

Winter's Maiden 1

Excerpt
from
Chapter 1

Winter's Magic Part 1

L. STARLA

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Chapter One

The Present

Alannah jumped out of her dad's Mercedes and marched across the freshly cut lawn in front of her Melbourne high school. She stopped at a picnic table to meet her two best friends, Emma and Melissa. The three of them, dressed head to toe in black, wore matching pale foundation, thick black eyeliner, and blood red lipstick. The trio had adopted the look after a sudden aneurysm had ended Alannah's mother's life three years ago. Not that Alannah's porcelain complexion required any cosmetics to achieve the pallor she wanted.

As they made their entrance, fellow students stepped aside and gawked at them.

Zac, a rugby player who also happened to be the hottest guy in year eleven (according to an official poll), moved to block their path. 'Oh look, it's the Graveyard Girls!' Gesturing toward his groin with a lewd grin, he continued, 'Hey vamp tramps, you wanna suck my blood?' He high fived his mate Bryce and they bent over laughing.

Rolling her eyes, Alannah pushed past them and continued walking along the corridor.

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Emma followed suit, turning to her, and pretending to stick her fingers down her throat. 'Zac is so gross!'

'Yeah, but you'd bone him given the chance,' Melissa added.

When they reached their lockers, Alannah dumped her bag inside. She was about to retrieve her books when she felt a hand on her backside. Grabbing the offending limb, she spun around and pushed its owner against the neighbouring lockers. Her breathing eased when she saw who he was.

'Jumpy much?' Cole grinned at her beneath his long, choppy fringe.

'Sorry.' She smiled coyly, following up on her apology with a heated kiss on her boyfriend's mouth, savouring the cool mint taste on his breath and the smell of his earthy fragrance.

'Ick, get a room you two!' Emma complained.

Alannah broke away from the kiss, pressed her head against Cole's chest, and turned to face her friend. 'You're just jealous you're not getting any.'

'Damn straight! I'm...!' A loud horn cut her off. 'Hey, I've been saved by the bell. Come

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on, let's get moving.' Emma closed her locker and took off.

After planting one more kiss on Cole's lips, Alannah took her books and chased after Emma. She made it to homeroom in the nick of time, yawning her way through the roll call and morning announcements. Her first period was Ancient History and was the only subject that she had any interest in at school. Given her Irish heritage, she was eager to learn about the Celts. As part of her research assignment, she had decided to raid the attic and dig out some of her mother's old books and papers. Casting her mind back to the previous night...

She was rifling through a pile of musty papers that contained crests and pedigree diagrams. When she put them aside, she found a large ornate trunk made from polished wood, with brass filigree designs embellishing the corners of the lid. It appeared to be locked by a series of brass medallions shaped in Celtic knots, each with a moonstone in the middle. When she attempted to unfasten the clasps, they did not budge.

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There must be a trick to this. *After studying the box for some time, she was entranced by the knotwork, her eyes following the intricate patterns. Almost without thinking, she ran a finger beneath the central fastening and drew it back with a start when she pricked herself. A small drop of blood fell upon the moonstone adorning it and she heard the catch mechanism release. When she tried each of the other closures with her bloodied finger, they opened. 'How strange. They must be in a state of disrepair. Simply needed a bit more work to open.'*

Alannah gasped as she lifted the lid, discovering several tarnished, silver trinkets, including a small dagger, a carved wooden stick, a mirror, and a chalice. There were also various crystals and gems. One item caught her attention: a book bound in black leather and embossed with a silver symbol depicting two crescent moons either side of a circular design.

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Before she had much time to investigate further, she heard Dad calling her, so she tucked the book and the family history papers in her bag, closed the box and ran downstairs.

Sitting at her desk in History, she retrieved the mysterious black volume from her bookbag and read the title page: '*Leabhar Scáthanna an Clan Gheimhridh*'. *Is that Gaelic?* Alannah recognised *Gheimhridh* as the original form of her surname, Winters. After starting up her laptop, she plugged the words into a translator. 'The Winters Clan's Book of Shadows.'

'Cool book. What is it?' Emma asked from the seat next to her.

'I don't know exactly, but it was my mum's. I think it might be a family heirloom or something. It's all in Gaelic, so I need to work on translating it.'

'Neat. I wish I had some family history stuff that was relevant.' Emma ran her finger over the symbol on the cover. 'What's this mean?'

'No idea. I'm gonna Google it now.'

Alannah looked for 'Celtic knot with crescent

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moons and circle.' She was not surprised when references to witchcraft appeared. Her mum had been interested in all that wiccan stuff and owned a shop that sold crystals and new age music. Alannah's search results suggested the knot was probably a Triple Moon, also known as the Triple Goddess symbol, although she could not find an exact match for the central dendriform motif.

As she delved deeper into her research on Celtic knots, she came across a familiar design known as the 'Shield'. It was much like the medallions on that old chest in the attic and, apparently, it was used for protection. She started taking down notes on symbology, deciding this would be her focus for the assignment.

She was engrossed in her work when Emma nudged her. 'You gonna respond to that?'

Alannah blinked at her friend. 'What?'

'You got called to the front office.'

'Really?' Alannah stood up. Before she left, she decided to put her mum's book in her bag. She did not want to take any chances leaving something so valuable lying around. When she reached the reception desk, her heart stopped at the sight of two uniformed police officers.

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