from her tears, cried out softly, "No one even knows I'm here, do they? Oh, someone, please help me!" Depression assaulted her senses, leaving her heart heavy and her eyes streaming until the grey of dawn approached, when she determinedly steeled herself to meet the day. Only then did she reach up to wipe away her tears and see a blueish energy flit from her fingertips to her face. It *was* true then. Last night really had happened.

Sitting up suddenly, Donnie experienced a strangely exhilarating epiphany because she realized this also meant that her belongings must be waiting for her out in the yard. For the life of her, she couldn't

remember what all she'd told Catie she'd need, but she distinctly recalled asking for her clothes. Oh, and her pooch! She'd specifically asked for him, she now recollected with glee. Someone from her world, she thought to herself longingly. He was her baby, the closest she'd probably ever come to having a child. And, jeez Louise, had she missed him terribly since leaving California. Missed his snout either in her hand or coming up from behind to goose her—well, okay, she hadn't missed the last part all that much, she decided.

She got up and tiptoed to the outer room, moving across it quickly to the front door with the green boots in her hand. She unbolted and opened the door slowly, hoping not to waken the cat because she didn't think she could face him right now. She slipped outside and pulled the door to behind her, leaving it slightly ajar. Turning, she gaped with joy. Her belongings had indeed arrived! The first thing she noticed was that all eighteen bookshelves seemed to have made it through safely. And her books were there too—hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah, she'd brought all her books!

There were also several very large black trunks strewn all about the overgrown front and side yards. Two trunks, standing side by side, had broken locks and their lids were flung wide open. She could see clothing spilling out from the depths of one. Yes! They were her own clothes, or at least some that looked very much like it.

Slipping into the green boots, Donnie ran over to these two trunks. She cooed with delight when she looked in the other open trunk and found her mother's (still serviceable) old boombox and headphones, her own digital music player (she'd had it forever) and its charging station and speakers, and her extensive CD collection, along with her CD organizer racks. For years, she'd made an art form of recording her own rock, folk and blues compilations from her and her father's extensive digital music collections. Randomly, she chose a CD marked with an "H" for "Happy" and popped it into the player. "Do You Believe in Magic?" by David Dean Smith began wafting from the speakers.

"Wow, good pick!" Donnie exclaimed, somewhat bemused at the unexpected appropriateness of song. It was a classic her father had played for her over and over when she was a little girl. She now danced happily to the other open trunk, singing along with the much beloved melody.

She picked up a set of clean sweats and underclothes fortuitously laying on top of the other clothing, still humming along with the song. Then she almost skipped over to the well, where she filled the well's water bucket and proceeded to peel off the, by now, putrid pajamas she'd been living in for far too long, deciding she would throw them in the fire

as soon as she went back inside. Ha, let the bedbugs crackle in the flames!

She dipped her hand into the bucket's freezing contents with a yelp and, grabbing the rough bar of lye soap from the rim of the well, scrubbed her body until it was squeaky clean.

When Donnie was finished with her bath, she shivered, suddenly realizing that she had no towel. She really wished she had one of her big, fluffy yellow towels because she was definitely getting chilled. Instantly, a towel of that exact description materialized into her wet hands. She nearly dropped it in surprise.

With an absurd pang of triumph, she chuckled and crowed out to her new world, "Hey, I've just performed my first magic act!" She continued washing herself and, once she'd dried off, she dressed in the fresh, clean clothes she'd gotten from the trunk. She pulled up some fresh water with the bucket, plunged her head into its depths, lathered and rinsed her hair a couple of times, and wrapped the towel tightly around her head when she was done. Then she went hunting for sneakers and the dog.

Chapter 2

This Home Is Yours

The trunks were a treasure trove to Donnie. She dug into each one eagerly, flinging clothing, bedding, pots and pans, tools and other implements aloft, laughing with delight at each rediscovered possession. And, to her great surprise, everything she unpacked floated gently from its trunk to the ground in an orderly manner as soon as she tugged on them and sent them flying. Judging from the condition of the cottage when she'd first arrived, she would not have thought Catie capable of such careful systemization.

In the third trunk she opened, Donnie found Rex the Wonder Dog, her huge, long-haired German Shepherd Dog. He bounded out as soon as the trunk lid lifted, and then raced around his mama, wriggling and crouching in play stance every time she caught him in a happy embrace. His silky-soft, red, black and tan coat gleamed and sparkled in the morning sunlight. Then, as was his habit, he came up behind Donnie, stuck his head between her knees and sat down, looking up at her with his expressive brown eyes. Quivering, he suddenly said in a youthful voice, much to their mutual astonishment, "Where are we, Mama?"

He growled once and whipped around wildly (nearly knocking Donnie over), looking for whoever it was who'd spoken. No one there. He began sniffing every inch of the surrounding ten-foot area, all the while repeating, "Who said that? Now, who said *that*? Hey, who just said *that*?"

In a few more moments, Rex mumbled happily, "Oh, I do believe it's me that's speaking! Why, yes, it is me! I can talk now! Hey, Mama," he shouted, "I can talk! D'ya hear me? Listen, I can talk just like you can!" He proceeded to run pell-mell around the yard trying out his voice, assuming different accents and timbres (she clearly had watched too much TV in his presence), having a merry old time discovering the wonder of speech.

Donnie stared at him glassy-eyed throughout these antics, her heart sinking. It wasn't bad enough to have a talking cat, now she also had a talking slash yodeling dog? Shaking her head slowly, she reached inside Rex's trunk and pulled out his bed, food bin and dishes, medicines and other sundries, plus his chews and toys. She looked at the pile they made and realized that she'd have to figure out what she was going to feed him once the dog food ran out, which was likely to be soon.

She vowed he would not have free run of the chickens. Even though they made the hair rise on the back of her neck, especially at feeding time when they all advanced on her at once, clucking and pecking ominously, making her want to dump the corn in a pile and run like hell, they were now under her protection, and she felt duty-bound to ensure their survival. Resignedly, she expelled a long, heavy breath and moved on to the next trunk.

In one, Donnie came upon the stylish white marble bathroom sink and matching toilet that she'd paid a month's salary for two years ago. When she'd pulled those out, she saw a corner of the huge shower stall that she'd paid another month's salary for. She drew it out too, although how it fit in the trunk in the first place, she had no idea. But there it was, and what good it would do her here, even she had to admit she didn't know. She also found her soaps, creams, lotions and makeup—in fact, all her bathroom and cosmetic paraphernalia.

In the next trunk was the beautiful Georgian mirror she'd inherited from her grandmother. Miraculously, it was intact. Donnie reached inside again and found the matching desk. "Wow, this is so Dusty Bobbins!" she shouted with glee to the cat, who, by this time had slipped through the open door and was watching her and the dog somewhat anxiously.

"What, pray tell, are dusty baw bins?" Sylvester asked, perfunctorily polite.

"Pray tell?" Donnie repeated under her breath, once again taken aback by the cat's antiquated allocution. She said to him, "Well, firstly, it's Bobbins, not baw bins; Bob-ins, get it? As to what she is..." Doubtful as to how to explain that peculiar children's literary character, Donnie chewed her lip a moment, then suddenly brightened, exclaiming, "Why, she's only the best teacher that ever lived! And, hey, guess what—she's magical too! Although, I really don't think she's a witch, just a magical teacher with a crazy, morphing whiteboard."

Still considerably unenlightened, the cat decided not to pursue this line of conversation. When he'd asked his one question, the dog had noticed his presence and was now approaching him with great interest, letting out a high-pitched play whine. Sylvester haughtily rebuffed this fresh arrival with, "Do not think it, for if you come any closer, I shall turn you into a toad."

The dog sat down abruptly, a few feet away from the cat, and cocked his head in surprise, his black eyebrows knitted together and his big tan paws set primly on the ground. He deliberated on this new development for a bit, then inquired curiously (echoing Donnie's own train of thought), "Can you really do that?"

Sylvester gravely nodded his head. Rex scampered away quick as rabbit.

At first, Donnie was astounded that she'd brought along her kitchen appliances. She nearly said so to the cat, but a sudden feeling of expectancy came over her and stilled her lips. It was followed by the surprisingly crystal-clear memory of her insistence the night Catie came to collect her that everything Donnie owned must be brought along. It had been essential that Catie bring it all—for what reason, Donnie could not fathom. But she now remembered how adamant she'd been when Catie had questioned her a second time about it.

Why hadn't she remembered all of this sooner? It was almost as though there were some sort of shroud on her memory, a veil that seemed to be lifting in part, at least. Yet, even now, there was no explanation whatsoever within her memory as to *why* she'd insisted all her belongings must be brought.

Well, okay then, so everything had to be here with her, for whatever reason. Donnie decided just to accept this for now because it felt right to her. Hopefully, before long, she'd figure out the answer to this and several other mysteries swirling around in her head.

But she still didn't know what she should do with her kitchen appliances. Storage maybe? Without electricity, it's not like she could use them for their original purpose, so what good would they do her here? Finding the sink gave Donnie inspiration; she hoped her book on plumbing was still on the Fix-It-Yourself bookshelf. After all, what's the point of being magical if you can't plumb a bathroom and a proper kitchen with it?

In yet another trunk she found her desktop computer and its assorted peripherals, her TV and stereo, her DVD player, her extensive movie collection, and her laptop and its wireless speakers. The presence of the laptop told her that Catie must also have included in the trunks the belongings Donnie had taken with her to Wales. Donnie shook her head sadly, relegating her electronics to "storage" for the time being.

Her huge cedar wardrobe and bench with built-in drawers were in the final trunk. She stuffed all her clothing inside the wardrobe and all the shoes and boots into the bench, deciding she'd write a spell on them there and then. She canted:

"Fill this cedar with all the things,
Any girl can wear from day to day.
Whatever her heart's desire,
When opening the door she'll only have to think or say,
I want to wear my blank today!"

She wasn't sure how this spell thingy worked, but she hoped it was understood about that "blank" part.

She looked inside the trunk again and continued to take out more of her bedroom furniture until the trunk appeared empty. Donnie reached into its blackness one more time anyway. Her hand found something solid, smooth and long. She tugged hard on it and out flew the king-sized bronze bed she'd sent all the way to New York for last year. The box springs came out next. She dug around inside the trunk again, but found nothing more in it. She closed the lid and locked it, preparing it to be stored in the hayloft above the stables.

"Rats, when I said I wanted my bed, I should've made it clear that meant the whole thing!" she grumbled, gazing forlornly at the bed frame. "I'm really gonna miss my Heavenly Sleeper. I don't suppose any of my books have a section on making mattresses. That would probably be asking too much!"

Sylvester, who had remained silent for some time, responded to this complaint. "Catie could not bring the mattress because a young woman had just fallen asleep on it. She could not very well have taken that from the girl also."

Donnie stared at him, her mouth agape. "You mean all this stuff really was ripped from my house in San Francisco that night and not just duplicated? Ha!" she crowed. "What a hoot! I wonder how Julia's gonna explain my empty house to Liz? And to the cops, because you know Liz will call them! Oh, m'gosh, the bathroom—how on earth is she going to account for that? Aw, now that's just priceless!"

She thought about her friend Liz warmly. Her greatest pal ever was small, barely five foot in her stockinged feet, and a perfect sized one. Her long, silky, burgundy-colored hair, admittedly not a hair color found in nature, was her pride and joy. Donnie had known her since they'd worked together at the *SFTimes* seven years before. Although Liz had left the paper for a corporate training job long ago, their friendship had developed fast and remained solid all these years later.

Julia was Liz's younger sister by about sixteen years. Once she'd heard Donnie was going to Wales for several months' sabbatical to finish her book, Julia had begun a relentless, campaigned attack on her sister. She complained incessantly to Liz of how tired she was of living in the crowded little apartment she shared with two other girls near the college campus and really needed, had to have a break from it or she'd just kill herself. There was simply no way she'd be able to write her master's thesis there, what with all the partying and general mayhem always going on, and Liz did want her to get her master's, didn't she?

It was only when Liz had reluctantly agreed that Julia's situation was indeed intolerable and asked how she could fix it that Julia had finally coughed up what she was really after. She wanted Donnie to let her housesit.

Donnie obviously didn't like Julia all that much, but since Liz was the one who'd asked, she hadn't been able to refuse the arrangement. Plus, it was cheaper than hiring a professional house and dog sitter. Under penalty of having to get a deliberately bad cut and color job and live with it for six weeks, Liz had agreed to check the house at least twice a week to make sure Julia didn't destroy anything in it. Otherwise, no deal. Liz had sworn solemnly on a stack of fashion magazines that she would take care of the place and watch over Julia and Rex like a hawk.

Donnie could just imagine Julia spluttering on the phone to Liz, "They took everything but the mattress I was sleeping on!" Liz would've been ready to kill her, Donnie thought cheerfully. Then she immediately sobered. Liz also would've tried to get in touch with Donnie in Wales.

She realized that her family and friends would be very worried about her disappearance and she now swung around toward the cat. "My family!" she cried. "Oh, jeez, Sylvester, my mom will be beside herself once she finds out I'm not in Wales anymore. Is there any way I can get a message to her and tell her I'm okay?" she demanded frantically.

Sylvester looked up from his morning bath, licked his chops, and said calmly, "She knows already." Noting Donnie's surprise at this revelation, he went on to explain, "You must understand, your coming here is part of your family lore. Catie told me this the night she brought you here. She said the volumes containing the tales of your adventures have been passed from generation to generation. Your mother grew up knowing full well that her eldest daughter would be sent to ancient times to save the family bloodline. Why do you think she named you Donemere, a most uncommon name for your time?" The cat studied Donnie's still-startled face for a second more, then asked incredulously, "Your mother truly never gave you any hint of this?"

"No, she didn't!" Donnie exclaimed once she could find her voice. "But that certainly explains why my parents cursed me with such a weird name, yet gave my sister the nice, normal name of Emily. I always wondered where *Donemere* had come from, but Mom would never say. It also explains why she insisted I come to Wales—oh, felonious families! That means my own mother sent me to my doom! But no, she wouldn't do that if things end badly, so they must turn out okay, right?" She suddenly processed the other news the cat had imparted to her and, again stunned, enquired, "What did you mean when you said I was sent here to save the family bloodline?"

Sylvester gazed at her steadily and silently, clearly sizing her up and, just as clearly, gauging her as falling far short of the expected requirements. He said dourly, "One day I shall be allowed to tell you this and much more with it, Donemere. That day is not today. There is much you must do, much you must learn. Do well with all I shall teach you and it will not be long before I may impart to you what must be done to save the Codlebaern bloodline. For now, believe that your family is in peace. Worries such as this must not distract you."

Donnie eyed him back doubtfully. "That's easy for you to say, O' Master Cat. Not so easy for me to do, though," she informed him. "Well...I suppose if you won't tell me now, you won't tell me. But don't expect me to drop the subject; I'll bug you every day until you do tell me. I'm just giving you fair warning. Hey, you say my mother knew all my life that I'd disappear one day? How weird is that? I wonder what she's going to tell everyone."

The cat spoke kindly to Donnie for the very first time in their brief acquaintance. "Catie said your mother was one in a million. She visited her before taking you away, so she could inform her that it was time for you to go. When Catie returned to your house, she told me that your mother was quite gracious throughout their visit. She will think of a suitable tale for all."

Donnie thought of her mother tenderly and her eyes filled with tears, which she brushed away immediately. No sense in starting that behavior again. What she needed right now was activity. Okay, what she really needed was to go home, but until she could figure out a way to do that, she was determined to make this place seem like home. And since her belongings had arrived, it was time to get busy.

Her most pressing problem was how to fit everything into the cottage. Even though its main room was quite large, it was, nonetheless, far too small for all of her furniture. She decided there and then that she'd just have to add a room or two. "How hard can it be?" she muttered wryly. "It's not like I don't already know the floor plan. Although, I really hope my DIY section's somehow improved because I don't think I have anything to fit this bill."

She considered what to use for materials. She had no clue how to cut stone from a quarry, but she did know how to fell trees; well, in theory anyway. Besides, the house she'd rented in Wales was mostly a wooden structure. And so, using magic, she could easily build the necessary rooms herself, right? She figured she could use Catie's instructions on woodworking to help her and she would just have to pray that she could actually trust the information the book contained.

She went back into the house and began reading the most relevant sections of Catie's journal. Most of the tools Donnie needed, she herself owned. Those tools she didn't have, she found amongst Catie's in the workshop at the back of the stables. Thankfully, Donnie's parents believed in teaching their daughters to be independent and, even better, handy with tools. She wished she could use her electric saw to shape the boards, but, for the present, her power tools were useless to her. Eventually, she would attempt to build an electric generator—but then again, no, she didn't intend on being here that long, now did she, she scolded herself severely, if not convincingly.

She decided to add a bathroom and a larger room at the back of the cottage for her office, which would also house her bookshelves. It took a little while for Donnie to realize that she truly was modeling her construction plans after the rambling cottage she'd been renting the past few months, although she was still a number of rooms short. She guessed they must've been added at another time. "Who knows, maybe even by me!" she grinned cheerfully.

A little while later, she rode the horse down the small rise the farm was situated on and up the hill to the top of the valley, where the forest began. There she walked around and started choosing which trees she would cut down. Sylvester and Rex came along with her; the dog to explore and the cat apparently to stare at her with curiosity. For the longest time, he neither said anything nor moved from the horse's rump, where he sat almost statue-like with his tail curled tightly around his feet.

Donnie had brought along a hand saw and, once she had two appropriately sized trees chosen, she untied the implement from the pack on the horse's back. Sylvester turned to watch her, unblinking, following her every move with his green eyes until finally he spoke, his tone forbidding. "You are not intending to fell a tree, surely?" he inquired.

"Well, yeah, how else can I build some extra rooms?" Donnie replied, absentmindedly pacing around while she worked out the directions in which she wanted the trees to fall.

"You might try asking the trees first."

Donnie took a few more steps before comprehending exactly what the cat had said, then she stopped in her tracks and twisted back to look at him. "Ask a tree if I can cut it down? Well, that's an angle I would not have thought of," she deadpanned. "Um, what happens if I don't ask it? Is it going to do something nasty to me?"

"Most assuredly."

"Ah, these are magical trees then," she said knowingly, bobbing her head.

"Naturally," Sylvester assured her. "This area resonates with magic. Therefore, its inhabitants are, by and large, almost all magical. Most magical creatures must live on magical lands."

"Why?"

"These days, they tend to distress nonmagical beings."

"I can see that. So, *pray tell*, just how far does this particular magical land extend?" Donnie asked with a devilish gleam in her eye.

The cat ignored her mockery and answered smugly, "Outside the valley, it runs for precisely twenty-four miles in every direction."

Donnie pursed her lips. "Let me guess, that's why there're no other humans living within twenty-five miles of here, right? Isn't that what you said earlier when you gave me that unbelievably long-winded lecture about my clothing?"

"You are correct."

"Okay, so why don't humans live closer to us? I seriously doubt they're aware the land is magical, so what's to keep them from settling here? Is there something in the water?" When Sylvester merely stared at Donnie for several seconds without speaking, she added, "You know, makes it taste bad or something like that."

The cat, still sitting on the horse's back with his tail wrapped tightly around his feet, blinked and intensified his stare, obviously perplexed. "I am unaware what water, bad tasting or otherwise, could possibly have to do with it," he finally intoned.

"Okay," Donnie sighed dramatically, just barely managing to stop herself from rolling her eyes heavenward, "instead of me guessing, how about you just tell me why no other humans live in these magical lands."

The cat looked at her as if she were a particularly dense specimen of her kind. "They are not magical creatures, of course," he said, clearly believing he was stating the obvious.

Donnie put the saw down carefully, leaned back on her hips, and crossed her arms in front of her. "Oh, I see, it's kind of a vicious circle then, innit? I mean, you can't be magical if you don't live in some part of the magical lands, but you can't live in any part of the magical lands if you're not magical. Well...I guess that'll certainly cut down on urban sprawl." She put a finger to her lip thoughtfully and tapped it, arching her right eyebrow as she enquired, "Does this mean that if I leave the area, my magic won't work?"

"No, your powers are permanent."

"Oh, goody," she drawled. "What happens if a nonmagical human does come onto the magical lands?"

"They become magical to some degree," the cat said, then admitted uncomfortably, "Mostly, they go mad from it."

“Why?” Donnie asked suspiciously.

“Because they fear magic so. Therefore, it weighs heavily upon their sanity.”

She gave the cat a long look before pointing out, “I wonder what that says about me? Or haven’t I been here long enough to tell whether I’ve gone mad yet?”

Again, Sylvester ignored her. “Catie always swore to the villagers that if only they would not fear the power in the land, but rather simply accept its existence, it would be far less harmful to them. Regardless, its effects would wear off within a day of their exiting the magical lands, and, since they needed Catie’s salt, they ventured here whenever necessary.”

“Ah, so it’s fair to assume that nobody believed her about magic’s effects, izzat right?” Donnie eyed Sylvester sardonically and quipped, “Imagine that, medieval villagers who don’t trust the local witch; who’d have thunk it possible? Oh, by the way, where did Catie get all the salt? She didn’t really refine it herself, did she, like she says in her journal?”

Rex called out to Donnie just then, running up to her at full speed and shouting excitedly, “Hey, Mama, the trees talk too! C’mere, c’mere, you gotta come talk to ’em! They’re really nice and they’re just dyin’ to meet ya! Come on!” He grabbed the bottom of Donnie’s shirt with his mouth and tugged.

As she was being led away, Sylvester called out to Donnie to remember to ask the trees before cutting them down. She waved a hand to indicate her agreement, then, under her breath, questioned who was crazier, her or him? Him for even suggesting such a silly thing, or her because she actually was going to try talking a bunch of magical trees into “letting” her cut them down.

Rex finally let go of her after being swatted lightly on the nose several times and ran on ahead. He stopped a few feet away from a small stand of very large, mostly ancient oak trees, and sat down, his ears perked straight up. As soon as she came within earshot, Donnie heard him telling about all the strange things that had been happening lately to him and his mama.

She decided this was a wonderful approach to take, and so she sat down nearby to listen to her dog’s tale. She supplemented Rex’s story whenever necessary, mainly where he didn’t know the details. They chatted with the trees for nearly fifteen minutes, with Rex embellishing his part in the story only a little—for him, that is. He seemed to have picked up Donnie’s habit of effusive hyperbole now that he could talk.

Many of the trees all around them displayed suitable interest in Rex’s chronicle of woe, actually nodding their branches and emitting

sympathetic tut-tuts in response to his emotional recounting of his ordeal. And they very kindly asked questions in all the right places in order to keep the conversation rolling along rather nicely, their rumbling voices emanating from deep within their trunks.

Finally, Rex's overly dramatic narrative came to an end, allowing Donnie to broach the subject she'd come about. Her dog had explained how their belongings were just sitting there, completely unprotected from the elements—"They're strewn *all* over the yard, can you believe it?"—and how he was just beside himself with worry as to how they were ever going to fit everything into that little bitty cottage, especially with winter coming on so soon. It's just terrible the way he was expected to—

Donnie interrupted him in the middle of his complaints to venture as cheerfully as she could, "Don't suppose you'd like to help us out with that situation, would you?"

A gnarled old apple tree, situated off to her right, piped up suddenly to ask, "How can we be of assistance to you, Donemere of the Codlebærn?"

"Well," she began delicately, her face registering surprise at the name she was apparently to be called here, "see, where we come from, wood is one of the best building materials around. It's strong, solid, lasts a long, long time, all that. And so, I was wondering if I could, er, well, if any of you would, um, if a few of you wouldn't mind, say...allowing me to use you for the floor, walls and roof of some new rooms on the cottage? Er, obviously it would mean I'd have to cut you down...well, I imagine you know what I'm saying." She stopped there, realizing that she had probably said quite enough.

The trees grew quiet for some while, during which time Rex stared at his mama reproachfully. She shrugged diffidently in return, mouthing to him, "Sylvester said I had to ask them that!"

Bryn Ddu (who Donnie immediately rechristened Brindle upon hearing his real name), a particularly large oak, finally spoke up and said, "I am more than twenty-one thousand years old and have spent many ages of my life moving all around the magical lands, but now that they have diminished so greatly, a tree cannot travel as before. I, like my brethren, have been forced to root myself permanently and, while I have accepted my fate, it has become wearisome to stand in only one place, knowing I shall die and be of little use to anyone. I find now I am yearning for change." He hesitated for a moment more before adding decisively, "You may use me for your magical house, Donemere of the Codlebærn."

Other trees chimed in that they too wished to experience a different future from what they had envisioned until now. A future which would

not leave them rooted to one spot simply to wither and die, to become nothing more than a mute, worthless monument to their rich, vibrant history.

"Why are the magical lands shrinking? I don't understand." Donnie asked Brindle, after thanking the trees profusely.

The mighty oak responded slowly. "There was a great battle some years past between men and the powers of darkness," he said. "Men prevailed, but, in doing so, many fair magical creatures were forced to make the exodus to Canavar. 'Tis the age of men now, and our time is coming to a close. You and your friend here are the most powerful magical creatures we have met in a very long time. Few remain who can hear our voices, and most of the trees outside your realm no longer even have theirs. This place is one of the few strongholds of magic left."

"But there are others?" By now, Donnie was standing in front of the old oak. She reached out a sympathetic hand to caress its bark.

Brindle sighed deeply. "There are but a few, and they are spread too far apart for a tree to move between without becoming rooted. We must stay here, next to the Codlebarn farm, or we too shall lose our voices."

"Then you will keep your voices when you become part of my magical house, as you call it." Donnie made this a statement of fact, then was nonplussed by the small wave of blue light that unexpectedly rushed outward from her body.

Accepting the trees' cries of gratitude, she pointed out, "After all, if I'm the most powerful witch ever, as Sylvester assures me I am, I should at least be able to offer you that comfort, wouldn't you think?" She then outlined her plan to them. They, in turn, gave her instructions on just where to cut.

She remembered reading in Catie's journal that whenever she needed wood, the little witch would use a spell that would soften any tree for a day, letting her cut through it like churned butter. Keeping this thought in her head and willing it to be so, Donnie canted:

"To make the day a good one,
Tree and bark are not so much,
To cut by hand and shape to touch,
With which to build a house, as such.
The day shall indeed be a good one,
When loving hands make the house a wood one."

The trees who had volunteered shimmered with a bright blue light. In a quiet voice, Brindle told her they were ready.

Donnie went to get the saw, while Rex cavorted amongst the trees. They seemed to like his presence, even his somewhat nonsensical chatter. She smiled broadly at her pup. Although he might not be the

brightest bulb in the package, he had more personality than any other dog she'd ever known. And a vocabulary that seemed to grow exponentially with each passing hour.

"Say, Sylvester, thanks for the tip about the trees," she said as she approached him and the horse. "A bunch of them agreed to be part of the new rooms. Too many in fact. I may have to build more rooms than I planned, since they all want to be used."

"Yes, like most of us, the trees have a keen desire to feel useful. Catie endeavored to befriend them on several occasions. Unfortunately, though she could sense the souls of all magical trees on her lands, she attained real discourse with only the strongest weald spirits, for her strengths lay in other directions."

"Oh? And what directions would those be?"

"Well, for one, her powers of prophecy were unerring whenever she put them to use. For another, she became a mistress of time travel. Regrettably, it has been her undoing."

"What do you mean, her *undoing*? How's she undone? What's happened to her?" Donnie asked in rapid succession, her curiosity greatly aroused.

But Rex came bounding up to them just then, calling excitedly, "Hey, Mama, guess what I found! A whole nest of those little black and white thingies that kinda look like Sylvester and kinda don't. Whaddya call them? Oh, that's right, skunks! Remember when I chased that one on the mountain when I was little?" He sat down and cocked his head inquiringly, his nose scrunched up and a painful look on his features. "And you yelled at me for a real long time and smashed those itty bitty tomatoes all over me when we got home—'member?"

Donnie vividly recalled the incident. It had happened in late spring, a few weeks after she'd adopted the dog as a puppy of seven months' age. They'd gone for a lengthy, evening hike in the headlands, where the overzealous dog had flushed out a grandfatherly skunk. The ride home had been unforgettable, even with all the windows down. The vehicles behind and around her car had given them a wide berth for the entire two hours they spent sitting in Saturday night traffic waiting to traverse the City.

Once they'd gotten home, Donnie found she had nothing, not even tomato juice, with which to de-skunk the dog, and it was far too late to go to the pet supply store. Unfortunately, the only tomatoes she had in the house were cherry tomatoes, so she'd mashed those all over Rex's head, where he'd been sprayed directly by the skunk. When this hadn't seem to work too well, she'd tried vinegar. Neither were successful in ridding him of the skunk smell, but after putting them both through all

that trauma, she'd found she had a dog *and* a house that smelled like a skunky salad. It was impossible to tell, by that point, who was the more miserable.

"And you smell like that again, don't you, my love?" Donnie observed with amusement, noting that oh-so distinct perfume in the air around her dog.

"Well, sure! It's not a very good smell, though, is it? It kinda makes my eyes water," he said, his nose somehow scrunching up even more than it already was. "Three or four of the skunks almost sprayed me, but only one of 'em actually got me, and that was mostly on my tail. I'm teaching 'em how to play keep-away and, boy, are we havin' fun! I'm actin' the part of the ball. Then they all hide behind trees and jump out when I race by, sprayin' for all they're worth! They're real quick on the draw, but I run way too fast for 'em!" Rex declared proudly.

"Yeah, okay," Donnie said with a shudder, deciding it was best for Rex to make friends his own way without interference from her. "But later today you're getting a good scrubbing, little mister! And you can tell your newfound friends that if you guys ever do this again, I will hunt them down and bring them back to the house. I will then de-skunk them with a bath exactly like the one you're going to get! And I will do that every time they skunk you in the future."

"Um, but Mama," the dog protested, "I don't think you can de-skunk a skunk that way, can you?"

"No, but I'm guessing that if they have to feel your pain just once, they'll never spray you again. I want you to promise me that after today, you will not play the object to be kept away, because if you do..." Donnie shook her finger at the dog and let her words trail off.

Rex grinned, pearly white teeth gleaming brightly amidst his grey-black muzzle, and agreed, "Okay, okay. Can I go back now? We haven't finished our game!"

Donnie shrugged, as if to actually say, *I don't care what you do today.*

Rex stood, his tail wagging furiously, and shouted, "I love you, Mama!" And with that, the dog was off, darting back into the forest.

Donnie smiled after him, very glad her full store of de-skunking cleanser had arrived with his trunk.

When she turned around to continue her conversation with Sylvester, she found he was gone. She spied him running up the hillside and toward the house. Well, well, it seemed the cat was developing quite a repertoire of avoidance mechanisms, wasn't he? She'd have to work on that aspect of his personality, see if she could trick him into giving away at least part of the ghost.

Donnie picked up the saw and headed back to the forest. Before an hour's time was through, she had felled the six trees who had volunteered themselves, cut them into the proper lengths where they lay, and was soon engaged in sawing them into planks. It was hard going, even though the spell worked beautifully and allowed her blade to slash through the wood quite easily. She found that whenever she touched the trees with her hands, their wood became much lighter, allowing her to manipulate them with ease. Shaping the timber into planks and boards was, by far, the most difficult part. But a simple string, attached to both ends of a log, sufficed as a guide to make a straight cut.

In another hour or two, all that remained of the trees were six massive piles of planks and smaller boards, and one large jumble of small tree limbs, twigs and leaves. Brindle advised Donnie to leave the tangled mass where it was, as many forest creatures would come round later to take what they needed to fortify their nests and dens. Within a few weeks, he assured her, the debris would be cleared and many homes would be much warmer and drier this winter. It was the way of the weald, he said, for trees to provide shelter for their neighbors by shedding a portion of their limbs every year. He then remarked dryly that, in this regard, it looked to be a particularly bountiful year for the animal nations.

Donnie acknowledged this with a bemused nod. She'd never thought of it like that whenever she'd seen tree limbs carpeting the forest floor. She considered this to be a very nice way indeed for trees to behave, and she told him so in a warm voice. He was silent for a time, and when he respectfully reminded her, " 'Tis the way of the weald," she could tell that he had been quite puzzled by her encomium.

She nodded again, more thoughtfully this time, then looked around her, studying the thick flush of vegetation that ran along the rim of the valley. She sensed numerous eyes staring back at her, each of them avidly curious, although none held either fear or malice in their depths. The woodland inhabitants seemed simply to accept her presence now and, she realized (greatly startled by this revelation), they could actually feel her soul, the same as she could theirs.

How funny; she no longer felt as though she'd just been abandoned here in this strange land. Oddly comforted by this discovery, Donnie smiled to herself and returned her attention to the task at hand. Her next obstacle would be to find a way to get the lumber nearer the house. She eyed the horse dubiously, deciding he would not thank her if she hitched him up to the wagon and made him pull that massive load down the hill and up the rise to the house, especially since she could only touch a few of the thick, heavy planks at one time, so most of them would remain

their normal weight. No, the horse would certainly rebel if she tried that. And she wouldn't blame him one bit.

She called out loudly to her familiar, "Hey, Sylvester, you there? I'm done shaping all the trees into planks and I was wondering if I should just sort of float them back to the house? Oh, heavens, I just thought of something: do I need a wand to do that kind of magic? Sylvester?"

The cat lifted his head above the tall grass so that he could now be seen. He was about halfway up the hill below the house, where he'd gotten quite involved in chasing noseums. "I must admit," he began slowly, "I am astounded that you have finished shaping all planks so quickly. That I had not expected. No, I had not expected that at all." He paused thoughtfully and stared at her across the distance between them for a few moments. "You should make an attempt at using your levitation skills," he finally instructed her, "so do that first. If you fail, there are other methods you may use, but they are more difficult and, at present, I am not prepared to have you try them. Yes-yes, I believe levitation will serve your purposes and will be one of the easier tasks for you to master. I will watch you from here to see how well you take to your powers without direction. As to your inquiry regarding a wand, 'tis my understanding that all wands seek out their master or mistress by themselves. You must wait for yours to find you. Until then, you will learn to wield your magic without one.

"Tomorrow," here, the cat paused for effect, "we begin your magic lessons in earnest." With this foreboding announcement, he disappeared back into the grass, presumably to critique her form.

Donnie wondered nervously how she was supposed to begin. Up 'til now, she'd only said a couple of spells and materialized one thing, and that only by accident. Nothing all that grand, certainly not on the scale of levitating hundreds and hundreds of huge planks across the valley, hundreds of feet away. She thought about some of the TV shows and movies she'd seen in the past that were about witchcraft. How did the witches in them usually do it? Was she supposed to write a spell for it, or was there a particular motion she was required to use?

In the end, she tried the most straightforward method she could think of. She flung her arm wide while she concentrated hard on one of the planks, visualizing it floating up into the air and down the hill, to the back yard. It, and several of its nearest companions, instantly shot high into the air, then zoomed at a downward angle to somewhere behind the house. Donnie heard them crash to the ground with loud bangs and groans of bewilderment.

"I am so sorry!" she shouted across the valley, then sheepishly looked down at the remaining pile of lumber from that particular tree to add, "I

am such an idiot! I honestly didn't mean to do that to you and I am very, very sorry."

After this reprimand to herself, she straightened her shoulders and stood tall. *It's also one heck of a start*, she encouraged herself silently and tried again. This time, she neither concentrated nor flung her arm quite so hard. The planks floated gently down toward the farm and stacked themselves neatly into one big pile of raw wood. In no time at all, she had every one of the planks and boards moved to the back yard. A hardly noticeable small wave of blue shot out from her midriff, right when she looked up at the sky, totally thrilled with her efforts so far. She marveled at how electric the heavens seemed to be today, then gathered up her equipment and scrambled clumsily onto the big horse. He shuffled down the hill and up to the farm. It was lunchtime.

Donnie took the lead rope off her steed and left him grazing in the front yard. She stepped up onto the little wooden stoop and then, the front door (which up to this point had behaved just as any door should) suddenly swung open on its own. Taken aback, Donnie hurried into the house, desperately hoping the darned thing wouldn't close behind her. It did not. After watching the door for a minute or so, and it doing nothing in the meantime, she turned toward the pantry, wondering what other surprises were in store for her now that she was magical. Not feeling particularly overjoyed at that prospect, she had what had become her usual midday repast of bread and cheese, eating quickly so that she could continue her home improvement project, her mood lightening again with the replenishment of fuel for her body.

When she was finished with her meal, she moved hesitantly toward the front door. She was relieved to find the thing behaved itself, although she practically darted past it to escape to the outside, admonishing herself with a murmured "Scaredy-cat," as soon as her feet touched the wooden stoop.

Once outside, she picked her way through her belongings to the trunk that held her music. She randomly chose another CD and popped it into the player. As soon as the first strains of "Flash to Dash" by Wooden Nickel emanated from the stereo, she went looking for her toolboxes. She searched in her largest for her compartmentalized nail box and took out a 20d nail, setting it on the wide ledge of the toolbox. By golly, she was going to try her hand at replicating them! After a moment's thought, Donnie canted:

"Take this one and find two,
Take those two and make them four,
Take those four and birth a score,

Take that score and times it four,
Take those four score and render four more.”

Before long, she had hundreds of nails. Then she replicated a few hundred 60d nails just in case she needed them. She put on her tool belt and filled the front pockets with nails. Digging farther into the toolbox drawer, she withdrew a six-inch long, one-inch diameter bolt, the only one left of those she'd bought to reinforce certain portions of her house in San Francisco in case of earthquakes. Bolts like this would be perfect to attach the addition to the existing stonework of the house. While drilling them into the stone was not going to be easy, she felt she could manage it. Especially if she concentrated really, really hard on them.

She laid the bolt on her palm, this time deciding to try something different: she simply asked politely for two hundred replicates. She got them instantly. They, of course, all materialized in a great mass right above her hand. This thick cloud of glinting aluminum fell to the ground the moment it appeared. Numerous errant bolts bounded up around her feet, making her hop madly and shout, “Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow! Talk about steel stilettos, you empty-headed, moronic, foolhardy—” She went on to include more of her most colorful epithets while she soundly berated herself. When she was finally finished with her hissy fit and the pain in her shins had subsided, she got down on her haunches to collect the bolts, shoving a bunch of them into her tool belt, with the remainder getting crammed into the toolbox drawer.

Now fully equipped with nails and bolts, Donnie grabbed the portable toolbox with her right hand and the boombox with her left, then trudged to the back of the house. The Hawks' “Lovin' Tonight” came on. She noticed that the animals had followed her to the back yard; was it her imagination or were they actually groovin' to the music? Even Sylvester appeared mesmerized. Hiding a grin, Donnie got to work on building the new rooms.

Using levitation, she laid down two narrow boards running parallel to each other, about ten feet apart. Again using levitation, she placed some wider planks across their lengths, on top of the two bottom boards. She walked around and nudged the planks with her foot to make sure they were positioned evenly along the two-by-fours. When she was satisfied that it was all square, she reached into a pocket of the tool belt and pulled out a handful of 20d nails. She made them float about six inches above her hand, grinning with pleasure at the sight. Man, she was really getting the hang of this magic stuff pretty easily!

She flung her arm toward the planks. The nails hit the wooden surface awkwardly, then rolled and flipped around, scattering all over the yard. Donnie hung her head, shoulders slumped dejectedly. So much for

getting the hang of magic on her first try. She shook herself and straightened her shoulders. Holding out her hand again, she willed the errant nails to float up and come to rest gently upon her palm.

She barely managed to move in time to keep from getting pierced by several of the sharp projectiles that sailed toward her. Donnie's whole body drooped as she stared dismally at the one nail she'd managed to actually catch. "You are making your point beautifully, you know," she complained to it.

Abruptly, the boombox stopped playing the Stone Chairs' "Locomotive Roar," cutting off the last few notes of the hard-driving song. It skipped into the smooth ballad "This Home Is Yours" by Ferris, Thompson and Jacksbridge. Donnie looked over at the thing and cocked her head to the side with a quizzical brow. "Now, those are two songs I wouldn't think I'd ever put back-to-back on a CD. Wonder what I was smokin' that day?" But the song was perfectly timed. She *had* been thinking about giving up her home improvement dreams because it was turning out to be much harder than she would've thought, even with magic. Listening to the song now, though, reminded her of just how wonderful it is to have the kind of home you really want.

Yep, the home improvement plan was here to stay, she decided, gritting her teeth and trying harder to control the magic in her fingertips. She concentrated on floating only one nail to her hand. When it hit her palm, it had the head turned toward her skin so, while it stung, it did no real damage. She tried again and again, finally finding just the right balance of will and concentration. Next, she tried two nails, and was once again successful in not maiming herself permanently. She increased the number of nails she was manipulating until she'd gotten up to sixteen. Then she began practicing making them drive themselves into one of the extra boards.

Learning how to drive the nails into a board at the same time only took Donnie about five minutes to master. She also practiced removing them. Whenever a nail became too bent, she'd float up another to replace it in the four rows of nails hovering above her hand. When she felt she was ready, she again floated all sixteen nails above her hand. She repeated her movements of before, flinging her arm toward the carefully assembled planks on the ground.

This time, the nails shot straight into the two layers of wood, one row at the top and another at the bottom, with each nail drilled in exactly where she'd imagined they should go. She was positively giddy with excitement. She could do this! She really could build her house, all by herself, just using her ingenuity and this gift of magic that had been bestowed upon her, she told herself, her heart swelling with pride.

Unnoticed by all because the surrounding area still glowed with a bluish cast from the induction of her magic the night before, another faint, pale blue wave of power pulsed outwardly from her midsection at practically the same moment as when she raised a fist and shouted, "Woo-hoo!"

Donnie continued flinging nails into the wood until all the planks were nailed securely to the frame and she had a solid section of flooring. Levitating this square into place, she quickly built the necessary bracing for underneath it. She then attached the flooring to the masonry of the house with several of the bolts. She'd been absolutely right; when she concentrated hard enough, the bolts seemed to almost melt through the wood and into the stone wall. She repeated this process for the remainder of the flooring and for each outer and inner wall, and also for installing the rafters and the rest of the roofing framework. Within a couple of hours, she'd built three rooms that were securely attached to the existing stone structure.

She began to build the roofs. This took her another hour, mostly due to making sure her measurements were accurate. When she had the roofs finished, she stepped back and admired her handiwork. They looked nice and solid, their peaks perfectly formed. Obviously, she'd have to cover them with thatch before winter set in, presupposing she could figure out what thatch actually was and where to get it. She'd also have to come up with a water-proofing resin for the wood. But she had a little time yet for all that; it shouldn't be needed for at least a month or more.

The smallest room, attached to her bedroom, would become the bathroom; the second her office and library, with its inner doorway opening into the kitchen and an outer door opening to a porch she had yet to build; and the third room she just might use as a workshop since Catie's was rather cramped, what with the mammoth forge and all those barrels of salt and assorted cauldrons stored in it. This last room Donnie had built on the other side of the house and was quite the largest of the three new rooms.

But it was now time for creating the inner doorways into the existing part of the little stone cottage. She started small, willing just one stone to dematerialize at first. It shimmered, went transparent, then re-solidified. Grunting at the effort, she tried again several times, to no avail.

Sylvester eventually took pity on his new pupil and offered this bit of advice, "You must have a destination in mind for the stone."

That's what I forgot with the bolts, was to say where I wanted them to materialize! Donnie thought to herself, glancing round and mumbling self-consciously, "Oh, thanks; that makes sense." Trying again, she dematerialized the stone to the field above the back yard. Instantly, it

disappeared from the wall. Once more, the air all around glowed momentarily with a hint of cerulean, an occurrence which, although Donnie noticed this time, she also studiously ignored. She methodically dematerialized stone after stone until rough rectangles were opened for both the office and workshop doors.

Eyeing the opening that led into the office, she dematerialized one-half of an offset stone. Again, though it was plodding work, she painstakingly worked through the offset stones, shaving off just what was needed to make the opening smooth enough to hang a door frame around. She repeated this same process for the inside doorway to the workshop and for the doorway from her bedroom into the bathroom.

After that she built and attached the door frames, along with the frames for the big window in each of the two larger rooms and the smaller one for the bathroom. All this in one day, and she still had well over half the lumber left for more building projects. She might even add on those other rooms and make the cottage's floorplan the same as it was in 2025!

"Just look at that," she purred, gazing at her handiwork proudly. "When I get back home, I'll bet I can carve out a fine little niche for myself in the home improvement blogosphere!"

The cat stared at her as if he thought her a loon after she made this unfathomable remark. Since this had early on become his choice expression to present to her, he now had it perfected. So much so, that Donnie, upon noticing it, shrugged her shoulders and conceded, "Well, okay, maybe that's not the best utilization of my new skills."

She set to work constructing the covered porch that would run around the entire back of the house. While she was working on the one step up to the deck, "In September" came on. Bad Blood was one of her favorite groups and her voice rose in unison with the recording. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw that the animals were definitely grooving now. She herself took some time out from throwing nails to dance up and down the unfinished step and onto the porch.

A song later came "Wasting the Day." The horse soon began swinging his head in time with the bluesy music. And then he shivered in ecstasy, his snowy white coat rippling in the late afternoon sunshine. When the song ended, he immediately swung his head around to look at Donnie, whinnied loudly to get her attention, and gave her one of the biggest smiles she'd ever seen in her life. "Might you repeat that melody, please? If that is possible?" he asked.

What, did every animal around here talk? An astonished Donnie replied, "Um, sure," and walked over to the boombox to hit the *Back* button, cutting off the next song a few bars in. Otis Waters' classic

rendition began again. Donnie also obligingly cranked up the volume. The horse proceeded to sing the full chorus and much of the words in the verses, which was very amusing for Donnie.

She told herself not to stare at the animals, but that was impossible. The cow was swinging her head in time with the beat and the horse was stepping forward and backward or side to side as the music moved him. As Waters' famous whistling faded, both animals begged Donnie to repeat the song yet again. She shook her head and said, "Nope, that's it. While I love that tune dearly, I have absolutely no desire to hear it three times in a row. Besides, if you like that one so much, you're really gonna love this next one."

Little Davy Ray's "Cold Heart" had come on and, as she'd predicted, the animals went wild. Donnie noticed out of the corner of her eye that even Sylvester's head was bobbing and his body twitching in time with the guitar riffs. She hid a wide grin and finished nailing the last of the facing onto the long step. The next song was the Harringtons' version of "Heard It on the Street." It finally had everybody dancing in the back yard, even the chickens.

Rex came back just as Donnie was attaching the door hinges and hanging the doors. He said he'd only been caught two more times by the skunks and wasn't that pretty good? His mama finished what she was doing *very* quickly, then pointed her finger toward the front yard, keeping her other hand over her mouth and nose. She followed her aromatic pooch over to the well, filled the bucket with water and drenched him with it, filling the bucket again with fresh water immediately. She doused Rex three times with the de-skunking solution and finally pronounced him fit to be around without needing a gas mask. By now, it was nearly dinnertime and Donnie had to get a move on. She still had to transfer her possessions into the new rooms.

Chapter 3

She's Gone

Donnie moved her belongings into the house that evening while there was still just enough light to see what she was doing, sending all manner of things floating through the outer doors in great batches into their assigned rooms, where they seemed almost to settle into place by themselves. Anything breakable she carried in manually if it was light enough or levitated in by itself, not trusting her control over her magic to float more than one fragile article at a time.

All the while, the cat watched her closely, providing an increasing number of superfluous instructions and dire warnings, already beginning his campaign to drive her nuts with his unrelenting pedagogy. But whenever Donnie was out of earshot, to himself he muttered a string of peevish cavils, beginning with, "Why did she demand that all of this nonsense be brought with her? Most of these monstrosities cannot possibly have any real purpose!" then, "How can she be acquiring these Gordian skills so readily? Catie complained once that it had taken her nearly an entire new moon to learn the art of levitation properly, and yet this foolhardy novice is mastering it on her first day of magic? I would believe that to be impossible but for the fact that I have witnessed it with my own eyes!" followed by, "Considering the amount of power she is wielding, one would expect Donemere to encounter even more difficulty than other witches of lesser *ilca* have when first entering the realm of Wiccecræft—and yet she is not. Each thaumaturgical skill she has attempted, while commanded most errantly to be sure, on the whole has been controlled and accomplished resourcefully, with uncommon dexterity for a Yfel Witch. A mere initiate, she is!" he snorted. "Can it be that Donemere truly is the only Codlebærn fit for her intended destiny? Is it possible that she will become Fægre by the time that destiny calls to her, which assuredly it must before another year passes? If so, then I perceive that she will be most difficult to instruct in the skills of her craft, for they will present no challenge to her. Given her recalcitrant temperament, married with her considerable aptitude, she means only to provide certain vexation for me, that much I can see. I see also that I must reconsider my intended approach to her lessons!" and then, "'Tis fortunate Donemere does not yet possess a wand to focus her power even more efficiently than she is doing currently, without that most sacred of magical aids. I dare not even contemplate the consequences of what

might happen then. Bah!” he spat. “The gods have not set me an easy task with this witch!”

Finally, after having watched his new charge float well over half of her strange and bewildering belongings into the house with practically no missteps in her magic (discounting the wobbliness of her early efforts, resulting in more than a few, frantic near-misses), the cat turned to the heavens and demanded to know, “As if Catie herself has not caused sufficient anxiety for me these long centuries, what manner of *dewines problemau* have I been burdened with this time? I tell you, Gwydion, I do not need this labor! I foresee an arduous path ahead of me, one riddled with unwonted hindrances, most of which shall undoubtedly be raised by Donemere herself!”

Donnie filled the back of the office with her bookshelves, the books still neatly organized in each one, and cleared some space for Catie’s tomes by stacking her own books and magazines from two shelves onto materials of other shelves. Miraculously, she managed to cram all of Catie’s books onto the two open shelves by also stacking them on top of each other. Twelve of Donnie’s eighteen bookshelves were arranged in three rows, back-to-back, with the remaining six lined up against three of the walls in the room in sets of two. She left gaps for the only window and also for the fireplace she planned to build on the east wall using the masonry instructions she’d found in Catie’s journal when she’d searched through it again. She would build the fireplace as soon as she’d plumbed the bathroom, which lay directly on the other side of the wall, then she’d duct some of the fire’s heat into the bathroom.

The glass for her new windows she materialized from a place Catie recommended in her journal. Catie wrote that there were legions of window panes there, all stored in row upon row in this one particular room. Catie herself had gotten the cathedral-like panes for the main room and the bedroom from there. The journal’s description of this window repository was detailed enough for Donnie to visualize it in order to take the glass she needed and actually included a spell to do so. She was thrilled that she could materialize something by description only, albeit using someone else’s directions and spell instead of her own, which Sylvester informed her is not how you’re supposed to work magic. Magic is an individual experience and every witch must make his or her own way with it, he reproached.

And although each of the windows was beautiful, delicately formed into incredibly detailed images with hundreds of pieces of multi-colored leaded glass, Donnie had to admit that she was rather embarrassed they were stolen goods. She hadn’t set out to become a thief, though. After charming her bookshelves to always make it easy for her to find a

specific book or books on a particular subject she was researching just by walking up to one of the shelves and thinking about what she wanted so that it would appear in front of her, she'd found a book on blowing glass. She hadn't even realized that she owned a book which detailed the process, but there it was nevertheless. Unfortunately, according to the book, blowing glass demanded long experience and real skill. Reluctantly, she felt she had no choice but to follow Catie's journal instructions to the letter.

The three panes Donnie had snatched were based solely upon their dimensions, so imagine her surprise when they also turned out to be strikingly beautiful. How could she feel bad once she saw them? Besides, it wasn't likely the original owner of the glass would find their way here, was it? She finally managed to convince herself that it was a petty crime at most and thereafter serenely admired the colorful panes firmly ensconced in their new sills with the light of the rising moon filtering through their artistically intricate flora and fauna images. She couldn't help but wonder what had happened to them by the year 2025 because the windows then were just plain old, clear, double-paned glass. The house was warmer with those, sure, but not nearly so interesting.

Donnie hung the moss-colored sheers that had originally been in her family room in the City in front of the window in the new office. Her Georgian desk and mirror also went into this room, as did the olive-colored, sateen-covered sofa, recliner and armchair, and the walnut coffee and side tables. She decided to go ahead and set up the walnut entertainment center and computer desk, complete with their associated electronics, not knowing what else to do with them. Her small art glass and crystal collections she spread around the room on various surfaces. Her paintings and other artwork she'd save to decorate the remaining rooms of the house.

When she'd finished in the office, Donnie stepped back to the doorway and surveyed the overall effect. The room was delightfully rustic; peaceful, yet still inviting curiosity and learning.

She artfully managed to fit all of her bedroom furniture into the bedroom. It didn't leave much room to walk around, just three or four feet or so all around the bed. Other than the bed frame and the wardrobe, the furniture was heavy wicker, painted in a light moss color with white accents, giving the room the illusion of space. She placed her thick, white chenille bedspread on the bed over her moss-green down comforter with a satisfied grin.

There hadn't been much she could do about the straw mattress, other than cover it with her worst sheets and lay another white down comforter on top of that. She realized that she would literally have to "make" the

bed on a daily basis to stave off bedbugs. Her experience with them, from day one here, had brought home to her what truly nasty little creatures they could be.

As a final touch to the room, she placed a large, soft, white woven-yarn rug on the floor beside the bed.

Donnie moved Catie's kitchen furniture to the workroom at the back of the stables, along with the rest of the little witch's roughly hewn bedroom and sitting room furniture. Some of Catie's personal belongings Donnie stored in her office and workshop since Sylvester wouldn't let her pack them away in the hayloft above the stables, which was accessed by Catie's workshop via a narrow staircase. Catie's complete and prolific set of thirty-two journals, many of which had been strewn haphazardly around the old workshop at the back of the stables, also went onto the bookshelves in Donnie's office, stacked in front of other books. And when she came upon Catie's small silver hairbrush and mirror set, with oddly familiar, finely raised glyphs of some sort and whorling designs in both gold and silver upon their backs, even Donnie murmured, "Can't part with those, if you'll pardon the pun." She wrapped these in a black velvet cloth bag and placed them carefully in the cupboard in her office.

Again, not knowing what else to do with them, she moved her kitchen appliances into the main room, even though there was no electricity for the fridge, the convection microwave oven and the dishwasher, or gas for the stove. While she hadn't intended to do this, she realized that she was already beginning to formulate in her mind a rather vague plan to one day provide power or fuel as needed for each.

She furnished the makeshift kitchen area, centered around the fireplace and complete with knotty pine cabinets high and low from her kitchen in San Francisco, with her matching breakfast table and its six chairs. Her white-washed oak formal dining set and its two matching oak hutches and sideboard containing all her dishes and cookware also went into this spacious room. The hutches and sideboard she placed as close to the kitchen area as possible, leaving space only for the door to her office, while the dining table and its ten chairs sat just a few feet away from both the front door and the door to Donnie's workshop, in the opposite corner from the pantry.

After she finished moving and rearranging things in the kitchen, she started on her workroom. This room was somewhat narrow and very long. She decided it would be perfect for storing her tools and other junk that had been kept in her garage in San Francisco, in addition to a few, odd pieces of furniture from around the house. To the left of the inside workroom door was her long, butcher-block worktable. She hung some pegboard above that and put most of her tools up there on pegs. Beside

the worktable, right behind the door that led to the rest of the house, were her power tools and two tool cabinets. She made sure that everything here was neat and orderly, so all tools could be found easily when sought. On the other side of the worktable, in the corner there, she planned to build another fireplace. For the time being though, she left the corner mostly bare, placing just the stand for her second, smaller TV and its associated electronics.

Across the room from the worktable she put the low, knotty-pine coffee table and its matching side tables that had come from her sitting room. Between these were her two wingback red Corinthian leather chairs. The matching leather couch, like her bed mattress, also appeared to be missing. Donnie hadn't realized that this morning when she'd unpacked her trunks, so she asked Sylvester about it now.

It was at this point that the boombox displayed its puzzling behavior again. Earlier, Donnie had set it on the floor next to the TV stand and, as soon as she inquired about the couch, the boombox suddenly cut to the middle of the Phantoms' ethereal "She's Gone." Donnie turned her head to stare down at the boombox, as she had earlier in the afternoon, her head cocked to one side and a deep frown knitting her brow. The volume suddenly increased when the song hit the chorus and spoke of the woman no longer being where she should be. Donnie listened to the song a few moments, somewhat bewildered by it, then decided her best course would be to ignore the whole thing and put the boombox's increasingly peculiar actions down to either a skipping CD or a waning battery.

Sylvester sat on the worktable watching the play of emotions on his new pupil's face silently. He finally replied that another female had been sleeping on the couch at Donnie's home and, like the girl on the mattress, Catie hadn't wanted to disturb her. From the description he gave of the woman, Donnie knew it must have been Liz, which meant Julia hadn't had to do much explaining about Donnie's missing things. What the two of them must have thought about the sudden disappearance of her furnishings, she couldn't even venture a guess.

After the darkly mysterious song ended, Lester Carlyle's "Stand Still" began emanating from the speakers, with the boombox gliding smoothly through the song as if nothing aberrant had occurred only a minute before. Shrugging uneasily, Donnie turned back toward the outside door of the workshop and resumed moving her furniture, boxes and other assorted oddball possessions into the workroom, carefully levitating the various pieces into place simultaneously or in long chains. She was determined to not let anything keep her from finishing tonight.

Beyond her workshop's sitting and work spaces, she hung the red velvet curtains from her former formal dining room, which, like most of

her things, had arrived at the cottage fully assembled and intact. The curtains turned out to be an attractive method of separating the front of the room from the storage area behind, although, when closed, they did cut the light from the large window at the back of the room. Behind the curtains, she ringed the room with the chrome shelving that had come from her garage. Stored neatly upon the shelves were all her sports equipment, those tools that she couldn't give a home to in the front, and the assorted junk she'd accumulated over the years and kept in the back of the garage both in boxes and just lying loose. It somehow made it so much more homey to have it all packed back there.

Next, Donnie moved the bathroom fixtures into the new bathroom, levitating everything in except the shower stall. This, she soon found, wouldn't fit through the doorways of the house, which meant she'd have to materialize it into the room. She hadn't dematerialized anything nearly so large yet and she wasn't sure if the mechanics of sending it elsewhere would be different. Well, she was about to find out. Figuring an empty room would be safest, she once again floated everything else in it to the middle of the kitchen, then went back outside to where the shower stall stood.

Following Sylvester's uninvited instructions, she placed her hands on the cold marble and concentrated on dematerializing the entire stall from the front yard and rematerializing it into the empty bathroom. It shimmered for a few moments and slowly disappeared beneath her fingers. Donnie looked toward the porch where Sylvester was sitting and observed nervously, "It certainly went somewhere, didn't it?" She went back inside, the cat at her heels, and found the shower stall sitting in the middle of the bathroom, right where everything else had been a few minutes before. She would definitely have to work on her placement of things when she rematerialized them, which, she could see, was the most difficult part of materialization. Sending things was easy; making sure they arrived in the correct place was not. But it would come to her, Sylvester said, especially as she seemed to be learning magic uncommonly quick. Almost as though she were born to it, he added pensively.

Donnie stopped still, her face frozen with surprise. Her expression then sobered to a sort of enigmatic watchfulness. After a few moments' silent consideration, her eyes cleared. She told herself firmly to stick to the here and now, and to get her stuff inside. Until she had some real answers to her situation, she should refrain from obsessing over every casual remark the cat made, or at least she should *try* to keep obsessing about them. She forced her mind to focus back onto what she was doing and levitated the shower into a corner. Once it was safely tucked away,

she floated her other bathroom stuff to the room again. She would arrange it all properly later, she decided.

When she had the remainder of her belongings moved into the house and had levitated the trunks to the hayloft, she built a fire in both the kitchen and bedroom fireplaces to stave off the nightly cold. Since she'd already used all the wood she'd brought inside the night before, she had to go out to the stables to replenish her stock from the huge stacks of it the elusive Catie had left for her there. It sure was a whole lot easier getting several pieces of the dry, split wood into the house tonight than it had been the day before.

That night, Donnie ate dinner on her best china, mostly because she felt she deserved her best china on this of all nights, and left the dirty dishes in the sink. Sleepily, she stumbled her way into the fire-lit bedroom, intending to fall onto the bed as soon as possible and pass out. She was thoroughly exhausted from both her mistrials and her successes of the day, and more than a little bemused at how perfectly her furnishings fit into each of the rooms, as if they'd been bought specifically for this house and its expanded floor plan.

Once she had the fire banked for the night, she changed into some clean pajamas, kissed Rex goodnight, and plopped down onto the side of the bed. Feeble fortunes, it sure felt good to get off her feet! She glanced at her watch as she removed it from her wrist and saw that its lighted dial read 2:38 am. No wonder she was so wiped out!

The boombox was sitting on the night table nearest to her, which was strange since she couldn't remember putting it there. She removed the CD she'd been playing earlier from its carriage and, seeing its jewel case sitting on top of the boombox, put the disk away. That was when she looked at the list of songs she'd created for the case. "She's Gone" was nowhere among the song titles.

Donnie drew back in surprise and dropped the jewel case onto the night table. It was the correct jewel case because it matched all the other songs and their order. Apprehensively, she picked up the CD case again, holding it at arm's length, and took it into her workroom, where she placed it on a shelf in the back of the room by the light of a candle she'd brought with her. She hoped she'd sleep more soundly with the screwy thing as far away from her as she could get it. She thought about destroying it, but decided she wanted to keep an eye on it in case it was haunted or possessed.

Feeling ridiculous, she whispered defensively to herself, "Well, it could be possessed. Anything's possible here, it seems," before padding nervously back to the bedroom.

Sleep came slowly and fitfully that night. Her dreams were wild and filled with numerous chase scenes from several of her favorite action movies, with Donnie herself acting as the heroine of each. The final dream of the night was again of the cave, but in this dream, she was herself. And this time, the dream seemed much more real.

She awoke from it abruptly, feeling savagely hunted by some unseen, malevolent force. Edgily, she rolled over and let her eyes close again, her thoughts racing. She forced her mind to still, to concentrate hard so that she could recall as much as possible about the dream. She'd been running, almost flying, down this gigantic tunnel carved through what looked to be solid rock, a tunnel which led to the same cave she'd dreamt of last night. Tonight, she'd been chased into the cave by an unbelievably large and fantastical creature whose body she couldn't remember seeing, except for its eyes, as it pursued her down the wide passage all the way to the cave. Whatever that thing was, its enormous eyes, each more than three feet wide, had been both fierce and minacious, a deep, angry orange in color, with a rim of brilliant yellow around their irises...and the pupils had been funny, they had dilated funny somehow...and there were flames reflected in their depths; violent, red-hot fingers of fire that she was sure would have engulfed her if she hadn't flown like a bat out of hell into the cave, where the dream ended.

She shivered, opened her eyes slowly, and stared at the moonlight streaming in through the window. The dream creature and its eyes, in addition to frightening her, had also left her with a lingering sadness, as though she'd done something terrible to the creature, something to warrant being chased by it. Donnie felt the pain and anger in its heart once more and knew it was all directed deliberately upon her. But why, she wondered, why was it angry with *her*? What had she done to cause it such pain, so much hurt that it wanted only to destroy her, to burn her to ashes?

After racking her brain for a few more minutes, she finally had to admit that she just couldn't remember that part of the dream. Perhaps she would dream it again and maybe then she'd know what she'd done to make the creature hate her so. Setting her mind toward sleep, only half-hoping to experience the dream again so she could recall its beginnings, she dozed intermittently over the next two hours until the dawn's groping fingers of light brightened the room.

When she arose from bed that morning and had received her good morning kiss from the dog, the boombox again exhibited its alarming behavior of the day before by coming to life on its own and playing "Blue Silk" by the Garthai Brothers, a song Donnie loved. When she realized that there was no CD in the boombox, she got dressed in record

time and almost ran out of the room, closing the door firmly behind her and Rex.

Donnie sat for a long time at breakfast staring into space, fighting to keep her mind on an even keel. She purposely ignored the little blue bolts of magical power that kept escaping from her agitated fingertips and the strange feel of her bones and skin now, as though a billion tiny pinpricks were constantly being applied to them from some unseen force, making them alternately hot, then cold with amazing amounts of energy. She desperately did not want to think about the permanency of her situation, nor of how lonely she was going to be here with no one to remind her of what it meant simply to be human, instead of being yet another magical creature amongst many. She tried hard to convince herself that she should look upon this magic thing positively and just focus on all the good she could do with it, eventually bolstering her flagging spirits by reminding herself that she had too many things to do and some new talents to discover.

Now that the house was enlarged and her belongings safely stored within it, the next major task she set for herself was to rig together a plumbing system of copper pipes, complete with septic tank. This project she began her second morning of magic. The instructions in Catie's journals had included not only methods of handling metals and minerals, but also how best to mine them, and over the next several weeks, Donnie became proficient at materializing the raw materials she needed, refining them according to Catie's journals, and then molding them into the desired shapes in her workshop, materializing the molten metal directly from Catie's forge into the molds Donnie created.

Throughout most of these initial days, Donnie succeeded in keeping her conscious mind mostly fastened on what she was doing, always moving forward with her quest to make her living quarters as modern as possible. Her subconscious, though, was an entirely different matter. The disturbing, violent nightmares continued to possess her nights for weeks, especially the dream of being chased into the cave by the creature with the flaming, orange eyes—although sometimes she was chased there by several creatures just as large, but with piercing yellow eyes instead of the incendiary orange ones. Even nearly a month later, these haunting visions were still leaving her unrested and jittery when she awoke. She figured that they must be her subconscious's way of working out her anxieties regarding her new life and the changes wrought in her body chemistry by the fantastical magic which had, within a few days of invoking her power, infiltrated every nerve, every sinew, every bone, until she truly felt as though her body were no longer her own. Nevertheless, she was determined to persevere, resolutely shoving these

underlying fears back down whenever they reared up to confront her during the daylight hours.

But no matter how hard she concentrated in the grey morning light, Donnie still could not recall the beginning of that one particular, terrifying dream. She always came awake as soon as she entered the cave and could never remember anything before the part where she was being chased down the tunnel toward the cavern. And each time she had the dream, she awoke feeling ever more bereft and melancholy toward the creature, completely unable to determine what it could possibly represent in her psyche.

To her daily magic lessons with Sylvester, she took a scientific approach, trying to work out the physics of each new skill as he suggested them, or as she herself thought them up. She had the feeling that the cat was amazed at her ingenuity (not that he ever let on about it, if he indeed was impressed), but he nevertheless constantly complained that Donnie was wasting precious time with this ludicrous modernization project of hers. She blithely ignored the cat's reproaches (and his accompanying belittlements) and plowed ahead with her plumbing plans.

She became quite adept at mixing manual labor with magic and purposely gave herself increasingly difficult tests of multitasking with her magic. Nothing was ever too heavy or too bulky to lift because she simply levitated or materialized things where she needed them. For instance, she didn't have to do any real digging with a shovel; rather, she levitated the shovel and set it into a pattern of digging. And dig it did; furiously, much faster than she would ever have been able to dig under her own physical power. And while the shovel was doing its thing in a corner of the back yard, and copper ore for the pipes was being refined and smelted in the forge in Catie's workshop, Donnie was in her own workshop measuring and fitting together the copper pipes she made. Strangely driven to achieve complete mastery over her powers, Donnie constantly strained her ability to set unsupervised magical tasks for various and unseen implements until she had this skill perfected.

Finally, it came time to actually lay the piping for the water and septic systems. Not telling the cat why she needed to know it, she explained to Sylvester that she wanted to be able to displace earth from a few feet down and replace it with something else, without having the earth around the hollow she'd created sink back in before she could fill the space. But, to do this, she'd have to see what she was doing. So how, she asked, would she go about performing a psychical magical act such as that?

Sylvester replied that she should begin by casting her mind into the Earth. At first Donnie couldn't understand what he wanted her to do and continued to question him until he finally yelled caustically at her to stop

thinking of the world as existing only above the surface, but to listen to the planet, hear its rhythms and its echoes. Doing this would tell her what was occurring around and below her and would give her mind a clearer picture of what she wanted to see. He ordered her to sit on the ground, with her palms flat upon it, and listen to what was going on below. What he did not confess for some long while was that this was a skill which Catie had learned on her own and he therefore only knew of it what few remarks she'd made about what happened when she did it and what he'd noticed when he'd seen her perform it; hence his increasingly ill-tempered frustrations with Donnie's queries.

But since Donnie didn't know this at the time, she rolled her eyes at his captious remonstrations and sighed, then plopped down heavily on the ground in order to attempt what the cat had told her to do. Eventually, she was able to filter out the sounds of the wind in the trees, the birds as they sang, and the insects buzzing on the plants in the yard until all was silent and she could focus only on what was happening beneath her. She heard the rhythm of the Earth first, its almost mechanical chug-chug-chug, chug-chug, chug-chug-chug. Donnie concentrated on its cadence for a while, fancifully deciding that it reminded her of a heartbeat and not, as she had first thought, of some machine. And, finally, she let herself hear the Earth's echoes, as millions of noises bounced off tree roots, rocks and living beings.

Who knew it would be such a busy place? Or so darned confusing! At first, she became totally disoriented each time she listened, even though she realized that she was only hearing what was going on in a very localized vicinity directly below her.

Feeling somewhat braver after almost an hour of focusing on these myriad Earth sounds, Donnie began to practice moving small clods of dirt up through the topsoil to the grass above. She carefully and very slowly, so as not to harm them, moved up some beetles and worms she heard scratching around until they and their immediate surroundings were on the surface, and she then watched with fascination as they scabbled back into the darkness of their underground world. She did this to several things, both organic and inorganic, so she could learn to recognize and identify the sounds they made and the exact tone emitted when other sounds bounced off them. That way she'd know just what she was listening to on future attempts at casting her mind into the ground. It also helped her to visualize what was actually going on down there and, after a long day of repeating this over and over, Donnie was able to let her mind float down confidently a little more than thirty feet into the Earth to "see" the world below her.

Then she practiced dematerializing cubic yards of earth from deep in the ground and dumping just the dirt onto the grass above, leaving all insect and animal life behind in the hollow created because she felt it was kinder than brutally subjecting them to the light of day. Besides, what if she miscalculated and rematerialized two living beings into the very same space when she put the dirt back below ground? Did she have the right to mess with nature like that? She didn't think so.

While she was practicing the art of dematerializing any amount of dirt she set her mind to, Donnie also set her magic to maintaining the shape of the hollow she'd just created below ground so that it didn't cave in. This she did with walls of magic, letting the energy slip from her fingertips and down into the ground, shaping its field to the exact dimensions she needed to hold the hole's form. She maintained this hollow shape steadily for hours on end, filling it with things, moving them in and out, sometimes having a pipe materialize into it at the same moment she dematerialized a mixing bowl out of it. And all the while, of course, she herself was at work in her workshop making copper pipes, joints and fittings. This constant stream of multitasking went a long way toward helping her compartmentalize her mind and her powers effortlessly.

Some days later, when she felt comfortable enough with these skills, she again knelt down on the ground outside the house and, in accordance with Sylvester's instructions, placed her hands palms-down on the cold, moist earth. She concentrated on using her mind's eye to see the best routes for the pipes to the well and those to the septic tank. Once she had decided those, Donnie dematerialized the earth that needed to be removed to make room for the piping, simultaneously setting up the properly configured energy barrier to hold the shapes of the hollows. She then materialized the pipes into the newly formed tunnels, fitting them together tightly as she materialized one length of pipe after the other. From that point, it took her less than three days to actually set up the entire water and septic systems.

One of her own books provided the recipe for mixing concrete, and after carefully building a mold for the septic tank, she poured the concrete into it. The mold was built out of planks Catie had stored in the corner of her workshop, which Sylvester strenuously asserted came from nonmagical trees. The inside of the mold Donnie covered with a thick layer of resin from some of the magical trees that rimmed the valley, having asked them nicely for it, 'natch. When the concrete was finally set, Donnie broke away the mold and levitated the tank to the huge pit the shovel had taken nearly eight days to dig, even though it had

shoveled continuously all day and all night long—it was, after all, a rather small shovel.

The longest part of the process had been the curing of the concrete. Donnie managed to speed it up significantly by increasing the temperature and lowering the humidity around the tank, encasing it within a protective bubble of her magical energy that she made quasi-resistant to cold temperatures and water vapor. But the bubble was too large and took too much of her power to make it truly impermeable. And even though she managed to keep this protective covering somewhat active while she slept, it still took nearly three weeks before the concrete was sufficiently cured and she was confident of its integrity enough to lower it into the ground, hook up the pipes to it, then bury it with packed dirt.

Throughout these weeks, Donnie incessantly asked the cat (sometimes ten or more times a day—he kept a running tally, beginning anew each morning) just where was she exactly; why was she sent here; who had really done this to her, because it couldn't possibly have been accomplished by Catie alone, could it; and oh, by the way, what year was it?

Sylvester either looked at her with a set expression on his face, completely ignoring her questions, or, when he did deign to reply, answered something to the effect of, “On this, the fifth occasion today that you have enquired, Donemere, I again refuse to impart any such knowledge to you.” Only once did he add, “What I can tell you is, the date here is the same as it is in your world. Catie was always quite insistent about that being the way time constancy works.”

Donnie would usually turn from him with a frustrated snort and continue her modernization activities, which, in their own unique way, completely frustrated the cat. The sewage system she was currently building was unseemly for a student witch, or any witch, for that matter (who would do that sort of thing indoors?), nor did it come anywhere near to what he was trying to instruct her on in the lessons he had so carefully planned for her. And although even he was forced to admit now and then that Donemere learned to wield her magic so well it flowed smoothly through her, he nonetheless felt it was not learned in the proper manner. To his conventional mind, this was quite distressing. Equally distressing was her complete disregard for his opinion on the matter.

Once she had the plumbing system set up, it was comparatively simple for Donnie to actually install the bathroom fixtures. She hadn't yet figured out how to build a hydraulic pump for the water intake system, but she could use her magic to levitate water from the well through the pipes in the meantime. For storing water, she'd built a large

cistern high above the toilet, with pipes routed from it to each fixture separately. This water was released through the faucet spigot and shower head whenever she turned either of their handles. The dirty, used water drained by gravity to the septic tank through a different set of pipes. The toilet was set up along these lines also, with two big stones stored in its tank to keep it low-flow.

In little more than five weeks of her arrival at the isolated little cottage, Donnie had a working bathroom. The day she finished it, she kept showing it off to the cat, who declared it the most revolting affront he had ever witnessed. So Donnie got out her copy of *We All Gotta Go* by LeAnne Wiggett and showed that to him. Sylvester looked at its pages with horrified amazement, succinctly voicing his concern over the future of mankind when he proffered an acerbic, “This book, much like your bathroom, is an unforgivable travesty of gentility. I would expect no less from your culture.”

When the bathroom was fully plumbed, Donnie set up the same type of system for the kitchen sink. She semi-heated the stored water in the cisterns by zapping them with small lightning bolts of her magical energy, which turned out to be a wonderfully effective method of providing warm water for showers and for washing dishes.

She soon found that there was an unforeseen bonus to using the magical trees as her building materials: the rooms adjusted their size according to what was put into them. Which meant she could push any of the wooden walls back as far as she wanted, or stretch them as high as she needed. But you wouldn’t know this by looking at the house from the outside. From there, the addition appeared to be the exact same size as what she’d built originally. It also meant the cisterns could hold as much water as she cared to fill them with.

Oh, and of course, the walls of the new rooms talked to her. Now, that had taken some getting used to, especially in the bathroom. Somewhat unwittingly (actually, mostly because she liked the varying patterns of wood grains), she’d used planks from all six trees in each of the new rooms or in their doors, so she had six voices to contend with at any given time of the day, except for when she was in her bedroom. There she had only the voices of the three trees she’d used in the door to the bathroom: Brindle, Carly and Parry.

Donnie learned not only how to differentiate between the trees’ voices, but also their personalities. Brindle, the great oak, was the boldest of the six and quite obviously their defacto leader. His voice was low and deep, and he was very wise from having traveled the world so extensively. And luckily for her, he had a pretty decent sense of humor.

Caer Lyen, or Carly to Donnie and soon to all others too, was a young female oak of nearly five hundred years, whose voice was both youthful and boisterous. She and Rex struck up quite a fast friendship and played all sorts of word and riddle games with each other for hours in the bathroom. Neither of them would say why they chose this particular room to play in, and Donnie didn't have the heart to delve all that deeply into it, figuring their friendship was their affair, not hers.

Parenon, or Parry, was a capable, mature female oak who, if Donnie was any judge in matters of the heart, appeared to be rather deeply in love with Brindle. Donnie also suspected that Carly was their child, if such a thing were actually possible, but she had difficulty building up the courage to ask this question of either tree.

Ffen Fællieu, or Fine Fellow, a good-sized ash tree, loved nothing more than to be read to from the encyclopedia or some other instructional textbook, otherwise he'd talk your ear off in his rapid-fire, questioning manner. But he loved to learn and, if Brindle was asleep or elsewhere occupied (by what Donnie had no clue; he would sometimes simply not respond to her calls), could only be silenced by the imparting of information. As a matter of fact, Brindle appeared to be the only one who could successfully exert mastery over the oh-so curious tree and silence him with a quiet, yet steely, "That will be enough questions for now, I think."

Solffanye, or Sophie, was very, very old. She'd been by far the largest of the oak trees and, because of her interesting wood grain, Donnie had therefore used more of her boards in the house than any of the others. At last count (that Sophie could remember, anyway) just slightly over thirty-six thousand years had gone by since she had been a sapling, so she slept a great deal of the time. She was very tired, she said. Always very tired.

And finally, there was Marn Vôi, or Mournful Jack. He was an alder tree, and the majority of the planks in the rooftops were his because, of the six trees, he was the best suited to withstand the elements, as he'd informed Donnie when she'd begun building the roofs for the additions to the house. His personality was hard for Donnie to peg, really, since he was very quiet, seldom speaking and then only slightly above a whisper. One thing she did know about him was that he was apparently very depressed, as signified by his tone and by the forlorn sough he expelled after each and every response he gave whenever anyone conversed with him. Donnie ruefully acknowledged that this made his new appellation of "mournful" much more apropos than she had ever intended it to be.

Thankfully, the trees gave her privacy whenever she requested it, even Fine Fellow. They all had many stories though and could keep her company for hours, if encouraged. But they too were not allowed to tell

Donnie anything about when or where she was, as they informed her when she asked them one day. She nodded her head at this and replied quietly, “Yeah, I figured that would be the way of it.”

Only after she had her modernization projects completed did she give in to Sylvester and agree to apply herself fully to his lessons. Over the ensuing months, the cat taught her various magical skills, walking her pedantically through the steps for each, such as shooting lightning bolts with unerring accuracy. For those, Donnie was to concentrate on her power, visualizing it as the electrical energy it, in fact, was. She was to then release a controlled flow of this energy, down to the exact amperage, carefully directing its path and its destination; both of which were equally important in reaching the desired target.

At first she blew up everything she shot at, which were mainly bowls of water she replicated by the dozens. After a morning of that, she finally dug out a few of Catie’s cauldrons and filled them with water to practice on since they were sturdier and withstood her energy better than her ceramic mixing bowls had. She actually managed to not blow apart any of the iron pots, although a few were deformed into rather arresting shapes, which she guiltily reformed into their original condition, believing it was not her place to destroy Catie’s handiwork. One of the more artistically pleasing malformed pots, though, found its way onto a shelf of the large cupboard behind the door in Donnie’s office as a twisted memorial to her painstaking labors.

After she’d mastered how to minimize the energy shooting from her fingertips, she then went through just as excruciatingly laborious classes with Sylvester on maximizing her power shots, blowing up huge mounds of sifted dirt until the area around the farm looked as though it had been attacked by giant gophers. With such dedicated practice sessions as these, Donnie learned to control the exact flow of energy being discharged from her fingertips until she could get the desired effect automatically. She took away from her lessons the hard-learned fact that the key to successfully working magic was in the details.

Sylvester always kept a close eye on her, not letting her stray too far off the farm because, as he reiterated hundreds of times and in as many ways, he was afraid she would get into trouble out in the world now that she was magical. Donnie couldn’t even wheedle Otis into taking her anywhere. Each time she tried, her weirdly omnipresent familiar would invariably be lurking just out of sight and would briskly interrupt these clandestine whisperings, reprimanding both her and the horse with a snappish, “Otis, you know better than to help her! And Donemere of the Codlebærn, as I have informed you on several instances now, ’tis not yet

time for you to leave the valley. Once you have your powers fully under control, you may go anywhere you wish.”

It hadn't taken long to find out that Sylvester was right, of course. Each of the times Donnie had ignored the cat's admonitions and tried to leave anyway, she'd gotten over the rim of the valley and through the forest, only to find herself once more looking down upon the cottage as though she were returning to it instead of trying to leave it. Just where or how she got turned around, she could never figure, no matter what she tried, whether it be making sure she walked a straight line by placing one foot carefully and directly in front of the other, or laying a string down as she went. She always came back out of the forest just a few feet away from where she'd entered it.

And on numerous occasions, she surreptitiously tried to arm herself with that one magical device (besides a wand, that is, which hers sure seemed to be taking its own sweet time in finding her, didn't it?) that all self-respecting witches must have—a flying broomstick. Unfortunately, every time even just the thought entered Donnie's head to see if she could make her own broom float, say when she was sweeping out the front room, the darned thing would immediately disappear from her hands. And then, of course, she was not able to conjure a replacement one, not even to actually *do* the sweeping. Apparently, she was well and truly stuck with her aberrant sassafras broom. The disappearing broomstick would be missing for days at a time until it would reappear sometime during the night whenever the mounting debris on the floorboards became too noticeable even for its thief's judgment. It was also the only object Donnie was not allowed to animate in any way whatsoever, which meant that sweeping out the cabin required manual labor on her part; something she never tired of grouching about, especially to the cat.

Obviously, something, or someone (she was pretty sure it was not Sylvester, no matter what he said), wasn't going to let her leave the farm until it felt she was fit for whatever duty they had planned for her. Naturally, she didn't know what this was since Sylvester would only allude to it in a vague, confusing sort of way. Donnie secretly suspected that the cat might not know the answer himself. But because of his excessively cryptic intimations on the subject (a habit of his which so seldom limited itself), Donnie couldn't help but be immensely apprehensive about her future, for she knew that she could not have been brought here for no reason, and it only made sense that the reason must be pretty immense.

And so, magic filled her waking hours for the next few months. She impatiently watched winter come and go, the snow often so deep from

the frequent, violent storms that seemed to occur every day or two that, when she magically cleared a path between the house and stables wide enough for her and the animals to traverse comfortably, the snow banks were piled at least as high as her shoulders.

For several weeks in the middle of the worst of the snow season, all the animals stayed in the house with Donnie, at her insistence, because she felt it was just too cold in the stables for them. This included the chickens, who immediately took to roosting on the bookshelves in the library. After several days' residency, Donnie reluctantly gave up shooing them off the shelves and resigned herself to their noisy presence there. But she gave them a stern warning about their potty particulars, decreeing that they were never to leave any leavings inside the house because dysentery is a dreadful disease and she, for one, had no desire to experience just how dreadful it could be. Amazingly, it seemed the birds took her wishes to heart and nary a one dropped anything other than their daily egg or the occasional feather.

Donnie spent these weeks companionably with the others, growing closer and closer to all, including Sylvester, although he wouldn't have agreed that their relationship was anything but instructor and pupil. She would do well not to forget that he was no pet like Rex, as he reminded her every time she unthinkingly reached out to stroke his fur.

The evenings they were all sequestered within the cottage were mostly spent playing board games. *Kingdom* became a particular favorite of everyone, even the cat. At first this was a bit tedious for Donnie because she had to roll the dice and make all player-piece moves for everyone, as requested. However, when she became sufficiently precise with her magic (and sufficiently frustrated by how very busy she was kept when they played), she placed a charm on the game so that the dice and all pieces, cards and cash were automatically moved or doled out according to the players' telepathically relayed directions.

She was so pleased with the effectiveness of this charm that within days she had nearly the entire cottage and everything in it and around it charmed in one way or another. This bout of feverish charming finally came to an end when the others intervened one afternoon, desperately begging her to stop charming things because it was making their heads spin with the effort of remembering just what everything did or didn't do and when it would do it or not do it. Reluctantly, Donnie consolidated many of the charms, keeping only those she felt were truly necessary for peace and harmony in their lives.

Throughout the long winter, the cat scheduled four hours of indoor magic classes in the morning and another four in the afternoon or evening. The hours that were left free Donnie filled with lessons of her

own or with exercising. From mid-November on, when the deepest snowfalls began, she cleared and maintained a set of long, parallel running paths that crisscrossed the valley north to south, so she could get some real cardio workout and also exercise the animals. She eventually expanded this into a whole network of paths that covered the valley.

At eleven a.m. sharp on any day that wasn't storming, Donnie looked up from her class work and announced that it was time for their constitutional and maybe a game or two of hide-and-seek. Since she would get dressed for the outdoors without even so much as asking his leave, Sylvester had no choice but to acquiesce, although he never did so gracefully, since this cut short his morning schedule by half an hour. Nevertheless, he too went along on these jaunts, informing her that, as always, he was merely keeping an eye on her.

Many a morning found them all traipsing out the door after Donnie as she prepared to race up and down her trackway. Rex dubbed her path system the "Ternate Tunnel" one day late in December after playing a word game he'd just invented with Carly, which he'd won by stumping the young tree as to the meaning of the word "ternate." He then proudly announced the new appellation for the trackway to the others, explaining that he had chosen "ternate" because the tunnel was now split into three separate sections that were connected in only a couple of places, and "tunnel" because of the height of its walls, which rose to thirty feet at the lowest point of the valley due to the staggering amounts of snow that had both fallen and drifted there. For much of the winter, as a matter of fact, even in the areas with lesser drifting (that is, the upper regions of the valley and the small, flat rise on which the farm buildings were situated), the top of Donnie's knit cap and Otis's head and neck bobbing up and down along the hillside were the only parts of the group that were visible to anyone who might have been looking down upon the cleared maze of footpaths from the edge of the valley.

The chickens too usually went along for some fresh air, flying and hopping short distances just at the rear of the little troupe. They would soon lag behind though, as their attention spans were about as long as one would think they'd be. Which meant that each time the birds accompanied Donnie and the others on these outings, they would reach the outskirts of the farm proper, then apparently would lose interest in trekking through the snow, and instead would wander around for a little while before suddenly recollecting as a group that there was a warm house and bookshelves back in the direction they'd first come. Their chaotic, feathery migration to the house was always performed quickly and *en masse*.

Diana, the cow, would only join in on the walks every so often, saying that she saw no need to subject herself to the freezing cold—unless Donnie liked having frozen milk for breakfast every morning? To which Donnie would grinningly reply something like, “Honey, you feel free to stay here and enjoy your Irine Norbert in peace!” Diana would invariably toss her head at this and retort, “Irine Norbert? Oh, mind you, she’s okay, but she’s basically an amateur! Callida Cardin’s the queen of romance novels—now that woman could write a thrilling love story!” After bestowing upon her friends a beaming, pleased smile, the cow would sidle back up to the table and resume reading the latest passionate paperback, while the others would file out the door.

Most of the time, Donnie and Otis trotted or walked several laps on the long track until their hour was spent. Rex and Sylvester usually raced ahead together, one chasing the other round the next bend, but there they would wait for Donnie and Otis to catch up to them. Truth be told, the snow tunnels kinda creeped out both the cat and dog because they were so desolate in places and so eerily silent all over. Rex, at least, had no problem admitting this to his mama, whereas Sylvester disdainfully denied that his fur was standing on edge, irrespective of the clear evidence to the contrary.

Two or three times a week, they’d end this exercise period with a couple of games in either of the mazes Donnie created to the east and to the west of her long trackway paths. To ease the *dog’s* fears, she and Otis surreptitiously kept an eye on either the dog or cat at all times, making sure they were never far away from whichever of the two were their respective charge for that particular game. Regardless of just how they spent it, everyone seemed to get what they needed from the time passed outdoors, be it fresh air, sunshine, or just plain old movement. Most mornings they came back laughing heartily with each other, feeling much invigorated and ready to eat lunch with a sharpened appetite.

Countless times throughout these months, Donnie’s magical power would suddenly increase in little bursts of blue waves, but she did not at first know why. Sylvester had no explanation for it either, but he clearly was not pleased with her progress through the formal levels of Witchcraft. He spent a goodly portion of his free time denouncing the great many hours of each day she wasted on unnecessary or nonmagical activities. Donnie, as was becoming her habit more and more, blatantly ignored the cat’s remonstrations and did as she wanted anyway. Her propensity for autonomy became even more pronounced once she realized that her power increases occurred whenever she mastered any new skill and sometimes even when just her acceptance of her abilities increased. To further that psychological end, she read as many books as

she could about her new craft. If every witch was supposed to forge their own magical path, then she wanted to learn enough about others' experiences to be able to make informed choices about her own methodology.

Winter eventually gave way to spring and their lives became more centered around day-long outdoor activities again. Warm rains soon had the valley surrounding the cottage looking lush and verdant. It seemed everywhere Donnie looked she saw the green of budding vegetation and renewed life. Deep within her began to grow a tiny seed of contentment.

At almost exactly six months after her arrival in this strange land, she started replanting Catie's vegetable and herb garden, mostly with the seeds and bulbs from the cellar. Donnie enlarged the original garden by looking up the flowers, herbs and spices she needed for her current medicinal studies. She chose only those that would survive the climate, visualized their seedlings or bulbs from their pictures in an old gardening catalog, and called for several to come to her if they existed anywhere in this land. So far, everything she'd called for had arrived instantly.

By the end of the second day of her horticultural efforts, the garden was complete. Donnie was tired, having done some of the work manually so she could feel the moist, rich earth in her fingers and let its freshness fill her lungs. She stood and stretched her aching back, gazing up at the dark clouds rolling in from the east. It looked to be yet another severe thunderstorm heading their way and would be at the cottage in less than half an hour. She hoped her seedlings would survive the beating they were going to take tonight. With a snap of her fingers, she materialized a couple of tarps onto the new plantings to provide them what protection she could. With another snap, she sent the gardening implements she'd been using to their proper places, then turned toward the animals, most of whom were either grazing or rolling around in the grass, whichever suited them for the moment.

Okay, it was only Rex who was doing the rolling.

"Hey, guys?" Donnie called out. "If anyone wants to sleep in the stables tonight, would you mind if I get you bedded down now? I don't want to have to come back out once that storm has arrived." She pointed a finger in the tempest's direction, while at the same time she magically set afire the logs in the hearth inside the house. It would probably be a cool night too, not just a wet and windy one.

Diana and Otis took one look at the clouds and the lightning flashing within them before heading toward the stables, saying they would indeed prefer to weather the storm in their stalls. The cottage just got too close when it was this humid, they added by way of explanation. Donnie

nodded, eyeing the black clouds with a touch of trepidation, then followed the horse and cow.

Rex elected to stay in the stables, telling Donnie as she passed by him, "Otis and I are gonna play *Trivia Hound* and we've both been looking forward to it all day long 'cause we're only usin' the music questions. That way it'll be real competitive."

Sylvester, on the other hand, as any smart cat would when rain is imminent, bolted from his lazy perch on the bench by the well and darted into the house.

Twenty minutes later, Donnie emerged from the stables to find the rain had already begun with a vengeance. It was pouring bucketfuls. She dashed to the cottage and jumped through the open doorway, sloughing off the heavy raindrops from her face and arms with her hands before reaching for the towel she kept near the door. It was only five o'clock but it already looked nearly night outside.

"This is going to be a really bad storm," she announced, "it came on even faster than I thought it would. And I wouldn't be surprised if it hails some later because the temperature is dropping fast. Hey, Brindle, are you guys going to be okay with this rain, do you think? Or should I have put more resin on you? Well, I guess it's too late for that anyway, innit?" She grimaced facetiously, still vigorously toweling herself off.

The tree's low voice rumbled back at her, "We shall do quite well in it, Donnie, regardless of the thinning resin. Although, I would recommend that you soon replace the roof over the kitchen and the bedroom with some of Mournful Jack's boards. I believe what is there now will weather this storm, but not many more like it, most definitely."

Parry added, "This looks to be the robin storm anyway, you know, so you should have plenty of time to repair the roofing over the coming months."

Donnie looked at the office door, from which Parry's voice had emanated, and flashed it a smile. "Parry, sweetie, I hate to remind you of this, but you've said the very same thing for the last three storms in a row now. Where I come from, we have a groundhog that's about as accurate at predicting the end of winter as your robin seems to be."

Parry sighed softly. "I suppose that is possible, although unlikely. Curiously, it is a system which has never failed until now. But then, many storms this season have been most unusual, arising so fast and furiously, and uncharacteristically from the east. Well, at least this storm should be another of those rather prodigious downpours to which you love to fall asleep. Let me see, it's been nearly two weeks since we had a storm such as this; has it not? Which means you should rest quite well tonight, Donnie."

"Oh, won't I just!" Donnie agreed heartily, grinning at the door. She glanced around the room and asked, "Do you know where Rex went, Sylvester? He ran off up the hillside after saying he was going to spend the night with Otis and Diana and still wasn't there when I left the stables."

"I have not seen him since I came into the cottage," the cat replied. "You know how he loves to play in the woods with the skunks and the deer. Even he is sensible enough to find shelter, so do not fret over him. He hates it when you do, you know."

Donnie nodded and strode toward her bedroom, intending to take a shower. "Yeah, I know he does. But I can't help it; I worry about him because that's my job. Besides, I hate not being able to—"

"Kiss him goodnight," the cat interjected sourly. "Yes, I believe we are all aware of that pointless penchant of yours, and of his for kissing *you* good morning."

Donnie stopped in the doorway of her room and stared back at the cat. "Why, I do believe Rex is right, Sylvester, and you're just jealous of our pointless penchant, as you like to call it. Y'know, anytime you want to participate, just say the word and we'll include you in it, okay?" She gave the cat a wink, which he ignored. She chortled in amusement and said, "Hey, I'm gonna jump in the shower and then fix dinner. How about a game of *Murder about Town* afterward?"

"That will be fine, Donemere," replied Sylvester, yawning indolently and sleepily deciding to stretch out in front of the roaring fire for a while longer.

Major Pine committed his murder in the Jailhouse with the pistol, with the motive being fraud, the first time they played the game, as Sylvester was the one to discover, and they were almost finished with the second game, with Miss Rose looking mighty guilty in the City Hall, when suddenly there sounded a small *thunk!* and the kitchen window flew inward.

Donnie and Sylvester both jumped in surprise. Turning, they waited to see who was looking to gain entry to the house, the turbulent wind outside blowing gusts of rain through the opening, down the stone wall, and onto the wooden floorboards below. A few moments later, something very small, very wet, and very black crawled over the sill, gasping for breath and groaning. It was the bat, *Mecholætera*.

Donnie chuckled and said, "Come on in, Mickey T, we're just playing a game of *Murder*. We're almost finished, if you want to play the next game with us," she offered with a cheery smile, adding sympathetically, "It sure is a nasty night out there. Probably not a lot of moths and

mosquitoes flying around, which means you'll have to settle with beetles for dinner tonight, I expect."

The bat shook himself, more water droplets scattering onto the wall and floor, then he glided over to the table, his fur already beginning to show the true brown of his species. The window closed firmly behind him once he'd cleared its span. "Oh, it be juth terrible out there, Donnie. And I thwear thith window geth thmaller every time I go through it! Theemth I can never make it on the firth try becauthe my eyethight ith juth not what it uthed to be, you know?" he lisped chattily, teetering precariously on the very edge of the table.

One of Mickey T's front teeth had gone missing a year or so ago now. The elderly, garrulous bat always told everyone that he'd lost it in a battle with an eagle who'd been hunting him, but Donnie had her doubts about the veracity of that story. Mickey T had a habit of running into things at full speed because, as he'd just said, the keen eyesight of his youth had deserted him some time before. He was a close friend of Sylvester's and had become a regular visitor to the cottage.

Donnie reached over and gently cupped the bat from behind to give him a boost onto the flat surface of the table when his teetering became even more pronounced.

"Well, my friend, you are getting up there in years, you know. Most Noctules only live to about twelve or thirteen years of age and you say you're already pushing eighteen. So losing your eyesight is probably to be expected at this stage." Donnie's response was stated somewhat offhandedly because she completed her turn and came up with the answer to the game. "Okay, Sylvester, I say it was Miss Rose in City Hall with the knife because Mr. Black, our victim, had the deeds to her old homestead and he refused to return them. Eeeuuuwwww, a bit gruesome, huh? And I thought she was such a lady! Let me just check the cards. Yep, I'm right. That makes it one to one. Ready to play the tie-breaker? Whaddya say, Mickey T, wanna try your hand at making it a three-way tie?"

The bat had pushed his way unsteadily onto the board and was peering closely at the upturned cards. Donnie suspected that he'd been quite an important bat in his day and was now allowed to live his life out peacefully, resting somewhat on his laurels with the rest of the magical bat population. He was really very old and rather rickety.

When she'd looked him up in her library, she'd found that his species was called Noctule. You'd have thought she'd bestowed everlasting life upon him when she'd told him this. Mickey T's cloudy eyes had lit up and he'd beamed at her, declaring, "Aha, tho that ith who we are! I exthpected that we muth have another name inthead of juth plain old bat!

Not very colorful, the word *bat*, ith it? But Noctule...now that ith a word you can really think your teeth into. Noct...tule."

Donnie liked Mickey T enormously.

He looked up now and gave her his brightest gap-toothed grin. "That Mith Rothee ith a wily woman, ith thee not? Thee makth my fur thtand on edge. It theemth thee ith alwayth the culprit! Well, yeth then, deal me in, Donemere."

"How do Sephala and Malerop fare?" asked Sylvester, turning to his old friend, while Donnie collected the game cards and began separating them into three piles. "Is Sephala recovered yet?"

"Ah, the kith are getting along wonderfully now that the lateth litter hath been born. Loth of mouthth to feed though, you know? And theeth oneth are a handful, believe you me! They all have thuch very tharp teeth! Juth look at what they did to my wing thith morning." The bat extended the injured appendage, pointing out the little, ragged teeth marks along its bottom edge. "They are making me crathy with their conthant crying and gibbering. I thwear they nibble away at everything ath though they never get fed anything at all! They've taken three monthth off my life already and they're only a few dayth old!"

"Oh, Sephala finally had the kids?" Donnie exclaimed excitedly, hiding a smile behind the cards she was shuffling. "You didn't tell me that, Sylvester. How many did she have, Mickey T?"

"A thouthand, I think!" the old bat joked. "They thertainly make enough noithe for that many!"

"When was this then?" Donnie snorted her laughter, unable to keep a straight face any longer. Even Sylvester chuckled broadly and shook his head at his friend's frankness.

"Three dayth ago. I came by to inform you that I am a grandfather onthe more, but I believe you were drething at the time."

Donnie finished preparing the board for the next game and said, "It's your turn, Sylvester, you go first. Well, Mickey T, be sure to give your kids my congratulations and best wishes. When the grandchildren get big enough, bring 'em on by so we can meet them. I'll turn on a big light outside and you can have a moth fest."

"Thank you, Donemere, you are tho kind to uth when almoth no one elthe ith. We bathth apprethiate that greatly, believe me."

"Oh, think nothing of it, really. It's just that I know only too well what it's like to be different and feared. Apparently my own kind are so frightened of me, they refuse to venture anywhere near the cottage."

Sylvester looked up sharply at her and said, "Whatever gave you that idea?"

"Well, no one ever comes here, do they?" she pointed out dryly.

The cat said nothing to this, wishing to avoid the subject completely, and instead inquired of Mickey T, "What brings you out on a night such as this, dear friend?"

The bat started to reply and then stopped short, his mouth hanging wide. "Well, there," he sputtered, "that ith what I came about! Good heaventh, I almoth forgot—I am becoming tho thenile! We cannot play thith game, I thay! We muth rethcue the man who appearth to have fallen on your landth, Donemere. He ith athleep in a ravine north of here, no more than three leagueth away!" The bat then added somewhat anxiously, "I don't think he even knowth it'th raining becauthe he ith thleeping tho heavily. If he'th not careful, he'th going to catch a cold, ithn't he? And doethn't that alwayth thpell death for you humanth?"

Stunned at first into utter silence, once the bat finished speaking, Sylvester let out a hiss and Donnie gulped, and then they both turned to stare incredulously at each other.

"There's a man on my lands?" Donnie finally croaked.

Notes from the Author

Please visit my website to learn more information about me and my writing, read my blog, find out who I'm reading, and add your name to my mailing list so you can be one of the first to know when my next project is due out or to maybe earn a little bonus read here and there of parts of my books (or maybe the whole thing). I promise to never send you spam.

My website can be found at:

<https://www.cherylagross.com/>

I want to thank all my readers for their support. Being an indie (independent) author means that I have to do everything myself, from the writing and storyboarding all the way through to book design, sales and marketing. While I'm pretty good at the first parts, I'm still learning the last parts and have a lot of growing to do in that regard. For instance, I am hoping to make my books available at several other venues than just Amazon by the end of 2017. I am also going to be looking to do some book readings and signings, and perhaps one day I will schedule one in your town, so please be sure to let me know who you are by joining my contact list from my website.

Also, if you would take the time to leave a review wherever you purchase my books online, that would be greatly appreciated. Search engines, especially those internal to book sites, display those titles with the highest number of reviews in their first group of results and therefore those titles get seen and purchased the most. More importantly, I just simply appreciate the feedback I get in reviews.

Lastly, I hope you enjoy reading the Donemere's Music series even half as much as I enjoy writing it. It is a positive story and one of empowerment of the mind, heart and soul, not just for the main characters, but also for those on the edges of the story who contribute so much to the telling. May we all strive to bring out the best in ourselves and each other, no matter what happens in our lives.

About the Author

Beginning when she was a very young girl in Wellsboro, Pennsylvania, Ms. Gross wrote fictional stories, sharing them with family and friends but never having quite enough confidence to attempt publishing them. By default, she fell into a career of technical writing, earning herself a niche in the technical editing market of mining study reports. She currently resides in the Santa Cruz, California area, although she has lived and traveled to various places throughout the world. Several years ago, she decided to take a hiatus from her professional work and focused on writing novels. The idea for Donemere's Music was born then and Thy Path Begins is the first of the books she wrote during this period. After some reworking, it is finally ready to take flight. The second book in the series was published in August 2017, so be on the lookout for The Cunning Sister Arises.

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Donemere's Music

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