

The Pirate Queen – A Timewalker Journey
By Christina Bauer
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Sample Chapter

The alarm clock's cracked screen flashed 11:43 PM. Tonight, like every other since arriving in Westport, Ireland, Jessica Ross lay atop her covers, wide awake. Between her palms she pressed a clover-shaped pendant.

"My luck is changing," Jess murmured. "Nothing bad will happen tonight for sure." She smoothed back her long tangles of black hair, revealing an oval face with porcelain skin and delicate, elf-like features. Her slender body barely looked thirteen years old.

Trembling, she raised the clover pendant to her lips. "Did you hear that, luck? Change."

Gentle scratching sounded from the far wall of her bedroom. Jess forced her bleary emerald eyes to open wide.

"Is anybody there? Dad? Jake?" From down the hall, she heard the buzz-saw snores of her father and brother.

"They're both asleep." Jess chewed her bottom lip. "And no one else is in here. Maybe it was a mouse." She scanned her room, finding a jumble of neon green paint, stained brown carpet, and translucent plastic furniture that was cracked and scuffed. Creepy posters of leprechauns with eyes as big as saucers glared down from the walls.

Jess gripped her clover pendant tighter. "Yeah, that's it. A mouse." She exhaled. "I can't let this stuff get to me. I've got enough to worry about with—"

The scratching sounded again. Something shifted in the shadows.

"Is that you, mouse?" Jess spoke in a sleepy, sing-song voice. "Heeeeere, mousey-mousey-mousey."

The shadowy form ceased moving. "Too scared to come out, mouse? I understand. This room looks creepy, but don't worry. There's really no such thing as leprechauns or demons or ghosts or—"

Crr-eak. Long groans sliced the still night air. Tension shot down Jess's spine.

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"Not again," she murmured. For a full minute, Jess sat frozen in place, listening intently. My mind's playing tricks on me again, she decided. It's all part of this bad luck streak that I—

Crrrr-eak.

The sound seemed to come from the behind her battered purple dresser. Squinting, Jess strained to examine the semi-darkness, but saw only her own reflection in the dresser's mirror. In the moonlight her emerald eyes looked black and wide with worry.

"I know how to break this jinx," she said, her voice trembling. "I'll put my lucky penny under my pillow, the one I found before mom was—" She stopped herself before repeating the words from the police report: *'declared missing, presumed dead.'*

Step by halting step, Jess tiptoed over to the dresser, slowly opened the top drawer and fumbled through its contents with one hand.

"Where is it?" she moaned, a note of panic rising in her voice. She rummaged through the next drawer, and the next, and the next. "This isn't happening."

With both hands Jess tore through the entire dresser. A worn-out teddy bear, frayed gymnastics uniforms and dog-eared copies of Vogue magazine were flung around the otherwise perfectly-organized room.

"Gotcha!" Jess shrieked with panicky delight. She punched the air, her lucky penny held firmly in her fist.

CRRRR-ACK!

The wall behind her dresser bulged and snapped, as if an elephant were squeezing into her room through the electrical socket. Slender tendrils of light broke through long cracks in the plaster. Jess froze, a spike of tension piercing her stomach.

Jess stood motionless by the opened dresser, her fist clenching ever tighter about her lucky penny. Bits off stuffing from the ragged teddy bear cascaded to the floor like so many snowflakes. The air became deathly still.

"No problem," Jess exhaled. "My lucky penny works every time." Her mouth twitched as she forced a smile.

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At that moment, the wall behind her dresser exploded. A thunderous jolt slammed into Jess. The plastic dresser shattered; debris blasted across the grimy carpet. A hole gaped in the plaster wall, pouring a shaft of blazing white light into the darkness.

Jess reeled from the force of the explosion, her mouth stretched into a soundless scream. White plaster dust flecked her tattered gray nightgown.

Faint rumbling echoed from the opening. Shielding her vision from the piercing light, Jess stumbled backward, breathing in rough wheezes.

The next instant, icy water crashed through the ragged gap. Jess felt chilly liquid swirl between her toes. The watery onslaught smashed more and more plaster, widening the opening in her bedroom wall. Searing light flooded her room, washing even the darkest corners in white radiance.

"Stop it," Jess panted. "Leave me alone." She pressed her lucky penny to her chest. The water only gushed faster. A cascade of plaster lumps tumbled into the swirling currents.

In no time, the entire the back wall of her bedroom had dissolved into an abyss of white light. A turquoise pool spun about Jess's knees. Her teeth chattered uncontrollably.

A rolling voice echoed in from the void. "Help me," it boomed in a thick brogue. "Help me find my treasure!"

Wincing, Jess forced herself to stare into the blinding light. Beyond the jagged edges of her darkened room, she saw a pale-blue sky stretching off into the distance. Billowing white clouds rolled over an immense, turquoise-colored sea. Above this glittering ocean floated a robed figure, the hood on its gleaming emerald cloak drawn low. Where eyes should have been, Jess saw only two points of white radiance.

"Help me," the voice called again. "Help me find my treasure!"

Jess pounded her temples with her fists. "No," she screamed frantically. "I told you a hundred times, no."

The void swallowed her voice as more chilly water gushed out, the liquid climbing higher and higher around her body. Within seconds a frigid current spun around her waist.

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"No NO NO," Jess squeezed her eyes tight, hoping to make it all go away, wishing for the brown carpet and leprechauns to come back. Icy cold spray splashed her chin. She thrashed around, trying to stay afloat on the churning surface. While fighting the swirling currents, her eyes popped open and she gasped at what she saw.

Leprechauns. Translucent plastic furniture. Neon green walls.

Jess found herself safe in bed, her covers kicked into a lump on the shaggy, perfectly dry brown carpet. Daylight streamed in through her open window, illuminating a bedroom that was exactly as she'd seen it when her lights went out the night before.

Sweat trickled down her cheek. "Another dream," Jess whispered, "another really, really bad dream." She tossed her clover pendant and lucky penny onto the floor. "These charms aren't working any more. I need something new." An image flashed into her mind: her mother's old blue sweater hanging on its peg in the kitchen.

"That's it!" Jess cried. "A lucky sweater is just the ticket. This will be my last nightmare for sure."

Unfortunately, Jess's true nightmare was just beginning. An evil spirit lurked in the tall weeds outside her window, hanging onto her every word. An ancient demon, it now appeared as a blood-red cat with rippling muscles, long claws and a whip-fast tail. Only the closest examination revealed its body was formed from swirling currents of tiny red particles.

While Jess hunted around for her slippers, the particles billowing inside the cat's body froze; then they began to disintegrate like so many tumbling bits of sand. A guttural voice reverberated as the creature vanished, the words too soft for Jess to hear:

"Is this the creature the prrrrr-ophecy foretold? The one chosen to destroy me?" The Shadow Cat's voice chuckled darkly. "This is woman-spawn, spineless and weak, an insect too frightened to heed the call of that do-gooder spirit. Never will it search for pirate treasure... or pose any threat to me."

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