

Chapter One: Of Blood and Bonds

I sit in the driver's seat, sipping at my overly sweet – and now very cold – tea. It's been forty-seven minutes since Devlin O'Shea entered the house and I'm starting to get itchy. A few cars have driven up to the crossroads behind me before turning either left or right, but none so much as slowed down. Considering the neighbourhood, I'm not surprised at that. In fact, I know that if there were anyone around, they'd be startled to see a lone woman sitting here. This isn't the kind of street where anyone should spend time lingering, let alone someone on their own. I don't feel I have much choice, however.

I take my eyes off the peeling green paint on the door frame and scan ahead. There must be at least forty more houses in front of me before the road finishes in what I already know to be a dead end. If any of the buildings are occupied, their inhabitants are staying well out of sight. There's not even the barest twitch from any of the dirty curtains hiding the houses' interiors from sight. In front of each dwelling, there's a small patch of garden where the grass – if it can be called that – is either hopelessly overgrown to the point where you'd need a machete to cut a way through to reach the doors, or blackened and dying. There appears to be no pattern to whether the grass at each house is healthy or diseased, although the fact that the one O'Shea has disappeared into is fronted by deadened blades rather than a glory of jungle green seems to make sense. My attention drifts back to his building. There's nothing. No sign of life.

I sigh. I am tempted to fiddle with radio dial, if only to hear the buzz of static filling the empty space. O'Shea isn't a pure-bred triber. His hearing won't pick it up. But I have no way of knowing who – or what – else is inside that house with him and I dislike taking unnecessary risks. It's unlikely there's anyone else there ... but still. I take another sip. Twelve more minutes to go.

A collection of dry, browned leaves skitter across the potholed road as the wind picks up ever so slightly. I flick a glance towards them, just in case, but there's nothing sinister. I'm getting too jumpy. I chew my lip and focus yet again on the house.

It's the very definition of nondescript. The red bricks were probably pretty once upon a time. Now, however, there are too many grubby stains from city pollution for them to look anything other than grimed and crumbling. There are a few tiles missing from the roof but the house is

probably still water-tight. Except, that is, for the broken window on the first floor which looks as if someone has punched a hole through it. Whatever lies behind is dark and indistinguishable.

I check my watch again and feel my insides tighten. It's still not time. I loosen my fingers from the polystyrene cup and flex them, one by one. I shouldn't have accepted this job. Cheating spouses are easier than errant half-breed daemons. Then I amend that to quarter breed. O'Shea's grandmother was pure Agathos but the rest of the blood flowing through his godforsaken veins is bog-standard human. I should be thankful that he's not a quarter Kakos, I suppose. But then, if he were, I wouldn't be here right now.

Seven more minutes. I drain the last of the tea and toss the empty cup onto the floor of the passenger side along with the other rubbish. Then I grimace as I feel my bladder tighten. Damn it, now I need to pee.

I consider my options. I was instructed to wait a full hour before breaching the property and confronting O'Shea. If I entered now, it would probably take me at least five minutes to locate him – by which time, I reckon an actual hour will have passed. Or almost anyway. I decide it's good enough. I can still catch him in the act. I'm still hoping he's on his own.

I zip up my leather jacket to stave off the cold and carefully open the car door, trying to remain as quiet as possible. I probably shouldn't wear leather; it tends to have a mind of its own, groaning and creaking of its own accord whenever I make a move. Plus, its distinctive earthy smell can give away my presence in a heartbeat. But anything which has senses that are so attuned will know I'm coming from half a mile away and I like the fact that it makes me look kind of bad-ass. It's difficult to appear threatening when you're just over five feet tall so I'll take whatever help I can get. The jacket is far too large for me and, if it wasn't so elaborate in its embroidery and zips, it'd probably look ridiculous. I 'borrowed' it from an old boyfriend of mine called Zupper who I'd spent one sensuous, long summer with, zipping around on the back of his motorbike. He took off around Europe to find himself. I just took his jacket.

I step out, shooting a speculative look at the keys which are still in the ignition. I have a bad feeling about all of this and I'm starting to wonder if I need to be prepared for a quick getaway. To be fair, no one has come this far up the street while I've been here; I don't even think a single bird has flown overhead. And it's not as if my rusting heap of junk is particularly desirable to even the most desperate jacker. If I leave the keys where they are, I have a better chance of vamoosing out of here at

warp speed should I need to. If someone appears from nowhere and nicks my car, however, I'll be pretty much screwed. Aside from the fact that then I'd have zero way to get out of this graveyard of a cul-de-sac, I simply don't have the cash to replace it and my insurance is virtually worthless.

I err on the side of caution and pocket the keys. I haven't had much time to research O'Shea but nothing I've learned points towards him being physically dangerous. Yes, he might have less friendly companions inside and, yes, the prickles on the back of my neck are far from comforting, but balancing an extra five-second fumble with the threat of ending up entirely car-less leaves me with no choice. I really should look into some proper alternatives for future encounters though. I silently add it to my ever-growing list of things to do.

I glance up and down the street. It's still deserted so I cross over quickly and jump the pathetic foot-high gate into the so-called garden, where I pause for a couple of heartbeats, cocking my ear for any sounds. Even though I'm barely a few metres from the front door, I still can't hear anything.

The grass looks worse close-up. It even smells of decay. In the far corner there's a one-eyed, blonde-haired doll, forlornly waiting for a long-since departed owner to return. Its sole iris stares at me emptily. I look away and move to the entrance, placing one cupped ear against it. I think perhaps I hear a dull thud from within, but I can't be sure.

The property has been sitting empty for the last eighteen months since its previous tenant ended up on the wrong side of the law so technically I'm not trespassing, but I still can't stop myself from checking the street again before I twist the knob and the door creaks open. Then I step over the mouldy envelopes with the tell-tale red of final demands peeking through their transparent windows and cross the threshold.

I pause for a moment, sucking in the stale air and listening carefully. I have no way of knowing which floor O'Shea is on, so I sidle against one wall and shuffle carefully along, making sure I avoid the centre of the corridor where the floorboards are more likely to creak. Although my aim is to confront him, I don't want to alert him to my presence before I'm ready. I unzip my upper pocket and pull out a small canister of pepper spray. In the unlikely event that he's armed and feeling twitchy, I'll be able to get the jump on him.

The door to the left is ajar, which makes my life easier, so I peek through the gap just to be sure. Even though I can't scan the entire room,

my senses tell me that it's empty. I move forward towards the kitchen, wincing as my foot crunches down on something, and I freeze at the sound. Fortunately I seem to have got away with it as the silence continues. I gently lift my foot and look down, raising my eyebrows when I see the dull glint of a used syringe. Interesting. From the previous occupant's criminal history and my rushed research, I've learned that he was staunchly anti-drugs. So either he was an untidy diabetic or some vanished squatters took up residence temporarily after he left. Or there is something about O'Shea that Tam failed to tell me.

Pursing my lips, I kick the broken needle carefully towards the stairwell and out of my way. Now is not the time to start worrying about how I should have been better prepared before confronting O'Shea. I'm here. It's already too late. I edge up to the kitchen instead, pausing where the carpet curls up at the edges. The door is hanging off one rusty hinge and the odour coming from inside is so bad I can imagine someone has died inside and their rotting corpse is lying there in its own putrefying juices...

There's nothing more than a few bin bags filled to the brim with empty takeaway cartons and crumpled aluminium tins of lager. Upstairs then.

I back out, picking my way round to the front of the stairs, and peer upwards into the gloom. Annoyingly, the carpet on the stairs is gone, leaving scuffed bare boards which will make it harder for me to stay quiet. I step up, keeping on my toes to avoid making any more sound than I need to. I clutch the sticky banister and creep noiselessly upwards. When I reach the top, I stop for a moment and wipe my hand on my jeans. I'll need to scrub myself down with disinfectant as soon as I get home.

I'm about to ease open the first door when I hear what sounds like a gargle emanating from the room furthest away. Considering the state of this place, I doubt that O'Shea is taking time to worry about his dental hygiene. Then I hear a low moan. If I didn't already know better, I'd assume it came from something of the spectrally challenged variety of being. But this building is less than fifty years old and, smell in the kitchen aside, no records indicated that there has ever been a death on the premises. So it is something else. I bite down on the inside of my cheek and tiptoe forward.

The door is firmly closed. Bad for me. At least the two remaining rooms are also firmly barred, so I'm likely to hear anyone sneaking up from behind before they get too close. O'Shea has to be inside. I reach

out for the steel door handle, drawing back with a hiss of breath when my skin touches it. It feels clammy and unpleasantly damp. Sniffing my fingers, I detect the faintest whiff of rose petals. Huh.

I pull the cuff of my jacket over my hand and try again, slowly pulling the handle down and opening the door, wincing at the sound. I give up the pretence of silence and kick it open the rest of the way. It bangs heavily against the wall, bouncing back towards me but I leap through, yanking out the papers from my inside pocket.

‘Devlin O’Shea!’ I deepen my voice and direct it at the dim shape in the centre of the room. ‘You are hereby served.’

The shape doesn’t move but there’s another indistinct moan from its direction. I squint through the gloom. O’Shea may not be performing the illegal magic it has been suggested he would be, but there is still something very, very wrong here. I can smell vomit and urine and something else besides.

‘O’Shea!’ I shout again.

The figure droops. Skirting round it, I go to the windows and yank open the heavy curtains with one hand, keeping the pepper spray outstretched in front of me. Light floods in. I gape. Tied to a wooden chair, his face a bloody pulp, is one very badly beaten daemon. I realise that the other smell I couldn’t identify is fear. He moans again. What in bejesus is going on here?

It’s impossible for me to positively identify him as O’Shea; for all I know O’Shea’s the perp who’s attacked this guy. But I have to deal with what’s in front of me, regardless of my almost overwhelming misgivings. The dark stain soaking the floor beneath the man indicates that he’s losing a lot of blood. Staunching the flow is my priority.

I stuff the pepper spray canister into my pocket, ensuring it’s still within easy reach but not about to fall out when I need it most, and immediately start searching the limp body for wounds. He starts gurgling again and I curse aloud. ABC, I tell myself sternly. Airway, breathing, circulation, in that order. I need to get him into the recovery position.

I realise that his hands are secured with an old-fashioned set of steel cuffs. I keep my own pair, passed down from my father for old times’ sake, but I prefer using plastic ties these days, like most people. The fact that he’s been tied to a chair with a cumbersome old set means something. Not that I have the time to muse about it right now. The cuffs are looped around the wooden bracket at the back so I lift my foot on to it and kick

downwards. Thankfully the chair is as rickety as the rest of this godforsaken house and it snaps with one blow, allowing the daemon's arms to fall backwards. I extricate the hanging piece of wood and chuck it to one side, then yank him off the seat and onto the floor as quickly as I can, manoeuvring his body and neck to force his airway clear. He coughs weakly and my face is sprayed with a mist of blood droplets, letting me know I've been successful. Then I return to searching his inert form for the wound.

There are two: one piercing his side, just to the left of his upper rib cage, and one higher up at the base of his neck. Clearly it's the neck wound I should be most concerned about. Using the base of one hand, I press hard to try and slow down the pulse of blood that's pumping out. With my other hand, I dig out my phone and tap out 999 with my thumb. I lift it to my ear and, as it starts to ring, the daemon's eyes snap open, orange slitted pupils taking me in through a glaze of pain. Well, it's definitely O'Shea.

'999, what's your emergency?'

O'Shea shakes his head.

'I'm in a house on Wiltshire Avenue,' I say.

'No.'

'Number 23,' I continue. 'I need an ambulance immediately.'

He moans. 'No. Stop.'

'Is that Wiltshire Avenue in Belvedere or Trockston?' enquires the voice.

O'Shea reaches up and grabs my wrist. Given the state that he's in and the blood loss he's suffered, his grip is surprisingly strong. 'Tell them,' he rasps, 'and we're both dead.'

I stare down at him. Death threats are nothing new in my line of work; daemons, even quarter-daemons, bleeding out in front of me, are. His eyes implore me.

'If you don't get to a hospital in the next five minutes, then you're dead anyway,' I tell him.

I can hear the emergency responder repeating her question. The futility of the situation hits me. We're in Trockston, the worst end of Trockston, no less. No paramedic is going to rush to get here. They'd

rather take their time so that whatever is going down has gone down by the time they arrive. Which means Devlin O'Shea won't make it.

'False alarm,' I mutter into the receiver and hang up.

O'Shea blinks gratefully at me.

'Don't,' I say, kneeling down and shoving him onto his side, then pulling out a pick so I can undo the cuffs and free his hands. 'Don't thank me. You're about twenty breaths away from rejoining your maker down in the depths.'

I'm surprised at the ease with which I manage to unpick the lock. The cuffs fall, one steel circle hanging loosely from his left wrist. He mumbles something into my ear.

'Nope,' I reply with as much forced cheeriness as I can muster, 'you'll need to speak up if you want me to hear you.'

O'Shea doesn't bother responding. I heave him onto my back in a piggyback and force his uncuffed hand up to his throat so he can continue to press on the wound. His weight drives my knees and shoulders downwards, but I do my best to ignore it and stagger to the door and on to the landing. I haul both myself and him down the stairs, this time thumping loudly with every step.

We're barely at the bottom when my watch beeps, indicating I should at this point be entering the property to find him, not leaving the property with him. And certainly not with him half dead. Those last seven minutes felt more like a bloody hour.

I nudge open the front door with my toe and edge out. The vacant one-eyed doll stares at me as I shuffle back through the garden with O'Shea's heavy body. I can feel his warm, sticky blood seeping underneath the collar of my jacket and connecting with my skin and I try to speed up. He can't have long.

Stepping over the garden fence is like scaling Mount Everest. I try to ignore that I'm about to collapse and instead run calculations in my head. Forty seconds to get him to the car. Another minute to get back to the crossroads. Praise the heavens that I don't already have to reverse and lose even more time. Then I can take the A road past Silverstein to Manorbridge hospital. Five minutes. Tops. I'll register him under a false name in case he was telling the truth about the dead part. It won't stop someone from finding him, but it'll stall them until I can speak to Tam and get a permanent guard stationed.

I try to reach into my pocket for my keys but his leg is in the way, so I'm forced to squeeze my fingers around to grasp them. Yeah. I should have left them in the freaking ignition. I was stupid not to trust my instincts.

Gasping for breath, I lurch round to the passenger side and open the door. I throw in O'Shea's blood-soaked body, noting with satisfaction that he's still conscious and pressing tightly on his neck wound. I slam the door shut before dashing round to my seat and starting the car.

I move up the gears, accelerating down the empty street. Come on, come on. I turn left towards Manorbridge, then abruptly slam on the brakes as sirens scream their way into my consciousness. Part of me can't quite believe it. The emergency responder must have taken my half-baked, half-garbled and half-finished phone call seriously, sending ambulances in both directions. Relief floods through me and I glance behind to welcome the cavalry.

Except it's not an ambulance. I stare at the vehicle bearing down on us while O'Shea moans at my side. The familiar stripes of an armed response unit wink at me tauntingly as the tyres screech and it wheels round into Wiltshire Avenue. Trying to ignore the tremor in my hands, I very deliberately start the car moving again, away from the sirens.

I run over the phone call in my mind. I'm sure I said nothing more than the address and that I needed an ambulance. There was no reason to send goons with guns to check it out. And how in the hell had they arrived so quickly? I only hung up on the responder a few minutes ago; response times are never that fast. If I'd waited to enter the house until I was supposed to, O'Shea would have lost so much blood he'd probably be dead and I would be the sole witness to the crime. Or the prime suspect. I grip the steering wheel and swerve right.

'What in the hell have you gotten me into?' I say aloud to O'Shea, not expecting an answer.

His spooky orange eyes swivel in my direction and he opens his mouth.

'Don't speak,' I tell him curtly. 'Conserve your energy. You can give me answers later.' I'm damned if I'll let him croak on me before I find out exactly what is going on.

I press down on the accelerator, speeding up again, and make a snap decision. I don't know who this guy is and why the police – and someone else much more violent – are so interested in him, but my interest is

piqued. The hospital is now out. There's only one place nearby where I can get him some proper medical help and avoid the suddenly undesirable eye of the law. I'd rather choke on my own tongue than go there but I'm out of other options. Shit in a hell basket.