



MIDORI SNYDER

The
*f*light of

Michael McBride

A Fantasy Novel of the American West

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the Flight of

MICHAEL McBRIDE



MIDORI SNYDER



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK

NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to real people or events is purely coincidental.

THE FLIGHT OF MICHAEL McBRIDE

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With special thanks for my friends Ray
Yeates, who gave out until I gave up and
went, and for Cathy Kaiser, who was
waiting for me when I got there.

the Flight of

MICHAEL McBRIDE

One



Hearing footsteps just outside the door, Michael glanced up from the chessboard. He was a young man, just twenty years old, and a worried flush stained his nearly smooth cheeks as he waited for the door to open and admit the doctor.

"Concentrate on your game," his father ordered.

Reluctantly, Michael returned his attention to his father, suppressing his anger. James McBride was an imposing figure, not one to suffer disagreements lightly. In his early fifties, the man had grown stout, his waist expanding to the width of his squared shoulders. His face was roughly hewn, with a prominent forehead over a large nose. From beneath shaggy eyebrows, the dark eyes held the pattern of the chessboard with an intense stare. Graying side whiskers joined an impressive mustache that remained coal black through the aid of waxing. Thick fingers closed around the miter of a queen's bishop and he moved his piece with authority, capturing Michael's knight.

The door opened with a quiet click and Dr. Callahan entered, neatly tucking a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles into

his vest pocket. He looked tired, his blue eyes watering with fatigue.

"She's asking after you, Michael," Dr. Callahan said.

Michael stood up quickly, his knee knocking the corner of the gaming table. The pieces on the chessboard wobbled. A rook toppled, followed by two pawns. A knight crashed into the white queen and she rolled to the edge of the gaming table and fell on the Persian carpet.

"Damn you, boy," James McBride swore. "You've ruined the game." He bent down to retrieve the queen, her serene face disappearing in the grip of his huge palm.

Michael begged one guilty glance for the fallen pieces and then went to the parlor door. The doctor stopped him, a hand on his arm.

"Not too long now. She's weak enough as it is. And there's your father to think of. He'll be wanting his last words as well."

Michael nodded stiffly and shouldered out of the room. His father had no words to spare his mother, he thought angrily. He never had. In all the years Michael had watched them, James McBride had rarely spoken to his wife. They'd lived in the same house, taken their meals together, and at least once before had shared the same bed. But Michael had never heard them converse together. Even their eyes seemed to deny the other's presence, staring blankly or turning dispassionately away. As a child, Michael had decided it was his fault; that his presence angered them or, worse, caused them shame. The feeling of shame deepened as he grew older. As an adolescent he had asked his father the reason for his animosity, but the man refused any knowledge of it. His mother became distant when asked, and it seemed as if her mouth snagged on unspoken words. Michael didn't press further for an answer but determined by their silence that he was the wedge between them.

And yet his parents were not entirely without small measures of warmth and kindness. In James McBride the game of chess evoked an expression of intimacy. In the thick of the battle, his face glowed, his skin grew ruddy, and his eyes sparkled. He spoke to Michael then, his voice direct even though his eyes were trained on the complicated patterns of the chessboard. He had taught Michael to play when the boy was barely old enough to hold and remember the function of each piece. Michael had endured long afternoons of chess in the hope that it would soften the man's temperament. After fifteen years of play, Michael had acquired considerable skill in the game but was no closer to knowing his father.

Michael walked up the carpeted stairs, glancing as he always did at the hanging portrait of his mother, Eileen McBride. His heart beat anxiously and he felt a heavy weight press against his ribs. The painting showed her sitting on a parlor chair, her back erect, a gown of pale green silk elegantly draping the rounded shoulders. Her ash-blond hair was coiled high on her head, accentuating the graceful arch of her neck. Her hands rested on her lap, and in her long tapered fingers she held an embroidered fan. Intelligent green eyes stared back at the viewer; the lift of one golden eyebrow and the subtle crook of the rose-colored mouth made her seem amused by what she saw. The painter had accurately caught the translucent quality of her skin that absorbed light with the soft sheen of a pearl.

But that was in 1858, when she was a young woman newly arrived in New York. A scant twenty years later, she was dying. They all knew it, though until recently the doctor had refused to admit it. He had come often in the last three months since she'd taken to her bed at the New Year. He had given her tonics, tinctures, and mercury pills, steamed her with pungent vapors and swaddled her chest

with mustard plasters. But despite his best medical efforts she had failed to thrive. She refused to eat, and what they did manage to coax down she vomited later. She drank only herbal tea, sweetened with a spoonful of wildflower honey.

Michael hesitated at the top of the stairs, afraid to see her. In the cold hollow that was his childhood, she had provided him with one escape. Eileen McBride never spoke of herself, nor her past, and had never once told Michael that she loved him. But she had filled his young ears with stories from home. In the absence of a loving touch, her voice had seduced him with its lilting music. With an immigrant's nostalgia she spoke longingly of Ireland, of its soft green valleys, the warm moist breezes, and the long summer days when couples danced beneath a pale moon at the crossroads. A blue-green sea, brighter than sapphire, lapped at a rocky shore, and narrow strands of white sand speared the water. The linnets and the thrush sang in the hedges, and horned stags belled in the few remaining forests.

As she spoke, weaving a glittering net of images, the crowded and dirty streets of New York faded. The city's harsh noises were replaced by the clash of swords in the great battles of Maeve and Cuchulain. The cobblestones became the steps of Finn Mac Coul's giant causeway; the bridal paths of Central Park where they went riding became the forests of the *Sídhe*, and he and his mother a part of the fairy rade. When Eileen McBride leaned her mouth toward Michael's ear and told him stories of the fairy world, all else around him ceased to exist in the lulling beauty of her voice.

Michael ran his fingers through his black wavy hair. He loved her desperately and he feared her death, feared his loneliness that only her voice kept at bay.

Mary, his mother's personal maid, stepped through the bedroom door carrying a tea tray. She was an older woman,

heavyset, with a rounded face and a rosy complexion on her finely wrinkled cheeks. On the tray rested Eileen's favorite teacup made of a cream-colored porcelain with a pattern of ivy leaves vining around the rim and the plate. The cup was full, the amber tea unsipped, the cutwork napkin lying folded beside it. Mary caught sight of him and clucked her tongue.

"I know, I know," she said softly, shaking her head at Michael's distraught face. "Go in then. She'll not last the night, I'm thinking, and then her suffering will be over, thanks be to God." She heaved a sigh, the starched linen of her blouse crinkling over her large bosom. "I'll bring the master a tray with some food to the parlor. Come yourself after and take a bite to eat," she finished. Her petticoats shushed beneath her long skirt as she passed him, leaving him alone on the landing.

Michael gathered his courage and opened the door to his mother's sickroom.

Though the early spring weather had been mild, a fire had been lit in the grate. The room was hot and stuffy, and sweat prickled Michael's forehead. It was a small, charming room, with high ceilings and ornate moldings. The wallpaper was a dove gray, with twisting vines covered with tiny leaves. The patterned leaves trailed over two huge bay windows that looked down into the street and Gramercy Park below. It had been his mother's study, and along the fireplace two bookcases held the leatherbound books that had been her pleasure to read. A desk with turned legs and inlaid drawers sat in front of the windows, the chair neatly tucked in, hiding its needlepointed seatcover. Unanswered letters lay stacked, weighted down by a silver letter opener. Near the inkwells sat a vase with bright yellow daffodils, their lifted throats like trumpets. At her request, the servants had moved a bed into the room when she first be-

came ill. She said the view was more pleasing, though from her bed, even propped up with bolsters, she could only see the tops of the trees in the park. The rest was sky. The drapes had been pulled at dusk, and their deep folds closed out the chill of the night.

Near the bed was a little table covered with a linen cloth edged in Limerick lace. On the table sat a small lamp, the wick trimmed low to give off a gentle light. There were gas fixtures on the wall, but his mother had never liked them, saying she didn't trust the hissing blue-green flame. Michael's feet tread noiselessly over the Liberty carpet as he approached the bed. His heart was rattling, and his mouth tasted sour.

He sat in the chair beside her bed and gazed at her sleeping figure. From a startling beauty, she had wasted into a pale ghost. The ash-colored hair spread across her pillow like old flax. She was thin, her cheeks gaunt and her eyes sunk deep into the circular ridges of her sockets. Her hands lay on the lace coverlet, the nails gray. Blue veins netted the backs of her white hands. Her translucent, cream-colored skin had become as dull as melted wax.

"Mother," he said softly. "It's me, Michael."

Her lashes fluttered as she slowly raised the lids, revealing the green eyes, milky as unpolished agates. "Ah, Michael," she whispered. "It's good you've come. I've something to give you."

Tears welled in Michael's eyes. His throat tightened at the feeble sound of her voice. She was fumbling, her hand weakly reaching for something on the bedside table.

Michael quickly wiped away a tear and then retrieved the object. It was a small ivory and glass jar. It had a silver lid etched with Celtic spirals. She made a motion with her hands that indicated she wanted him to open it. He did,