

unquiet dreams

By
Mark Del Franco

early reviews...

"UNQUIET DREAMS is the second book in the series and although I've not read the first, I can say without reservation it a solid adventure filled with unique characters and plenty of fast paced suspense--*Pulp Fiction Reviews*

"It's back to the Weird for the second chapter in this striking first-person druid detective series. Del Franco's clear and textured voice ensures that readers vest instantly in characters and story. Waiting for the next installment will be tough." --*Romantic Times*

"Unquiet Dreams is an urban fantasy wrapped around a police procedural and that makes for a fast paced action packed novel...This looks to be a great new urban fantasy series judging by the first two books in the series" --*Gumshoe Reviews*

CHAPTER ONE

No good phone calls come at seven o'clock in the morning. Strike that. No good phone calls from Detective Leonard Murdock come at seven o'clock in the morning. Actually, strike that too. No good phone calls from Detective Leonard Murdock come at seven o'clock in the morning unless you count the fact that it means I might have a paying job. Of course, it also means someone is dead, too, but that's where the "no good" part comes in.

That's how I make my living now. Waiting for the phone to ring. Hoping a crime has been committed. Ideally, one that Murdock needs a little fey

expertise on. Some people make the mistake of thinking I used to be a high-powered druid working the crime unit for the Fey Guild. The only 'used-to-be' part of that is working for the Guild. I'm still a druid. I still look in the mirror and think 'Yes, Connor Grey, you are a druid.' Just because I've lost most of my abilities doesn't mean I am not what I am. To be fey, to be a member of a species that can manipulate what is superstitiously called magic, is not just a job description. It's a state of being.

And my current state of being was in the backseat of a cab wishing I had a cup of coffee. Murdock had given me an address in the deep end of the Weird. The Weird is not the nicest neighborhood in Boston. It's certainly not the safest. But it's where the fey live when they have nowhere else to go. There's a comfort in that, a community of sorts, that outsiders don't understand. Especially when so many people end up dead here.

The cab pulled off Old Northern Avenue onto a narrow lane that ran between two burnt-out warehouses. A block away, the lane ended at a desolate field with a small group of people wandering about, which, given the early hour, could only be my destination. I paid the driver, got out and shivered. It was cold--too cold for early October and much colder than when I got in the cab just a few blocks away. I looked up at the sky and sensed more than saw a faint white haze in the air that was by no means natural.

The early morning sun cast a surreal light, bleaching colors like a faded photograph. At the curb, a police car with its blue lights flashing enhanced the effect with a silvery sheen. Across the field from where I stood, the officers'

uniforms looked almost black and the medical examiner's coat a stark white. I recognized Murdock immediately by his long trenchcoat even though it looked a pale beige instead of its normal camel color. The field looked ashen.

I stepped across the remains of a sidewalk and walked toward them. It had rained like hell the night before, and while the field should have been muddy, it was now an uneven surface of frozen ruts. I made my way to the center of activity, a body in dark clothing lying on the ground.

Murdock didn't see me until I was standing next to him. "Bit nippy," I said.

He didn't startle, but smiled slightly as he cupped his hands over his mouth and blew into them. "That's part of why I called you."

I nodded. As a human, Murdock has no fey abilities, but he's worked the Weird long enough to know when something is, well, weird. He's good at what he does, and part of what makes him good is that he knows when to ask for help. It's a lesson I'm still learning.

I bunched my own cold hands into the pockets of my leather jacket. It didn't occur to me when I left the apartment that I'd need gloves in early October. "What do you have?"

He gestured at the obvious body. "Tell me why I called you."

I stepped away from him, then between another officer and the medical examiner. On first glance at the body, my chest tightened. "Dammit, Murdock, you could have warned me it was a kid."

"Late teens, we're guessing. Haven't checked for ID yet," he said.

The cop standing next to me nodded without saying anything. When you're with law enforcement, you see a lot of things you'd rather not. Dead kids are the worst. The younger they are, the worse it is. Even if this guy—this boy—turned out to be eighteen or nineteen, he still had a helluva lot of life to miss out on. And his parents, if he had them, were still going to be heartbroken. Telling the parents is the second worst thing about it.

I put that aside for now and took in the scene. Lying face up was a white, dark-brown-haired male, obviously young, with a pained grimace locked on his face. His head angled up too sharply to one side which probably meant a broken neck. His arms and legs splayed out haphazardly. One foot had an orange Nike sneaker, the other just a plain white sock. He wore two black hooded sweatshirts, generic-looking jeans, and a bright yellow bandana on his head. The bandana was wrapped so that knotted ends stuck out from his temples. At a guess, I'd go with gangbanger. So far, unremarkable.

I swept my eyes up and down the body again. His clothes were frozen. That meant he was out in the rain long enough to get soaked before the air got cold enough to freeze him. And the mud around him. He was embedded in it, sunk a good two or three inches into the ground.

I scanned the periphery of the body and gazed outward in concentric circles as I turned. "He ended up here before the mud froze, but there're no footprints and no indication he was dragged. No sign of a struggle."

"Bingo," said Murdock. "Tossed or dropped?"

Now I saw why Murdock had called me. The kid was too far from the edge of the field to have landed in this spot on his own. Either someone with tremendous strength had tossed him in or someone who could fly had dropped him. A fairy dropping him was an obvious possibility. I estimated the shortest distance to the street at fifty feet, well within the range of strength for a troll or even a dwarf. It could have also been an UnSeelie, one of the shunned fey that don't fit into any species category easily. We didn't see a lot of those in Boston, but it was too early to rule out them out.

"I'd go for dropped," I said. "There's no slippage in the mud. He looks like he came straight down. I suppose if he were flung the right way from the street, he wouldn't slide, but dropped is the easier explanation."

Murdoch nodded as though he had come to the same conclusion. "Naturally, that leads to 'why?'"

I shrugged. "I don't know, Murdock. Look at the gear he's wearing. I think you're looking at a gang fight."

He tilted his head to the side as he continued looking at the body. "No physical signs of struggle, no visible bruises. We might find something when he's stripped, but why would a fey bother with him?"

"Fey gangs are out there, too, Murdock. The xenos figure out how to hold their own against the fey ones. You know that," I said. "And the human ones have been known to hire free-lancers for a little revenge. I'd check that angle."

He didn't look convinced, but that's Murdock's nature. He won't be happy until he nails it down precisely. I know he has more than a few files of unsolved cases that he uses for bedtime reading. He's the type.

"Can you sense anything off him?" Murdock asked.

At one time, I had the ability to manipulate essence on a high level. I was growing, maturing into my skills to the point where I thought I might end up being one of the most powerful druids alive. It sounds vain and ambitious, which is why I would never have admitted the thought aloud to anyone. But I did suspect that about myself. I had attracted the attention of some very powerful people, who took me under their wings, some of them literally. The more I learned, the more I saw that I hadn't peaked yet.

But I fell. More like, 'was knocked on my ass.' Hot on the trail of a miscreant terrorist elf named Bergin Vize, I had cornered him in a power plant. Just when I thought I could take him out, Something Happened. No one knows quite sure what., but it involved a lot of essence, a Teutonic ring of power and a smidge of nuclear energy. I don't remember anything after catching up to him. I woke up dead inside, with no real ability anymore, a mysterious mass in my head that feels like molten knives stabbing my brain whenever I try to manipulate essence. It gives me a really, really bad headache.

Now I have just a few abilities, none of which are extraordinary for someone of my kind. Humans normals can replicate most of what I can do with the right accessories. Except for one thing, which is literally sense essence. For some reason, that skill remains strong. It might be because it's a biological

function. Receptors in my nose and eyes are what make it work. Most fey have the ability to some extent, but not as strongly as druids. Researchers have been studying the phenomena for decades with no real understanding.

So, it was time for my parlor trick. "Can I have everyone step away from the body a moment?" I said.

Since working with Murdock, I was beginning to recognize more of the local force. In turn, they were getting used to me being around to help. The officers and medical examiner shuffled back to allow me a clear space.

I crouched over the victim, trying not to think about how young he was. Sometimes when you see dead bodies, you can tell if they knew what was coming. This kid did. He died scared. I shook the thought away and inhaled. The boy had been dead awhile. Between the cold and the rain, most of the essence he recently had come in contact with had faded. What hit me immediately was troll. Trolls have a strong essence that lingers. They also stink. That lingers, too. The next strongest essence was human, but not the victim's. He had been with another human for an extended period before he died. To complicate matters, I picked up traces of two different elves and a fairy, all weak enough that I could not place the actual clans.

I told Murdock what I had found. "Our victim keeps very strange company."

"Well, it is the Weird," he said.

I stood up. "True. But you don't get elves and fairies hanging out together much. And everyone is creeped out by trolls."

“That’s Guild talk, Connor. Politics don’t mean shit down here.”

He had a point. Publicly, the Guild was all about fey crime investigation first, politics second. Operatively, it’s the other way around. It makes a show of unity between the fey races—druids and fairies, elves and dwarves all one big happy family. But underneath lies chronic suspicion of each other’s motives. It’s been going on for over a century. The Celtic and Teutonic races had a little war that got out of hand and somehow it caused the event known as Convergence. Modern reality found itself merged with parts of Faerie that it thought were just myth and legend. And the fight continues, sometimes physically, but mostly in boardrooms now.

Me, I couldn’t care less about Faerie. I was born here. I have no nostalgia for a place I’ve never known. While leaders of both sides talk about return, I’ll take this reality, thank you. Besides, I’ve asked people who would know, and there’s no Guinness in Faerie, so it couldn’t be that great.

“You’re right. But it still complicates things. He came in contact with two of the races that could have dropped him here. If I thought about it, I could probably come up with a way for an elf to do it, too. They’re pretty strong,” I said.

Murdock shrugged. “Hence, the job. We have some leads now. And unless this kid ends up being the son of the President of the United States, you know the Guild is not going to take the case. So it’s mine. Ours, if you want in.”

I didn't have to think about it. I hate unsolved kid murders, human or fey. "I'm in."

He turned his face to the sky. "What about this cold? It's only around here."

I had a little mind hiccup. Seeing Murdock check out the sky had me thinking for a moment that he could see the residual essence I was seeing, which wasn't possible for a human. Then I realized he was just doing what everyone does when they talk about the weather; they look up.

I scanned the strip of sky above us. The haze of essence covered the entire block we were on. "I'm curious about that myself. There's a residual haze of essence up there. Let's check it out."

I walked across the field with Murdock a step behind me. We crossed the street to an abandoned warehouse. Grabbing the end of a fire escape ladder, I gave it a hard tug. It clattered down to within a few feet of the pavement. I gave the metal rungs a good shake to make sure they'd stay attached. Even as I did it, I tried to understand my logic of possibly pulling a fire escape down on top of me being somehow safer than it collapsing under me. Fortunately, it held.

We jogged the six flights without speaking, our breaths streaking warm plumes into the cold air. Murdock and I work out often together. The fire escape was like doing the StairMaster, only colder and with more clothes. At the top, we used a vertical ladder to the roof. Actually, the remains of the

roof. Most of it had fallen in, creating an open crater of space with a lovely view of the rubble-strewn top floor.

The rising sun hit us full in the face, and I felt a surge of essence from Murdock. Even as I turned to look at him, it faded. As a human normal, Murdock's essence should register on the low end of the scale. A few months earlier, he had helped me accidentally save the world and caught a nasty blast from an insane fairy. Or elf. It's hard to describe. Anyway, since then his essence has been mucked up.

Everyone's essence is unique, like fingerprints, and the different species of fey resonate differently. Murdock's essence fluctuates throughout the day from normal to damn strong. What makes that odd is that usually only the fey have strong essence. Elves and fairies. Trolls and dwarves. Druids and the like. Yet, Murdock always feels human. He says he doesn't feel any different except for an occasional adrenaline surge. He's on outpatient from Avalon Memorial Hospital now. I'm no healer, but I had a sneaky suspicion they're as baffled as I am.

Above us, a streak of white haze marked a trail of essence. That's where the cold was coming from. Weather manipulation was probably as old as Faerie itself. Keeping crops growing, protecting livestock and clearing or clouding the skies for a battle were keen motivation for developing the ability. Boosting existing conditions was simple; Changing clear skies to rain was complex. The end result depends on the manipulator's level of skill and ability.

The after-effect of this particular manipulation was pedestrian in results but grand in execution. The ambient air temperature had been lowered below freezing, something that was fairly easy to do in early October near the open ocean because the air was already cold and changeable. The level of ability applied, however, was impressive. The haze was easily two or three blocks wide, nearly three-quarters of a mile long, and long lasting enough to freeze water. That took Power of the serious kind.

The northern edge of the haze, not far from where we stood near Old Northern Avenue, had begun to break up, indicating the effect was not being maintained. As it snaked southward, its density increased. At the far southern end, it appeared uniform. That told me that the spell had been initiated nearby and sent southward—first effects were the first to fade. Even as I watched, the spell eroded away from us.

“I doubt this is related, Murdock,” I said. “It’s a pretty powerful spell and looks like it had a defined purpose. I think the kid just happened to die here. Whoever has the ability to make this level of cold happen, probably has more creative ways to kill someone and hide the body.”

“And the powerful don’t really care what happens down here beneath them,” said Murdock.

I didn’t respond. I didn’t need to. That statement summarized an entire conversation for Murdock and me. He’s been on the police force a long time, long enough to get out of the Weird. I ended up living in it when I lost everything else, and it opened my eyes. No one cares about the Weird, at least

no one official. Sure, around election time politicians will give a nice little speech about making the place better and cleaning out the riff-raff. The only problem with that is most people outside the Weird consider everyone in it to be that riff-raff. Murdock and I know better. Lots of good people live down here, people who fell through the cracks of everywhere else. And, yeah, some of them are a little shady. But most of them are only trying to get by. They don't deserve to be ignored. A few nasties poke their heads up every once in a while. When they do, they find Murdock waiting to smack them down again. And if they're fey, I get to help.

"So, what do you know about gangs?" I asked.

Murdock shrugged. "Just the majors. The Sapiens. The TruKnights. HiFlys. A couple of others. I know mostly snitches. I don't keep close track of the rivalries unless it's related to a case I'm on. I've got good ties with the gang unit though. I'll check to see if yellow and black is a known xeno."

Xeno was the current catch-moniker for humans, mostly teenagers and early twenty-somethings, who don't like the fey and form a nice little social club whose entertainment involves harassment and, all too often, violence against the fey. The phrase itself doesn't make sense unless you knew it was evolved from "xenophobic gangs." Don't get me wrong—there are plenty of fey gangs, too, that technically meet the definition of xenophobic. But, they are seen as the minority and so their antagonists earned the xenophobic badge first.

I looked down at the field, then the surrounding area. "Do you know whose turf it is? Nothing's here but empty buildings."

I waited while Murdock flipped through his mental files. "Not sure. I don't think anybody's. It's elves to the south. Human and fairies along Oh No. I think this is a no man's land." Oh No was the local nickname for Old Northern Avenue. You hear the phrase used with everything from fear to laughter.

"If a gangbanger dies in an empty field and no one is around to hear it, is he a gangsta?" I said. Murdock didn't laugh. I wasn't really trying to be funny.

Murdock blew into his hands again. "I still don't like this cold. You know I like to rule out anomalies at crime scenes only for good reason. You're more likely to find out what it was for."

"Sure," I said. I had contacts that Murdock couldn't necessarily cultivate. For one thing, I was fey. While it doesn't always produce cooperation and honesty among the fey, simple psychology still applies. Like groups are more willing to extend trust to one of their own. I also lived right in the Weird, and people can tell. Places generate their own essence imprints, and if you stay in them long enough, you pick it up, too. Murdock smells like South Boston, not the Weird. That's not a criticism. It's like recognizing someone's accent. Whatever attributes you assign to that is your own prejudice.

The sun rose higher, and the temperature went up a little. The erosion of the weather spell seemed to increase. Interesting. That meant sunlight was meant to dissipate it. Whatever it was for, was for last night only.

“Looks like it’s going to be a nice day,” I said.

Murdock’s two-way radio squawked, then emitted a string of gibberish that pretended to be a woman speaking. Murdock cocked his head and lowered the volume. How cops understand those things is beyond me.

Murdock’s eyes flicked up to my face. “We’ve got another body.”

end of chapter one

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