

**Appalachian Elementals Two**

**KEEPING HOUSE**

AN APPALACHIAN PARANORMAL FANTASY

**JEANNE G'FELLERS**



[mountaingapbooks.com](http://mountaingapbooks.com)

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of both the publisher and the author.

This is a work of fiction. Certain existing institutions, agencies, businesses, and geographical locations are mentioned but others are fictitious, and the characters involved, and their stories are wholly imaginary. Any resemblance is purely coincidental.

Nothing in this book is intended as a substitute for professional medical advice. Readers should consult a qualified medical professional in relation to their health and particularly with respect to any symptoms that may require diagnosis or medical attention.

Published 2019 by Mountain Gap Books  
Jonesborough, TN  
[www.mountaingapbooks.com](http://www.mountaingapbooks.com)  
Copyright © 2019 by Jeanne G'Fellers  
All rights reserved  
Cover Design by Jeanne G'Fellers  
Paperback ISBN: 978-1-7323277-6-4  
eBook ISBN: 978-1-7323277-7-1

## A Note from the Author

*Keeping House*, like the other titles in the Appalachian Elementals series, is set in Southern Appalachia, primarily in the year 2018, and the characters, faiths, and spiritual paths presented in this novel are diverse. This includes my usage of the pronouns they and them. I've chosen to use they and them to identify the elemental spirits because they are genderless shape-shifters, meaning they cannot be defined in binary male/female terms. Such magical creations cannot be limited by Human constructs, though my Human characters often try for their own understanding. The elementals in the Appalachian Elementals series can also be seen as non-binary if readers so choose because I include non-binary, sometimes referred to as genderqueer, Human characters within my writing.

The Human characters within the Appalachian Elementals series also include pansexual, gay, transgender, and heterosexual identities, and their faiths vary from Protestant Christianity to pagan spiritualities to mixes of the two because no one faith or identity defines us all. Why this mix? The Appalachian (properly pronounced Ap-pa-latch-un) people are the complicated result of Scots-Irish, British, German, African American, and Native American traditions blended with a heaping serving of Protestant Christian beliefs.

We're often misunderstood and commonly stereotyped by outsiders who know very little about our culture. That said, *Keeping House* embraces the queer Appalachian experience on multiple levels, a unique blending of resistance, acceptance, and perseverance. We, like the rest of Appalachia, are as hearty as they come, and, yes, it is entirely possible to get our red on or dander up, though generally in the liberal sense. Again, we're unique and complicated. We're rainbow pinpoints in a red, mountainous sea, but we live here happily because we're

Appalachian folk. Some of us will never leave these mountains. Some leave and never come back. But many of us, like myself, leave only to return because our lives aren't right once we leave the mountains. Something is missing. We're lost. Part of us dies when we leave because our roots run from the bottom of New River Gorge to the top of Mount Mitchell.

We're poor and middle class. We're college graduates and high school dropouts. We're coal miners, teachers, convenience store employees, doctors, and nurses. We're able-bodied, disabled, multi-faith, and multi-hued, but we all have one thing in common— our traditions.

*Keeping House* is set in Washington County, Tennessee, where I was born and raised. While Washington County rests in the Southern Appalachian foothills, I have also lived and worked in the more rural and mountainous settings of southern Carter County, Tennessee, and McDowell County, West Virginia. Neither of those locations is for the faint of heart, but the people there are amazingly resilient.

In short, I am an Appalachian native and proud of it.

I would also like to mention the use of Appalachian Granny Magic alongside European and neopagan witchcraft in *Keeping House*. While Appalachian Granny Magic has its beginnings in both European and Native American traditions, it is firmly rooted in Protestant Christian beliefs. The characters in *Keeping House* embrace both Granny Magic and witchcraft in the form of paganism because their family lineage has embraced both paths, creating a unique belief system that is on the rise in Appalachia. Many, but by no means all, Appalachian witches are as likely to call on the Holy Trinity as they are to call on Gaia or the Goddess, a seeming conflict, but it isn't to the practitioners. They plant by the signs, use natural means for both medicinal and magical

purposes, and practice water-witching as a means of finding a viable water source so why wouldn't they pray to the God of their raising alongside the gods of their path? With this knowledge, the reader should also realize that the herbal remedies and medical procedures described in *Keeping House* are in no way a recommendation for their usage. Medical care should be obtained from a qualified medical professional and never be based on something you read in a work of fiction.

As for the non-human characters in *Keeping House*— please remember that this is a contemporary fantasy novel, a work of fiction so the liberties are mine, the author's, to take. But if you don't believe in fey, spirits, haints, or elementals, find a quiet, wooded spot, relax, and open your eyes to the possibilities. You might be surprised by what you find.

## **The Keeping House Playlist**

Because all good stories bring to mind a song or forty.

[https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLIfRTJ\\_vkiJcvyTVJ-tj1kQ2kdmn7UZbh](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLIfRTJ_vkiJcvyTVJ-tj1kQ2kdmn7UZbh)

## Acknowledgements

While I can safely say I am familiar with many of the cultural and magical traditions of Appalachia, I admittedly had help with a few of the finer points. As such, I would like to acknowledge the following people for their valuable insight:

-Information concerning Appalachian folk medicine traditions, specifically the application of a comfrey and poultices for swelling and the carrying of hog head bones for headache prevention come from Anthony Cavender's text *Folk Medicine in Southern Appalachia* (2003), which is available at multiple booksellers.

-Information concerning the mines on Embreeville Mountain derives from "A Historical Overview of the Bumpass Cove Landfill Controversy, 1972-2002" by Robert Clinton Marsh III available at:

<https://dc.etsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1848&context=etd>

Thank you, Dr. Cavender and Mr. Marsh, for sharing the information you worked so hard to compile.

This is but the second novel in the Appalachian Elementals series so I'll probably be referring to your wisdom again.

-Jeanne G'Fellers

# Prologue

Near the Nolichucky River

The Appalachian Mountains, Summer 1603

“What have ye captured, lassie?” Duff Gow, king of the Hunter Fey, draws close, curious as to what quarry young Dane has caught and is now trying to hide from him. He is a tall, pale-fleshed man, broad-shouldered and the possessor of a long, flowing mane of black hair that matches his equally dark beard, but he is no longer handsome. It is not his age of nearly a thousand years that uglies him. His skin is flawless, his smile dangerous in its ability to disarm, and his teeth are straighter and sharper than any Human’s. It is his ever-burning rage that petrifies those who encounter Duff’s wrath. It is his black, battle-scarred wings and blood-stained blades. No Hunter survives so long without fury, does not become king without being aggressive and suspicious, without being manic, murderous, and conquering of everyone who stands in his way. “Is it a turkey? A peacock?” This shape is much larger. “Have ye nabbed an entire flock in one throw like ye did last new moon?”

“Tis nothin', Great King. 'Twas a mistake is all. Ah am embarrassed ye saw before Ah took it away.” Dane gulps and gathers her skirts in one hand, stretching them to cover her spoils. “Ah shall take it back tae th' forest an' release it.” Dane bends to gather the net, but Duff knocks her aside and pulls back the weave to find a terrified Tsalagi woman nearing Dane’s age, barefoot and clad in a simple deer-hide dress, tangled inside.

“No mistake, lass. Ye have netted tonight’s meat.” Duff nods and turns away, confident that making his favorite wife’s Human pet into Hunter Fey had been a good decision.

“Please, Wise King, Ah beg ye.” Dane’s voice is soft but brave as it calls after him. “Please, Ah wish this one for mah own.”

Duff digs his boot heels into the damp, moss-covered ground as he turns to face her. “Is Morag’s pet old enough tae crave a pet fer herself?” He laughs at this, at Dane’s gall. She is Hunter Fey, and Hunters, even the women, are to be smart and brazen, but they are also to know their place among his subjects.

“Indeed, mah King. Please. Ah beg ye. This one pleases me.” Dane drops to her knees beside the Tsalagi woman to hold her head in her lap and stroke her disheveled, mud-caked braids. “Th’ men are bringin’ back more than enough for this night, an’ there be none here mah age besides ‘er.”

Duff looks down the mountain to see his men carrying two large bucks, properly butchered and ready for the roasting hearth, enough meat to feed their thirty-six-member community for three days. “Ye fancy her?” He considers the Tsalagi woman then Dane’s soft curves beneath her skirts, offering her one of his most dashing smiles. “Aye, sweet Dane, ye may chain her in yer room, a proper pet if th’ deal suits me.” Duff assists Dane to her feet and lifts her head, brushing back her wild raven locks to kiss her cheek, drawing, compelling, knowing her wants as well as he knows his own. “Her life for mah needs met. Deal?”

Dane tremors in his hold, resisting his spell though she is desperate for what she desires. “This Ah know, sir, will be what happens, magic or not, so... deal.” She wants the Tsalagi woman more than she can express. This one. No other. Dane’s heart is already tightly tangled with her beautiful catch, so she jumps into the deal before she fully thinks, shuddering when Duff pulls her close to kiss her.

“Ah made ye Hunter because ye pleased mah Morag’s heart, but now that ye are grown an’ she has become resistant tae mah charms, ye will please me in her place.”

The Tsalagi woman remains silent, unfamiliar with the tongue they speak, but her eyes grow large with the knowledge of what her captor must endure to save her from the spit.

“Secure her then come tae mah chambers.”

“Aye, Great King.” Dane, Hunter strong and nearly as tall as the men, carries the Tsalagi woman to her small room within the new-built log housing further up the mountainside, securing her to the wall with the same chain that’d once wrapped her own ankle. “Stay quiet. Ah will be back wit’ food an’ water fer ye.” Dane removes the net and looks at the woman who whimpers and stares back with tear-filled brown eyes. “Yer mine now. Ye understand? Ah keep ye shackled ‘cause Ah love ye.” The Tsalagi woman shivers, and Dane gives her the top blanket from her bough-and-fern-heaped bed. “Shh.” She places her finger to her lips and backs from the small room, closing the door. What she wants, what she desires most, now relies on her return, so she holds her head high and pivots toward Duff’s cabin, obedient but armed with a breathing reason to endure what has been thrust upon her.

To deal is to sacrifice. To deal well is to be Hunter. To deal at whatever cost, for what your heart most desires, is to love.

# Chapter One

## *Leave Taking*

Brigid, February 1, 2018

**5:00 p.m.**

“Well, hell.” Centenary Rhodes sat on the bed with her legs crossed, staring at the bag she’d be taking with her. She didn’t want to leave the homestead, especially with all the improvements taking place, but she knew she had to go. The Brigid sabbat meant the beginning of Spring, new life, new... She looked through the homestead’s wavy-glass windows at the snow-covered hillside. Far more than a skift, the snow had been halfway up her calves when she’d gone to the trailer for a shower early that afternoon. She didn’t care what her Wheel of the Year calendar said. This was the dead of winter, and it was cold enough for long johns and extra thick socks. Cent shivered and turned her eyes toward her eternal spouse, Stowne. “Hang it. I’m not going.”

“You must.” Stowne placed her bag on the floor and sat beside her. “It is part of the deal.”

“Dane doesn’t have any damn right to me.” Cent moved her hands into her lap to clench them. “I’d sooner die.”

“But you cannot die, asiule ehu. You are immortal, like me.” They turned to face Cent when she sighed. Stowne was in the form she liked best, tall, broad-shouldered, and androgynous as any Human could be, but Stowne wasn’t Human at all. They were an earth elemental, dirt and sand and rock, and the ancient soul of Embreeville Mountain where Cent and her family lived. Appalachian, so very Appalachian, and as unique and old as the mountains themselves. Her elemental. Her lover, companion, and spouse. Cent had lived over a hundred lives, and Stowne had waited for her return every time she’d died, but now... Stowne worried their hands in their

lap. “You are correct. Dane has no right to your physical presence, but your bookkeeping abilities are another matter. We agreed you will assist her in her business dealings between Brigid and Beltane. That is only three months.”

“Sounds like forever from this end of things,” she mumbled. “I hate it.”

“That feeling will change as the years progress.” Stowne lifted her head so their eyes met.

“Remember you will still be within my realm.”

“If it’s inside your realm, then why can’t you go with me?” *I’m desperate. Can’t you see it?*

Stowne gently shook their head. “While the Hunter kingdom is technically part of me, Lord Long Man says I am not to set foot within the boundaries.”

*Why does a river spirit have any control over what happens on land?* But she knew Lord Long Man had more sway than any one mountain, meaning he had more power than Stowne. “I guess.”

“Remember Pyre and Exan will be with you.”

“God help all three of us.” Cent wiped her eyes and squared her shoulders. “All right.” She went to the bookcase lining one side of the bedroom, removing her newest copy of the Bible, but when she pulled her oldest spell book from the shelf—

“It should remain here.”

“I might need it.” She tried to clutch the old book to her chest, but it was too big to do so easily.

“There are things in there Dane should not have access to, so you must rely on the memories from your past lives.” Stowne swallowed hard, a learned behavior, a signal they were nervous.

“Please. Leave it here.” Their tone became soothing.

*They're trying so hard.* Cent lifted the book back onto its shelf. *I need to build a stand for it.*

"I'm taking my prayer books for certain." She gathered the four soft-covered volumes and shoved them into her bag. "Earth Prayers especially. They remind me of you." She sniffled and returned to the bed, drawing her knees to her chest. "I'm going to miss you, baby, especially at night."

"I will miss you as well." Stowne pulled her into their lap to hug her. "I am glad you will have Pyre and Exan to watch over you."

"You don't trust Dane either, do you?" She raised her head to kiss their neck, which had tightened with Dane's mention.

"Hunter Fey cannot be trusted."

Cent clenched her jaw and pushed from Stowne's lap. "I'm part Hunter. Remember?"

"Yes, but you are not one by choice."

"No, it was all *your* decision. And Dane's." Cent sighed. It remained a sore point between them.

"Guilty as charged." Stowne hung their head, but Cent knew it was for her benefit, and they regularly accepted blame to prevent another argument. "I should amend what I said. I do not trust Dane and her court."

"How do you think I feel?" She poked their arm with her pinky. "I'm going to be living with them quarter-time."

"I understand." Stowne pulled her to them again and took a shaking breath. "I have never been anything other than immortal, so I can only imagine the adjustment involved."

"It's hard either way, I think. And despite how Humans fear death, I've come to realize there's a certain comfort in it." She pressed her head against Stowne's chest. "Immortal is a

relative term in my opinion. We can still be killed by Dane and any other Hunter with the right weapon.”

“True.” Stowne stroked the back of her head, grumbling when they drew their fingers across the stubble. Cent’s head normally stayed shaved except for the off-center longer section that gave her a defined undercut. “I am glad you are growing your hair while you are away.”

“After Dane’s note about shaving the underpart for me while I’m there?” Cent blanched. “If I could grow it to my ass before I go, I would. Too bad hair-growth spells don’t work that fast.”

“Indeed, but Hunter hair grows quick enough on its own. It will be nearing your shoulders before you return.” Stowne lifted the long portion of her hair to nuzzle her ear. “The sun is setting.”

“I know.” Cent reached for the heavy socks sitting on her bedside table. “It’s cold out there.” She slipped them on then went to the wardrobe, pulling out the black, insulated coveralls she’d shoved to the back. “Dammit.” She slipped them on and zipped the front to her neck. “I ain’t giving Dane any sort of view.”

“That view is mine alone to appreciate.” Stowne held out her boots. “We still must place the sigils, and you will need to say goodbye to everyone.”

“You first.” Cent knocked the boots from Stowne’s hand and pulled her lover from the bed. “It’s the first time we’ll be apart since I woke to things.”

“And that makes this particularly painful.” They kissed the top of her head. “We will all miss you.”

“I’m gonna miss this mell-of-a-hess we call home and everyone in it.” Cent looked around the bedroom. The homestead she’d built with her own hands nearly two centuries ago was in the middle of a major restoration and update. They were trying to modernize as much as possible

while retaining the home's feel and keeping its structure natural enough that elementals didn't lose their energy indoors. It meant researching every material they used and making expensive choices they didn't necessarily have the means to buy outright, which meant loans.

*From free ownership straight back into debt.* Cent hated the fact, but it still wasn't going to update the homestead to the point they all wanted. "So y'all are gonna build a barn while I'm gone?"

"I begin gathering the foundation stones tomorrow." Stowne returned her bag to the bed. "Do you need to put anything else inside?"

"You."

"Centenary?" Stowne peered at her with sad brown eyes.

"It was worth a shot." She grabbed her coat from the wall pegs and tossed it onto the bed. "We're adding a closet while I'm gone too, right?"

"It is on the schedule directly behind redoing the bunkroom for Aubrey and Rayne." They'd found, via word-of-mouth, a carpenter who understood what elementals needed. He was coming from Kentucky with his fire-elemental spouse, and they'd be living in a yurt beside the homestead until the construction was complete.

"And that's behind the second bath and the kitchen addition." She peeked through the bedroom door to see her family gathering in the living room. A kitchen addition was desperately needed, but not because it wasn't big enough. No, the addition would hold the fridge, microwave, free-standing range, and the small appliances like the slow cooker. They'd debated putting a dishwasher in there too but finally decided the family was large enough that they could take turns. "Aubrey's going to teach you and Rayne how to wash dishes."

“We already know how,” said Stowne. “But it is far from my favorite activity, more so since I do not eat the way Humans do.”

“I’m not completely Human anymore.”

“Hunters eat too,” Stowne reminded her.

“No, Hunters *gorge* every night. I don’t understand why they’re not too heavy to fly.”

“It is part of their magic, I am certain. And you consume more at the evening meal than you once did.”

“I hope that magic took when Dane made me. Otherwise, another year of Aubrey and Tess’ cooking, and I’ll be rolling across the house.”

“I will love you regardless.” Stowne chuckled. “And I do not believe it is in your genetics. That is what they are called, correct?”

“Yes, but have you seen Mama?” Cent glanced to the living room again. The handmade solid-wood furniture with natural fiber pillows had been exorbitantly expensive, so they were keeping it covered in hopes it’d last as long as possible.

“Your mother is overweight because of her medications.”

“I know, but I still wonder if some of it’s in my genes.” Cent looked at herself in the mirror. “I’m not lacking for meals either.”

“You were malnourished when you returned home, and you are only now approaching the proper weight for your height and bone structure.” Stowne frowned at her. “Stop comparing yourself to others.”

“You sound like Aubrey.” Cent sucked in her gut then let it out. “You’re right. All this Hunter fey crap aside, I’m feeling good these days.”

“You look good too.” Stowne stood behind her, peering at her in the mirror as they wrapped their arms around her waist. “We have time.” They flicked their hand to close and lock the bedroom door.

“Time for— oh.” Cent smoothed her hair as she turned to face Stowne. “I thought we still had a list of things to do before I leave.”

“Come here.” Stowne clutched Cent to them, lifting her until she wrapped her legs around their waist. “Hushed, rushed, and glorious.”

“Sounds good to me.” Cent rolled her shoulders when they itched. “Then you can give me a good scratch.”

“If that is what you desire.” Stowne pulled Cent tighter against them. *But first, this...* They placed her on the bed, opened her coveralls and unbuttoned her long johns. “Your halter top.”

“Hold on.” She undid the ties and settled into the energy and warmth of Stowne’s touch. They stroked her body then drew into a lit orb above her, pressing against then entering her abdomen to possess her in spirit fashion, the quickest means of mutual satisfaction they’d found.

*Wow.* Cent bit her lip to keep quiet. She didn’t need anything more than Stowne and was going to miss them terribly, especially in this regard, so she offered them everything they sought, and Stowne reciprocated in short order, leaving her panting on the bed as they exited her body. “Damn, baby.” She pulled Stowne down when they manifested above the bed, encouraging them to drape over her. “You do possession right.”

“Only with you.” Stowne kissed her softly on the mouth. “But you are now covered by my earth.” They crumbled into sand that spread over her, sliding beneath her long johns then down her front to collect at her feet. “Turn over.” They repeated the process on her back then settled

onto the floor in their androgynous Human form, naked and looking pleased when she glanced over her shoulder at them. “Unfurl and I will give you the scratch you requested.”

“Thanks.” Cent waited for Stowne to step back before she flexed her shoulders to unfurl what defined her as a Hunter, black wings that stretched from the top of her head to her knees when they were fully open. Hunter wings had no feathers, so she thought they resembled bat wings more than anything angelic. They had sharp edges and flexible, finger-like bones with skin that stretched tight when they were fully extended, and she’d already learned they were far stronger than they looked. Cent flapped them once to shake them out then let them droop forward, all but covering her head. “They’re driving me nuts.”

“As usual.” Stowne opened her nightstand to pull out a ceramic jar of hydrocortisone cream. “I am certain Pyre or Exan will do this for you while you are gone.”

“As long as it ain’t Dane,” huffed Cent as she placed her chin on her pillow.

“I am certain she will try, but I am equally confident you will handle it well.” Stowne was careful with their application, but it still hurt enough for her to grit her teeth. “I am finished but stay where you are.” They went to their nightstand, returning to her side with something in each hand. “This is how we will share while you are away.” Stowne set a fat, handmade book by her head.

“Honey, you shouldn’t have.” Cent pushed onto her elbows to hold the book, stroking its soft cover with her fingers. “Bamboo?”

“Aubrey found it for me online. The inner pages are bamboo as well. Do not open it now. This will be our nightly conversation. I have written the first entry so you know where to start. You can write your response below that, and I will see it in my copy.” They produced a book

identical to Cent's, which they held out. "We can only write each other once a day for the magic to hold, but this will be how we speak privately to each other."

"Aw, I'm gonna miss you too." Cent smiled as she tucked her wings under her shoulder blades and sat up. "What's in your other hand?"

"Protection." Stowne's smile faded. "I feel better knowing you will be carrying it." They extended their hand to reveal a dagger covered by a deer-hide sheath. The metal glistened when she pulled it, but the blade itself was spiral, the quillon twisted gold, and the handle rare American Chestnut inscribed with sigils.

"My love is with you." Cent flipped the dagger to read the other side. "Our love is protected through hardship." She peered at Stowne. "This is one vicious-ass dagger. How'd you get it?" She examined it closer. "You didn't deal for this..." Cent's mouth tightened. "Did you?"

"It is not a Hunter weapon. It comes from the Seelie Fey Court, but the handle has been replaced, and I added the sigils myself." Stowne took the dagger and pulled her to a stand. "I secured it four centuries ago after your first run-in with Dane. It cannot kill a Hunter or an elemental, but it is capable of wounds that take centuries to fully heal." They pulled her coveralls lower and tied the sheathed dagger to her outer thigh with leather strings.

"What am I supposed to do when I'm dressed?" Cent tied her halter then raised her long johns and coveralls.

"Betty helped there. Check your right pocket."

"Shit." Cent grinned when she shoved in her hand and pulled out the dagger. "I thought my long johns were torn. When did she have time for this? What with her other work and—"

"She insisted on doing it. Are the openings accessible?"

"Yeah, but I'll have to practice."

“All your coveralls are altered this way, as are your cargo pants.”

“My jeans?” It took Cent both hands to slide the dagger back into place.

“Betty did not have time, so leave them here.”

“Can do.” She threw her arms around Stowne. “Thank you, baby. Ever so much. And I’ll thank Betty before I go.”

“We all want you protected.” Stowne kissed her firmly on the mouth. “Rayne is at the door.” They flicked their hand to undo the lock.

*I want to learn how to do that.* She glanced over her shoulder. “Come on in.”

“I hate to interrupt, but…” Rayne closed the door behind them. They were in their preferred form, androgynous like Stowne but wearing blue, flowing robes, a water elemental from their clear, watery toes to the tip of their long, waving hair. “Drop those coveralls to your waist.”

“What for?” But Cent did so anyway and the long johns too. She trusted Rayne as much as she did Stowne and knew there had to be a good reason.

“So we can draw those sigils,” said Aunt Tess as she entered the room. “Can Gan join us?”

“Why the hell not?” said Cent. “Is Aubrey coming too?” Aubrey was Cent’s cousin and her closest Human friend aside from Betty. He was head-over-heels in love with Rayne, but he wasn’t a witch like Cent and Tess. Aubrey was a healer and an empath, both of which were new to him.

“He’s mixing herbal teas for you to brew while you’re gone.” Tess fished four black Sharpies from her cardigan pocket. She wasn’t quite Cent’s height and was far too skinny for her build, but Tess was as tough as they came, even at the age of seventy-five.

*Crap, I'm going to miss her birthday every year now.* “What kind of tea?” Cent watched as Tess wrapped three of the markers in cotton rags. “Please tell me he’s not putting catmint in any of those bags.”

“This is gonna be stressful so I’m sure there’s some in there.” Tess passed markers to Stowne and Rayne. “She said you could come in, Gan.”

“Excellent. The more we have for this the better.” Gan entered the bedroom in a swirl of warm air that settled beside Tess in a clear Human form. Some part of them was always moving, though more slowly when they were around Tess, who they cared deeply for. Theirs was a new relationship, and Tess called Gan her second love, the first being Uncle Kinnon, who’d passed a decade earlier. “Where’s my marker?”

“Right here.” Tess passed them her Sharpie and opened another. “We’re going to mark you up good, honey.” She moved to face Cent dead on. “This is some serious group magic so stand still and think on somethin' that makes you happy.”

“Or better yet, sing.” Rayne held out their marker for Cent to uncap it. “Whatever comes to mind as soon as we begin.”

“We are putting all our energy into these sigils to protect you.” Stowne turned Cent’s arm to draw on her tricep, mumbling and moving their hand back and forth as energy built inside their form. Rayne and Gan were doing the same, but Tess raised her head, breathed deep, and began to chant, her hands trembling as she pushed aside Cent’s halter strap to draw.

“You are loved.” Tess blew on the sigil then placed her hand over it. “Bless you, child.”

*Loved and blessed.* Cent closed her eyes when the other markers touched her skin and relaxed as her family’s energy circled her. *A song. What song?* Only one came to mind, and it was a bad choice, but she began singing anyway, first quietly then at increasing volume until her acapella

version of Miranda Lambert's "Something Bad" rolled through the house in less-than-perfect tone.

*Loved.*

*Wanted.*

*Guarded.*

*Protected.*

*Longed for.*

*Will return safely home.*

*Something Bad.* Yes. She knew it was coming. But Stowne was waiting for her return. They always would be, and she'd be home before she knew it.