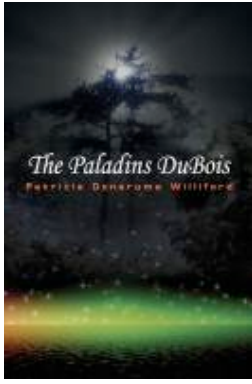




The Paladins DuBois

Patricia Donaruma Williford



Eighteen years after the infants Kai and Mahri DuBois were separated and taken from La Foret de Chenes for their own protection, they are called to return. Appointed as Paladins, they receive their first charges from the Elders. The twins must overcome the devastating act of treachery that tore their family apart, restore the integrity of the treasure they guard, and beat back the encroaching evil of La Famille DeMauvaise.

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First Edition

Mahri

“Auntie Lina! Auntie Lina! Where are you? You are not going to believe this! I have a job offer. Well maybe not an offer, but an interview...or something. I don’t know but...it’s in the forest...” The redheaded dervish of energy known as Mahri Woods spun through the house. “Auntie! Where are you?” Unable to find her aunt, Mahri dropped cross-legged onto the couch and examined the envelope. No return address, no postage, it was sealed with wax and stamped with an odd signet. *Caretaker? What could it mean?*

Her fascination for *La Forêt de Chênes* had often drawn her to the large bay window of her bedroom. But oddly enough, in spite of her curious nature and her aunt’s love of exploration, they had never ventured into the forest. In fact, the thought had never actually occurred to her until now. She tingled with a sense of anticipation as she read the brief contents again. Somehow, she felt that she had been waiting for this...summons? Maybe it would satisfy her ever-present, unshakable feeling that she had a missing piece.

Impulse rather than reflection being Mahri’s strong suit, she flew up to her room, threw a few things in her backpack, then left a message on her aunt’s voice mail explaining where she was going. Mahri couldn’t imagine that Lina, who had always encouraged her to embrace new experiences, would object. Besides, she would call her again when she arrived at the forest. Mahri wheeled her bike down the sidewalk and headed toward Oakenwood Road.

From her vantage point in the cupola of the rambling old Victorian house, Angelina followed Mahri’s progress as she cycled off toward the forest. She had raised Mahri, homeschooling her and providing an eclectic education which produced an inquisitive, imaginative, and capable young woman. For eighteen years, Lina had kept watch on *La Forêt de Chênes*. Last night, when she saw the first glimmer of the fireflies high above the trees, she knew the forest was calling, and it was time to move Mahri to her destiny. So, early this morning, she had placed the envelope in the mailbox for her niece to find. Her eyes filled

with tears. If all went as planned, it was likely that Mahri would find it hard to forgive her years of deceit.



Neither the symphony of forest sounds, nor the unfamiliarity of the comfortable bed awakened Kai. He slept the deep sleep of contentment until the early morning light peeked in through the window stirred him to consciousness. The boy reveled in the luxury of the down filled mattress, the soft sheets, the warm quilts, and a bed that was actually long enough to accommodate his frame. He stretched and let every part of his body relax before lazily opening one blue eye and then the other. Like the living room, the light green leaf and vine covered walls created a sense of serenity and oneness with the forest. Hidden under the leaves were tiny white blooms that lent a subtle scent of freshness. Kai marveled at how right it felt.

Piqued by curiosity, he got up, dressed, and went into the bathroom. Overhead, a skylight revealed a brilliant blue sky, and swaying branches indicated a slight wind. Looking at himself in the rose trimmed mirror, Kai discovered that he was inexplicably less dissatisfied than usual with his reflection.

There was no sign of O'Shaunessey in the kitchen, but a low fire still warmed the stove. Kai poured a cup of coffee from the pot steaming on the burner, piled the rest of last night's popovers on a plate, and took them to the table where he found a basket of fresh raspberries. After eating his fill, he poured another cup and went outside to enjoy the morning.

He paused on the landing, absorbing the beauty of the forest, letting the peace he felt seep into his lonely soul. The melody of bird songs was underscored by the breeze rustling through the leaves. He stepped into the yard and walked slowly around the cottage. Covered with blooming vines, it seemed so much a part of the forest that it was almost indistinguishable from its surroundings.

The fireflies fluttered and danced their way from flower to flower, leaf to leaf. Kai admired the diverse shades of browns and greens, from the old willows and oaks, to the slender birches, hickories, elms, maples and young saplings. Flowers grew with wild abandon in both

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shade and sun. A growing feeling of contentment was interrupted when that prickly feeling from yesterday crept up the back of his neck. Something seemed, not wrong, but *off* in some way.

Then it struck him. *The path!* The entrance to the path was nowhere to be seen.

More intrigued than disturbed, Kai spent the rest of the morning exploring the woods surrounding the cottage. Although he never did discover the beginning of the path, he gradually found himself able to differentiate the birds, the flowers and even the trees. He used the sun as his guide, but he didn't need to wait until it was directly overhead to tell him it was time for lunch. His stomach managed that job quite well.

Returning to the cottage, Kai opened the larder and found a loaf of fresh bread, jam, a crock of cream cheese, a bowl of fruit, and a pitcher of milk. He savored the pleasure of eating until he was full, and then washed his few dishes in the green leaf-shaped sink. Although he was impatient to discover the meaning of his invitation, he found himself enjoying the peace and quiet. Figuring that O'Shaunessey would return soon enough to offer some explanation and clarify his duties, he decided to relax and enjoy the first true vacation of his life. Taking a book from the bookshelf and a few molasses cookies that he hadn't seen earlier from the larder, Kai poured another glass of milk and went outside where he stretched out in one of the wicker lounges.

He knew he should feel more concerned about the strangeness of his situation, but he felt oddly at home in the forest. It was clear the McNairs were glad to see him leave, and he had no plan for his future. He might as well make himself comfortable while he waited for some explanation from the Irishman. Opening his book, Kai read and let his thoughts drift into pleasant daydreams.

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Mahri rode until she spotted a little used path, tangled with vines, marking an entrance. Chaining her wheel to a slender birch, she pulled out her phone to call her aunt. No signal. *Oh well, I'll try again later,* she thought slinging her pack over her shoulder and heading down the path, unaware that she was being watched from the high cab of a pickup truck parked up the hill and across the road.

The late afternoon sun beamed at Mahri as she entered the forest, belonging and joy so filled her soul that she danced along the trail. The songbirds called to her, and she picked up their tunes and warbled back. The brook gurgled a laughing sound, and she laughed in turn. She stopped often, to drink in both the beauty of her surroundings and the cool delicious water.

The path closed behind her, but she didn't notice. Convinced that once she arrived at her destination a marvelous purpose would be revealed, she cared little that she didn't know where or how far she had go. A sparkling rainbow of fireflies led the way, and the fact that she could see them during the day didn't seem odd to her at all. She heard them singing, "*You're here! You're here!*"

"I am! I am!" she sang back. She paused occasionally to embrace her surroundings, but she was so enlivened by her ebullience, she couldn't stop for long. She threw her arms in the air and spun around in circles feeling more alive than she had ever felt in her life.

Feeling that the old oaks were staring at her, Mahri gave them a wink, then giggled when she heard a low rumble resembling a chuckle. Unbothered, by the fact that the path was closing behind her and opening in front of her, she skipped on. Just as the sun touched the horizon, she felt a branch reach out and give her a quick push. She tumbled out of the forest and into the clearing.

Kai, who had been dozing in the lounge chair, jumped, startled by the intrusion. Mahri picked herself up, brushed off the bits and pieces of the forest clinging to her, then stuck out her hand and said with a grin, "Hi! I'm Mahri, reporting for consideration as a caretaker of the forest. Are you in charge? What do you need to know?"

Speechless, Kai stared at the girl who had just bounced up in front of him. Her red hair was tousled and filled with pieces of twigs and leaves. Cut in a chin length shag, it framed a heart shaped face and creamy skin that had a natural healthy glow. Her tie-dyed tee-shirt, yellow shorts, hot pink flip flops and bright blue toenails painted a petite riot of color. Sparkling green eyes pierced him as the questions tumbled out, "How do you know about me? What's the first order of business? Is there someplace I can wash up? Something smells good. I'm starved. Wow look at this place!" Mahri marveled as she eyed the



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cottage. “Amazing! It looks as if it grew here instead of being built. It’s like the cottage Snow White shared with dwarves, magical in a good way. Do you live here?”

The sound of silence caught her attention. “Well?” she pressed her question.

Kai’s jaw hung open. The whirlwind of questions caused his brain to reel so quickly he felt seasick. “I...I...I’m not in charge of anything. I’m here for the job, too.”

“Both of us? Do you think there’s more than one opening? Have you been interviewed? What kind of job is it?”

Since he didn’t know what to say or do, and he couldn’t keep up with the questions, he decided to listen to his stomach as opposed to the gibberish in his ears. “Why don’t you come in? Dinner should be about ready.” She was still buzzing with non-stop chatter, when he led her up the few steps and into the cozy room. As the door swung closed behind them, neither noticed the growing swell of fireflies gathering outside.

Mahri walked into the cottage slowly turning around to take it all in. The vine-covered walls took on a soft glow from the fireplace and lamps. Delicious smells rose from the pots on the stove. The table held a dinner setting for two. “Did you know I was coming?”

Kai shrugged his shoulders, “No, I didn’t. The house...it seems to anticipate what’s needed.”

Mahri, who had never been speechless in her life, did slow down a tick or two. “It’s enchanting,” she breathed.

“*Enchanted*, is more like it,” Kai replied dryly.

“Well, who are you? How did you come to be here? What’s this all about?”

Feeling bowled over by the barrage of questions, Kai rubbed his eyes and sank into a chair. “To be honest, I have no idea. Yesterday, my uncle gave me a letter that he had been told to give to me at my graduation. It invited me for consideration as a caretaker of the forest.”

“I got mine today!” Mahri, too excited to sit, rocked on her heels.

“It gave me instructions to pack a few things, come to the forest and find an entrance.”

“Me, too!”

“When I got here, a man, O’Shaunessey was his name, appeared and said he was expecting me.”

“What did he tell you?”

Kai ran his hands through his already unruly blond spikes. “That’s the funny thing. He did a lot of talking, but I can’t remember what he had to say. I’ve been trying to all day. The only thing I’m sure of is that he said he would be back. But, I haven’t seen him yet.”

“That’s strange. Let me see your letter!”

They pulled out their letters to compare. Identical seals, one was addressed to Kai Woods, the other to Mahri Woods.

Mahri’s jaw dropped, “How old are you?”

“Eighteen and a half.”

“When’s your birthday?” Mahri demanded.

Kai’s eyebrows furrowed, “December fifteenth.”

That brought Mahri to a halt. She dropped into the opposite chair. “Mine, too,” she whispered.

Both felt a clutch deep in their chests. Breath held, they met one another’s eyes.

“I’m an orphan,” they said, together. And together, they slowly exhaled.

Mahri said, “You first.”

“When I was six months old, I was left in a basket at the house of some distant relatives. They told me my parents were dead.”

“I’ve lived with my Aunt Lina since I was six months old. She told me my parents had disappeared in a boating accident.”

Mahri swung her green eyes up to meet his blue. They held each other’s gaze for a moment. A frisson of something... recognition?... affinity?...memory?...raced through them like an electric current.

“It’s like...” they blurted at the same time.

“As though...” again together.

“You...”

“No, you...”

“Could it be?”

“Is it possible?” Kai asked, his face contorted in bewilderment. “Brother and sister?”

Mirroring his confusion, Mahri countered, “Twins?”

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And even though they were as unlike in appearance as it seemed they were in temperament, the idea wasn't as preposterous as it should have been.

"It can't be, can it? But if it is...how could my aunt not know I was a twin?" Mahri's forehead wrinkled in puzzlement. "Why would she keep this from me? It doesn't make sense."

"My aunt and uncle never told me anything. Not even the name of the cousin who brought me to their door." Kai paused and combed his fingers through his hair. "What did your aunt tell you about your parents?"

Mahri suddenly realized how little Lina had told her, and how cleverly she had deflected her questions over the years. She answered slowly, turning the meager information over in her mind. "She told me that my mother was her younger sister, Jennvieve, my father was named Mackenzie, and they loved me dearly."

A spark of temper flared in her green eyes as the possibility... probability...dawned on her that her that her beloved aunt may have been keeping substantially soul shaking secrets from her. "Well, I'll just call her and see what she has to say about this," Mahri declared whipping out her phone.

"Good luck, no signal, in fact, no power."

Mahri's phone was, in truth, quite dead. She looked around for an outlet, but there were none to be found.

"No electricity. In fact, I'm not even sure there's a way out. The path itself seems to have disappeared."

That thought diverted her attention enough to slow her down. She cocked her head at him quizzically, "You don't seem to be especially bothered by it."

"Oddly enough, I'm not." His eyebrow and a shoulder lifted. "It's not as though I have anything else to do or anyplace to be. I've only been here since yesterday, but somehow it feels right. The cottage takes care of my needs. And even though I want some kind of explanation, it's peaceful here and I have a strange sense of..."

"...belonging," she finished.

They sat back and just stared at each other for a while. Confusion was replaced by a sense of wonder until the silence was finally broken

by the grumble of Kai's stomach, followed by the rumble of Mahri's. Tension broken, they got up laughing, "Come on. Let's see what's for supper while we try to sort this out," Kai said, curiously at ease for a young man who was so shy he could barely string three coherent words together when speaking to a girl.

Shy was never an adjective that had ever been applied to Mahri. As soon as she stood up, she started chattering, about the forest, the path, the trees, the stream, the fireflies. "Let me just wash up, before we eat."

Mahri was as enthralled by the bathroom as she was by the rest of the cottage. She washed her face in the petal shaped sink, and looked longingly toward the leaf curtained shower. When she returned to the living room, Kai was putting a fragrant cheese and broccoli quiche on the table.

"Did you make this?" Mahri asked.

Kai laughed, his brilliant blue eyes underscored by deep dimples, "I can barely make toast. Food just appears, but I haven't seen any meat yet."

"OK by me. Eat nothing with a face or feet is my motto." Throughout the meal they pondered the meaning of the letters, the questions of their connection, the possible duties of a caretaker, and the enchantment of the cottage. And while they were curious about the lack of cell service, electricity, or any apparent way to return through the forest, they weren't troubled by it. They talked until they nodded with exhaustion.

Yawning Kai said, "When O'Shaunessey shows up, we'll make it clear we want some answers."

Mahri nodded in heavy-eyed agreement, "Or maybe, we'll figure out a way to reach my aunt."

Kai stood up, "You take the bedroom. I'll sleep on the couch." He gestured to the back wall, and, to his amazement, spotted a door he had not seen before. It was identical to the arched wood paneled door to his room. He strode over, turned the handle, pushed, and was astonished to find another bedroom.

Mahri peered around his side, "Well, I guess the house is taking care of me, too." Bemused, they shrugged their shoulders, said goodnight, and settled into their respective rooms.

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Once Mahri cycled out of sight, Lina climbed down the narrow staircase to her bedroom. The rambling old Victorian house in West Williston sat on a bluff overlooking the cold waters of the North Atlantic. French doors in the kitchen opened onto a deck, where a set of wooden stairs led down to a dock that reached out into a small sheltered cove. The window in her room faced the sea not the forest, and she could hear the lonely call of the foghorns. Melancholy overcame her, as she allowed herself the exquisite torment of thinking of Shaun.

Angelina DuBois O'Shaunessey had locked her memories of her husband away in a chamber deep in the recesses of her heart. When she did crack open the door to peek in, she caught a glimpse of dancing eyes, or heard the hint of a brogue. More often, the door opened on its own, and the scent of him drifted by, tangy as the sea air that blew in from the cove. Lina opened a dresser drawer and pulled out a small velvet pouch. She untied the drawstring and shook it, letting a plain gold band fall into her palm. For the first time in eighteen years, she put on her wedding ring. *Shaun*. She lay down on her bed, their bed, and let her thoughts...both poignant and hopeful...drift.

Sometime after sunset, Lina woke with a start. Wandering into the kitchen, she poured herself a glass of wine, carried it into the living room, and sat cross-legged on the couch alone with her memories. She felt a prickle at the base of her neck as a shaft of light from the purple crystal on the fireplace spread across the room and crooked its finger at her. She was being called! The forest would open to her now! *Shaun!*

Springing from the couch, Lina ran upstairs and tossed some clothes into a bag. Her green flowered dress swirled around her legs as she fairly skipped out to the front porch, then closed and locked the door behind her. When she got to the road, Lina looked back fondly. She had enjoyed raising Mahri here. They had shared good times and been both safe and happy. Lina allowed herself to harbor the hope that the next time she saw her home, their home, her husband would be with her. She left the light on, just in case.



Moonlight reflected off the frame of Mahri's bike marking the head of the path. Waiting fireflies hovered at the forest's edge and beckoned to Lina as she approached. She stepped into the trees, took a deep breath, and whispered, "I'm back."

"*So glad. So glad. We missed you! We missed you!*" the little lights blinked their welcome.



Melisandra DuBois peered through a telescope positioned at the window of her penthouse. From her vantage point, she could see the city of *Bonchance* below her, but she was rarely interested in that sight. More often, she gazed into the distance to the forest that surrounded High Tor. For eighteen years, she had seen only the changes that were expected and seasonal. But tonight, when she stared through the lens, she caught a glimpse of the shimmer of fireflies. A shiver ran up her arms and down her spine. She blinked and bent to look again. Hearing the door open, she abruptly straightened, turned her back on the view, and smoothed her long sable hair.

The man who entered was extraordinarily handsome. Viktor Szeteras's thick black hair was shot through with a few silvery streaks giving him an air of intelligence and experience. He wasn't exactly a friend. Business partner, companion, occasional lover would be more accurate descriptions of his relationship to her. Tall, fit, and self-possessed, Szeteras had the bearing of an old world gentleman. Bowing slightly, he said, "Melisandra."

"You're late, Viktor," she snapped.

He was, in fact, early, but he saw no reason to contradict her. He did see, however, that something out of the ordinary had disturbed her. "Is all well?"

Deciding not to share what she had seen, she replied curtly, "Of course." She picked up her fur cape and swirled it around her shoulders. He swept in behind her and deftly settled it to perfection. She gave a tug on her elbow length black gloves as they left the penthouse. A limousine was waiting to take them to their casino, *Un*

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*Coup de Chance*, which provided her enough income to allow her to live in the style she felt she so richly deserved.

Melisandra embraced the darkness of the night. It suited her disposition and tastes.



“I’m really back,” Lina whispered again.

“We see. Welcome back, Angelina,” rumbled an old oak.

“Are they safe?”

“For now.”

“Will you let me go to them?”

“Not now.”

“Will you tell me...?”

“Not yet.” The dignified Elder moved aside and pointed a way down the path.

“But...” however, when Lina looked up again, the face of the tree was closed to her. Still, she reached out to stroke its bark. “Does he know I’m here?”

But there was no answer, and she knew there was no use trying to get another response. She picked up her bag and started down the darkened path. The glistening lights of the fireflies illuminated the way. Just as the midnight blue of the early edge of dawn appeared on the horizon, Lina reached a clearing. Overcome with fatigue, she curled up on the soft ground by the natural pool. Laying her head on her pack, she fell asleep to the steady sound of a waterfall nearby.



The wee hours of the morning have a quality all of their own, especially in the city. The scent of left-over romance mixes with desperation and the refuse of the night. Squalling cats climb over the fences, barrels, and dumpsters. Sirens, howling in the distance, accompany the sounds of low drifting jazz and diesel trucks making early morning deliveries.

Leaving *Un Coup de Chance*, Viktor held the car door for Melisandra. The usual diet of too many flutes of champagne, smoke-filled rooms, phony compliments and smart remarks had produced the

usual results. Bored, Melisandra was ready to go home. “Come up for a nightcap?”

As they walked out of the elevator into the penthouse, Melisandra dropped her wrap on the floor and strolled over to the telescope. Viktor turned on the light by the bar and poured them both a brandy. She took the glass from him, sipped, and bent to the eyepiece. After several minutes she murmured, “The fireflies are about. The children are either there or on their way.”

“Indeed,” Szeteras answered. Swirling the rich amber liquid, he stood staring out the window for a long while. Then, swallowing his brandy, he set his glass on the polished surface of the bar and let himself out. Melisandra never even turned around. That is until, she felt a cold caress slither its way up her spine to the nape of her neck. The crystal on the fireplace had let loose long purple fingers of light to creep across the room and clasp her in their icy grip.



“*Enfin.*” Auguste DeMauvaise stared at his computer screen, as Bernard, his oldest son, pointed to a small island east of Nova Scotia. “Finally.”

“*Ici,*” Bernard pointed. “It is called *L’Ile de Saule*. Settled in the mid-eighteenth century by *emmigrants* from France, England, Ireland, the timing is right. The Google Earth application responded to the power of *Le Noir*, and so I was able to program it to alert us should *un signe d’enchantement* arise. *Vois ici, les lucioles.*” Bernard zeroed in on the forest in the center of the island, and using the magnifying tool, they could see the fireflies flitting above the canopy. Guy DeMauvaise leaned across the desk for a better look.

“*Toujours une faiblesse.* This attachment to creatures was always a weakness. Now we will exploit it.” *Le Patriarch* DeMauvaise pierced his brother with a black eyed stare. “Guy, make arrangements. Leave in the morning.”

Guy nodded, his pernicious little eyes glinting behind his glasses.

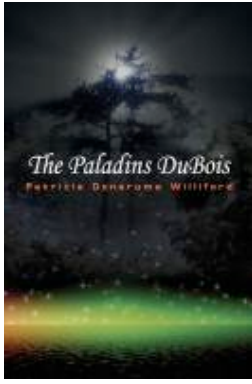
Looking back at the screen, Auguste stroked the hairless Peterbald cat, who paused from licking her barbed claws long enough to ask, “*La Rouge?*”



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*“Elle sera à nous très bientôt,”* Auguste murmured with a satisfied smirk. “She will be ours very soon.”

Sheera’s approving purr vibrated through the room like a death rattle.



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