

INTO THE LURE OF TIME
By Vera Bell

EXCERPT #1

Everything—the floor, the walls, the air—fell away. Only this parchment in my hand remained.

Chimeric. Foretold.

Somewhere deep down, I knew I stood very still, calm, and mute, my eyes fixed on Aedan's precise English hand. But I also hovered above, crumbling into bleeding bits. Watching my life's blood drain out of me and wash the world in crimson, drop by drop by drop—

Kian said something, his voice familiar, ordinary. *It cannot be.* I shifted my gaze to the broken seal. An English forgery to foment strife. A cruel trickery to break our spirit. But there was yet a paragraph unread—

As I shall be returning soon after you take delivery of this dispatch, I trust that as my loyal subject, you will abide my expressed demand in the proper and expeditious fashion commensurate with the sensitivity of this matter. As well, it is my uttermost wish that you will, hitherto, regard me solely as your rightful ruler, and as such, would not seek my audience in any unseemly or unsuitable manner. Furthermore, shall you find yourself in my presence, I rely on your good sense and proper decorum to act toward me with such deference and regard as befits my rank.

Earl II of Tyrone, Lord Aedan O'Neal

This 5th Day of January, 1565

The hall swayed. The parchment slipped from my fingers. His handwriting. His name. His signature. What forgery?

Kian steadied me with his hands on my shoulders, eyes frozen with horror.

He bent to take the parchment, pinching it between his thumb and index finger like it was something vile to touch. Like it would sully anyone mad enough to lay a hand on it.

“Is...is h-he...dead?”

The dais stood wrapped in saffron and gold, awaiting the O'Neal's return.

I came back to myself. My eyes burned with salt. My throat chafed with sand. My heart burst into icy, piercing shards. How determined he was to go to London, how callous to slam our chamber door.

INTO THE LURE OF TIME

By Vera Bell

EXCERPT #2

It was midnight before Beltane when, after tossing and turning in my narrow bed, I fixed my gaze on the night sky through the window. The waxing crescent hung high amidst the clouds, small and fragile. A single star flickered, fading and shimmering, shrinking and growing. It peeked into my window and passed through the pane into my chamber. Sighing and groaning, it took human shape and stood at the foot of my bed, gray hair tangled, face creased with years, a thin line of scarlet glistening where her head had been severed. Fúamnach.

“He left me,” she whispered, unblinking silver gaze trained on me. “He cast me aside for a new plaything and brought her home to humiliate me.” Her shrill laughter turned my blood to ice. “But, oh how he loathed the bitter taste of my revenge. Never credit old tales; they’re full of falsehoods. Midir loved only himself. He had me killed for daring to take from him what he cherished so well—his new passing fancy’s young flesh. A winged insect is no match for a woman’s embrace.”

I sat up, swallowing bile. “Teach me your craft, Fúamnach, so I can turn the countess into a butterfly and blow her away.”

She pushed her raveled strands from her face, studying me with narrowed eyes. “You are the craft, foolish child. A thousand spells won’t right a selfish heart; a thousand storms won’t stay a disloyal soul. But Aedan O’Neal is no Midir, and your revenge is but self-indulgent folly.”

I woke with a start and lay without sleep until the break of dawn, struggling to make sense of Fúamnach’s words. But she must have grown mad with sorrow, for the Earl was Midir, and my revenge was all I had left.