

Joe Donnelly

JACK FLINT

and the Spellbinder's Curse



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AND THE
SPELLBINDER'S CURSE

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JACK FLINT
AND THE
SPELLBINDER'S CURSE

Also by Joe Donnelly

Jack Flint and the Redthorn Sword

For Linda Young, Gavin Docherty and
Chick Young, for years of fun.



ONE



Corriwen Redthorn had vanished.
She had tumbled, *was thrown*, through the space between the standing stones and she disappeared.

Jack Flint lurched from the far side of the ring of stones with Kerry Malone taking most of his weight. But for his friend's help, he'd have dropped to his knees.

They were hurt, bruised and bloodied. Jack felt as if every inch of his body had been beaten. Blood matted on Kerry's shoulder where *She* had hit him, slammed him into the air.

The Morrigan.

As old as time, as foul as sin, the Goddess of Death.

She had harried them across the dead lands, rending the rocks with her fury. They had made it to the gateway – the ring of stones so close to home – so nearly safe, but she had come sweeping after them, a shade within shadow.

She had almost killed them both. But they had survived and had sent her, screeching, down into the infinity of dark.

Kerry groaned. Jack could see the bruise swelling across his cheek, but his eyes were still bright and somehow fierce.

‘We beat her,’ he said.

‘We did. And I think I got us back to *before*. I mean, before it all went crazy.’ Jack paused. ‘Where is she?’

‘I told you. She’s gone.’

‘No,’ Jack said. ‘Where’s Corriwen?’

They both turned round quickly.

‘She was ...’ Kerry started, then stopped. ‘I think she was here. I was running with that thing coming on like a train. Then I threw the heartstone to you and she hit me such a wallop I went ass for elbow.’

‘Corriwen was hit too,’ Jack said. His heart lurched. ‘She was hit. I saw it.’ He started to walk, ignoring the pain.

‘She went flying.’ He took a slow step and then another in the direction Corriwen had tumbled when the Morrigan had flipped her away, expecting to find her broken body against one of the standing stones. That final blow must have been devastating.

He moved from one stone to another – then he saw it. On the soft earth, where Corriwen had landed and rolled, scuff marks in the thin grass.

They continued towards the space between two standing stones.

Then they vanished.

Jack looked at Kerry.

‘She must have gone through,’ Kerry said. Regret and relief were struggling in his expression. ‘Back home to Temair.’

Jack shook his head. 'No,' he said. 'That's not the gate to Temair. The *Farward Gate*. She was thrown through the *wrong* one. They were all open at the same time. I saw different places out there.'

They locked eyes. 'Kerry. I don't know *where* she's gone.'

'Oh Jack,' Kerry whispered.

Jack picked up the amberhorn bow and hefted his backpack. His jacket was in rags. One shoe was torn from sole to heel. He was hurting from head to toe. The standing stones towered above them.

Beyond them, Cromwath Blackwood's trees crowded close. Beyond them, some distance away was the tall wall that was built to keep people out. Now he and Kerry knew the astonishing secret of the wall and the stones. The *gates*.

On the other side of the wall was a world back to normal. One without creeping darkness, or whispering shade.

Perhaps the Major's telescope would still be focused on the woods, Jack thought. Everything back the way it was. *Home*.

He itched to get back there, ask the Major all the questions about who his father really was and where he came from. He'd surely have the answers.

Jack paused, heart aching with the need for that knowledge. He walked across the ring, to the space between the stones through which they had run, panicked, on that first night.

Jack leaned against the stone, utterly worn. Utterly torn.

Corriwen Redthorn had saved his life. She had helped both of them survive all the odds in her strange world and helped them get back again.

In a rush, he recalled all their travels in Temair. Their

battles; her bravery. Jack Flint owed a debt of life to Corriwen Redthorn. A debt he would repay come what may, no matter the cost; no matter the sacrifice.

He turned back and faced across the capstone to the gateway through which she had disappeared.

Kerry's eyes followed him, sensing the fight going on inside Jack's mind.

'What do you want to do?'

Jack slammed both fists against the great stone, venting his frustration and despair.

Unsteadily, but very deliberately he limped across the ring of stones.

'She's lost somewhere. Lost and alone. I've got the key to open the gate.'

He turned to face Kerry, looked him straight in the eye. He held up the black heartstone on its silver chain.

'I'm going to find her,' he said.

Kerry nodded. Understanding was clear on his face. He clapped Jack on the back. They both winced.

'Not on your own, you're not.'

'I can't ask you ...' Jack began.

Kerry held up a hand. 'You're not asking. And you don't have to. We're not going to let a girl come between us, are we?'

'Cross my heart,' Jack said.

'And hope to die.'

And together they walked forward into the unknown.



TWO



They passed between the standing stones, turning their backs on the world they knew and everything that was familiar.

The obsidian heartstone suddenly began to vibrate against Jack's chest, so fast it sang a clear high note that sounded like glass on the verge of shattering. He gripped Kerry by the arm as the light of the moon vanished behind them and they waded into a darkness that seemed solid.

Kerry said something, but his voice sounded stretched and far away. Brilliant colours spangled and sparkled all around them. Jack's skin puckered, every hair standing on end as stings of a thousand nettles prickled all over him.

He tried to call Kerry's name but the words were snatched away. His ears popped and pressure pounded behind his eyes.

And then they were stumbling in daylight, pitched forward on short cropped grass. Kerry tripped and his arm pulled from Jack's grip. He went down with a cry and Jack sank to his knees.

Kerry shook his head. 'My ears are still ringing.'

Jack breathed clean cold air. A hard frost rimed the ground and a bitter wind blew.

Somewhere in the distance a lone curlew piped.

'Winter,' Jack finally said. 'Or autumn. Wherever we are.'

'Just brilliant,' Kerry muttered. 'Couldn't she have picked somewhere warm? Like the Bahamas.'

'She didn't have a choice,' Jack replied.

'Only kidding, Jack. Let's find her and get out of here.'

Jack got to his feet, still hurting all over, and helped Kerry up. Both of them looked around, almost as if expecting Corriwen to be sitting on the grass, but there was no sign of her, no footprints, no trodden leaves. No marks in the rime of frost.

The ring of stones had vanished. Only two great pillars of the gateway stood. The stone was eroded with age, but they could still make out the worn carvings on each of their four faces.

'Look,' Kerry said. 'It's a harp. Maybe we're in our own time.'

A harp was etched in great detail into the south face. The others depicted what looked like a great sword, a witch's cauldron, and a club of some sort; its head shaped like a skull.

Down the slope, a stream wound its way through rushes and over shingle shallows. Together they started down the

hill towards the water. Jack dropped his pack and the amber-horn bow. Kerry dug his sword into the turf and together they waded in, side by side until the water came up to their thighs, to let its icy cold ease their hurt.

The flow cleansed the cuts and scratches and sucked the heat from their bruises until they began to feel numb from the cold. They clambered up the bank and lay gasping under a leaden sky that threatened rain or snow.

Kerry propped himself up on one elbow.

'You look like you've been hit by a bus.'

'Thanks. You don't look so good yourself.'

'I've felt a whole lot better,' Kerry admitted. 'And I've lost half a shoe.' He held it up. The sole flapped like a fish mouth.

Jack raised a dripping foot. 'Mine are torn to ribbons.'

'I could use some fresh undies. Maybe there's a charity shop.'

'Somehow I doubt it.' Jack levered himself to his feet. 'Come on, she's here somewhere.'

'You sure you got the right gate?'

'Pretty sure.' Jack *hoped*. 'You saw where she hit the ground.'

'Was she hurt?'

'I don't know. Maybe. *It* hit her pretty hard. Swiped her off her feet.'

'I know what that feels like,' Kerry said. The water had washed most of the blood from his rabbit-skin tunic. Jack hoped the cold had closed the wound. He would have to look at it, check the damage.

They made it back up the hill and stood next to the stones,

scanned the land around them. The slope gentled down on all sides, short grass and clover for a hundred yards. A hedge of some sort beyond the stream; a pine coppice further on. Hills in the distance.

Jack rummaged in the backpack and drew out the Major's binoculars, fingered the focus ring and the coppice snapped into close-up clarity. A flock of snow buntings broke cover and whirred out of sight. Jack scanned the trees and saw nothing, then panned around, searching beyond the hedgerow and the stream. There was still nothing to be seen. He had hoped to catch a flash of Corriwen's red hair.

Kerry kept his eyes on the ground. If there was any trace, anything to see, he'd find it. He might have had trouble with books at school, but he could read the ground the way Jack could read stories.

After a while he came back, shaking his head.

'Not a thing,' he said. 'Nobody's been here in a while.'

'That doesn't mean she wasn't here. Or that she won't be.'

'I don't get you.'

'I think time runs differently on the other side. She could be in the past ... or the future.'

'You're taking the mick!'

'I wish I was.'

Jack was holding the heartstone in one hand. It was warm from the contact with his skin, but now no pulsing beat warned him of danger. Finbar the Bard had told him it was a key, and Jack knew now how true that was. He sensed it was much more than just a key. It had saved him from the

hellish heat when the ground in Temair had split into bubbling fissures. What else this stone could do, he didn't know. But it had been his father's, and it was the only link he had to a parent he'd never known. He held it tight and tried to think what to do next.

'This links all the worlds,' he finally said. 'And it opens the gates. That's why the Major gave it to me. My father must have been the keeper.'

'So how did the Major have it?' Kerry asked.

'I don't know. He didn't have time to tell me, remember?'

They'd had no time at all, when they ran from the foul darkness that oozed through the big house. It had happened so deadly fast on their way home from the Halloween party. The darkness had flowed up the walls into the Major's house.

Nightshade. That's what he'd called it. Something profoundly bad that had broken through a thin place in the fabric of their world. The Major had stayed to fight it and had told them to run. Down the dark stairwell, along a tunnel Jack had never seen before and they had found themselves in Cromwath Blackwood, then through the mysterious ring of standing stones to Corriwen's world.

Temair. A world Jack had only read about in the Celtic Legends in the Major's library, but a world as real as his own, and for a time, infinitely more terrifying. Yet it was a world, Jack discovered, where his father had already travelled, and even as they journeyed through its dangers, he had found cryptic clues about John Cullian Flint. They had fought their way across Temair, hunted and harried all

the way and they had faced the ancient Morrigan that Corriwen's uncle had resurrected in the Black Barrow. They had faced her, fought her and survived.

Jack raised the heartstone, catching the sunlight and sending a prism of purplish light across Kerry's cheek.

'So where are we now?' Kerry asked.

'Only one way to find out.'

Jack took the backpack and pulled out the old Book of Ways which had guided them through the perils of Temair.

He opened it and again, as if by magic, words slowly appeared on the blank page. The script was different, more rounded and ornate than that which had scrolled on the old vellum pages in Temair. On either side of the lines, more faintly etched, the massive stones stood alone on the small hill.

Together they read:

*The Farward Gate of Fair Eirinn
Journeyman, a quest begin
The green sward turns to winter Waste
And famine spreads in evil Haste.
Traveller be southway bound
Ere a friend now lost is found.
Yet journeyman be well aware
This Eirinn now is serpent lair.
The quest is now to find the song
To find a king, to right a wrong
To fight for right, to face the fate
Before you find the Homeward gate.*

‘Clear as mud, as usual,’ Kerry remarked.

‘Some of it,’ Jack’s expression was troubled.

‘So where are we?’ Kerry repeated.

‘Eirinn. It’s another name for the Celtic world.’

‘So it’s Temair again?’

‘No. The writing’s different. This isn’t like where we arrived before.’

‘Too right. That was totally creepy. Remember the hand that grabbed me?’

‘That wasn’t the worst of it. *She* was. The Morrigan. Whatever’s going on here can’t be as bad as that.’

Jack examined the script again. It had taken them a while, back in Temair, to realise the Book of Ways gave warnings as well as directions.

‘It says we go south, to find a lost friend.’

‘Does that mean Corrie’s here already?’ Kerry asked.

‘I think so. Probably. Or the Homeward Gate is south of here.’ Jack closed his eyes, got his bearings, and pointed beyond the coppice. ‘It’s that way.’

‘Okay,’ Kerry said, rising to his feet. ‘We’d better get moving.’

Jack grabbed his wrist and tugged him back down to the grass.

‘But there’s more to it than that. It says we have to do something else before we reach the Homeward Gate. I think I worked that out on Temair. You have to *earn* your way home.’

‘Are you kidding?’

Jack shook his head. ‘I think that’s what the Book of Ways is all about.’