





*a short story  
prequel to Echo Crossing*

# *Rosemily's Run*

*by Ashleen O'Gaea*

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A prequel to the  
*Echo Crossing* series

by Ashleen O'Gaea

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# Rosemily's Run

“Do you know anything about this?” Mother Rowan, Mother Superior of the Acadamh, sounded stern; protocol demanded it.

“Know? Not really,” Sister Macala answered.

“You’re her advisor. Why don’t you know?”

“She’s a mind of her own, that one.”

Mother Rowan allowed herself an inner smile. “An undeveloped mind,” she said.

“Her instincts are good,” Sister Macala said.

“She is unpracticed.”

“I think she wants to stay that way,” Sister Macala said, and both women nodded.



The whole school knew that Rosemily was gone, but only Mother Rowan and Sister Macala – and Rosemily herself - knew that she had not been expelled. It was not difficult for them to trace the girl. Her very breathing was audible to them when they were alone in the chapel.

“It means more to her to leave than it does to us for her to stay,” Sister Macala said softly.

“You have known her for half her life,” Mother Rowan said. “I will take your word for it.”

Rosemily had run away to France, where led the only portal she knew about.

“Will she be alright there?”

“If she is not, Sister, she will find her way back here. And if she cannot do that, you will go and fetch her home. But for now, we will let her be brave.”



She had no way of knowing exactly where or when she was. This was only her second time through a portal, and it was not graceful. She retched and then paused for another moment before rising from the marshy ground on which she sat. Her hands were muddy up to her wrists, and the back of her cloak was wet.

When she stood, she could see buildings. Smoke rose from their chimneys. She thought she could smell water, too.

If she’d been at home she’d have grunted and probably come as close to swearing as she dared. Here, though, she kept quiet lest anyone hear her. Bad enough that walking made a squishy sound. She hoped the Beansidhes weren’t in the chapel listening to her steps.

When she reached solid ground, she stopped again. Birds circled - seagulls, she thought. Probably as lost as she was. She closed her eyes and tried to remember her geography lessons. She decided she must be near Paris, and that would mean ... That would mean the buildings she could see were tile factories.

As soon as she could dry off and find shelter, she'd be able to scrounge a meal. *Why did I not bring food with me? Because, she comforted herself as soon as the thought occurred, you took your chance when you saw it. You had no time to plan.*

Life at the Banshees' Acadamh was not uncomfortable, but it was tightly planned. Classes, meals, study times, exercise, practices – everything had its time and place. Between scheduled events students found a few minutes, mainly allowing time to get to the next classroom or field, but now and then to gossip. Rosemily Innes had taken one of those “travel breaks” to set out on a path of her own.



Her talent had been recognized early. She remembered seeing dark-robed Sisters talking to her mother, who poured sweet-smelling tea for them.

“I see what you're saying,” her mother said. “But she's so young ... I wonder if now's the right time for her to start at your school.” Rosemily thought her mam sounded cautious, almost like she was trying to soothe a wild animal or an agitated cow.

“She's six,” one of the Sisters said.

“Just turned two weeks ago,” her mother interrupted.

Peeking 'round the corner where the parlor met the passage to the bedrooms, Rosemily could see the Sister smile. She looked kind. Her voice was kind.

“Six is when the girls usually come. You were not in error.” Sister said. She did not mention that here in Einion Mawr, it was usually only royals' and aristocrats' children who were chosen by the fine schools. The Acadamh was looking for talents and inclinations rather than for bloodlines and future prominence.

“Sister Macala, I ... I want what's best for Rosemily, but now I don't want to let her go, either.”

“So do all the mothers feel,” Sister Macala said. “It's hard for us when our graduates leave, too, but we must let Nature lead us in these matters. You can expect to see her again, you know.”

“I ... I didn't know that,” Rosemily's mother admitted. “I did think she'd be gone forever.”

“All children go to school, one way or another,” Sister Macala said. She reached out and touched Mrs. Innes' pale hand. “She won't be skipping home at the end of every day, but she won't be gone forever, either.”

“I want to go to school, Mam,” Rosemily said, coming out of hiding. “And I'll come home sometimes to see you, and show you how much I've learned.”

*I wish I'd learned sooner to keep my mouth shut,* Rosemily thought, remembering. So did her mother, but Rosemily was not to know that.



She had been home a time or two, but she could never tell her mother everything she'd learned. It wasn't a secret that the Acadamh – the Acadamy – was for Banshees, but the specialized lessons were utterly private. But Rosemily and her mother were content to talk about the ordinary classes, maths and writing and geography. Science ranged from biology to astronomy, and they could talk about that, too.

Rosemily Innes was a very good student. She'd won every prize the Acadamh had to offer, some of them twice. She enjoyed her classes; she enjoyed the exercises and athletic games; she enjoyed learning to cook and sew. She understood on her own that the stitches she made, for seams or embroidering, held a magic of their own.

Spellwork, introduced to her when she was ten or so, was easy for her. She understood the rules and followed them without complaint. She had a knack for the magic that required gesturing. And then she found out what else would be required of her.

"How did it get hurt?" she asked Sister Macala when she found the injured hedgehog.

"We don't know," Sister said. Her voice was sad, but still kind.

"Can we heal it?"

Sister Macala shook her head. "No, Rosemily. This little thing is dying, and it's in pain. You see how it pulls its paws in, even though it's too weak to roll up?"

Rosemily did see. There was a double gash in the hedgehog's belly. *Something bit it, and shook it,* she thought. She looked at Sister Macala, who nodded.

"You want me to sing it?" Rosemily whispered her question, hoping the answer would be no.

But Sister Macala nodded again.

"The hedgehog needs your help, Rosemily. We cannot keep it from dying. We can only keep it from dying in agony. Your song will ease its passing. That's a beansidhe's blessing," the Sister reminded the girl.

The simple song wavered at first, like Rosemily's voice. But as she saw the wee 'hog's feet relax, her singing steadied. At last, with no more blood to lose and no more pain to endure, the tiny creature – seeming smaller in death than it had in life – passed through the Veil, leaving its body behind. Rosemily wept.

*You did well, Rosemily,* Sister Macala thought, hugging the girl so the thought would be transmitted.



Not for another two or three years did Rosemily decide that she could never take the Beansidhe's Oath. It wasn't that she wanted to do the few things that it forbade. It was that she did not want to do what it would obligate her to. She did not want to spend her life – her very long life – bringing news of impending death.

Singing the hedgehog over had been heartbreaking, but she saw the mercy of it. And the hedgehog had been only the first such creature she had delivered from lingering pain that could not lead to recovery.

Like her classmates, she learned how to hide herself in fields and meadows, and almost silently sing game through death before the hunter's knife could finish what a carelessly shot arrow had started. She could sing a falling duck or pheasant away from the terror of shredding bullets. The need of it wrenched her, but she accepted the duty.

She shadowed her teachers when they took on the legendary guise of washers in the stream, crying out to warn that someone beloved was about to die. It left families anxious to think who might die, and how. It led friends and families and even some doctors to leave wounds and illnesses untreated because they took the howl of a banshee for fate. *It causes as many deaths as it cautions*, Rosemily thought. *I will not be bound to this life.*

With just a few more songs to learn – the deadliest only recently mastered – and even fewer dramatic lessons left to finish, Rosemily Innes took her surreptitious leave of the Acadamh. If she'd had time to pack, she'd have had time to realize that she could never elude the Banshees. There was no interlude, not even an odd moment to think that they might let her go, but never lose her.

Now she was in France, and might not ever see her family again – the Inneses or the Banshees. Given that there were still tile factories here, rather than the Tuileries Palace she'd read about, it was before 1559. How long would she be able to hide from the teachers at the Acadamh, the Sisters who wanted her to take the Oath of the Beansidhe?



Finding her place on the outskirts of Paris hadn't been terribly difficult. It was easy to pass herself off as an orphan and get work. It was hard work, but she was conditioned for it. What she would not tolerate was letting the older, rougher workers take advantage of her body in ways that had nothing to do with the manufacture of tile.

More than once, after injuring a would-be offender, she had to make herself look different and find work at another factory. That ended when Queen Catherine acquired the land where the factories stood, and in 1564 built her Gardens. Rosemily couldn't find work as a gardener, but the years of construction and redesign offered hiding places – and larders to raid.

It wasn't a life she was proud of, but it kept her healthy enough to become a well-known flirt who, while she never gave herself to any suitor, accepted gifts. She still had to keep moving, because she did not age as girls of this realm did. A young woman of twenty was supposed to look different than a girl of fourteen, and as the years passed, her slow ageing was ever more problematical.



Money, however, was not a problem. Not long after the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Rosemily thought it was time to leave France – to leave Europe – altogether. She knew of only one portal, and using it would take her back to her own world, to the kingdom of Einion Mawr, and the Banshees' Academy. She saw no other choice than to board a ship and sail to North America.

The portal offered rough passage. Her undignified landing in the swampish expanse near Paris had been almost a comfort after the gut-turning experience in the portal. She still couldn't be sure whether it was the portal, her own inexperience, or even the stench of the marsh. Either way, it had been a short trip, and the effects had not lasted long. The sea voyage, on the other hand ...

Cutting her hair and binding her chest, she hired on as a cabin boy on the Merry Wife. It took the ship a little more than two months to get to the Massachusetts shore. There, rather than try to establish herself in any colonial settlement, she made for the woods.

The trees and other plants were different than at home – where in this realm weren't they? – but she understood them well enough to find respect as an herbalist. Both the colonials and the Natives gradually came to trust her, and with enough dirt or walnut stain on her face, no one noticed how young she looked even after a few years.

One day – Rosemily guessed it might be a little past mid-day and about half-way through the century – a thin child came to her door. It wasn't unheard of for a family to send a child to “the old woman in the wood” for some tea or a charm, but this child was neither Native nor the relatively clean offspring of a colonist.

“How can I help you?” Rosemily was pleased to hear in her own voice the kindness she'd always heard in Sister Macala's.

“Mmmf,” the child responded, and fell on the hard-swept dirt floor.

*Oh, please ... do not be beyond recovery!* Rosemily examined the waif – a girl, maybe eight years old – and was glad to count a strong pulse, and quiet breathing. *Hunger, then, or some upset.*

Lukewarm peppermint tea – on this journey, Rosemily had packed well – revived the child. Once wrapped in a blanket and propped in a bed, looking at a friendly face, she cleared her throat and reached for the mug. After a few more sips, she straightened herself and said, “You're the witch in the woods.”

“That’s not what I call myself, but yes, I guess so,” Rosemily said. She still overheard people talking in the market on her few trips to town for supplies. She knew it would be unwise to be known as a witch. Witches were still burnt in Europe, and hanged or crushed to death in some places here. Fortunately for everyone, not many towns were as superstitious as some itinerate preachers wanted them to be.

“You can hex,” the child went on.

“I can’t,” Rosemily said. “I don’t know how, and I wouldn’t if I did know how.”

“Then you’re not a witch,” the little girl said. She narrowed one eye at Rosemily and asked, “Can you heal?”

“Sometimes,” Rosemily said. “A little.”

“You made me feel better.”

“Good. Are you very ill?” Rosemily sat down on the side of the bed and held the back of her hand to the girl’s forehead. *No fever. Good.*

“I’m hungry,” the guest said, “and I’m sore.”

“Did you run away?”

“No!” There was a pause. “Maybe.”

“Well, you’re safe here,” Rosemily said, knowing that much was true. “Why don’t you tell me your name?”

“You tell me yours first.”

“My name is Rosemily Innes,” Rosemily said.

“Rose Emily. That’s pretty. My name is Prudence,” she said. “But I’m not very prudent.”

“I ran away once too,” Rosemily said, getting to the point.

“Nobody found you.”

Rosemily smiled. “You found me,” she said.

Prudence half-grinned, and shook her head. “People find you all the time,” she pointed out.

“They find the old woman in the woods,” Rosemily said. “They find the old woman with the teas and the poultices. They don’t find *me*.” The little girl was young, but Rosemily thought she’d understand.

“People don’t forget to feed *me*,” she said, nodding. “They don’t hit me or kick *me*. They’re mean to a child who has no family, not to *me*.”

“How did you get here?” If Prudence answered the question Rosemily was really asking, then she’d need to stay here, under Rosemily’s protection.

“I’m not sure. It was late. I was running. I fell, I think.”

“And when it was light again, you didn’t know where you were,” Rosemily guessed.

“Is that what happened to you?”

“Something very like that,” Rosemily said. “You can tell me more about it later if you want to, Prudence, but right now, I think it’s time to prepare supper. You live here now, and I’m your family.”

And then, for the first time since she’d been out of Einion Mawr, Rosemily let herself glow faintly. If she was right, the girl would be reassured, not alarmed. Prudence leaned forward and hugged her.



A hundred years later, it was painful to remember Prudence. Rosemily never found out what the girl was running from, but whatever it was, it – they? - eventually found her. Rosemily found only a few remnants of Prudence’s clothes, and one shoe.

The edge of the portal was weedy enough to show it hadn’t been used often since ... then. Rosemily had wondered where it went, but she didn’t step through to find out. “I’ll keep your shoe, Prudence,” she’d whispered, “and I will never forget you. I’m still your family.”

For a number of years – Rosemily lost track of how many – she kept the shoe on her mantel. She got used to strangers coming by, not very often, for teas and poultices. She was surprised when someone came in for a tea and noticed Prudence’s shoe.

“Where did you get that?” he asked.

“It was ... left behind by a friend who ... suffered ...” Rosemily wasn’t sure how to explain. No one had asked before.

“Did it involve a portal? Is it nearby?”

Rosemily sat down, hard. She looked at her hands. They weren’t shaking, but she felt like her whole body was. Had the Beansidhe found her? Was this man here to return her Einion Mawr?

“I didn’t mean to alarm you,” he said. “I’m not very good at this.”

“At what?” She was surprised her voice was audible.

“I ... I’m ... I work for a small group who try to shelter refugees,” he finally managed to say.

“Refugees from ...?”

He saw that she was glowing faintly; she wasn’t sitting near enough the uncovered window for it to be an effect of the sun shining into the room. He guessed she wasn’t aware of it. “From our world,” he said. If he was wrong about her, she’d only think he was an idiot. If he was right, she might talk to him.

“Our world?”

“I’m from Einion Mawr,” he said, still sure of himself. “But we help people from other kingdoms too.”

“What group?” *Have I just admitted something?*

“We don’t have a formal name,” he said. “We tell some people we’re hunters, so they’ll imagine we’re either harmless or authorized. But we ... look for people in trouble and try to help. I was here for a girl called Prudence.”

“You missed her by a hundred years,” Rosemily said. “You can’t help her now.”

He paled. “A hundred years?”

“More or less,” she said, nodding. She wiped away a tear that hadn’t fallen yet. She’d felt responsible for Prudence too, and she hadn’t been able to help either. “It’s hard to be sure of the time drift,” she said. *Why am I being nice to him? He could get me in trouble.*

“I’m ... sorry. You knew her well?”

Rosemily shook her head. Her smile was wistful. “I wanted to,” she said. “She was only here for a few months before ... she went missing. I didn’t know about the portal until I found her shoe.”

“I’m sorry,” he said again. “That must have been a terrible shock and sorrow.”

“It was. It still is,” Rosemily admitted.

“My name is Kerill Niall,” he said, bowing slightly as he introduced himself. “You’re not by any chance Rosemily Innes, are you?” He sounded like he didn’t think she was.

Once again stunned into the silence of fear, Rosemily could only nod.

“No need for worry,” he said. “It’s clear you don’t need any help – you’re doing well here. Honoring your heritage by helping people as you do.”

*What does he mean, honoring my heritage?* Rosemily still couldn’t ask aloud.

“I didn’t expect to find you, given that I wasn’t really looking yet. But I do have news for you,” he said. His tone was considerably brighter now that he’d been so pleasantly surprised.

“What news?” Her voice was only a whisper, but he didn’t seem to think that meant anything.

“You have an aunt,” he said. “It was she who suggested I might meet you here. Somewhere in this realm,” he added hastily. “Not here in this house.”



It took Rosemily some time to consider what Niall’s news might mean. While she thought about what to ask next, she offered him some tea and scones. “They’re raspberry,” she said. *Apparently this is why I had the impulse to bake them this morning.*

“Thank you.” A moment later, he said, “Mmmm.”

“I’m sorry there’s no cream. It’s hard to keep here.”

“These are delicious without,” he said. When he finished a second one, he acknowledged that she must have many questions. “Let me see if I can answer some of them before you ask.”

“Please,” she said, pouring herself more chamomile tea.

“Your aunt emigrated to this world a long time ago,” he said, unsure of exactly how long. “She lived among the Natives most of that time, but when the colonists came, she ...” He thought about how to explain. “Many of the colonists looked on the Natives as inferior, as if they didn’t matter, weren’t quite human. Your aunt – she’s taken the name Lassais Biggs,” he said. He sipped more tea, wishing he didn’t think it would be rude to have a third scone.

“Lazy Biggs,” Rosemily repeated.

“Yes. She understood that if the colonists knew how civilized – how canny – the Natives were, they’d be inclined to be even more aggressive when they wanted Native land. So she did her best to distract them, while still doing what she could to keep her old friends aware of the colonists’ plans.”

“Dangerous?”

“For an ordinary woman, yes, probably, but your aunt is not ordinary.”

“She’s ... Fae?” *She had to be.*

“Yes.”

“My parents ... I had aunts and uncles Innes, but no cousins,” Rosemily said. So far Kerill wasn’t making it easy to understand how Lazy Biggs could be her aunt.

“That you knew of,” Kerill said. “You left for school at the age of six. Did you think life just stopped for the rest of your family?”

“My mother said it did,” Rosemily said, a little petulantly. She did see how silly that sounded, though.

“It did not. One of your mother’s brothers married Lazy”

“My mother was a Biggs,” Rosemily said, almost to herself.

Kerill nodded. “Their relationship was troubled from the beginning. She wanted to travel – to this world – and he did not. Then she found out why he didn’t want to leave Einion Mawr.”

“Oh dear,” Rosemily said, afraid she could guess what Kerill would say next.

“He had another family. You did have cousins,” he said, “but not by your uncle’s wife. That’s why nobody told you about them,” he added.

“Well!”

“So Lazy Biggs left him and came here, and then – I don’t know how, so don’t ask – she heard about you leaving school. She’s wanted to find you, take you in, but she didn’t want to ... draw attention to you by searching openly.”

“So she came to you.”

“No, we went to her. She wasn’t hard to find, not really, and we needed to tell her that your uncle, her husband, had been killed. By your father, who was incensed when he found out how his brother had dishonored the family.”

“My father’s a murderer?”

“Technically, yes. He might have been able to plead self-defense because when he confronted his brother ....”

“Uncle Duffy.”

“Duffy struck him, and your father struck back. But he had the intention of killing him, and he did, so ....”

“Is he in prison?” *I know fratricide is serious, but please do not tell me he was executed.*

“Nooo,” Kerill said. “The way we know your father intended to kill Duff is that he hired a shifting witch to change him when the deed was done. Legally, he disappeared. The fact is, he is – he was – a stag that hung around the woods behind your family’s home.”

“By the Elders!” Rosemily exclaimed, not referring to trees. “Did my mother know?”

Kerill shook his head. “I don’t know. But I do know that stags don’t live hundreds of years.”



Kerill Niall spent that night and the next several nights in the drafty loft at the top of Rosemily’s house. There was more she wanted to know. They got the hardest news out of the way first, catching up on the Innes family business. Most of it was more nefarious than any child imagines. Rosemily began to understand what a blessing it was that her mother had sent her to the Acadamh. Kerill confirmed that it was, in fact, her mother who had contacted the Beanshidhes and suggested that Rosemily join them. She’d had second thoughts later, but eventually both mother and daughter understood it had been for the best.

Learning about Aunt Lazy Biggs was much more pleasant.

“When can I meet her?” Rosemily wanted to know.

“There are things to be arranged first,” Kerill said.

“What things? What do I need to arrange?”

“You need to find a successor,” he said. He sounded serious.

“A successor?”

“There must be a witch in the woods for a long time yet,” he answered.

Rosemily winced. “A witch in the woods” was what Prudence had called her. As she remembered that, she realized that the Natives who came to her, and the occasional colonist, had other resources, and would not suffer in her absence. But any from her home realm would need her, or someone like her, for guidance and protection.

She knew now that there was a portal to Einion Mawr not too far from her house. There would be others coming through, even if not many, and they would all need help. They might not all be in as much danger Prudence had been – *but some might be in*

*even more danger, and need help to resist it!* she thought suddenly. So yes, someone trustworthy would have to take over for her.

“Who ... how...?”

Kerill smiled. “I might be able to help,” he said.

“Tell me.”

“I see that you are anxious to meet Lazy, and she is anxious to meet you,” he said. “I’d be willing to take over your work here, until someone equally suitable can be found.”

“You? You’re an herbalist?”

“You could say so,” he said. He sounded like he was hinting at something. His tone made Rosemily think.

She closed her eyes and let her mind drift back to her days at the Acadamh. She ran her thoughts down a list of the classes she’d taken. She focused on her breathing as she went through every subject again.

Her eyes opened suddenly. “You’re a Gwenwynwr!” she exclaimed.

He tilted his head in acknowledgement that she’d guessed correctly.

“And you would give up your ...hunting life?”

“I’ve done it for decades. Centuries. I’ve thought more than once about settling down, at least for a while. I could stand to brush up on some of my herbal skills anyway.”

“Not the poisoning part,” she said, as much as commanding him.

“No, not the poisoning part. That’s not really much of what we do, despite the translations people make. In truth, we’re not that different from you, Beansidhe.”

Rosemily sat straighter, shocked that he’d named her a banshee. *I’m not, I’m not*, she thought but did not say. “I think I see what you mean,” she said. “Poison is not always a weapon. Sometimes it’s a mercy, if someone is hurt or ill beyond recovery, and death will come by unnecessary suffering.”

Kerill smiled again, gratefully this time. “Thank you for understanding.”

“And those who expect to see a woman in this role?”

“You have forgotten, I suppose, our other power,” he said. “Or maybe you never knew it.” When she tilted her head in curiosity, he began to transform. A few seconds later, she sat across from herself.

“You’re shifters too,” she said, and laughed with delight. *Do I really look like that?* In his shifted form, she could see herself looking older than the thirteen-year-old she’d been when she left Einion Mawr. Now, if his reflection was accurate, she seemed to be in her early twenties, and apart from remarkably untamed hair, not bad to look at.



In 1721 the population of New Orleans, Louisiana, was less than five hundred, a motley congregation of backwoodsmen, troops, convicts, slaves, indigents, and

prostitutes. Nevertheless, Lazy Biggs was able to live there without compromising her principles or exposing her other-realm origins. Over the next hundred-ish years, she saw more people settling there, until by 1803, when the United States effected the Louisiana Purchase, there were eight-thousand residents. This made Lazy's life much easier.

By 1850, more than a hundred-sixteen-thousand people crowded the place. Lazy Biggs opened a bookstore, which managed to survive the cholera and yellow fever epidemics that cost the city as many lives as there'd been people there only half-a-century earlier.

Hand Bound Books, with "books" the smallest word on the sign, attracted a few customers who expected a very different sort of shop, but Lazy's charm convinced most of them to stay a while and browse the shelves. Very few left without buying at least one volume. She did well. It was not difficult to get old and rare books through the port, and enough of them were "tastefully illustrated" to keep niche customers without offending any of the scholars and casual readers who were her main clientele.

One day, sometime after the Civil War, when reconstruction was underway for good or ill, a letter came. She knew at once it wasn't an inquiry about a book. Kerill Niall was scrawled at the top of the envelope; she opened it immediately.

*My dear Madame Biggs, it began. I have found your niece. She is doing important work here in the north, but I will be taking her place so that she can come to you. This is the 4<sup>th</sup>, and I expect she will be with you by the end of the month.*

*Your humble servant, Kerill Niall, it ended.*

By the end of the month! It was the 18<sup>th</sup> now, so there was time to tidy up and make a space for Rosemily. Lazy was sure she could persuade the young woman to stay – if nothing else, to hear family stories, and perhaps to relate some of her own adventures. Ideally, Rosemily would be interested in the bookstore. Almost certainly, several of the books would fascinate her.



Rosemily spoke to some of the books almost as if they were people. Ironically, they did not communicate in words, but in feelings well beyond the texture of leather covers and parchment pages. She came to consider a few of them as good friends.

Aunt Lazy became a good friend too. She knew more about the family than Kerill Niall had been able to tell her. She and Rosemily could agree, though, that the murder and other scandals were ancient history, and not as interesting as what was happening now.

Even with the two of them working together, Hand Bound Books took a lot of time and effort to stock, maintain, and operate. It was hard work, but worth it to Lazy and Rosemily both. Almost all of their customers were interesting; not many were from Einion Mawr, but some were from adjacent kingdoms.

“If my husband knew I was reading novels, he’d be shocked,” quite a few of the women said. “But he doesn’t notice.”

“He likes the books I buy for him so well he doesn’t suspect I buy anything but cookbooks and sewing patterns for myself.”

These things were true because either Lazy or Rosemily would lay their palms across the covers of novels so that they were all but invisible on a home bookshelf, except to the wife – or daughter – reading them. More than seventy-five years after it was published, Susanne Rowson’s novel, *Charlotte Temple*, was still popular, and so were the novels that fairly leapt into readers’ hands after that.

“These old books, these are the best. Very sensible of you to carry them, Missus Biggs,” most of the white-haired men said.

Their choices ranged from history through engineering all the way to novels. They looked away when they pushed their cash across the counter, and did not meet Lazy’s or Rosemily’s eyes again until the secret pleasure was wrapped in brown paper with the other purchases.

“This reminds me of home,” some customers said, carrying their choices to the counter like gifts to a countess. Most of them were talking about travel narratives or sketch books about the place they’d left to come to New Orleans. A few were talking about places on the other side of whatever portal they’d used to get there.

After some time, enough of those other-realmers, none of them suspected by their fellow New Orleanians, grew to trust Lazy enough to accept her invitation to a book club. They met on the second Tuesday evening of the month in the back room at Hand Bound Books.

It was good for all of them. For some it was a real book club, opening their eyes to stories or recipes or landscapes they’d never heard of. For all of them it was a stroll down memory lane.

And for a few, it was a way past the prejudices they’d grown up with. It didn’t surprise Lazy, but Rosemily was at first amazed to know some of the biases the fae held against each other. Rosemily was glad to see Lazy resolving those misunderstandings, and happy when she could help.



Their comfortable routine lasted until the early 1950s, when one day Aunt Lazy closed the store in the middle of the afternoon and led Rosemily to the back. In a corner apart from the big table around which the book club sat for meetings, there was an intimate setting: two club chairs and an ancient table that wobbled unless it was asked nicely not to.

Today, there was a silver tray in the center, with a bottle of port and two glasses on it. “Let’s sit, Rosemily,” Lazy said. As soon as Rosemily did, Aunt Lazy sat down too, and poured them each some of the tawny liquid.

“What’s wrong?”

“Oh, Rosemily, dear, why is that the first question you ask?”

“Because the last time we shared a drink in this corner, it was because of the cholera. Or the yellow fever.”

“Well, there’s certainly nothing like that going on.” That wasn’t entirely true. Polio had been an epidemic since 1916; New Orleans got its first iron lung in 1932. The Kenny Unit at Charity Hospital was opened in 1942 to treat polio victims. But in 1953, Jonas Salk developed his vaccination, and since then, things had improved radically. And that wasn’t what Lazy wanted to talk about.

“The polio,” Rosemily said. Had Aunt Lazy contracted it?

“The vaccine,” Lazy answered, “and no, I don’t have it. My arm is sore because I got the vaccine, though, and so should you.”

“Okay,” Rosemily said. Maybe now Aunt Lazy would get to the point.

“You’re probably going to think that what I’m going to tell you is something wrong,” she said.

“Then I’ll ask again,” Rosemily said. “What’s wrong?”

“I’ve decided to go home.”

“I thought this was your – oh! You mean Einion Mawr.”

“Yes. I’ve decided on Calon.”

“The capital. Alright, but why?”

“I miss it. I mean the country, not Calon – I was only there a few times. But it’s an interesting city, and there’s nothing back at the homestead now.”

Rosemily knew that her mother had died, and her father’d been shot, no doubt for his antlers. She could certainly understand that Aunt Lazy wouldn’t want to go back to their little village.

“I guess I understand. And I don’t think it’s wrong, but ... I’ll miss you. It’ll be hard to run this place on my own.”

“Well, that’s the other thing,” Aunt Lazy said. “Finish your drink, dear.”

Rosemily did. “What’s the other thing?”

“You remember Kerill Niall, of course.”

“Of course.”

“I’m leaving Hand Bound Books with him.”

Rosemily gaped for a moment like a fish out of water. “Oh,” she said. “Is he back?” She looked around as if he might be sitting on the other side of the room, at the head of the book club table.

“He will be, and before I leave, so we can bring him up to speed.”

“Oh,” Rosemily said again.

“But there’s an inheritance, if you will, for you too – on one condition.”

*Am I dreaming? Hallucinating?* “What condition?”

“That you change your surname to Biggs,” Aunt Lazy said. She blushed. Out loud, it sounded sillier than it had in her head.

Rosemily considered this. “Do I have to agree before I find out what you’re leaving me?” She smiled; she thought – she hoped – she might be joking.

This took Lazy aback, but after she thought about it for a moment, she said, “Now that you ask, yes.”

“Will you tell me why?”

“Because your Innes line has been dishonored, and I do not want the name to taint the rest of your life, or the heritage of any children you may have.” She blinked twice, and Rosemily wasn’t sure whether that was in defiance of the pettiness or something more.

“That seems ... petty, but also fair,” Rosemily said. “Alright, I’ll change my name to Rosemily Biggs. But I don’t understand why, after all these years ...” *an understatement* “... you’re not leaving the bookstore to me.”

“Oh, but I am, Rosemily. I’m not leaving you *this* bookstore; I’m leaving you the *other* bookstore.”

## **Afterword**

Other bookstore? you may be asking, what other bookstore? Well, it’s called Book Bound, and it’s in Habit County, Washington. To find out more than that, you’ll need to read *Echo Crossing Book One: Echo Bound*. To read more about that novel, visit my website, [www.ashleenogaea.com](http://www.ashleenogaea.com) .