

An Extract From:

The Keeper of the Mist

by

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Chapter One

“They say Lord Dorric is dying,” Tassel told Keri, swinging without ceremony into the bakery kitchen. She let the door slam shut behind her. It banged hard because its frame had warped in the wet spring weather, an event predictable as the blooming of crocuses and daffodils. The bell chimed, once and again and a third time as the door bounced against the frame. The chime was a bright cheerful sound, meant to turn away ill wishes and evil sorcery while allowing good luck to enter along with any visitor. But this spring, the sound only reminded Keri that she needed to hire someone to replace the warped frame.

Keri’s mother could have got out a hammer and a handful of twopenny nails and fixed the doorframe herself. If Keri tried to do that, she would probably bend all the nails and crack the doorframe and knock the head off the hammer. But since her mother’s death, the bakery never seemed to earn enough in a week to pay a carpenter to repair the door, so from week to week the door continued to bang in its frame. These days all such tasks seemed to go undone, until both house and shop creaked with neglect.

Keri sighed, blinked, and looked back at the immediate task facing her – one she could at least address properly, and one that would earn decent coin. Maybe this cake would even pay for a carpenter at last.

Tassel began to hitch herself up to sit on the edge of the scarred kitchen table, but then, careful of the lace on her gown, sat on a stool instead and only leaned an elbow on the table. The gown was pearl-gray and pink and frothy with lace, certainly nothing sensible for a working kitchen. If Keri had tried to wear a dress like that, even if she hadn’t been working in the bakery kitchen, she would have stained the fabric and pulled out bits of lace within the hour. Tassel was the sort of girl who never tore or stained anything.

Tassel watched critically as Keri piped frosting around the circumference of a cake layer and then spread peach jam over the layer. “Did you hear what I said?”

Keri produced a wordless murmur, more interested in keeping the peach jam from oozing out of bounds than in Tassel’s far-from-surprising news. She placed a second cake layer on top of the first and repeated the piped circle of frosting and filling of peach jam.

“Yes, but my cousin says you can stand in his back pasture and actually *watch* the mist thinning,” Tassel persisted. Her voice dropped portentously. “He says, some days lately, you can see right out through the mist into Tor Carron. He says you’d swear you can glimpse the tips of mountains against the sky.”

“Um?” said Keri. She placed the third layer on top of the second and began to spread frosting in large swirls across the sides and top of the towering cake.

Tassel clicked her tongue in exasperation. “Not *Gannon*, and not any of the girls. It’s Cort who says he’s seeing mountaintops through the mist.”

Her attention momentarily captured, Keri glanced up. She tried to imagine Tassel's youngest and most humorless cousin standing in his back pasture, gazing into the border of Nimmira, frightening himself with vague shapes in the mist. Her imagination failed her. They had all used to be friends, she and Tassel and Cort, but then Cort's father had died, and then her own mother, and after that everything was different.

"There, you see?" said Tassel, satisfied that she had finally impressed Keri with the significance of her news. She then spoiled her portentous air by asking in an entirely different tone, "Are you going to use all that frosting? It's the kind you make with soft cheese and whipped cream and white sugar, isn't it?"

"It is," said Keri heartlessly, "But yes, I'm going to use all of it."

Tassel widened her eyes in a woebegone look and blinked, dark eyes filling with tears. It was a trick she had used to great effect as a child. Tassel had been an exquisite child, all huge eyes and curls and porcelain skin. She had been able to weep beautifully, with never a blotch or a reddened eye, even before she was steady on her baby feet.

Keri would have envied her friend that skill except it would have been wasted on her; *she* had never been pretty enough to make tears charming, and besides, Keri's mother, unlike Tassel's parents, had never been in the least susceptible to charm. At least, not since falling, briefly, for the charm of Keri's father.

Tassel was still exquisite, although no longer a child. They had all grown up rather suddenly a year or two before, but where Keri had gone awkward and self-conscious for a season, and Cort had spent a gawky year tripping over things while his voice broke, Tassel had stepped straight from pretty childhood to adult grace. She was tall for a girl, taller than Keri, nearly as tall as Cort, but somehow this did not interfere with her ability to wear frothy pink.

Even so, Keri only raised an unimpressed eyebrow. "If you want some frosting, next time offer to whip the cream."

"But that's hard!"

Keri snorted, but she also relented so far as to dip a spoon into the bowl of frosting and hand it to her friend.

Tassel accepted the spoon cheerfully. "Mmm."

"So what else does Cort say?"

"Only what I told you. But if it's true, doesn't it mean the Lord must really be dying this time?"

Keri only shrugged. Dorric Ailenn had been a fixture of Nimmira for forty years at least, more than twice Keri's whole life. She supposed he'd been a good Lord at first

– people were. Nimmira didn't choose anybody to be Lord – or Lady – unless they'd be good at it. So Lord Dorric must have been a good Lord at the beginning.

Only then he'd become a little bit self-indulgent, and then a little bit selfish . . . and once you started giving yourself license to be selfish and thinking you had a right to be self-indulgent, there was no end to it. Or so Keri's mother had said, on the rare occasions she said anything at all. Keri thought that must be true. Look how Lord Dorric had turned out.

Keri had imagined Nimmira with a different Lord; of course she had. She probably spent a good deal more time on such daydreams than most people. But Lords of Nimmira were generally long lived. Keri thought Dorric would probably rule for another twenty years. No matter who imagined he could see through the boundary mist.

Finished frosting the cake, Keri eased away the parchment that had protected its glazed platter from unsightly crumbs and dabs of frosting. Then she replaced the parchment with a row of sugar flowers, carefully nudging each flower into place around the base of the cake. Violets for happiness, bluebells for honesty, and a single hibiscus flower for the top, carefully tinted pale blue to match the other sugar flowers. Hibiscus for endurance but Keri liked them because hibiscus flowers were large and showy and impressive.

“No roses,” observed Tassel.

Keri looked at her, eyebrows raised.

“Oh, well,” Tassel said philosophically. “I know. ‘Borage for a brave young man, bluebells for an honest wife, hawthorn for abundant land, violets for a long, sweet life.’ But I like roses.”

“They'd probably throw the cake away. And refuse to pay for it.”

“Well, I don't care. That's just children's nonsense, that thing about roses. You can put roses on a cake for me, one day.”

Keri slanted another raised-eyebrow look at her friend. “Oh, can I? Something you haven't told me?”

It was Tassel's turn to snort. “Hardly. All the boys in Glassforge are boring. Predictable little puppies who trail after you with their tongues hanging out . . .”

“That's just you, Tassel. Anyway, if and when you need a cake, I will not either put roses on it. I'll make you a nice hibiscus flower in pink, if you like.” Keri placed the hibiscus flower carefully, handling it with the lightest possible touch lest she break a sugar petal and have to make another.

“So,” said Tassel, changing the subject with what she no doubt imagined was studied casualness, “who do you think Nimmira will go to, if Lord Dorric really does die?”

Keri shrugged.

“Oh, now, Keri – you must have thought about it! You, of all people! Would Brann get it, do you think? Or Domic? Domic’s strong. He might be able to deal with the Bear Lord of Tor Carron, if it took a bit for the mist to thicken back up. But what if the mist is thinning all the way around, even up north where it’d be Eschalion on the other side of our border? If the Wyvern King realized we were here –” she shivered theatrically. “*He* wouldn’t likely be so easy to put off for a day or two, and, well, Brann’s the clever one.”

Keri shrugged again, more elaborately, refusing to comment. Nearly everybody did expect the succession to go to one or the other of Dorric’s elder sons, and argued about which would be better. Probably everybody was right, but Keri was not about to join in that particular argument.

“I’d rather have Lucas,” Tassel said wistfully. “Those lips! Those cheekbones! Those eyelashes!” She batted her own, which were exquisite.

Keri lifted her eyebrows in one of her mother’s best *looks*, the skeptical one that could stop a boy from carelessly tracking in mud or a child from threatening a tantrum. “That would certainly be entertaining,” she said, drawn in despite herself. “He’d throw a huge party and half Nimmira would get drunk and kill themselves falling down stairs and into fountains, and the other half would die of apoplexy.”

Tassel laughed. “Keri! Which half would you be in?”

“Oh . . . both. Anybody could see Lucas would be an awful Lord. He’s got less sense of responsibility than little Wren.” Wren was Tassel’s smallest cousin, a toddler of three and a half. “But I wouldn’t mind seeing Brann and Domic passed over.”

Tassel laughed again. “You see? You like Lucas best, too.”

“But how much does that say? Anyway, there’s no use setting *your* cap at him, Tassel, even if you do admire his lips and cheekbones and . . . whatever. Everyone knows he’s already got a girl.” Even Keri, who avoided gossip about Lord Doric’s sons when she could, knew that Lucas vanished several times a year, presumably to visit a girl. Not that Lord Dorric, of all people, had any right to object to any girl Lucas liked. Keri thought it more likely the girl’s family would object to any connection between their daughter and a son of Lord Dorric.

“Oh, I’m not setting my cap at Lucas!” protested Tassel. “Keri, really! Lucas? But I’m not *blind*.”

“If you say so. Anyway, probably Dorric won’t die at all,” Keri said, going back to carefully setting sugar flowers around the edge of the cake. “Probably he’ll recover again and the mist will thicken right back up and no one Outside will ever realize they almost glimpsed something they hadn’t known was here. Yes,” she added, bitterly. “I expect he’ll be back on his feet in a week, throwing tempers and laughing at anyone foolish enough to worry about him *or* the boundary mist, and writing poetry to

girls half his age –” she stopped because her voice had gone a little too sharp on that last.

“He probably will,” Tassel agreed, eyeing Keri with sympathy but without comment. “The border mist will thicken right back up and we’ll all be fine. Who’s that cake for? Anybody I know?”

Keri, accepting the change of topic, nodded. “Merin and Nasric are to be wed at noon tomorrow.”

“Nasric! Marrying *Merin*?” Tassel lifted a significant eyebrow. “You do mean Merin Strannan? Isn’t that a bit . . . spring-fall?”

Keri had to laugh. “Merin Strannan, yes, but not *that* Nasric! I mean, Nasric the jointer.”

“Oh.” Tassel laid a hand across her heart in theatrical relief. “That’s much better, yes.” She considered for a moment and then nodded judiciously. “That may do. Nasric the jointer is terribly boring, I’ve always thought so, but Merin is so flighty, she needs a steady sort of husband. Yes, I think they may suit very well.”

“Anyone would think they were waiting for your personal approval,” Keri said, amused. “Nasric isn’t boring. He’s nice. Merin really isn’t good enough for him, not that anybody asked me.”

Tassel paused on her way to drop the spoon in the sink. “Keri! You never told me you thought Nasric is nice.”

Keri rolled her eyes. “Not *that* nice. I think Merin’s lucky to get him, that’s all.” Though Merin *was* lucky to get him, Keri didn’t exactly envy the other girl. She did like Nasric, who had always been kind to her and polite to her mother, but she didn’t want to get married to him. She didn’t want to marry at all, certainly not soon. Which was just as well, as she knew she would never get so good an offer, not from a steady, generous young man with good prospects, like Nasric. Not from any young man from a decent family. No, the sort of young man who might offer marriage to the unacknowledged bastard child of a mere serving woman was not the sort Keri would accept.

She knew too well what most of the townsfolk of Glassforge had thought of her mother, right to the end. A serving girl careless enough to let herself catch a child – a woman could never live down that kind of reputation, no matter how hard she worked to put her past behind her and build up a business on her own. No matter how much fierce determination it took to build up a bakery from nothing while raising a small child. No matter how successful a woman became after a bad start, the bad start was all people remembered. Keri’s mother had never told her that, but then, she had never had to.

But the bakery had become modestly successful anyway. “Remember,” Keri’s mother had told her more than once, “People find excuses why it’s all right to do what they want. Offer them the lightest, airiest, most wonderful cakes and they’ll find

reasons to buy from you even if they don't like you a bit and their best friend's cousin owns a bakery right in the middle of town." And she'd taught Keri to make the cakes so light they nearly floated off the platter. She taught her to beat the butter and sugar for twelve full minutes before adding the eggs, and to beat in the eggs one at a time, and to make sure she bought just the right flour, ground fine and soft from the earliest winter wheat.

That was why Keri had managed to survive her mother's death, or anyway why the bakery had survived. Keri would never give it up. Certainly not for a man – certainly not for the kind of man who might condescend to offer her marriage. No. She knew just how her life would go: she would work hard and make the bakery a success, and she would never marry. Someday she would be so successful she would be able to hire a girl to help her. Two girls, even. And she would make sure to hire girls who were somebody's fatherless daughters. Clever girls who would work hard and take pride in their craft and who would know better than to listen to the promises of young men.

But all that was in the future. Right now, there was this cake for Merin's wedding. Keri picked up the cake platter and turned to take it to the ice cellar.

"Anyway, if Nasric and Merin don't suit, it won't be your fault!" Tassel called after her. "That's a lovely cake!"

It *was* a lovely cake, Keri had to agree, privately. And it should taste as lovely as it looked, which not every baker could claim for her confections. Keri had used the best white wheat flour, and chestnut flour for the flavor, and six hen's eggs, and cream whipped so stiff it was nearly butter. The cake should be wonderful. She hoped it would be. She would not be able to taste it herself, because Merin's mother had not invited her to the wedding.

On the other side of the kitchen, the door swung back, its bell chiming. Keri turned, surprised, still holding the cake platter with both hands, ready to explain politely that the shop was to the left and that the kitchen was not open to visitors. Tassel slid off the table, ready to be firm herself if she thought Keri was too polite.

But then they both stood still, silent.

The newcomers were not confused customers seeking Keri's bakery goods. Keri knew them, of course. Everyone in Glassforge knew them. The man in the front, framed by the doorway, was the Timekeeper himself. He had a bony, colorless face and eyes as pale as though the passing years had worn the color out of them and cobweb white hair bound back with a black ribbon. He wore a tailored black coat with a high collar and gold embroidery on the cuffs and innumerable brass buttons down the front, and black trousers with silk piping down the seams. He carried a large pocket watch, its gold chain looped across his hand and around his wrist. The watch had an ornate gold back and a crystal face. Keri found her eyes drawn to the steady, sharp movements of the watch's five hands. She looked at the watch because she did not want to meet the Timekeeper's pale eyes.

Behind the Timekeeper stood the Doorkeeper. His coat was embroidered with crimson thread rather than gold and the buttons on his coat were much larger. The Doorkeeper was heavy-bodied, with a small, tight-pursed mouth, pouchy eyes, and soft hands. He wore rings on every pudgy finger, some plain, but others set with garnets or carnelians. He carried a heavy ring of keys on his belt, which had a buckle shaped like a dragon biting its own tail.

At the rear, standing diffidently to one side, holding the door for the other two and entering the bakery kitchen only after they moved aside to make room, was the Bookkeeper. She was a thin, pallid woman with straw-colored hair bound tightly back at the nape of her neck. All her features were narrow: she had squinty secretive eyes and a sharp nose and a mouth tight as a miser's purse. She carried a small book bound in black leather and a pen made of polished bone, and wore an elaborate black gown heavily embroidered with blue thread the rich color of sapphires, with ruffled shoulders and lace at the wrists. It did not suit her.

The Timekeeper cleared his throat, a dry rattling sound that made him sound consumptive but was probably just meant to compel everyone's attention. Though she tried to keep her gaze fixed on his watch, Keri's eyes rose to meet his. He bent his head, masking what little expression he wore. He asked, in a husky voice that made clear he already knew what answer he would receive, "Kerianna Ailenn, called Keri the baker?"

"Yes," Keri said. She meant to say it firmly, but discovered, when she could barely hear herself, that she had whispered. She put the heavy platter with its frosted cake down on the table without looking; it was more luck than care that the cake did not smash down in ruins upon the floor. Beside her, Tassel was standing perfectly still, the back of one elegant hand pressed to her mouth in a pose that might have looked affected but somehow didn't. Keri wished her friend would say something – would do something – would somehow break the moment. But Tassel only stared at the Timekeeper, her dark eyes wide and stunned. Almost as stunned, Keri thought, as she felt herself.

Keri asked at last, when no one else spoke, "Why have you . . .? Why have you come seeking me?" Her throat felt tight, and her voice sounded, even to her own ears, as husky and dry as the Timekeeper's. She already knew what answer he would give her. She and the Timekeeper had fallen into a ritual, question and answer, and so now he would say –

"The Lord is dead," the Timekeeper told her gravely. "This is your hour, Kerianna Ailenn. This is your hour and your day."

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