

XANDER'S FOLLY

Belinda M Gordon

Copyright © 2016 Belinda M Gordon

www.belinda-gordon.com

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Printed in the United States of America

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, 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.

Cover Design by Wesley Goulart
Cover Illustration timurd © 123RF.com

Publisher:

Shaggy Dog Productions
221 Skyline Dr., ste 208-228
East Stroudsburg, PA 18301



Sign up to be on the author's **VIP List** to be the first to hear about new releases, specials and contests!

Go to:

www.belinda-gordon.com/newsletter/

For a *leanbh*,

Joshua

Though I am old with wandering
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
I will find out where she has gone,
And kiss her lips and take her hands;
And walk among long dappled grass,
And pluck till time and times are done
The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun.

-William Butler Yeats
The Song of Wandering Aengus

CHAPTER ONE

Two armed warriors ushered Alexander and me through the dimly lit stone catacomb—a rarely used, cold and musky underground passage that connected the castle to the courtroom.

The warriors leaned against two solid wood doors that marked the end of the passage, opening the entrance to the courtroom and flooding the catacomb with a cacophony of noise.

Spectators packed the arena-style seats in the round amphitheater. The crowd buzzed with anticipation as they waited impatiently for the trial to begin.

The room hushed into an eerie silence as we stepped into the round twenty-foot section in the center of the stadium. Hundreds of Sidhe eyes, like a sea of faceted gemstones, stared down at us.

A storm raged outside. The dark and blustery sky added to the ominous mood that permeated the building. Tall marble columns, spaced around the perimeter of the open air stadium, supported a roof two stories above our heads. The height of the ceiling created the impression of being exposed to the storm and yet protected at the same time.

A circle of soldiers, dressed in the charcoal gray and moss green uniforms of the King's Guard, created a barrier between the crowd and the open area in the center which would act as a stage for the trial. They stood at parade rest, holding their shields in front of them with the bottom resting on the stone floor and their spears beside them.

I took in these benign details, attempting to distract myself from the stone fire pit, piled with burning logs, that marked the center of the open area.

A fire blazed at every trial as a symbol of the power and authority of the court. I expected it, but everyone knew of my pyrophobia, so I had also nurtured a small hope they would forgo it this time.

The guards led us past the fire to stand on a low platform on the opposite side of the pit. We turned to face the dancing flames. I pulled myself up tall to create the illusion of confidence, and perhaps subconsciously attempting to distance myself from the fire.

Alexander stood beside me, warily evaluating the scene. He brushed a comforting hand against mine; no doubt he knew how my heart raced. I laced my fingers with his and hid our hands in the folds of my skirt. The warmth of his touch did more than anything else could have to sooth my distress.

My aunt and uncle—King Lomán and Queen Ciara—sat tall and regal to our right in a boxed off area situated midway down the rows of seats. Uncle Lomán steepled his fingers, his expression grim as he stared into space. Rosheen and Keelin, my identical blue-haired cousins, sat one on either side of them. The twins smiled at us encouragingly.

Our warrior escorts now stood at parade rest in front of us, matching the other soldiers around the room. Still, I sensed that their quiet, still demeanor would change the second we tried to leave the platform.

"This feels more like we're the accused, rather than the witnesses," Alexander commented as he scanned the spectators. Though his words were soft, I could still hear the tension in his deep throaty voice. I raised a quizzical eyebrow and gave him a slight nod.

I had felt an undertone of antagonism towards Alexander since we had arrived in the Otherworld, and it felt stronger than ever in the stares from the crowd. I couldn't be certain if the hostility was due to his humanness or because he was with me—the King's Jewel—or both.

I took a deep breath to sooth my nerves and remembered that Alexander still carried the sword. A mysterious, strong glamour concealed its presence. None of the guards had noticed it. Even I couldn't see it, though I took great comfort in knowing it was there.

An old and withered Sidhe with scarred eyes and knotted knuckles came into the arena. She held on to the arm of a soldier, trusting him to lead her safely through the crowd. She held a cane in her other hand, tapping the floor as she shuffled to her designated seat on the opposite side of the arena from the King and Queen. The clicking noise from her cane echoed through the quiet arena.

"That's Deirdre the Wise—the oldest Sidhe in *Tír na nÓg*. She has the ability to sense the truth, like Rosheen. She will decide Gilleagán's fate," I whispered to Alexander.

The crowd buzzed again as the doors opened to admit two more armed warriors who escorted my golden-haired brother to a platform across the fire pit from us. Gilleagán ignored the crowds, keeping his focus on me with an evil glower in his eye. I fidgeted uncomfortably under his glare. It pained me to see the blackness of his aura—to know how thoroughly his soul had fallen.

Belatedly I noticed that Gilleagán walked freely, unencumbered by shackles of any kind. My eyes grew wide in panic. "He's unbound," I whispered, tightening my grip on Alexander's hand.

One of the guards in front of us turned his head a quarter of the way in my direction. "Not to worry, My Lady. His guards will stay vigilant."

His guards didn't relax into a parade rest—instead they remained alert, with weapons in hand. Still, I feared they underestimated my brother.

The doors opened one more time. Sophia entered the courtroom holding onto Shamus with one hand and Keelin's ballerina doll in the other. Alexander sucked in air as if wounded to see his daughter. He hadn't known she would be there. Sophia dipped her head and looked over at him through her eyelashes. Her big brown eyes, confused and scared, filled with tears as her chin quivered.

Alexander reached out to her, but Shamus stopped halfway across the room, standing alongside the fire pit and facing the old woman. Alexander moved to take a step toward her, but I held tightly onto his hand to hold him back. I understood his desire to go to her, but the guards wouldn't have allowed it.

The stage, it seemed, was set, the players all in place. A flash of lightning lit up the dark, brooding sky.

"Gilleagán Danann of the House of Finna stands accused of murdering his Grandmother, Órlaith Finna dé Danann, former queen of the Sidhe people and mother of the current king." The old woman's scratchy voice was surprisingly strong as it boomed across the large room. "He is further accused of abducting this child and of attempting to turn the King's Jewel over to the Unseelie Rebels."

A clap of thunder rolled through on the heels of her words.

"His accuser," Deirdre continued, "is a Son of Adam known as Xander Mannus, handfast with the King's Jewel, the defendant's sister, Tressa Danann."

"No! *I* am his accuser," I called out, but the tittering of the crowd drowned out my astonished voice.

"Silence!" Deirdre bellowed, her voice cracking.

"Respectfully madam, but I am—"

"You are a victim of the crime. According to our laws you cannot accuse him; a third party must do this. Is there some reason not to trust this Son of Adam with whom you have chosen to be handfast?"

Alexander stiffened next to me and I flushed at the baiting tone of her question. It added to the sense that *we* were on trial—criminals instead of victims.

"He is completely trustworthy, madam, but he is also unaware of our ways and the rules that we live by."

The old woman waved off this argument. "He need only answer my questions truthfully. Do you so swear, Xander Mannus, Son of Adam?"

"It'll be okay," Alexander whispered. The strain in his voice belied the comfort he meant to give me. He clenched his teeth, making the thin scar that ran along his jawline stand out.

"I do so swear," he said aloud.

"Son of Adam, did you witness Gilleagán Danann start the fire that killed Her Majesty?"

"I did not. I arrived after the flames had engulfed the house."

"Did anyone witness the Prince start this fire?" she called out to the crowd, using the Sidhe tradition of drawing testimony from the audience. The negative responses that rumbled through the room seemed to mock the accusation.

"Did you witness Gilleagán conspiring with the Unseelie with regard to surrendering his sister to the Unseelie prince, Deaglan Mór?"

"Yes." Alexander projected his voice to fill the room, staring down the crowd as if daring them to contradict him. "I saw him with the Unseelie Rebels. He had Tressa and my daughter

bound and captive at the time. I saw him fighting alongside of them. I saw him kill several of your warriors."

Though I tried to keep my full attention on Alexander's words, his voice—even with the oddness and strain of the proceedings—wasn't enough to distract me from the fire. I forced myself to listen to the voices in the far reaches of the stadium, to the sound of the rain falling outside, to anything other than the crackle of the flames.

The crowd grew louder with each accusation Alexander made, their antagonism developing into a smoldering heat. Oddly enough, they still aimed their resentment at Alexander, rather than Gilleagán. Tension flooded Alexander's body as he stood at the ready beside me. His eyes darted around the room, alert to every movement.

I caught snippets from the uproar. "Surely he lies." "He is but a human." "His own grandmother and sister?" "Not the prince, I knew him as a boy." Finally, I couldn't stay quiet any longer.

"The Queen Mother passed on her gift of Aura Sight to me," I shouted over the murmur of voices. This news brought out a loud burst from the crowd; Deirdre shouted over them and demanded quiet. I kept going, resolute that they would listen to what I had to say.

"When I received the sight, I could see how black Gilleagán's soul had become. His aura is darker than any of the Unseelie at the camp where he held me hostage."

Over the escalating noise of the crowd and the raging sounds from the storm, I still heard the fire snap and crackle. I felt the heat of it on my skin. I closed my eyes and took several deep breaths before continuing.

"When I questioned Gilleagán, he admitted to what he had done. He admitted that he had killed my beloved grandmother. I heard him. So did Alexander, and everyone else who was there."

"Truth. She speaks the truth!" Rosheen stood and shouted at the crowd. "I sense the truth in her words now, and I was there and sensed the truth in Gilleagán's confession."

I took another deep breath; this time the air tasted of smoke.

"Ask her what *she* has done," Gilleagán shouted, pointing at me. "Tressa's no saint. She holds *Dominion* over humans; she has opened the eyes of—"

Deirdre spoke over him, obviously not listening to or caring about what he had to say.

"The fact that Órlaith bestowed her Aura Sight onto you shows that she favored you above all others," the old Sidhe said.

A loud pop came from the fire as one of the logs fell, shifting the half-burned stack beneath it. Despite my best efforts, I jumped back and grabbed onto Alexander's arm to steady myself.

I looked across at Gilleagán, whose face was distorted with rage. The edges of his aura drifted away from him like steam. He stared at Sophia as he spread his hand wide, circling his wrist to call the wind to him.

Nobody else seemed to notice what he was doing. I had seen him wield the wind as a weapon in the Unseelie camp, but perhaps no one else knew that he had this rare ability. His gaze moved to the fire pit as he prepared to unleash the ball of wind in his hand. In one horrifying second, I understood his intentions.

I thrust down my fear of the flames as I grabbed a shield away from the closest guard. I ran to Sophia, crouching in front of her and brought the shield up just as the wind ran over the

fire and exploded towards her. The blast knocked the two guards closest to Gilleagán off their feet.

The shield eradicated the flames, dissolving them into nothing but a blast of heat.

"Shamus, get her out of here," I shouted to my grandmother's butler. In an instant he had grabbed Sophia's hand and flitted away.

ALEXANDER

Gilleagán screamed in frustration. He chanted a few words and a dagger materialized in his hand. I was already speeding toward him when he lunged at Tressa, knocking away her shield and sending her sprawling.

Several Sidhe warriors rushed toward him, but I got there first. I unsheathed my sword as Gilleagán drew his dagger overhead. As he swung downwards I pushed Tressa out of the way, causing him to miss his target again.

I stepped in front of Tressa to protect her from his next assault. Gilleagán came at me instead, eyes bulging with fury. When he lunged at me, I thrust my sword and pierced him through the heart. I pulled my weapon back, and he fell to the ground.

Tressa scrambled to her feet. I reached out a hand to her and held her behind me as I warily turned, assessing the threat that surrounded us, sword at the ready.

I had expected outrage. I had expected the crowd to descend upon us... But something else was going on. I just wasn't sure what it was. A din of frantic voices arose. I picked out a few words—"Claiomh Solais," "it's the sword," "a treasure, they have a treasure," "the prophecy lives," "Nuada's strength." A hush fell over the courtroom as the King rose to his feet.

"Niece, explain what we are seeing here," he demanded.

I didn't want to let Tressa come out from behind me and stand exposed before this crowd—ridiculous, being that the crowd surrounded us on all sides. Slowly I began to realize that the spectators seemed friendlier now than they had been earlier, before I killed their prince.

I let go of Tressa and she stepped out to address the royal family, but I spoke before she could say anything. The words came out without my thinking about them, as if someone had placed them into my head.

"I am Nuada's heir of choice.

Chosen to wield the Sword of Light.

My strength and fidelity will be the Jewel's ally

in her quest to save the Sidhe people.

No harm shall come to her while I take air.

To this I swear."

The runes on the blade of the sword glowed. I held it aloft and spun around so everyone could see the soft green light.

CHAPTER TWO

TRESSA

The warriors had finally gotten one side of the courtroom cleared, after resorting to threats to use their weapons. Alexander and I sat in the bottom row of the cleared section. Uncle Lomán left the arena to take the queen and his daughters safely away from the raucous crowd. He had asked us to wait there for him.

Alexander held onto the sword, though he kept his posture non-threatening. He leaned forward with his forearms on his thighs. He held the sword tip down, between his knees with the point resting on the floor. Yet for all his attempts to appear relaxed, his dark chocolate eyes patrolled the surrounding scene with cat-like intensity.

I curled my body in his direction—just enough so that our knees touched. Instead of watching the guards hustle the rest of the crowds out of the courtroom, I watched our aura's dance and roll around each other. Nevertheless, I felt the curious stares aimed our way.

Several guards carried Gilleagán's body away. I know not where they took him, nor do I care.

The rain stopped and the sky brightened; the cool breeze felt good on my sweaty skin. Someone had put out the fire, and the air was fresh again.

"Where did that oath come from?" I asked Alexander.

He shrugged and didn't answer for a minute. When he spoke, his voice sounded exhausted. "I don't know. The words just came out." He curled his mouth into a sardonic smile. "It sure seemed to do the trick, didn't it? I expected the crowd to attack. My only concern at the time was stopping them."

We were silent again as others bustled around us. The amphitheater was nearly empty when he spoke again.

"Where's Sophia?" Alexander asked, tension burning in his voice.

"She's with Shamus," I said. "I asked him to take her way."

"Can we have him bring her back? I'd rather have her where I can see her."

"Aye." I looked around for someone I could ask to find her, only to see Shamus enter with her through the catacomb doors. Sophia broke away from him and ran to us. Seeing that Alexander still held the sword, she jumped into my lap instead, throwing her arms around my neck and burying her face into my shoulder. Once cuddled there, she burst into tears.

"There, there, my sweet," I cooed as I petted her dark hair. "All is fine now."

Alexander cradled his daughter's head with his hand, then leaned over and kissed her temple.

"She would have nothing but to come back," Shamus said, an apology in his voice. I nodded.

"Tressa, I'd like to get out of here as soon as we can," Alexander said.

"Sure and they won't keep us much longer."

"I mean I want to go home. Back to the real world."

"Xander..."

"I know this is the real world to you, but it isn't for me. I need to get back to where I understand how things work. I need to be better prepared for the next time we come back here. I assume there will be a next time?" He looked at me in a way that suggested he would be perfectly happy if I told him no. When I didn't immediately answer, he continued speaking.

"Yeah, I thought so. Well, I never want to be this unprepared again. I'm asking you to give me some time—on my own turf—to do that."

"Aye, of course. We'll leave as soon as we're able."

Shamus cleared his throat. "My Lady, I have become quite attached to the little miss. With Mistress Órlaith gone, I have no one to serve. With your permission I would like to go with you, to care for the wee one."

I reached out and took the scruffy old Brounie's hand. "We would be honored, Shamus. Thank you."

A tall, burly guard helped Deirdre down to the floor of the courtroom. Walking slowly, matching the old woman's pace, he escorted her to us.

She held a hand out in Alexander's direction. He looked at her, puzzled.

"The sword, boy. Let me touch it," she said testily.

Alexander looked over to me and I shrugged. He gently placed the hilt into the blind woman's hand. He held the flat sides of the blade, both to hold it steady for her and to ensure it stayed in his possession.

"Ah, it feels warm to the touch," she said, her expression softening into a look filled with peace and contentment. She ran her fingers over the Celtic knot design on the hilt, learning its

shape. Then she reached out and traced the scar on Alexander's right arm. She traced the geometric design on the bracelet he wore before allowing her hand to drop away.

"So, Nuada's Heir, at last you have come to claim your prize."

"My prize?"

"Aye, the King's Jewel. Nuada's heir was always a part of the prophecy. You spoke the oath. And you have Nuada's mark on you," she said, tapping the scar on his arm.

I had noticed before how the scar that curled out of his palm and ran up his arm created a Celtic knot that resembled the one on the sword hilt, but I hadn't made the connection. Now that she said it, it seemed obvious—the scar marked Alexander as Nuada's heir. Nuada had lost his forearm and hand in battle. Alexander had lost the use of his arm and hand—also in battle. Nuada had been restored via magic, just as I had restored the strength and dexterity in Alexander.

The guard who had escorted Deirdre to us leaned in to examine the sword for himself. Alexander eyed him skeptically. I watched his aura extend and wrap around the hilt as he drew it away from both of them, sheathing it in the scabbard that hung between his shoulders. His aura made him one with the sword. Aye, truly he was the rightful steward of the *Claiomh Solais*.

"I knew this day would come. Your mother foretold it. Sadly, I will not live to see any of the other treasures."

"My mother?" Alexander sat up suddenly, the feigned casualness gone.

"Are you not the son of Neve of the House of Falias?" She waved a hand toward the agate bracelet I had used as a talisman to heal his arm. "Is that not the mark of a hound? The emblem for the House of Falias?"

When I had carved the bracelet I had merely thought of it as an attractive geometric design. However, it seemed that she was right: the arrangement of various circles that went through the middle of the design could be interpreted as a creative take on a paw print.

"Neve Falias. Yes, that was my mother's name," Alexander said, a mix of anxiety and excitement in his voice.

"Surely you know she has a great gift for *Darna Shealladh*."

"You said—you're saying—are you telling me my mother is alive?" Alexander sputtered.

"Her body never returned to her ancestral home. I must conclude that, aye, she is still alive."

CONTINUE READING: [Click Here](#)

