# Shylah

A Dark Irish Folklore Fantasy

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Second Act Ramblings

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Book Cover by Gerard F Dunn

# Introduction

***"If you could live again, would you take another's life?"***

Carey is a promising grad student at Old Dominion University, trying to live up to her successful family's high expectations. Unfortunately, she has a useless boyfriend, too, wrapped up in his ambitions. On the surface, her friends are supportive, providing the outlet she needs to manage daily stressors until they invite an old evil into our world one night. Carey's friends are working with this evil from a faraway land to take Carey's life away so it will live again.

This entity has a counterpart coming to our world, and mortal allies will try to banish it back to its prison.

The two groups clash in a ceremony that could determine the balance of our world, costing Carey her life.

It is loosely based on Irish folklore of ancient and malevolent spirits.

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# Chapter 1

# Banished

Upon a green field of winter barley, the crowd gathered around a hastily arranged pile of wood and peat. In the center, a long wooden pole stood, with a woman dressed in fine clothing chained to a large ring at the top. She looked out of place compared to the rags worn by people in the crowd. I inlaid her dark green dress with gold and red stitching, ruffled sleeves, and a collar. The woman looked more like royalty compared to the people gathered around. Her face, known to all before this moment as angelic and serine, had melted into an angry, twisted mask of pure malevolence displaying a predator's teeth as she laughed. She screamed at the group gathered around her, causing their mood to grow increasingly fearful and ugly, "You all know that you cannot trap or contain me unless you also do the same to the Cómhaith." Your opposite has made the journey of his own accord to the Sídhe. In doing so, he will be your anchor in prison." He paused, staring into her eyes, seeing at first hatred, then a hint of defeat. "But you know that already. Don't you?" The old man smiled with satisfaction. He was missing several teeth; his smile looked somewhat silly, though the tone of his voice was deadly serious. "Neither of you can leave, even if it was the will of the gods, and I don't believe that will happen soon for you or him." The man said with satisfaction.

The woman's perfect features momentarily softened into a hurt and almost pitiful expression but quickly twisted back into an ugly scowl: "I will find a way. My clan will not give until I am free to take my rightful place over this land and all of you." She gestured with her head, then smiled sweetly, her eyes betraying the malevolence from within. "Nothing is forever," she said with a feline smile.

An involuntary shiver washed over the crowd.

The old man shook it off and stared back. "Aye, that is true. I must protect those whom your evil would harm."

He nodded to several men holding torches, signaling to light the kindling the witch stood upon.

The pyre quickly burst into fire. The fire climbed hungrily through the stack of kindling under the woman's feet. The hem of her delicate dress sizzled and caught fire. It burned with an orange-red flame and quickly consumed her body beneath it. The flesh on her now exposed legs blistered. Those closest to the fire could hear a sickening, sizzling sound from her flesh. Flames encircled her body like writhing, hungry serpents. I quickly reduced her entire dress to ash. She was briefly naked in the mesmerized crowd. She was then re-clothed in the fire.

The woman stared back at the crowd with hate burning brighter than the flames devouring her body. No screams escaped her parched lips when the fire completely engulfed her body. Witnesses later would claim an unearthly silence while the flames raged. None could remember hearing a sound, not even the sound of burning wood. She would not give these people the pleasure of hearing her cry out. Then, without warning, the flames flared up with a bright red-green glow, temporarily blinding the witnesses. It took several minutes for their vision to return. Spots were dancing before their eyes. Gradually, the flames died as the fire burned itself out. The crowd dispersed, leaving a handful remaining. After a while, the old man collected the ash and held a container before the remaining crowd. They locked it with the Key, and he put it around his neck on a simple cord. Next, the old man gave the container to his best rider to transport it to a hidden place. The two men vowed never to speak to each other again. Nor to

anyone else about the destination of the container. We have done this to ensure secrecy and safety for the men and their families.

The young man rode away on the county's fastest horse to the docks of Dublin. When he arrived, he boarded a ship for a long journey far away from his homeland. He knew this was a one-way trip. He could never return home or to the mounds of Tara again. But he knew it must be done. The risk was too significant if the Cailleach would ever return to this world.

# Chapter 2

# The Graduate Student

It was morning before she knew it. Carey sat up painfully in her chair. Her neck hurt. She had fallen asleep at the kitchen table, resting her head on her arms. What time was it? The clock on the microwave displayed 9:00 AM. Well, at least she was not late for her 10:00 AM class. She grimaced when she moved her head. Carey began rubbing her neck, trying to soothe the pain. Before long, she was out the door on her way to class.

Morning classes seemed to drag on and on. Carey felt like she was in a daze. She felt as if she was on automatic pilot all morning. She met up with her friend Pia at the student center for lunch. Pia was also a graduate student at ODU and was close to completing her studies. She was from Eastern Europe and, in Carey's opinion, was among the smartest and well-adjusted persons she had ever met. Her outlook on life was one Carey envied. Nothing seemed to annoy or surprise her at all. Because she was European? Pia was not as stuffy as the average American, either. It showed in her clingy clothing and how she carried herself in public.

"How are you today, Carey?" She asked, hugging her. Pia was of average height, with blonde hair and an athletic build. She was not shy about showing

her physical assets, which always got much male attention. Pia admitted to Carey that she liked men and even dated a few but found them lacking. She preferred the company of women. She asked Carey if that made her uncomfortable. Carey has assured her it did not. The subject never came up again. They just enjoyed hanging out together—nothing else.

"OK, I guess." She sighed audibly and then looked at her friend. "Do you ever feel you wished you could start your day all over?"

"Yeah, sometimes, but each day is a lesson and a gift. So, I tell myself to get on with the rest of the day." Pia smiled. She was looking intently at Carey.

"What is the problem? Ricky again?" It was no secret that Pia could not stand Ricky. She had tried to get her friend to see what he was doing to her. She thought he was a leech or worse. In Pia's mind, Ricky was a man who drained Carey of her potential. But she never told her to leave him.

"No, it's not him," Carey mumbled defensively. "I fell asleep at the kitchen table last night. Now I have this crick in my neck. Great start to my day. It's already off, I guess."

Pia smiled. "Well, it can't be all that bad. You got to your classes on time?" She reached over to Carey and began rubbing her neck and shoulders.

"Yes, that's the spot," Carey sighed, feeling some pain subsiding, not listening.

Pia stopped rubbing Carey's neck and grabbed her shoulders suddenly. "Now you are here with me for lunch! Smile!" Pia smiled widely, turning to face her friend.

"Stop being all, Miss Sunshine," Carey giggled, pushing her way gently.

"Make me," Pia answered back with a grin. The smile on her face quickly melted. "Do you need my help with anything?"

"No, so far, so good today. I guess I am just off my routine." Carey said, now serious.

The two women finished lunch, mostly in silence, and then left the student center.

"Listen, why don't we go to the beach or a movie to change scenery, meet some new people, and see what happens?" Pia asked.

"I can't do that; what about Ricky?" Carey said, her smile quickly fading.

"Ricky? What about Ricky? She looked left and then right. I don't see any Ricky here. That is a good thing." She nudged Carey's shoulder. "You need to go outside and have a life."

Pia's face had a smile, but her body language displayed that she was dead serious.

"I got to get to my next class. Thanks for the company,"

"No problem. I will walk with you. So, which class are you going to, anyway?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'll pop into a random class and sit."

Pia stepped in front of Carey, stopping her in her tracks. "Are you sure you're OK? I didn't mean to bum you out."

"No, you did not bum me out." Carey smiled, then walked around her friend, not looking at her directly.

"OK, but tell me if there is anything I can do, please."

"Yes, mother."

They walked in silence for the next few minutes. The two women stopped at a crosswalk and saw a crowd gathered in the parking lot on the other side. Carey could not see what was going on amongst the people gathered, but she could hear people talking in hushed tones. Once across the street, Carey could listen to some voices.

"Gross, that's sick, man!"

"Should we call the campus police?"

People were milling around, talking on their cell phones, taking pictures of something on the ground.

"What is going on here?" Pia asked when the two girls got closer. One of the students looked back, shaking his head.

"Got to be some messed up person that did this," he answered.

"Did what?"

"That poor cat looks like it suffered. I can't figure out how someone could do that kind of twisted stuff to an animal."

They got closer and could see what had disturbed the students. Carey had never seen anything like it, even though she had seen plenty of horror movies. Most of the time, those movies' "gross-out" scenes always seemed fake.

But this was no movie. What she saw in front of her was real and not fake. The cat was lying on its back with all four paws spread eagle. The entire underside of its body was laid open, but not like a neat incision. It was ragged, almost ripped apart. She could not take her eyes off the expression frozen on its face—agony.

"Let's get out of here," Pia said, pulling Carey by the arm.

The two women walked away from the scene. Carey proceeded on to her next class, disturbed and unsettled. After class, she went straight home.

Ricky was home on the couch watching TV.

"Hey, how was class?" he asked, not looking away from the television program. He was watching some talk show. A kind of program that showcased what Carey considered "people who lacked class." They were airing their dirty laundry that any 'normal' person would not want on public display.

"Long... just long," Carey muttered tiredly. "What is for dinner?"

"I ate out with some friends a little while ago. But there are some leftovers in the fridge," he replied without turning away from the TV.

Carey sighed. At least if he were late, she would have called him to see if he was hungry. Ricky never called her to see if she was hungry or wanted something ready when she got home.

Carey went into the kitchen in no mood for leftovers and made a sandwich. She was devouring it without even sitting down at the table. Feeling a little better now, she went to the living room.

"Did you hear about the cat on campus today?" she asked.

"Yeah, guess someone does not like cats," Ricky mumbled dismissively.

Carey was shocked at his response, "Really? It was horrible; sick. I wonder if anyone knows what happened."

"Oh, Carey, it was just a cat," Ricky sighed. He still never took his eyes off the TV. He was not even listening.

A little angry at his attitude, she went to the bedroom. All she wanted now was to get a decent night's rest.

# Chapter 3

# Useless Partner

The next day was much of the same for Carey. Wake up, go to class, study, and come home. Ricky was asleep on the couch when she left for class. She found him still sleeping on the couch when she returned home that evening.

She was feeling a strange funk come over her. Something in the back of her mind was making her edgy. Carey put down her backpack, which was full of textbooks. A list of new assignments loomed within the pile of books she scattered on the table. Carey stared at them momentarily, turned around, and entered the living room. Ricky was still stretched out in front of the TV.

"So, how was your day?"

"Well, I was followed up on some job leads, then went out to see a few friends, then came home," he yawned.

Carey sighed. So, he wasted time all day again, she thought to herself. She sat on the couch next to him. Carey looked over at Ricky and then noticed his hands. They were covered with many minor scratches.

"What happened to your hands?"

"What?" he answered back distantly.

"Your hands are scratched," she said, leaning in for a closer look.

"It's nothing. I don't even remember how I got them," Ricky dismissed her question in a quiet tone. He did not seem very concerned at all.

Carey took a deep breath, dreading asking a familiar question, "So, any new job prospects?" She awaited the inevitable downturn these conversations took every time she brought up work.

"No, I can't say I have any good news. The job market just plain sucks."

Carey could tell Ricky was starting to get agitated again, so instead of creating another confrontation, she left the room and went to the kitchen, intending to begin the day's assignments. Just as she opened her first book and booted up the laptop, she heard the doorbell ring.

"Can you get that?" she yelled. Silence. Several moments went by.

The doorbell rang again.

"Ricky?"

"OK, OK... I'm coming," Ricky boomed. She heard him stumble off the couch and open the front door.

She could hear voices. One was sterner than the other, and Pia walked into the kitchen.

"Hey, girlfriend!"

"Hi, what is going on?" Carey looked over Pia's shoulder and said in a lower voice. "I thought you hated coming here because of..." She tilted her head, indicating Ricky in the next room.

"I can handle him, don't worry," she laughed. "Besides, I never let a mere man intimidate me." She had a strange smile on her face. One Carey imagined a cat would have if it were toying with a mouse.

"Let's go out tonight. The moon is full, and the sky is clear. We can go dancing or whatever else you want tonight," Pia winked.

"I would love to, but..." Carey stammered for an excuse, "I've got too much studying to do.... uhh... and an assignment I should at least try to start on tonight."

"You are no fun," Pia feigned a pout. "Well, if you change your mind, call me." Pia turned and left.

"OK." Carey smiled weakly, but Pia was leaving the room by then. She went back to her studies. It was going to be a long night.

At around one in the morning, Carey woke up. She had fallen asleep at the kitchen table. Again. Getting up from her chair on her way to bed, she noticed the TV was still on. Ricky was not on the couch. "In bed now?" She muttered to herself as she walked toward the television. It was still on. He must have left it on. That is not like him, she thought.

"I am starting to feel like his mother." She sighed.

She turned off the TV and then walked up to the bedroom. Ricky was not in bed. Now puzzled, she decided to look around the apartment. He was nowhere to be found. Carey was concerned but too tired to worry about where he was. She went to bed, thinking maybe he just went out for a while. He would be back soon, Carey reasoned. She lay down and then quickly fell asleep.

The following day, when Carey awoke, Ricky was fast asleep beside her in bed. She got up quietly. They got ready for class and left their apartment. Thank God it's Friday, she thought. Halfway through the courtyard, Carey noticed flashing blue lights from a campus police car. She bypassed the growing crowd, going straight to her class. Carey did not want to be late today.

Inside the class, Carey heard the other students talking about the excitement in the courtyard.

"That is the second one this week..." she heard from behind.

"What do you think is going on?" One student asked.

Some sick freak that does not like cats, I guess." The second replied.

She could not help but turn to the student behind her, "Excuse me, what happened?"

"Another cat mutilated on campus again. Staked to the ground, then gutted," the student replied.

Carey felt ill. "That is all we need is a freak running around campus." She muttered to herself.

After class, Carey met Pia for lunch at the student center.

"Hi Carey, you look tired. Didn't you get enough sleep last night?" Pia looked intently at Carey.

"I fell asleep at the kitchen table again," Carey groaned.

"That is because you work too hard and don't play enough," Pia teased, gently tugging at her arm. " I don't think you play at all. Maybe you have forgotten how to play?"

"I do, too," Carey exclaimed defensively. She forced a slight but unconvincing smile.

Pia put her hands on her hips and stared at her friend, "OK, tell me the last time you went out for fun?"

Carey started to speak, and then her face reddened slightly. But she stayed silent. Damn her! Nothing came to mind.

"See! You have just proved my point," Pia laughed. "Let's go out this evening. Maybe we can bring some fun into your boring existence."

"I can't, Pia; I have too much work to do... I will have fun after this fall session ends," Carey's voice began to trail off.

"Come on, isn't your last class just a study session anyway? You need to recharge those brain cells." She pointed at her head. "Then maybe you will stop falling asleep at the kitchen table." Pia crossed her arms on her chest as if she would not accept any argument.

Carey almost told Pia no again. Then she thought about it and turned to her friend: "I have been going nonstop for months. It would be nice to get out of the house. Ricky would worry if I did not come home on time." Carey was still having this internal debate with herself when Pia interrupted.

"Well?"

"I guess I could just tell Ricky I will be in the library for an extended study group session. He might be upset, but, oh well," Carey exhaled slowly.

Pia rolled her eyes. "Good girl!" she said with a bit of sarcasm. With a mischievous grin, "OK, so where should we go?"

"I guess we could wing it," Carey shrugged, stammering. "If I go out, we should just see what happens."

Pia grinned and hugged her friend, "Great, see you at seven?"

"OK."