

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

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BRAVELY

What if you had one year to
save everything you loved?

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Designed by Margie Peng

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TO THE ISLANDERS

PROLOGUE

THIS is a story about two gods and a girl.

It takes place a very long time ago, when Scotland was only beginning to be called Scotland, at a castle called DunBroch.

The first god, the Cailleach, was very old. In fact, one of her other names was the Old Woman of Scotland, although most humans never saw her in that form. Instead, those with the Sight merely felt her invisible presence in a wild storm or a rushing waterfall or even in the melted snow that pools in fresh-plowed spring fields. The Cailleach was a goddess of creation. She made trees bud. Grass thicken. Calves grow inside cows. Fruit ripen on the vine. Her work was the ancient business of making and renewing.

Oh, she was a wily old woman.

She was a rule-bending, shape-shifting, trick-playing, truth-splitting old crone, and she'd do whatever she could to get her way.

The second god, Feradach, was very young. It wasn't that he hadn't been around as long as the Cailleach, because he had, in his own way. But unlike the Cailleach, who had the same physical form every time she became visible, Feradach appeared as something different to every person who saw him. It meant he was always learning himself new, over and over and over, a kind of eternal youth.

Feradach was a god of ruin. His work was the ancient business of destruction. Under his attention, fires seared landscapes, plagues harrowed communities, and floods erased civilizations.

Feradach destroyed the obsolete; the Cailleach prompted renewal.

Together, they kept the balance.

Unfortunately, they didn't always agree on what the *balance* required. Or rather, the Cailleach didn't always agree. Young Feradach was unflinchingly fair, because it's easier to have unclouded justice before experience complicates things. The Cailleach, on the other hand, was old enough to have preferences. Biases. Favorites. This meant that sometimes,

even when ruin was perfectly merited, she wanted *her* side to win instead.

And that was usually when she cheated. She'd been playing tricks on Feradach for ages.

Some years she managed to save a warrior or a family or even an entire village from him. Some years, she lost them all. Some years, when the tricks didn't work, she used a miracle, although she didn't get many of those to spend. The Cailleach was old, but wherever the miracles came from was even older, from a deep part of Scotland that has always favored healing and creation. Miracle years were rare ones.

This story takes place in a miracle year.

On the day it begins, DunBroch looked particularly splendid on its perch above the glittering loch. In that sharp winter weather, everything that wasn't green and red was black and white. Black water, white-heaped shore. Black road to the castle, white-shouldered bracken on either side. Black walls, white-capped battlements. A powdered sugar layer of snow rendered all the courtyard's divots smooth as an iced bun. Red berries popped brightly in the holly and bay leaf boughs hung over every threshold. Old green banners flapped elegantly from the tall towers.

DunBroch was getting ready for a Christmas wedding. Yes, they had Christmas back then, and weddings, too, although neither looked exactly as they do now. The part of weddings we spend a lot of time on these days—the bride and the groom, the picking of flowers and matching of dresses, showers and stag parties, flower girls and ring boys, the kiss, the kiss—that was the least involved part back then. A DunBroch wedding ceremony was just a couple quickly exchanging a ring or a brooch in front of a cleric, then getting on with it all. No kiss. No romance. Just a perfunctory transaction. But the celebration that came after—now that was really something. It could go on for days. Pantomime plays, courtly dancing, feats of strength, silly games, and, of course, the food. The food, oh, the food! To modern eyes, it would have looked much more like a festival than a wedding.

Now, a DunBroch Christmas was more like its modern-day cousin. The Christmas turkey was more likely to be a boar or a swan, and the board games played before the fire were ones that have long since gone extinct, but the seasonal trimmings were the same. Holly wreaths and ivy boughs, mischievous mistletoe and merry carols, twelve short winter days of gifts, twelve long winter nights of treats and spiced wine. It was a natural companion to the revelry of wedding feasting.

The Christmas wedding was Leezie's. Foolish, lovable young Leezie, who had been a member of the DunBroch household staff so long that she

was like family. She loved ritual and religion. The Christians, the druids, the Jews, the witches, the Cistercians, the Lads of Cernunnos, the Ladies of the Morrigan, the Tironensians, the Cluniacs, she had tried them all. Recently, she'd dedicated herself to Minerva, the Roman goddess of wisdom and crafts, and spent weeks weaving and writing songs about owls. It was a trying time. Luckily she'd moved on to astrology and then, on to getting married. Leezie had always wanted a Christmas wedding—a perfect combination of ritual and religion—and now she'd finally found a man to star in it with her. The others at DunBroch called him the Cabbage.

Cabbage is not exciting, but it is nutritious. He would do.

Leezie is not the girl this story is about, however. It is about another DunBroch girl.

Now, there are three DunBrochs: the *castle* DunBroch, gazing watchfully over the wooded hillsides. The *kingdom* DunBroch, with its lochs and burns, its lowland fields and highland shielings, its coven of white-haired mountains and sliver of black-tongued sea. And the *Clan* DunBroch: King Fergus, Queen Elinor, Princess Merida, and three triplet princes, Hubert, Harris, and Hamish.

This story belongs to the Princess Merida.

Merida was less like the mannered royal you're imagining and more like a struck match, although matches did not yet exist. Red hair, keen eyes, quick brain, built to start fires but not to put them out. She was an absolute wizard with a bow and arrow. For over a decade, before the wee devil triplet princes arrived, she'd been the only child, and where other children might have had friends, Merida had her bow. She practiced her archery breathlessly, automatically, in every moment her mother hadn't scheduled her for lessons in embroidery, music, and reading. There was a stillness to archery she couldn't get anywhere else. Whenever she had a problem she couldn't solve, she went out to practice. Whenever she had a feeling she didn't understand, she went out to practice. Hour upon hour, she collected calluses on fingertips and bruises on forearms. At night, when she dreamt, she still sighted between trees and adjusted for strong highland winds.

In the months before the wedding, Merida took her bow and traveled the kingdom. In spring she'd gone with the villagers and their herds up to the temporary bothies in the shielings. In late summer she went down to Morventon to study letters and geography with the nuns. By fall, she was traveling with a handful of her father's old confidants who had vowed to map the varied terrain of DunBroch.

In winter, she returned for Leezie's wedding. She hung up her bow.

How safe and unchanged she found DunBroch after her months of wandering.

She didn't know that Feradach—and disaster—was approaching.

But the Cailleach knew. That wily old goddess.

She also knew that DunBroch had earned Feradach's ruin. But the Cailleach was old, and she was biased, and she had a stake in the Clan DunBroch.

So she cheated.

This is that story.

PART I

WINTER

THREE KNOCKS

MERIDA had been eating bread rolls for an hour when the first knock came.

The rolls were wonderful. Fresh baked. Crisp on the outside, pillowy and warm on the inside. Merida had finished off all the wonky-shaped ones, and had now moved on to some of the perfectly shaped ones. There were still hundreds of them piled on the rough-hewn kitchen table, far outnumbering the planned guests for the Christmas feast. The bread was destined for a silly wedding ritual: Leezie and the Cabbage were supposed to try to exchange a kiss over the top of a wall of buns. Merida was doing them a favor by making the wall just that bit shorter.

Leezie, getting married! Merida couldn't really believe it.

As she munched bread in the dim midnight kitchen, she used her bare foot to trace her name through the flour dusting the stone floor. How pleasant to feel the chill of the floor on the bottom of her foot and the heat of the smoldering hearth on the top. How pleasant to feel the squish of the roll's interior against the roof of her mouth and the crisp mountain crust against her tongue. How pleasant to just let her mind prattle, as her mother Elinor called it, to just let it play over nonsense like how her name spelled backward was *Adirem*, which wasn't half bad, really. *Adirem* of *DunBroch*. Her mirror self, she thought. Her shadow self. As dark and pensive as Merida was bright and active.

Merida traced *DunBroch* into the flour. *Hcorbnud* didn't look at all appealing backward.

Then came the first knock.

Tap-tap-tap.

Merida stopped chewing.

She listened.

Could it be one of the triplets? Hubert had had a mischievous look in his eye as Merida pinched the triplets' candle out at bedtime.

But the castle was silent in the way that only castles can be. The stone

stopped most sound dead in its tracks and the wall tapestries drowned the rest of it. Everyone besides Merida was dreaming of Leezie's wedding and the Christmas feast to follow. The knock had probably just been one of the fireplaces popping.

Merida finished her roll. She took her time selecting another, resisting a somewhat triplet-like impulse to pull one from the bottom of the heap to watch it collapse across the floor. Picking a perfectly round one, she tore it open to admire the structured crevices and crannies inside. Over the past several months, she'd eaten a fair bit of bread, but none could compare to Aileen's. Aileen, the family cook, was irritable, territorial, and foulmouthed, but Scotland's kitchens had no better. Merida's mother Elinor went to great lengths to find the most modern of recipes for Aileen, often all the way from France, and every time a new one came via messenger or pigeon, Aileen closed herself up in the kitchen for days, testing and retesting it before she was willing to let any of the royal family try the result. Well, most of the royal family.

This wasn't the first time Merida had snuck down to sample Aileen's handiwork.

As she ate this roll, she thought back over her grand homecoming earlier that day. There'd been hugs and tears, the works. DunBroch was very enthusiastic about stories, about legends, and Merida had delivered the Ballad of Merida's Year, at volume, from atop one of the tables in the Great Hall, fainting around Christmas decorations. The triplets and her father and Leezie had hooted with delight, and her mother had pretended to look disapproving.

Ah, home! It was so nice to be back among DunBroch's creature comforts: its bellowing fireplaces and plentiful candles, its worm-free snacks and discreet privy, its flea-free blankets and luxurious bedrooms. Nice, too, to find the little things unchanged: the herbal smell of the kitchen. The chaos of her triplet brothers caterwauling in the halls. The percussive clearing of her father's throat as he sat in his chair by the fire. The ritual of kissing her mother's cheek good night as Elinor wrote down the day's events in her journal.

Tap-tap-tap.

Was that a second knock?

It seemed like it might have been. A soft triple tap, just like she thought she'd heard before.

"Hubert, I hear you," she whispered.

But it didn't seem to be Hubert. Was it coming from the door? The castle gate was barred at nightfall, so no one could have gotten into the

courtyard, and even if they could, the closest civilization was the wee blackhouse village, which was a twenty-five-minute walk even when the road wasn't bad-tempered with snow and ice as it was that Christmas Eve.

Merida waited. She listened. There was nothing.

She got another piece of bread.

The strange restlessness that had driven her out of bed in the first place was beginning to rise again.

Why was it even there?

She should have felt marvelous. She loved her family. She loved her home. She loved it more than she had words to say. It was wonderful to be back, to find it almost exactly as she'd left it.

But up in her tower bedroom, she'd lain awake in the cold moonlight that snuck around the window tapestry and wished desperately that it wasn't dark so that she could go outside to the exercise fields and shoot her bow until her body and mind felt perfectly still. Instead, she fidgeted, her feet itching to take her away on an exciting journey.

Exactly how she'd felt the night before she'd left months before.

But she'd *gone* on the journey already. Something should have changed. She should have changed.

Then came the third knock.

Tap-tap-tap.

This one was definitely not coming from a fireplace. It was coming from the door. Not the main one, but the little ugly one around back, for deliveries, where the carts wouldn't tear up the grass. But who would be out there on a night like this?

Merida had a sudden, hideous thought that perhaps it *was* one of the triplets, somehow trapped outside for hours, able to manage only that feeble tap. Leaping across the kitchen, she turned the enormous key in the lock and heaved the heavy door open.

Outside, the courtyard was brighter than she'd expected. The huge moon, although out of sight behind the castle, lit all the snow to daylight brilliance. Freezing air, scented with woodsmoke, blew into the kitchen around Merida. Every star was so bright and shimmering that they seemed as if they'd be wet to the touch.

There was no one standing on the doorstep. There weren't even footprints in the snow. But she knew she had not imagined the knocks.

A very peculiar and particular prickling was rising inside her. She could tell that *this* feeling had been hiding among her other restlessness all along, only now it had become big enough for her to recognize its unmistakable timbre. It was like the wet, sharp shimmering of the stars

overhead, but in her chest.

Magic, it whispered. *Magic is near.*

It had been a very long time since she'd felt that call.

And that was when she saw him.

In the deep blue shadow near the castle wall stood a hunched figure, although he couldn't have been the one who knocked—there were no footprints leading from him to the door. He was paused in the act of tugging one of his gloves off, absolutely motionless, hoping she wouldn't notice him.

This was no visitor. This was an intruder.

“Hey!” she called. “I can *see* you!”

The figure didn't move.

Merida would have preferred her bow and arrow for effect, but she used what she had in her hand already: bread. With her perfect aim, she railed it right off the figure's head.

“*Hey!*” she said again. “Announce yourself, stranger!”

He turned his head. What was his expression? Merida couldn't see; it was hidden in shadow.

Merida snatched up a weapon; the closest to hand was a fireplace shovel. She crossed the courtyard in several massive strides. “I said, announce yourself!”

The stranger's voice was scornful. “You can't hurt me—*ow!*”

Merida hit him right behind his knees, a trick she'd learned not from battle training, but rather from her fiendish brother Hubert, who'd hidden for weeks beneath the Great Hall table, perfecting the technique on Merida and anyone else foolish enough to wander close.

It worked just as well on mysterious strangers. He fell to his knees. His gloved hands disappeared right up to his wrists in the snow. He shot Merida a single, astonished look.

“You can't stop me,” he told her.

This was not at all the reply she'd been expecting. “Stop you from *what?*”

But he simply took off running.

Around DunBroch, Merida was considered hot-tempered. She felt this was unfair and only because she was a girl, as she had three redheaded triplet brothers who were far more likely to pop off in anger than she was, and they never got called hot-tempered. What *she* was, she felt, was quick-witted. She didn't take a lot of time to put her reactions together. Sure, sometimes that reaction was a blunt reply, but sometimes, that was what was deserved. For instance, sometimes you were a stranger in the night

and what was needed was a fireplace shovel to the back of the knee and then a pursuit.

In the back of her head, she heard a tiny voice that sounded a lot like her mother's saying, *Merida, princesses do not chase strangers barefoot through the night!*

Merida narrowed her eyes.

She gave chase.

THE BLACK RAVEN

MERIDA realized very quickly this was no ordinary pursuit.

One moment she was chasing a man, his cloak twirling.

And then she was chasing a deer.

Or something like a deer, something large as a deer, its flanks silvery in the starlight as it leapt over the bracken into the snow-light woods.

No, she thought, she was mistaken. It was a fox, surely. She saw its tail whipping gray through that black-and-white landscape.

A wolf, ears pricked as it cleared a creek.

A stretched, lanky hare, incredibly spry.

A sinewy mink, teeth flashing in the moonlight.

A floppy rabbit pillowing into the brush.

Oh, she thought. It is magic after all.

Scottish magic was not much different than Scottish wildcats: both were pretty rare, and a person could go their whole life without encountering either, if one wasn't paying attention. Most people paid magic (and wildcats) as much thought as they did songbirds or fruit that grew in funny shapes; there were more concrete things that required their attention. Some people didn't even believe in magic (or wildcats).

Merida believed. She had to. A few years before, it had called to her, she had answered it, a world of trouble ensued, lessons were learned. It had turned out for the best, but ultimately, she understood that the world of humans and the world of magic were separate for good reason. They followed different rules. Her mother had told her there were two kinds of people with the Sight: people who were interested in magic, and people magic was interested in. After the last experience, Merida had decided she was certainly not the first.

Yet here she was again, chasing magic through the woods.

Could she turn back?

You can't stop me, he'd said.

She had to know what he was doing in the courtyard in the middle of

the night.

But it was clear she was never going to catch him in a one-on-one chase, so she turned her attention to trapping him instead. This was *her* DunBroch. She knew the low boggy areas and the sudden rises. She knew where the mossy boulders became untraversable and where the trees were knit too close for fast travel. She knew the way to a treacherous burnside, a place where the river cut through the ground so swiftly that the banks were steep and unforgiving. Impassable.

A good trap.

The two of them angled and circled, bounded and shifted. Her shimmering quarry thought he was being pursued. But he was being driven. He fled right to the field that ended at the burnside, and not a moment too soon, because her lungs were bursting with this cold air and her feet stinging from running over the rough ground.

Drawing to a halt, hand pressed to the stitch in her side, she watched the stranger, now vaguely hound-shaped, leaping away across the field. Over the thump of her heartbeat in her ears, she could just barely hear the complicated sound of the cold river charging fast in the burn beyond, and she doubted he could hear it at all over his progress through the dry grass.

Sure enough, the burnside took the stranger by surprise.

He slid, slid, slid, legs wheeling, then: stopped. Just in time, right at the edge.

Slowly, he turned to face her.

Now he was neither a stag nor a fox, hare nor rabbit, mink nor wolf. He was a comely young man with a blond mane of hair like a wild pony's. His heavy cloak, powdered with snow, was held shut by a brooch engraved with a tree with both the branches and the roots visible. He had no visible weapon.

"You're—you're trapped," Merida gasped. She was still too out of breath to sound commanding, but she gave the fireplace shovel a threatening sort of twirl. "I've seen two cows drown in this river, and *they* weren't wearing a cloak to drag them down. Now: who are you?"

His gaze dropped to her bare feet, which were bright red from the cold, then back to her makeshift weapon.

"I am not a thing you fight," he said. "Why do you think you can?"

"Why were you in our courtyard?" Merida shot back.

"How did you know I was there?"

"You knocked!"

"Knocked? I certainly did not."

"Someone knocked!"

“It wasn’t me!”

“Why did you run from me?”

“Why did you run *after* me?”

“I thought you knocked!”

“I wouldn’t knock! You weren’t supposed to see me doing my work.”

“What work?”

He didn’t answer.

With a great *pwang* against the cold rock, Merida knocked the head of the shovel right off, exposing the rather pointier metal end. She directed this pointy end at him. Not like a sword, but like an arrow without a bow, drawn back and resting on her shoulder, waiting for her to send it right through his eye. “I demand you tell me what your business was at DunBroch.”

The stranger shook his head as if he were clearing cobwebs from it. “No. No, this is a distraction. This is a trick.” He didn’t seem to be talking to her. “I told myself I’d be wiser.”

He leapt neatly over the edge into the roaring burn below.

Just like that, not a bit of hesitation; he’d never been trapped at all. He had simply let himself be stopped out of what—curiosity? And now he was gone.

Maybe she should just go home. Maybe it would be all right.

But the knock, she thought.

It hadn’t been the stranger, according to him, and she couldn’t imagine why he would lie about that. If not him, then who? Someone who wanted her to see him out there, to catch him in the act of—what? *You can’t stop me*, he’d said. She had to know. That’s all there was to it.

Merida jumped after him.

It was madness, of course. The river, wild with winter, was in the sort of mood to devour bridges, and from the feel of the debris-ridden water, it already had. Merida swam and tumbled. She hit boulders. Wood hit her. Her fireplace shovel swam away from her grip to start its own adventure somewhere else.

“I’m not leaving you!” she shouted, getting a mouthful of icy water. Who knew if the stranger could hear; possibly he’d turned himself into a fish. She barked her knee on a boulder. “You might as well give up now and answer my questions!”

Suddenly she was *flying*.

She fell—

fell—

fell—

Midair, she realized she was going over a waterfall. She knew this waterfall! She'd seen it many times during the day, and it had always appeared quaint, small, and picturesque. It didn't feel that way at all when she was going over it. She fell for countable seconds, hit the surface of the shallow pool at the fall's base, and then smashed her shoulder against the gravel bottom. There was just enough current left to unceremoniously wash her up to the pool's edge. Her mouth felt gritty with river water. Her lungs felt pierced with icicles. Every limb was completely numb with cold.

Footsteps crunched on the brittle rushes by her head.

The stranger stood inches away, looking down at her where she lay on her stomach, completely robbed of any royal dignity she may have possessed before. "Just when I think I understand mortals. What do you want out of this?"

Mortal! It was shocking to hear him say it, even though she already knew after this chase that he was no ordinary human.

She licked her frozen lips to warm them just enough to speak. Her voice sounded thin as ice as she said, "I demand an answer. I *caught* you."

He said, "You haven't caught me."

Merida reached out to snatch his ankle.

The stranger recoiled.

Not the calculated move of someone avoiding capture, but rather the involuntary jerk of someone leaping back from an adder. Stiffly, he said, "I don't think you'd like that, Princess."

Princess! It was as shocking to hear this as *mortal*.

"Why not?" she asked. She got to her feet, slower than she would have liked. Her bare feet were still completely numb, and a bit of a worrisome color. "Or is that another question you won't have an answer for? Are you only a thing that runs away?"

"How do you know you want answers?" he shot back. "How do you know you want your prey? Are you only a thing that gives chase?"

"More questions? And still no answers," Merida said, but as she did, she wondered if perhaps he *couldn't* answer. Magic was funny that way, sometimes, according to some of the women she'd met at the shielings. Around the fires at night, they'd told her many half-believed stories about the fey beasts and uncanny entities that roamed their kingdom. In these legends, the magical creatures often had limits upon them, especially the human-shaped ones. They could speak, but they could only repeat what humans said to them, or they were extremely beautiful, except for an ugly rat's tail, or they couldn't touch water or sunlight lest they turn to dust. There were always consequences to appearing human. Maybe he was

magically forbidden to confess his purpose. Or perhaps he had none. She mused, “Perhaps you’re just a bogle playing silly tricks.”

“You think I’m a *bogle*?” he replied, in disbelief.

“Or a *pooka*,” she suggested.

“A *pooka*?”

She could tell this needed him, so she went on. “A brag, a shellycoat.” She was running out of creatures who sometimes took human form. Her teeth were starting to chatter. “A...a...hobgoblin.”

His mouth puckered. “You want an answer. Here is an answer.”

She was mystified when he followed this statement by showing her his hands. They were covered by wonderfully made gloves, thin and supple as a second skin, stitched with oxblood thread.

He began to take one off now. Slowly. Dramatically. She was reminded that he’d been in the process of removing his gloves when she first saw him.

“Don’t look away, Princess,” he ordered. With his newly bare hand, he seized the narrow trunk of a sapling close to him. Skin to trunk, fingers immediately pinking in the bitter cold. He squeezed tight.

Merida just had time to think, *Wait, maybe I didn’t want an answer*, and then a sharp wind shouldered past her.

It was clearly on its way to the sapling.

Spiky white frost prickled up from the ground like colorless weeds. Frost wasn’t supposed to appear that quickly, but this frost did—only around the tree. Ice scoured the tender bark. And, worst of all, a wretched, wild dread surrounded them all.

Magic, magic, magic.

The sapling began to die.

The bark went dull, then dry, then colorless as every bit of green life went from deep within it. The very ends of its branches seemed shrunk in on themselves.

Merida could tell that if she put any pressure on the narrow trunk, it would simply snap.

The sapling was dead.

The frost vanished. The harsh wind subsided. The dread remained.

The stranger tugged his glove back on, his gaze fixed knowingly on Merida all the while.

Magic, magic, magic.

Oh no, Merida thought, but she didn’t even quite know why. She fought back her shivers. She did not want to appear to be afraid, even though she was. *Oh no, oh no.*