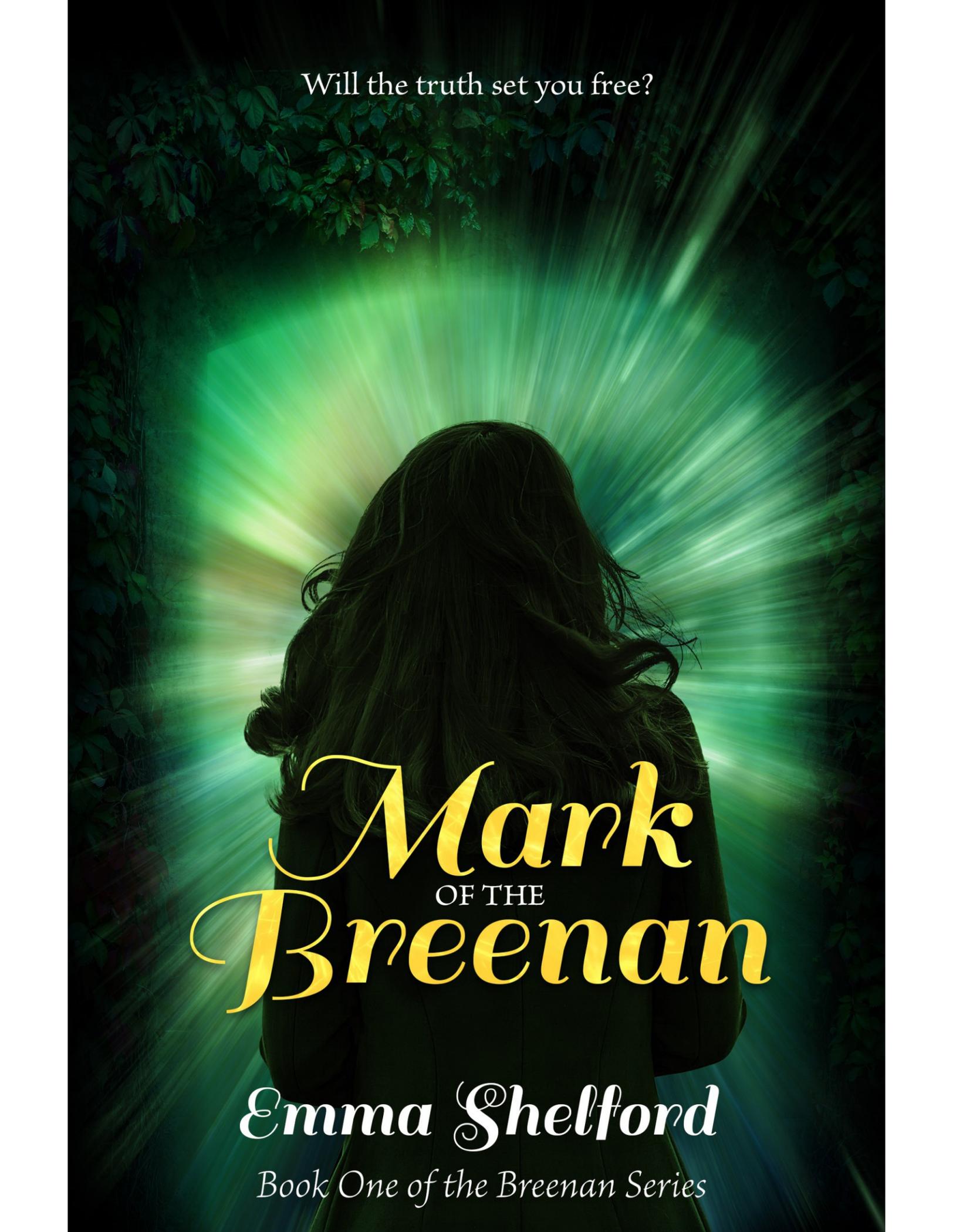


Will the truth set you free?



*Mark*  
OF THE  
*Breenan*

*Emma Shelford*

*Book One of the Breenan Series*

Mark  
of the  
Breenan

Emma Shelford

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MARK OF THE BREENAN

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First edition: October 2014  
ISBN: 978-1502318329

# Prologue

Gwen screamed, as loud and high as only a four-year old can.

“No! No, I don’t want to go!” Her breathing came quickly, in and out and in again. She wouldn’t go. She didn’t want to leave their house, her room with the pink hippos painted on the wall, the rope swing dangling from the apple tree in the backyard.

Her father sighed and knelt down to look into her tear-filled eyes.

“I’m sorry Gwennie, but we have to move. If we don’t, Daddy won’t have a job.” His voice became lighter, more joking. “If Daddy doesn’t have a job, all we’ll be able to eat is broccoli and brussels sprouts. That wouldn’t be very nice, would it?”

Gwen glared at him through narrowed eyes, her hands balled into fists and her body stiff. He couldn’t make her go. She squeezed out a few more words to make him understand.

“No. No. No. I won’t go.” She shut her eyes tight against the unfairness of it all. Her whole body started to shudder and something deep inside her belly began to get hot and wriggly.

“I know it’s hard, Gwennie, but sometimes life is mean like that.” Her father put his hand on her shoulder. “You’ll like Vancouver, I promise.”

Gwen’s body was tight and hot. The warmth in her middle was spreading, the heat flowing into her legs and arms and up her neck. Her cheeks were hot and flushed like she’d just run back from the corner store. Something began to rattle noisily behind her father, but she ignored it. Nothing mattered except making her father understand that they couldn’t leave.

“What the…” her father said incredulously.

Gwen couldn’t contain herself any longer. She opened her mouth and a huge release of a scream ripped out of her chest. The heat flowed out and away from her body in a great wave.

There was a shattering explosion behind her father. Gwen's eyes popped open in shock as her father turned back to face her. His face dripped with black ink, but between dark streaks his skin was bloodless white. His wide eyes looked at her with a wariness tinged by fear.

Gwen's lip trembled. What had just happened? Had she made her artist father's ink bottle explode? She had. It was her fault. She was just so angry. She didn't feel that way anymore. Her body was cool and calm now, the extraordinary heat of the previous moment extinguished.

She hadn't meant to hurt her daddy. Her eyes filled with tears and she blinked quickly as her lip quivered. She stepped forward.

"I'm sorry, Daddy," she sobbed. Her father quickly dropped to his knees and put his arms around her. She shook in his embrace and he kissed the top of her head.

She pulled back, sniffing.

"We can go to Vancouver. I don't mind." She bit her bottom lip as she looked around the room at the destruction, ink splatters covering the walls and ceiling in a mockery of wallpaper. "I don't mind anymore."

# Chapter 1

*Bzzzzt.*

Eighteen year-old Gwen Cooper twitched out of a daydream from the vibration of her phone. She glanced around at her university classmates, all either staring vacantly toward the front or scribbling notes. The professor had her back to the class, focused on keeping her laser pointer steady on the screen above. Gwen slid her hand into her jeans pocket and wiggled the phone free. A text waited from her best friend Ellie Brown.

*I have an adventure for us. You ARE coming.*

Gwen smiled wryly. Ellie was always hatching up crazy plans, like the time she wanted Gwen to join her in a hot yoga-polar bear swim combo class. She texted back.

*What is it THIS time? ;)*

*We're going to ENGLAND. To live in a CASTLE. For a whole MONTH.*

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“We are *absolutely* going.” Ellie slurped her pop with enthusiasm, her blond braid quivering as she wriggled in her chair.

“I’m not signing up for anything without more info.” Gwen took a resolute bite of her tuna sandwich. The cafeteria buzzed around them with the hungry hum of undergrads. Gwen and Ellie had managed to snag a table as another group was leaving, Ellie swooping in front of some unfortunate dawdlers as Gwen bent her head and slipped into a chair, avoiding the eyes of the slow students.

“It’s a proper university, we take courses and get credits and everything,” Ellie said. “So we can just use the credits as electives. It’s all focused on British stuff. Art history, English lit, as long as it has a British theme.” She waved her hand in the air. “And did I mention it’s in a castle? In England?”

She put her hands flat on the table, imitating the voice of a pompous psychology professor they often mocked. “This is an incredible opportunity to immerse ourselves in our studies, Gwendolyn.”

Gwen laughed and took another bite of her sandwich.

“You just want to go because you’re into everything medieval. How old is the castle?”

“It was built in fourteen fifty-three,” Ellie said in an awestruck tone. “But seriously, it’d be so cool. Check out the website later.” She tugged a pamphlet out of her backpack and shoved it across the table. “What do you think?”

Gwen was tempted. The classes did look interesting, and she hadn’t started looking for a summer job yet. Her stomach gave a little twinge of excitement as she skimmed the pamphlet—it was filled with glossy photos of green pastures and crumbling castles. She’d never done much traveling. The thought of a trip abroad both excited her and made her nervous. Her stomach lurched again as she thought of another reason to go to England, one she didn’t bring up with Ellie. She took her time over the pamphlet, sensing Ellie wriggling with impatience across the table. She hid a smile.

“One last, very important point.” Ellie leaned forward toward Gwen, her index finger tapping the point home on the table. “British boys.” She leaned back as if she’d given irrefutable evidence at a trial.

Gwen couldn’t help laughing aloud at this.

“Oh, Ellie. You’re such a sucker for an accent.” Ellie stuck her tongue out at her. Gwen grinned and looked down at the pamphlet again. “Wait a minute—it’s all of May. You’re going to miss the Renaissance fair. You love the Renaissance fair. How will you deal?” She raised an eyebrow.

“But this is like all Renaissance fairs at once!” Ellie bounced in her seat.

“But wasn’t your medieval dance troupe giving a demonstration this year?” Gwen raised an incredulous eyebrow at Ellie. “You’ve been practicing like crazy, on top of all your other dance classes.”

As she always did, Ellie said, “You should totally join one my classes. It’s so much fun.” Gwen bit her apple without looking at Ellie, and Ellie sighed dramatically. “Fine, miss out on all the action. One day you’ll stop caring about looking silly and just have a good time. I know it.” She looked out the window for a moment, and said tentatively, “You know, it might be nice to see where you were born. Maybe you could find some relatives there or

something.”

Gwen swallowed the last of her apple, avoiding Ellie’s eyes.

“Yeah, I thought of that.”

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The elevator wheezed and trundled up to the eleventh floor apartment Gwen shared with her artist father, Alan Cooper. The mirrored wall across from Gwen reflected mid-length black hair whose soft waves contrasted with the sharp planes of her face. Gwen wasn’t conventionally attractive. But her face was so distinctive, all angles and high cheekbones and sharp lines, that it warranted a second look. Hazel-green eyes, usually lively and quizzical, gazed vaguely as Gwen’s thoughts strayed to Ellie’s castle abroad.

Gwen snapped to attention as the elevator creaked open. She shifted her backpack to one shoulder as she dug for keys in her raincoat pocket. She fitted the key into the lock, brushing her left hand over the doorframe’s peeling paint as she entered the apartment. Throwing her keys on the carpeted floor in the entryway, she shrugged out of her coat and backpack, calling out a greeting.

“Hello?”

“In the studio,” a voice replied a few beats later. Gwen smiled. Her father was in the middle of a project and his concentration was legendary. She walked through the kitchen, grabbing a banana on the way, and leaned against the doorway of her father’s ‘studio.’ The apartment they shared had only two bedrooms, so the studio did double duty. The wall to the left of the window housed a narrow bed and was plastered with sketches and watercolors depicting scenes of nature and landscapes, although these were liberally interspersed with images of Gwen. The right-hand wall was a pure, unblemished white. Gwen’s father said he was inspired by both walls, “One for ideas, one for peace. Chaos and calm in equal measure. That’s what creates magic.”

Gwen watched her father smear a mossy green over a canvas with sure strokes.

“Do you think the landlord will ever paint our hallway?” she asked casually. “He said he’d do it three months ago.”

“Oh, maybe someday. But putting up with him is how we get such low

rent, right downtown. And can you beat the view?" He swept his paintbrush majestically toward the wall of windows. The setting sun glinted off a nearby skyscraper, highlighting the deep green of Stanley Park and glittering off the ocean beyond which was uncommonly still for January.

Gwen laughed and took a bite of her banana.

"Fair enough," she said between chews.

"So, what'd you learn today?" Her father peered at her over his glasses. His kind, cheerful face tried to look stern and professorial, but laughing brown eyes softened the expression.

Gwen was ready for his question.

"There's a castle, in England."

"Indeed, there are many." Her father raised an eyebrow.

"Let me finish!" She reached forward and swatted his arm. "Ellie wants to go. It's a one month program where you go live in a castle and take classes for credit. It's affiliated with the university here." She bit her lip. "I think there are scholarships if you're accepted in."

"So, back to the old country. I never took you, did I?" He swiveled side to side on his stool. "I think it's high time. So Ellie wants to go. Do you want to?" He gazed at her searchingly.

Gwen looked out the window, considering.

"Actually, yes. The courses sound good, and I'd like to see the country where I was born. And of course Ellie needs someone to look after her." Gwen didn't add the final reason, the most important of all.

Her father laughed, a nice deep one from the belly.

"She sure does." He swiveled again. "Well, if it's what you want, I'm all for it. Try for the scholarship, but we'll make it work no matter what." He raised an arm, and Gwen hugged him close.

"Your paint's drying," she said.

"Darn. Oh well. Pizza tonight?"

"I'll go call it in," she said, kissing the top of his head.

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Gwen's father was still painting when the pizza arrived, so Gwen delivered a few pieces to the studio, grabbed her own, and flopped onto the couch on her stomach. She flipped her laptop open and booted up, glancing at

the studio door. There was no sign of her father, except for the occasional squeak of his swivel stool. She typed in the web address of the British census from memory. In the box labelled *Given Name* she typed ‘Isolde,’ and ‘1960-1975’ in the date of birth. She hit enter. A long list of hyperlinked names appeared on the screen, half of the links on the first page already purple with previous clicks. She selected the next on the list, an ‘Isolde Smith.’ Results flashed onto the screen.

*Isolde Smith*

*Born August 25<sup>th</sup>, 1961*

*Emigrated to United States of America 1976*

This one had moved out of the country at age fifteen. Gwen tried the next name.

*Isolde O’Connor*

*Born May 13<sup>th</sup>, 1968*

This one looked promising. Isolde O’Connor was the same age as her father and had lived in Cambridgeshire the year Gwen was born, eighteen years ago. She still lived there now. Gwen opened a search engine and typed ‘Isolde O’Connor Cambridgeshire.’ She reached into the backpack at her side and carefully pulled out a folded piece of paper, opening it gingerly and smoothing out the well-worn creases. A woman’s face appeared, sketched in pencil. She was exotically beautiful, with wavy dark hair cascading past the edge of the image. Her large eyes gazed out of the page, sultry and confident. Her pointed chin was raised in pride and self-awareness of her beauty. In her father’s loopy hand on the bottom right was written ‘Isolde.’

Gwen propped the paper up beside her laptop screen and pulled up image results for her search. Twelve pictures of the same woman appeared, grinning and apple cheeked, blond but greying hair piled on top of her head in a loose bun. The rest were unrelated photos. Gwen’s shoulders slumped resignedly.

“Oh, love. Are you still trying to find your mother?”

Gwen jumped and turned to see her father behind her. She realized belatedly that the squeaking of his chair had ceased minutes ago.

“I just thought—if I actually go to England...” Her voice faltered. She turned back and stared into the eyes of the portrait. Her father sighed and sat down on the couch beside her.

“Scooch a little. We’ve looked before and found nothing. I doubt she

would have appeared since.”

“I know.” Gwen leaned her head into her arms. “I just thought I’d try.”

Her father rubbed her back in slow comforting circles.

“I’m sorry I don’t know more. She wasn’t very forthcoming, and I didn’t know you’d be arriving on my doorstep nine months later, needing answers.”

“Tell me again how you two met,” she said into the couch.

“Well now,” he said, leaning back. She wriggled to accommodate him. “I was doing a ‘grand tour’ of Europe, as I liked to call it, off traveling while more diligent and responsible friends worked. It was just me, my backpack, and an entire continent’s worth of art at my fingertips. England was on the list, of course, because I had my Auntie Ada to visit. I’d run out of money by the time I hit Cambridge, so I got a job sweeping out a bakery that Auntie Ada’s friend owned.

“One day, when it was actually clear for once instead of all the endless rain, I snuck away from my sweeping and took my sketchpad for a walk. I wanted to capture the lush greenery and rolling fields that folk in the town seemed to take for granted.”

“Enough about art, Dad. When did you meet my mother?” Gwen nudged her father with her knee.

“I’m telling the story, impatient one. Well, as I tried to figure out the best way to capture the mist and fog, I heard a voice behind me.

“‘You have a talent for art,’ it said. I whirled around and saw the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen. Her face and form were flawless, pale skin against perfect red lips. She had on a green swirling cloud of a dress. Even now I’ve never seen fabric like it. It was an old-fashioned dress that fell to the ground, with ribbons and laces and huge floating sleeves. She had spring flowers entwined in her hair, and somehow the petals floated down, even though the flowers stayed whole. I was young and didn’t know what to say, although I imagine I’d still be speechless now. My first thought was, ‘If I could capture her likeness on canvas, I’d consider myself a true artist.’

“She asked me to come with her, and it would have been a stronger and more foolish man than me to say no. She led me to a clearing in the woods where there was a pavilion, with food and drink, velvet pillows, the whole works. I stayed with her for seven days, not thinking even once about Auntie Ada worrying, just blissfully happy and falling deeply in love. On the eighth morning I awoke shivering, alone and naked in the middle of the clearing.

Everything had vanished—plates, pillows, everything. And *she* was gone, taking a piece of me with her.

“I stumbled down to my aunt’s house in the village, naked as the day I was born. Aunty Ada was absolutely speechless when she saw me.”

“What did Isolde tell you about herself?” Gwen knew the answer, but this was her role in the story that her father had told her since she was a little girl.

“Only that her name was Isolde, and that she lived nearby, but too far away for me to imagine. She tended to speak in riddles. I didn’t mind. It just made her more mysterious.” He gazed out the window for a moment. “I wandered the hills for weeks after that, looking for her. Eventually I gave up—if she were still around, she obviously didn’t want to be found. I left Cambridge with a bruised heart. Months later, I called Aunty Ada from a flea-bitten hostel in Vienna. She was frantic, saying a baby had arrived on her doorstep overnight. The baby had a piece of paper tucked into its blankets, a sketch that looked like mine, she said. I was confused, but agreed to travel to Cambridge right away to help. She showed me the sketch when I arrived. It was a portrait of Isolde that I’d drawn and given to her during our week together. I knew then that the baby was mine. Isolde had left me a perfect little creature, the creation of our magical time together. I don’t know why she left you there, but I’m so glad she did. I can’t imagine my life without you.” He leaned over and kissed Gwen’s cheek.

Gwen kissed his cheek in return, and he closed the laptop lid.

“I hate to see you on such a fruitless errand. If you do go to England, promise me you’ll enjoy yourself and not spend too much time chasing phantoms.”

Gwen sighed.

“I promise. It’d still be nice to see where I was born, though.”

Her father heaved himself off the couch with a grunt.

“Well, it’s a beautiful country. I don’t think you’ll be disappointed.” He moved into the kitchen. “Where’s that pizza she ordered?” he muttered.

“I brought it into the studio for you! Honestly, Dad, open your eyes.” She rolled her own at him as he made his way to his room. She opened the laptop, stared at the browser screen for a few moments, and then resolutely closed the window. The sketch, however, she carefully folded and tucked into a side pouch of her backpack.

## Chapter 2

Three months later, Gwen and Ellie stared up at a castle. It squatted heavily on a small rise, surrounded by a deep ditch filled with water in which two swans floated languidly. A gravel drive wound sinuously up to a bridge crossing the moat. A copse of trees lined the edge of a brilliant green lawn and disappeared from sight behind the castle.

Ellie's face glowed with a happiness that approached awe.

"This is amazing."

Gwen couldn't help herself. She started laughing.

"This is literally your dream come true, isn't it?" She grabbed Ellie by the crook of her arm and pulled her down the drive, their wheeled suitcases dragging and making crunching noises against the gravel.

Inside the massive wooden doors was a whirlwind of luggage and bodies. Gwen and Ellie were quickly herded into a reception area by a friendly but harried woman, where they registered and received their room assignment.

Gwen looked incredulously at the paper she clutched in her hand.

"They gave us a map of the castle. This place is so big we need a *map*."

"Isn't it gorgeous? Here, let's take these stairs. Spiral stairs are the best." Ellie ran toward a doorway in the vast stone wall nearby, her suitcase bouncing behind her. Dim light from a tiny slit window illuminated a narrow spiral staircase winding upward.

Gwen consulted her map four floors later, her breath coming in short pants.

"I shouldn't have packed so much." She called forward to Ellie, "I blame the weight of my bag on you."

Ellie was already halfway down a hallway, her own map dangling from her hand.

"You'll thank me later when you can dress for any occasion." Ellie started

reading the placards that hung from the numerous doors lining the hallway.

“The Silver Room, the Velvet Room—ooo, I bet that one’s nice—the Amber Room, the Green Room! Here’s ours.” Ellie pushed open a heavy door on the left side of the hall. Gwen hurried forward, anxious despite herself to see their new home for the next month. She reminded herself not to get too excited. Already her breath came more quickly than was sensible. She had to let Ellie express enough enthusiasm for both of them—Gwen couldn’t afford to lose control. Luckily, Ellie was excellent at expressing herself.

“Oh Gwen, it’s perfect!”

Gwen rounded the corner. Her eyes were instantly distracted by an excessive amount of green. The bedspreads were a rich forest green, green brocade curtains draped over deep recessed windows, and even a painting suspended on the stone wall beside the dresser was a tasteful nature scene with a prominent green willow dominating the frame.

Ellie dropped her bag and leapt onto the nearest bed. Her ecstatic expression became slightly marred by a hint of disappointment. She turned to Gwen, and spoke in a tone of someone presenting unwelcome news.

“It’s a modern bed.” Ellie patted the offending piece of furniture. “I thought it might be straw. More authentic, you know.”

Gwen started to laugh.

“Seriously? You’re staying in a medieval castle, in England, and that’s not enough?”

Ellie joined her in laughing, and for a while they couldn’t stop.

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“What do you think?” Ellie’s eyes were wide with excitement, her shining face waiting for Gwen’s reaction. “For the fancy dress ball later this month.”

In her hands she held out a long dress, slightly wrinkled from its cross-Atlantic journey in a suitcase. Gwen thought that ‘gown’ might be a more appropriate term for the garment. It had a crushed green velvet overdress, with a lace bodice and huge trailing sleeves. The dropped neckline sported lace that sparkled with fake diamonds. It was a perfect medieval dress.

Gwen’s chin dropped.

“You have got to be joking.”

“You don’t like it? I made it for you. It should fit.” Ellie swished the skirt

back and forth.

“It’s incredible, Ellie. You’ve outdone yourself as usual. But can you really imagine me waltzing around in it?” Gwen shuddered as visions of the spectacle she’d make of herself blossomed before her eyes.

“Yes! You’ll be perfect in it. Honestly, Gwen, you’ve got to let your hair down sometime.” Ellie held the dress up to Gwen, and pulled at a lock of Gwen’s hair. “You should totally dye a piece of your hair green to match.” She grinned wickedly. “Show a bit of your rebellious side. If you have one.”

Gwen rolled her eyes.

“For the last time, I am not dying my hair.” She turned with an air of finality to her own suitcase and continued her interrupted unpacking.

Ellie tossed the dress on Gwen’s bed and flopped onto her own with a dramatic sigh.

“Isn’t it all so perfect? I can’t believe we’re in England. In a castle. I’m going to explode from excitement.”

Gwen picked up her dress.

“Well, don’t explode over your handiwork.” She carefully hung the dress in an enormous wardrobe beside the door. “How am I supposed to wear it with Ellie guts all down the front?”

Ellie smiled smugly.

“I knew you’d come around. And I didn’t even have to guilt-trip, much.”

Gwen smacked Ellie’s ankles, the closest part of Ellie she could reach.

“Come on, let’s go explore before dinner. Dinner,” she added significantly, “in a *great hall*.”

Ellie leapt up.

“I love this place!”

Gwen laughed and pushed her out the door.

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Gwen and Ellie wandered through the wrought-iron gates of the castle, scuffing their shoes in the gravel drive and turning onto a narrow lane bordered by short stone walls. They reached a fork in the road.

“Left or right?” Ellie asked.

Gwen looked to the left. The road passed between large poplars and disappeared round a bend. Beyond, she knew, lay the village of Amberlaine,

which they had passed through on their way to the castle a few hours before. To the right the road led straight up a shallow hill, lined by houses. A strange sensation started tingling in her chest. She took it for curiosity.

“Right. We can explore the village later.”

They strolled beside the road, laughing and chatting. Squat cottages tucked into hollows in the hill emanated quaint comfort. Some even had chickens pecking near the front stoop, like an idyllic setting for a glossy magazine called *Rural Chic* or *Modern Cottage*. Gwen had a sudden fantasy of turning into one of the driveways, maybe the one on the left with the purple door, and having her mother open it. She’d say, ‘Oh, Gwen, I’ve been waiting for you for so long,’ and open her arms wide for Gwen to fall into them. Gwen could imagine her cheek brushing against wavy hair scented with flowery shampoo.

The purple door Gwen had been gazing at opened. A dark haired woman stepped out, face shaded with a hand against the afternoon sun. Gwen’s heart leapt then throbbed with longing. Her breath came quicker and quicker. Ellie gasped beside her.

“What’s happening to your hands?” Ellie grabbed Gwen’s wrists and turned them face up. Small flickers of blue flames danced across her palms and up her fingers. Gwen stared in horror then took a deep breath to calm herself. The flames dimmed and died. Ellie let go of Gwen’s right wrist and touched Gwen’s left palm gingerly.

“Are—are you all right?” She flipped Gwen’s hand and looked at the back. Gwen extracted herself from Ellie’s grip, avoiding her gaze.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” She made a show of wiping her palms on her jeans. “That was weird. Maybe there’s a storm coming. Lots of static charge in the air.” Ellie looked at her, and Gwen was aware of how flimsy the excuse sounded. “You know, like that St Elmo’s fire old sailors saw on the rigging during a storm?”

“Maybe.” Ellie sounded unconvinced. “You’re sure you’re okay? Because that was really weird.”

“I’m good, I promise.” Suddenly remembering the woman with the purple door, Gwen snapped her head around to look. The woman was feeding the chickens, but now her face was visible. The woman looked nothing like the sketch of her mother. Gwen shook her head inwardly. She’d let her emotions get the better of her. She couldn’t afford to lose control like that again, not in front of Ellie. Only her father knew about her strangeness, and that was more

than enough. A memory surfaced from the last time she had lost control fully, before she'd learned to rein in her peculiarities. She had been eight, and Janelle was the lady who cared for her after school, back when her father had an office job to pay the bills. Janelle was the one who painted her toenails in every color of the rainbow, who taught her how to make chocolate chip cookies and who poured the milk Gwen dipped them in, who hugged her close when she scraped her knee in the park. And then one day Janelle had left, and that evening Gwen's sobs shook the little apartment, draining water from every tap no matter how tight her father twisted the knobs. After that night, staring in horror at the endless running water, seeing her father's face swim before her teary eyes, wary and afraid—she had vowed to herself that she would never let the strangeness out again. She couldn't afford to let it happen. Ellie was her best friend, but would their friendship be able to withstand that test? Gwen didn't want to find out.

“Come on, let's keep going.” Gwen linked her arm with Ellie's, and together they set out again. Gwen carefully kept her eyes away from the woman with the purple door.

They rounded a bend. On the right, a path opened into the woods marked with a sign stating, ‘Glengarry Barrow, ½ mile.’

“What do you think? You game?” Gwen turned to Ellie whose eyes gleamed with excitement.

“A real barrow? Of course I'm game.” Ellie bounded toward the path. Gwen followed then stopped, rubbing her chest. The tingling was still there, stronger than before. She took another deep breath to calm herself just in case, although she didn't feel in danger of releasing fire or explosions or whatever else her body wanted to throw her way.

“Come on, Gwen! What are you waiting for?” Ellie's disembodied voice floated back to her.

“Coming!” Gwen called back. She squared her shoulders and started walking.

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“Wow. Isn't it amazing?” Ellie's large eyes were even wider with wonder as she gazed at the barrow.

“It's a hill. A little green hill.” Gwen was less than impressed. The hill,

thirty feet across and twenty feet high, sat on a grassy plain with the hedgerow of a farmer's field on one side and a grove of poplars on the other. It was an unremarkable sight. "Is this really what we came to see?"

"Oh, Gwen!" Ellie wailed in dismay. "Use your imagination! Do you even know what a barrow is?"

"Um, no," Gwen admitted. "All this history stuff is more your thing. What's a barrow, then?" Gwen asked less with interest and more with the hope that Ellie would distract her from the tingling, which had spread from her chest into her arms and torso. She tried to ignore it.

"A barrow is an ancient burial mound, Bronze Age or something. I don't think archaeologists really know all that much about them. There are lots of legends about them and the *aes sidhe*, though."

"Excuse me? The 'ais sheth-uh' who?"

"The *aes sidhe*. Faeries to uneducated heathens like you." Gwen stuck her tongue out at Ellie. Ellie continued, serenely ignoring the gesture. "Also known as elves, the good folk, or the people of the barrows. Apparently they live in another world that you can get to through the barrows. There are lots of stories of poets and bards being lured by faeries into their world."

"Huh." Gwen looked at the grassy knoll with new interest. She wondered how much her father knew about faeries. She bet he'd love to hear about the similarities between these legends and his own story about meeting her mother. "So, is there a door into this thing?"

Ellie gasped and grabbed Gwen's hand.

"Let's find out!" She started dragging Gwen around the barrow. The tingling in Gwen's chest grew stronger as they rounded the other side. The setting sun bathed the whole western slope of the barrow in a brilliant orange glow, except for a deep gash in the middle. The excess of light only highlighted the profound blackness of the entryway. Both girls' jaws dropped as an empty silence blanketed the slope. Gwen's tingling reached full body proportions, and she started to shake.

"Let's go," she whispered. She tugged Ellie's jacket sleeve. Ellie backed away slowly from the doorway, her eyes fixed on it. Then she shrieked and grabbed Gwen's arm, and they fled in panic from the silent barrow.

## Chapter 3

Gwen and Ellie careened onto the road, gasping for air. Ellie burst into semi-hysterical laughter.

“What the hell just happened? Are we really such wusses?” She clutched a tree for support, doubled over with laughing.

Gwen joined in, her body still shaking from adrenaline. What had just happened? Why had she felt that strange connection between her and the barrow? Unease settled over her like a damp blanket.

Ellie finally stood upright.

“Whew, that was crazy. I haven’t got that freaked out since we went to that stupid haunted house at the fall fair. We are such suckers for spookiness.”

“Did you feel the tingling when we got close to the barrow?” Gwen dusted off dead leaves that clung to her jeans, trying to stay casual. “It felt really weird.”

“Tingling?” Ellie looked at Gwen with concern. “No, it was just creepy. You know, like a ghost was going to pop out and say BOO!” She stepped toward Gwen and put a hand on Gwen’s forehead, smiling slightly. “Are you feeling okay?”

Gwen batted Ellie’s hand away, forcing a smile. “I’m fine. I think we need a pick-me-up, though. Banish the ghouls. Let’s see if there’s anywhere to get a drink in the village.”

They wandered back down the road, past the house with the purple door—the woman was nowhere in sight—beyond the imposing stone pillars of the castle gate, and down the hill to the village. Gwen tried to shake her disquiet while Ellie chatted happily, appearing to feel nothing beyond a momentary fright. Gwen wondered if the tingling had something to do with her strangeness. After her slip-up on the road, anything was possible. And now

Ellie's stories of faerie mounds felt a little too real—what had *really* happened that week her father met her mother?

The village of Amberlaine appeared, compact and snug in the twilight. They strolled past cottages and shops. A hanging sign, motionless in the calm evening, read 'The Green Man.' A carved likeness of a strange, wild man with leaves curling around his face rested above the lettering. Dimly-lit windows were too foggy to see through, but a hum of lively chatter drifted out the half-open door.

"This looks like the place to be," Ellie said. She turned to Gwen. "Thirsty?"

"I don't know," Gwen said with trepidation. "I was thinking of a café."

"This is England, silly. It's all about pubs here." Ellie grabbed Gwen's elbow and marched her to the door. "It'll be fun."

Ellie strode confidently to the bar like a regular, Gwen awkwardly trailing behind her. Ellie rested her forearms on the well-worn counter and leaned in, smiling. Gwen shuffled close to Ellie, half-turned from the counter to surreptitiously scan the pub's clientele. There were a number of students she recognized from the castle's reception area, two of whom waved at Gwen when they caught her eye. She gave a small wave back. The rest were mostly young, likely students from nearby Cambridge, with one group of middle-aged men clearly reliving their student days.

The bartender approached the two girls with an easy grin. He was about their own age with a shocking head of messy red hair, a pointed chin and nose, and high, sharp cheekbones. Bright green eyes twinkled under eyebrows that looked on fire. He distinctly reminded Gwen of a fox.

"Hello, loves. Wait, I always guess what my patrons want. You," he said, pointing his finger at Ellie and making a show out of screwing up his face in concentration. "You—want a single-malt whiskey, on the rocks. A double. And you," he pointed to Gwen, "definitely a port. Or is it a sherry?"

Gwen snorted and Ellie gave a peal of laughter.

"Hardly! I want something sweet. The fruitier, the better. Anything with a little umbrella," Ellie added, giggling.

"You think this is a beach resort, do you?" the bartender said, grinning. "I'm sure I'll find something to suit. And yourself?" He directed this at Gwen. "Did I also mistake you for an old professor?"

Gwen blushed at the attention.

“Whatever you have on tap is fine.”

He smiled mischievously.

“My choice? Don’t worry, I won’t pour you a Guinness.” He winked and strode off to the taps at the other end of the bar. Ellie looked at him, and back at Gwen’s profile as she looked out into the pub.

“That’s so weird. You and the bartender totally have the same look. Maybe he’s from the same part of England your mum is from.” Ellie knew all about Gwen’s unusual birth circumstances.

Gwen eyed him with renewed interest, and then turned to Ellie. “What do you mean, the same look? I don’t look like I’m on fire, thanks very much.”

“No, no, you know, your face, your features. You’re both all pointy and sharp. You know how great you look in photos, all cheek-boney and dramatic.”

“What do you know about sharp, little Miss Apple Cheeks? You and your trustworthy face, all round and innocent.”

“Little do they know, eh?” Ellie giggled.

The bartender came back carrying their drinks.

“There we are, señorita,” he said, placing Ellie’s drink in front of her with a flourish. He’d somehow fashioned a perfect little umbrella out of newsprint and a toothpick, and it rested on top of a ruby red drink. Gwen smiled and Ellie gave a delighted giggle.

“Oh, it’s perfect!” She beamed at the bartender, who grinned.

“How on earth did you make that so quickly?” Gwen plucked the umbrella out of Ellie’s drink and examined it, marveling.

“It’s magic. I’m a magician, of course. Day job. Not that it pays enough to give up my night job, but there you are.” He studied her face as she examined the umbrella. Gwen caught his eye and blushed, putting the umbrella back fussily to cover her embarrassment. The bartender placed another drink in front of her.

“And for you, our special ale tonight, brewed with bilberries.”

“Thanks.” To fill the awkwardness, she said, “What’s a bilberry?” She busied herself taking a sip. It was actually quite pleasant.

“They grow in the forest, they’re small and purple—I think they’re related to blueberries?” He cocked his head to the side in question.

“Oh! Well, then maybe I should drink more, to help me remember my classes tomorrow. Blueberries are good for the memory, you know. Not that I

have problems with my memory, but, you know, never too much of a good thing!” Gwen snapped her mouth shut, horrified at her babbling, and took another sip. The bartender laughed.

“So you’re telling me we should drink ale for our health? I like the way you think.” Another patron waved him over. He waved back and said to the girls, “My name’s Aidan. What do they call you?”

“I’m Ellie, and this is Gwen,” Ellie said cheerily. Gwen glanced at her.

“Call me if you need anything, another drink, another umbrella.” He winked at Ellie. “I’ll make sure to have a swig of the bilberry ale so your names are in my noggin for good.” He tapped his head, grinned at Gwen, and moved to the other customer. Gwen felt a nudge from her right.

“What did I tell you?” Ellie breathed in her ear, giggling. “British boys!”

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Ellie was nearing the end of her glass, and getting sillier. Gwen was relaxed, but more from being comfortable in the pub and less from her drink, which she’d only sipped at. Ellie slid off her stool and stumbled a little, laughing.

“Gah, I’m such a lightweight! I’m just going to the bathroom. Or, as they say here,” she affected a terrible posh British accent, “the loo.”

Gwen laughed and pushed her in the right direction.

“Go on, you sodden tart.” She watched Ellie weave her way between tables.

“Well, at least one of the drinks went down well.” Aidan eyed her half-full glass as he cleared away Ellie’s glass and the slightly damp newspaper umbrella.

“Oh, I didn’t—I mean, it’s really good. I’m just not a big drinker.” She looked sheepishly at Aidan. He laughed.

“Sure, but here ‘not a big drinker’ means only three drinks an evening. I think my granny drinks more than you on Sundays. But you’re American, right?” He looked at her expectantly.

“Canadian, actually. Vancouver, on the West Coast.” She fiddled with Ellie’s empty beer mat.

“Oh, Canada! Have you ever seen a bear, then?” Aidan’s face lit up with excitement. “The closest we’ve got to wildlife here are badgers. Oh, or a

wolf?”

“I’ve seen a few bears. My dad and I go hiking sometimes. No wolves, though. They’re not quite as reckless as bears are.” She relaxed into conversation, the strained embarrassment of earlier drifting away in the face of Aidan’s interest in her world. “We were hiking high in the mountains at Whistler, once, and a huge black bear started stalking us and...”

A customer hailed Aidan. “Thirsty men over here while you’re chatting with pretty girls, Aidan!”

“I’ll be right back. Keep your bear story ready.” Aidan pushed off from the counter. “All right, who’s first?” he asked the waiting men.

Ellie slid into the stool beside Gwen.

“So, what’d I miss? Were you chatting with Aidan? I think he likes you.”

“Ellie!” Gwen’s face grew warm and she shoved her shoulder against Ellie’s. “I only just met him. We’ve exchanged maybe three sentences.”

“Oh, let me have some fun. You’ve got to loosen up a little, Gwen. You’re so on edge sometimes, you worry me.” Ellie looked seriously into Gwen’s eyes, but ruined the effect by hiccupping. They collapsed into giggles.

Aidan passed by behind the counter, eyeing them curiously.

“Aidan. What do you do for fun around here?” Ellie suppressed another hiccup behind her hand as Gwen tried not to laugh. Aidan thought for a moment, then his expression cleared.

“Come by the pub Friday night. We’re getting in a live band and having a bit of a dance.”

“Dancing!” Ellie said. “Excellent. I adore dancing. Are you working that night or are you coming with your girlfriend?” Ellie looked expectantly at Aidan.

Gwen gasped and kicked Ellie.

“Ellie!” she hissed, half appalled and half admiring of Ellie’s initiative. Aidan threw back his head and gave a shout of laughter.

“Your friend doesn’t beat around the bush, does she?” he said to Gwen, chuckling. “Yeah, I’ll be working. And no, my non-existent girlfriend won’t be there.”

“Good.” Ellie nodded smugly. “We’ll see you then.” She checked her watch and grabbed Gwen’s arm.

“Gwen!” she said. “Dinner! In the great hall! We’re going to miss it if we don’t go now!” She clutched Gwen’s shoulders and leveled her gaze into

Gwen's eyes. "We *can't* miss it."

"Okay, okay." She opened her wallet and looked at the strange bills inside. "One of these?" she asked Aidan. He grinned.

"That'll about do it. But I suggest you learn our money before someone less honest than me swindles you."

Gwen gathered her coat.

"Well, bye then." She gave a little wave to Aidan. "Nice to meet you."

"I still need to hear the end of your story," he said. "See you Friday."

Gwen smiled shyly as Ellie pulled her to the door.

"See you later, then."

Aidan gazed at her as she left, a half-smile relaxing his face.

"Say," said a customer sitting nearby who had been watching their exchange. "Do I get half-price beer if I pretend not to know what money looks like?"

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Gwen flipped through her English literature textbook as classmates zipped open backpacks and pulled out pens. The chattering of students and scraping of chairs echoed off the vaulted ceilings of the grand guest bedroom-turned-classroom. Ellie gazed enraptured at a tapestry hanging on the wall to Gwen's right that depicted a hunting scene. Gwen wondered idly why the lions in medieval art always looked so bizarre, with strange curling manes and grotesque humanoid faces. The angry eyes of the lion seemed to bore straight into her own. Strangely unsettled by the tapestry, Gwen turned away with a twinge of unease.

The professor stood up and the class fell silent in response. He smiled, and said, "Good morning. I hope you've all had a chance to do your pre-reading. Today we'll be discussing the *Faerie Queene* by Edmund Spenser. Can anyone tell me how the first book begins?"

A few people raised their hands. Gwen tuned out and looked at her phone, out of sight of the professor in her lap. She'd done the readings and already knew that the knight and the lady were riding their horses through some forest. She'd found the language pretty thick, but had better luck understanding when she'd read the text out loud. She searched for 'faerie' on her phone, curious about the title. The first link was simply entitled 'Fairy.'

She skimmed down the article, reading about characteristics ('appearing human with magic powers') and origins ('spirits of the dead, or demon-figures, or a race separate from either humans or angels'). She kept skimming, and paused at the words 'sidhe (fairy mounds).' She clicked on the hyperlinked 'sidhe,' frowning slightly.

*The aes sidhe (lit. the people of the mounds) are a mythological race similar to fairies or elves. Legend has them dwelling underground in fairy mounds (sidhe), in a world parallel to our own.*

On a hunch Gwen searched for the word 'barrow.' Her heartbeat increased slightly.

*In Great Britain, earthen mounds or barrows were commonly built to bury the dead from the Neolithic to the Bronze Age.*

Gwen shut off her phone, her palms clammy. What did this have to do with the overwhelming sensations she'd felt at the barrow? And why did she get the sense that the barrows had something to do with her long-lost mother? She started paying attention to the professor again.

"... and you'll notice the shift in setting. The Red Cross Knight and Una are traveling across an open plain initially. But when the storm comes, they are driven into the dark forest where the monster Error dwells. This is a very common theme throughout literature, not only in the Faerie Queene. The forest is symbolic of wilderness, wildness. It is untamable, chaotic, a manifestation of our primal sides, where everything is not as it seems. The forest is often seen as separate from reason and intellect, the antithesis of the orderly pastures and tamed fields of civilization. The forest is where the Red Cross Knight truly begins his quest to conquer the base vices personified by the monsters and magicians in the forest."

Ellie passed a note to Gwen.

*I always knew I was a 'wild' one. Guess it's from all our Canadian forests.*

Gwen suppressed a smile.

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"Are you sure this looks okay?" Gwen tugged at her emerald green mini-dress. The stratospheric hemline exposed far too much leg for Gwen's liking, and the color was very striking. Although it wasn't as conspicuous as Ellie's

outfit—Ellie had paired a short black skirt with a hot pink sequined shirt, and topped the ensemble off with dangly earrings. The earrings winked at Gwen in the setting sun, and brushed against Ellie’s neck with trailing feathers as they walked.

“Stop fussing,” Ellie said. “You look gorgeous, and green makes your eyes pop. Honestly, you look great, in a demure sort of way.”

“I only look ‘demure’ because I’m standing next to you,” Gwen said. Ellie rolled her eyes.

“One day I’ll get you to let your hair down—metaphorically speaking,” Ellie added as Gwen swished her hair at her. “Oh look. They put out streamers.”

Friday night in Amberlaine was livelier than during the week. Shops were still open, and light spilled out from most store windows. Shoppers and restaurant-goers mingled and wandered down the main avenue. The Green Man pub was on the shadowy side of the sunset-lit street, but cheerily festooned with haphazard streamers. The door was open and drums punctuated the still air. Ellie grinned at Gwen.

“Ready? Promise me you’ll dance lots?”

Gwen sighed. She wasn’t fond of dancing, and had hoped to just enjoy the music. She always felt so awkward and wrong-footed dancing. She knew she looked like a fool next to Ellie, whose years of dancing lessons paid off with smooth, sure moves. She gave a wry smile.

“I’ll do my best.”

“That’s my girl.” Ellie beamed at her. “Come on, the music waits for no woman.”

Inside, someone had strung up white twinkle lights around the windows and bar, lending a soft glow to the scene. Tables were shuffled to one side to create a dance floor in front of the band, which included a guitar, an electric bass, a drum kit, and a fiddle. The dance floor had five people bravely twirling and swaying, but the tables were filling fast. Three more people squeezed by Gwen and Ellie as they stood at the door.

“We’d better get a table, pronto,” Gwen said as she eyed the last two available. Aidan weaved between crowded tables, delivering drinks. As he turned, he saw them and grinned at Gwen. She gave a small wave back, smiling.

“Who needs a table? We’re here to dance.” Ellie shrugged off her coat,

shimmied Gwen out of hers, and threw them over an empty chair beside the door. "There. Now let's go."

Ellie made a beeline for the dance floor, Gwen reluctantly following. Ellie turned, walking backward, and took Gwen's hands in her own.

"Let's show these Brits how dancing's really done," Ellie said. Gwen groaned as Ellie whirled her around.

"There aren't enough people dancing yet," Gwen hissed as Ellie wriggled her hips vigorously to the beat. Gwen tried to imitate her, but knew she was failing miserably. "I like it better when there are more people. Then no one looks at me."

"Where's the fun in that?" Ellie said as she twirled, her arms in the air. Gwen sighed and contented herself with gently swaying her hips to the beat. She envied Ellie's complete disregard for the opinions of others, how she did what she wanted without worrying if she looked foolish or extraordinary. Gwen wished she didn't care, but being ordinary was paramount. She didn't want to think what might happen if anyone found out exactly how *unordinary* she really was. No one knew except her father, and keeping a low profile kept it that way. She watched Ellie moving rhythmically, anticipating changes in the music and accompanying them with twirls and shakes, managing to look flowing and exacting and sensual all at once. Gwen concentrated on matching her own shuffling to the beat.

After a particularly exotic move involving a lot of hand movements across Ellie's body, Gwen said, "Now you're just making stuff up."

"Of course I am!" Ellie said merrily. "Just do what the music tells you!"

Their appearance on the dance floor seemed create a critical mass, and people flocked to the floor in droves. The song ended and everyone cheered. Gwen turned in relief to go to a table, but Ellie grabbed her hand.

"Oh no you don't," she said. "Lots more dancing to do yet."

"But perhaps you'll have this dance with me?" A voice spoke from beside them as the music started up again.

Gwen and Ellie turned to look at the newcomer. Bright green eyes in a narrow pale face gazed steadily at Ellie from below smooth black hair. Gwen raised her eyebrows. He was very handsome, in a strange, exotic way that Gwen couldn't place. He made such a sharp contrast to Ellie's apple-cheeked curviness that Gwen would have laughed, except for the way he looked at her friend. There was intensity in his gaze that was more than admiration. A thrill

of disquiet snaked down her back.

Ellie appeared oblivious to this, as she quite readily accepted his offered hand.

“If you can keep up.” She arched an eyebrow at the stranger, who gave a confident smile and twirled her away, his arm around her waist. Ellie shrieked with delight.

Gwen took the opportunity to exit the dance floor and head for the bar, dropping onto a stool with a sigh. Aidan came up behind the counter looking flustered, a bar towel draped across one shoulder.

“Hi Gwen. Glad you could make it, you and your very enthusiastic dancing friend.” He pulled a glass out from under the counter. “What’ll it be tonight?”

“Do you have ginger ale, or some kind of pop? Soft drink?” she asked, feeling lame. She was already on edge and felt exposed without Ellie by her side. She didn’t want to risk losing control of herself.

“How about a ginger beer?” he said, reaching into the cooler behind him. “I promise there’s no actual beer in it.” He cracked the bottle open and poured a glass for her. “It’s got double the ginger, though, since I poured it.”

Gwen laughed as she caught his wink. She took the proffered glass and said, “Is it just you working tonight? It’s awfully busy here for just one.”

“Tell me about it.” Aidan ran his hands through his hair, leaving it standing on end and even wilder than before. His head distinctly looked like a flaming bush. “The person I hired cancelled at the last minute, and the owner’s out of town.” He looked toward the dancing crowd and the band. “The live music night was my idea, and I really want it to go well. I love music.” He gazed at the band, his eyes wistful.

“Do you play?” Gwen asked, interested. She had played the clarinet briefly in high school, but had sold her instrument immediately after graduation.

“Yeah, lots of things. Guitar and harp and piano and flute—I wanted to study further, but my mum didn’t think music was a real career.” He laughed without much humor. “So you can imagine how proud of me she is now.”

A group of dancers peeled out of the throng and headed to the bar.

“Damn,” Aidan muttered. “The vultures are circling.” He glanced sidelong at Gwen. “I reckon I shouldn’t say that in front of a customer.”

Gwen giggled, then looked out at the crowded tables, littered with piles of

empty glasses.

“Do you want me to help out tonight? I can clear tables while you deal with drinks.”

Aidan’s eyes lit up with hope, and he looked down at the counter to hide them.

“I couldn’t ask you to do that,” he said.

“Luckily you didn’t have to ask, because I offered,” Gwen said briskly. She reached out and grabbed the bar towel off Aidan’s shoulder then took a tray from behind a line of bottles. Aidan’s face flooded with relief and gratitude. She smiled at him and jerked her head down the bar.

“Your customers await,” she said as she turned to go.

“Thank you so much,” he said hoarsely. He cleared his throat. “I’ll give you free drinks for life!”

Gwen called out over her shoulder, “Good thing I liked that ginger beer.” She walked around the dance floor to the nearest tables and started piling glasses onto her tray, then straightened, looking for Ellie. She finally spotted her through a gap in the crowd, in a thoroughly un-demure position with the stranger who had asked her to dance. Ellie’s arms were entwined around his neck, and their bodies were pressed against each other as they moved to the beat. Gwen couldn’t see the stranger’s face, buried into Ellie’s neck. Gwen frowned, and turned resolutely away to continue clearing tables.

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Gwen sat down at the bar with a sigh a couple of hours later, dropping the bar towel on the counter. She kicked off her heels, despicable spiky things that Ellie had made her buy to go with her dress. She closed her eyes and tilted her head back in relief as her toes wiggled in the open air. When she opened her eyes again Aidan had flopped down on the next stool over and leaned his arms on the counter. He hung his head in exhaustion.

“Wow, what a night,” he said into his lap. Gwen looked at the few remaining dancers. The band had finished its last set ten minutes before, and only a few diehards remained swaying to canned music. Gwen noticed with a frown that Ellie was still firmly ensconced in the stranger’s arms.

“Everyone seemed to have a good time,” she said.

“Everyone except you. Oh, Gwen, how can I ever repay you?” He turned

his head to look at her with a woebegone expression. She laughed.

“It’s fine. Two are faster than one.”

“Except when riding a unicycle.”

Gwen let out a burst of surprised laughter, glancing at Aidan’s grinning face. She nodded at the dance floor. “And anyway, you rescued me from a dancing marathon with Ellie. I never know what to do out there.”

“I hear you loud and clear. Music I can do. Dancing,” he paused dramatically, “well, let’s just say there have been incidents.” He nodded sagely.

Gwen leaned over to nudge him with her shoulder. “No details?”

“Ha. You think I’m going to tell you all my shameful secrets? You’ve got to find those on your own. I prefer to remain a man of mystery.” He grinned at her and she rolled her eyes, smiling.

They both looked at the stragglers for a minute. Gwen cast around for something else to say.

“Ellie and I walked to Glengarry barrow the other day,” she said. “Do you know anything about it?”

Aidan pulled himself upright with a groan.

“Oh, yeah, old Glengarry. It’s said to be the burial mound of a Pictish king, three thousand years ago. It’s mostly a picnic spot on the weekends, and a teenager hangout at night. Not that I would know about that.”

“Yeah, I’m sure.” Gwen raised an eyebrow at Aidan’s mock-saintly face then looked down at her hands, whose fingers twisted together nervously. She tucked them under her legs. “It really creeped me out. I felt...” she paused.

Aidan looked at her curiously. “Felt what?” He almost looked a little wary.

“Oh, just weirded out.” She couldn’t bring herself to mention the strange sensations the barrow had brought out in her. “We just got all worked up about it. Silly, I know.” She changed the subject. “What do you think of that guy with Ellie?” She nodded in their direction. “Do you know him?”

Aidan shook his head.

“No, never seen him before.”

“I think he’s creepy.” Gwen pursed her lips in distaste.

Aidan laughed.

“Are you sure you’re not just being protective of your friend?”

“No, really,” she insisted. “He doesn’t look at her like he likes her. He

looks at her like he's a lion, and she's dinner." She swallowed. "Kind of predatory."

Aidan frowned, looking at the two. Ellie's eyes were closed and the stranger nuzzled at her neck, eyes half-lidded. He said, "Maybe I could walk you two back to the castle? It's pretty late, and I'll be closing the pub shortly."

Gwen bit her lip, more relieved than she cared to admit.

"Would you? I'd feel a lot better," she said.

"For my savior? It's the least I can do." He stood up, and reached toward Gwen's face. She held still as his hand brushed beside her cheek then presented her with a budding rose. She stared at it in astonishment, and he grinned and tucked it behind her ear.

"How—how'd you do that?" She reached up to touch the flower.

"A magician never reveals his secrets," he said, looking at her mischievously.

## Chapter 4

Gwen drooped over a plate of eggs and sausage. Surrounding her in the great hall were similarly bleary-eyed students trying to wake up after a late Friday night. Ellie dropped her plate across from Gwen on the long trestle table and climbed onto the bench heavily.

“Saturday mornings should be outlawed,” she said grumpily, stabbing a sausage with a vindictive thrust of her fork. Gwen grunted in reply. She hadn’t drunk the previous evening, but hard work, a late night, and an early breakfast time had all conspired to make her long for her bed with a passion. She could imagine its soft warmth, enveloping her in a dark cocoon...

“Gwen! Are you even awake?” Gwen jerked upright as Ellie’s voice pierced her daydream. “I asked if you had a good time last night. Aidan seemed attentive. He walked us home and everything.”

“Mmm.” Gwen made a non-committal noise. Ellie clucked her tongue.

“Fine, don’t tell me anything.” She sniffed. “I, on the other hand, had an amazing time. Corann is such a great dancer, and we just really clicked last night, you know? And his eyes are so intense, it’s like they see right through me...”

With growing discomfort Gwen listened to Ellie prattle on. She’d seen plenty of Ellie crushing on boys over the years, but this was different. Ellie wasn’t usually so effusive about the boys she liked. She was always quick to laugh when other girls ‘got all sappy,’ and she was usually self-aware enough to see when she was getting sappy herself. Gwen could hear no trace of satire in Ellie’s descriptions this time. She prodded a little.

“This guy sounds too good to be true,” she said, trying for a jovial tone. “Where can I get one of those?”

To her great surprise, Ellie’s face darkened.

“Sorry, he’s taken,” she said stiffly. She cut her eggs with a determined

air, keeping her eyes fixed on Gwen's.

Gwen was shocked to her core. Ellie had never acted like this in all the years Gwen had known her, from the very first day in elementary school when Ellie had thrown her arms around the shy Gwen and declared them best friends. The Ellie Gwen knew would have recognized Gwen's words as the joke they were, and responded with a jibe of her own. Gwen looked down at her plate, a little stunned.

"I'm sorry," she said, not sure what she was apologizing for. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"Okay," Ellie said, sounding mollified. She went back to her breakfast.

"So, are you seeing Corann again?" Gwen ventured, not wanting the silence to grow awkward. Ellie looked up with a big dreamy smile on her face, the offense of a moment ago apparently forgotten.

"Yeah. We're meeting at the big oak by the crossroads just before the village, Tuesday night. He's going to show me around the woods."

Gwen's stomach sank.

"Why don't you go for coffee, or somewhere in Amberlaine?" she said. "It's nice to have other people around, especially since you don't really know him yet."

Ellie's face soured.

"You don't know what you're talking about," she said with a sneer. "We have a connection. You're just jealous because someone likes me and you're too timid to go after anyone yourself."

Gwen looked down at her plate, her eyes swimming. She automatically took a deep breath to calm herself as her emotions threatened to take over.

"I'm just worried for you. That's all."

Ellie sighed deeply and Gwen looked up to see her rubbing her eyes. She looked at Gwen, confusion and guilt playing across her face.

"I'm sorry, Gwen. I don't know why I said that." She passed a hand over her face. "I think I'm going to go back to bed. You okay on your own?"

Gwen nodded.

"Yeah. I'll see you later." She watched Ellie walk to the doorway, wondering. Was this normal behavior upon meeting someone special, or should she be worried? Not for the first time, Gwen fervently wished for her mother.

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By that evening, Ellie was back to her old self.

“So when are we heading back to the Green Man? Your British boy is waiting for you,” Ellie teased when she and Gwen met in the great hall for dinner.

Gwen rolled her eyes as she set her tray down on the table and climbed on the bench.

“Honestly, Ellie, you read too much into things. I helped him out, it was no big deal.” Gwen gave a show of indignation at Ellie’s teasing, although inside she was relieved that they were back to their old friendship. Gwen carefully left the subject of Corann alone, unwilling to broach the topic and revert to the strain of the morning.

Ellie had no such qualms.

“I’m so excited for my date on Tuesday,” she said happily, cutting into her meat pie.

Gwen said nothing, pushing her beans around her plate without enthusiasm. She suddenly found herself thankful that their stay in England would last only a month.

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Gwen watched Ellie get dressed on Tuesday night.

“Is that what you’re wearing?” Gwen drew her lips into a thin line. Ellie’s blouse left little to the imagination as it draped open, an eye-catching pendant dangling low around her neck.

“Don’t be such a prude, Gwen.” Ellie threaded large hoop earrings through her ears and looked at herself in the mirror, beaming. She turned to Gwen.

“Don’t wait up.”

Gwen bit her tongue around the warnings she wanted to speak. Instead she said, “Have fun,” and watched Ellie bounce out of the room with a sinking feeling.

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Gwen awoke with a start. She had been dreaming of endless green hills

and stone doorways. The click of the latch alerted her to another presence. She sat up and looked toward the door.

Ellie's voice whispered in the darkness.

"Sorry I woke you."

Gwen sighed in relief. Ellie was here, safe and sound. Gwen's worries had been unfounded.

"That's okay. Did you have a good time?" She glanced at the glowing hands of her watch—it was one o'clock in the morning.

"Oh, it was amazing." Ellie giggled and fell into bed. "I told you it would be fine."

Gwen just got up and gave her a silent hug, happy to see her in one piece. Despite the uneventful date, Gwen's unease still lingered.

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The next Saturday, after a school excursion to a nearby castle, Gwen and Ellie found themselves wandering to the Green Man after dinner with a few classmates.

"That trebuchet was wicked cool," one of their classmates said, his eyes glowing. "Man, I would've loved to see it in action."

Ellie pushed his shoulder playfully.

"War-hungry boys!" She turned to Gwen. "I did like the crenelated towers. They gave it a perfect fairy-tale look."

"It was a pretty great castle," Gwen agreed.

"But not nearly as nice as ours," Ellie said smugly, in a proprietary tone.

They entered the pub and jostled around a table in the corner. Gwen quickly looked to the bar, but instead of Aidan, a middle-aged man with a snub nose and a round belly pulled drafts out of the taps. Gwen's shoulders drooped only slightly, but enough for Ellie to notice.

"I'm sorry, Gwen. I guess tonight's his night off." She put an arm around Gwen's shoulders and gave her a squeeze.

"I got the first round," one of their classmates said, to appreciative noises from the others. "Hey Gwen, want to give me a hand?"

"Sure thing," she said, following him to the bar. When they returned, balancing a cluster of glasses each, she was annoyed to see Corann had materialized in a chair beside Ellie.

When the drinks were poured Gwen pulled two glasses toward herself and Ellie.

“I already got one, Gwen.” Ellie pointed to the full glass in front of her that Corann had smoothly placed there moments before. Ellie barely glanced at Gwen as she laid a hand on Corann’s arm, giving him a coy smile. Corann leaned toward Ellie’s ear and murmured something Gwen couldn’t hear.

Gwen bit her lip then turned her attention to the rest of the group. She could have a good time without Ellie.

By the third round the others were getting rowdy. Gwen continued sipping on her first drink, feeling a little lonely. Just then Corann and Ellie stood up, Ellie grabbing her coat.

“We’re going for a walk. You don’t mind, do you, Gwen?” she said carelessly. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes weren’t quite focused. Gwen frowned.

“Yeah, I guess. I’ll walk back with this lot.” She gestured at her classmates, but Corann had already put his arm around Ellie’s shoulders and steered her toward the door.

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Aidan stared into the open cupboard, his eyes raking over the shelves, empty except for an upside-down can of tuna. He sighed, closing the cupboard door harder than necessary. He bent down to examine the contents of another cupboard.

Behind him an ordered chaos reigned. A coat and three socks lay on an unmade bed in the one-room flat. A cluster of shoes and boots gathered in a heap by the door. A large window was centered in a red brick wall, unaccompanied by any other decorations. A tiny table with a rickety single chair held the remains of breakfast, but the dishes beside the sink were clean and neatly stacked in a drying rack.

Aidan took one last look into a tiny fridge under the counter before slamming it closed in disgust. He marched to the door, grabbing the coat from the bed on his way. The clattering of his descent down the stairs echoed through the flat as the door swung shut.

Once outside, Aidan took a deep breath of the cooling night air. He directed his steps in the direction of the main road. He hadn’t been walking

for one minute when a voice broke through the stillness.

“Aidan!”

Aidan turned and peered into the twilight. A trio of young men approached from the opposite side of the street. Aidan’s mouth opened in an easy smile as he recognized the owner of the voice.

“David. Good to see you, mate.”

David greeted this with a wide smile of his own and a clap on Aidan’s shoulder. “Aidan. It feels like forever since I last saw you. Graduation last year, wasn’t it? How’ve you been? What are you up to these days?”

“Oh, this and that,” Aidan replied. “I’m working at the Green Man at the moment.”

“We were just heading there, for old times’ sake. Oh,” David turned to his two companions, “I forgot to introduce you. This is Will, and this is Simon.” They nodded at each other. “They’re my mates from uni. Say, do you want to come with us? Make a night of it?”

Aidan looked regretful. “Thanks for the invite, but I’ve got to be heading off. Good to see you though, David.”

“You too, mate. I’ll have a drink for you.”

Aidan watched as the others walked toward the pub, chatting casually and familiarly. Aidan’s hands clenched into fists. He shoved them into his pockets, his jaw tight and his eyes sad. Then he sighed and directed his steps toward a nearby fish and chip shop.

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By the fifth round her classmates were singing and Gwen had had enough. Murmuring excuses that no one heard, she grabbed her coat and slipped out the door. The cool evening air hit her face with welcome freshness. Breathing deeply, she walked along the street, away from the castle for a change. She came across a small park lit by a single streetlight and sat down on a bench. The glow of the half-moon played tag with the streetlight’s beam in the rustling shadows of a sprawling maple. She let her mind go vacant, trying not to think of her worries about Ellie.

Footsteps padded nearby in the still night. Gwen tensed, suddenly aware of how dark it had become and how alone she was. She turned to watch the newcomer, and was relieved to recognize Aidan’s tousled red mop and lanky

frame. He stopped in surprise when he saw her.

“Gwen?” He cleared his throat. “What are you doing here?”

She stood. “Just thinking. The pub was getting too rowdy for me.”

“Where’s your partner in crime? The one with the disco fever?” He looked around, as if expecting Ellie to pop out from the bushes.

“She’s out with that guy again. The one she was dancing with the other night at the pub. His name’s Corann.” She tried to sound nonchalant, but Aidan gave her a sympathetic glance anyway.

“Where are you headed? Can I walk you somewhere?” Aidan asked.

“I think I’ll head back to the castle. I’m sure I can manage on my own—but I’d love the company if you’re not busy.” She stuck her hands in her pockets and lifted her shoulders up, waiting for his answer.

“Of course. Lovely night for a stroll.” He walked over to a garbage can nearby and tossed in the grease-soaked newspaper he’d been holding. “Shall we?” He spread his left arm in the direction of the castle.

They fell into place together, a comfortable silence settling around them. Gwen peeked at Aidan, and he smiled back. To cover, she asked, “Was it fish and chips tonight, then?”

“Yeah,” he said cheerfully. “Just the ticket for Saturday night.”

“Were you out with friends, since it’s your night off?” she asked, curious to know more about him.

He shrugged and put his hands in his pockets.

“I usually keep to myself. It’s easier that way.” His face was sad for a moment. He covered it with a grin. “Besides, a bartender can’t afford to have too many friends, or else he wouldn’t sell any beer.”

Gwen chuckled, but wondered about his answer. She said without thinking, “But you’re so…” She trailed off awkwardly.

He broke into a wide smile.

“So what? Say it. I could give you some excellent suggestions,” he said, his head turned to look at her.

“Friendly,” she said with a hint of defiance. “I was going to say friendly.”

They walked for a bit in silence. The castle gates appeared around a bend in the road.

Aidan said, “I hope you have a good time at your fancy dress ball next week.” He kept his gaze forward.

Gwen turned to him in surprise.

“Did I tell you about that?”

“Oh, I have my ways.” He whistled a lively tune then turned and winked at her as they drew up beside the castle drive. He made a flamboyant show of taking her hand and bending down to kiss it. Keeping hold of her hand, he looked up at her. “Your castle awaits, my lady.”

His fingers were warm and dry, and Gwen could still feel the mark of his lips on the back of her hand. She tried to match Aidan’s playfulness, but her heart beat faster than usual. She surreptitiously took a deep breath to calm herself and stay in control, just in case.

“Thank you, my lord.” She gave a little half-curtsey. “You are too kind.”

He slowly released her hand. They looked at each other for a moment, then Gwen glanced down. “Thanks so much for walking me back.”

“Hold out your hand,” Aidan said. He put his palm down on hers, and when he lifted it up there was a glowing ball of bluish light balanced on her hand. Gwen gasped.

“So you don’t get lost in the dark on your way to the door,” Aidan said. “Don’t examine it too closely—you might discover my secret. And a magician should never reveal his secrets.”

Gwen held up her hand, and light streamed out in front of her.

“Wow, cool,” she said, marveling. “I want to learn magic tricks.”

Aidan stood back, crossing his arms.

“You’d better get moving. The light won’t last forever.” He looked cautious, or unsure of himself. It was an odd look on one who always seemed so confident. He stood watching her as she walked up the drive, the light falling on her path. She looked back when she reached the doors, but he had disappeared.

## Chapter 5

Gwen lay on her stomach on the bed, idly flipping through her literature textbook with a notepad and pen beside her. Ellie rummaged through the wardrobe, the late afternoon sun catching motes of dust in the air and landing on the warm mahogany of the open wardrobe door. Gwen picked up the pen and started chewing on the end absentmindedly.

“So, in *Lanval*, is the forest symbolic of the wild, or of Sir Lanval’s inner turmoil?” She flipped the page again. “This stupid essay is due next week, and I still don’t know what Marie de France was going on about.”

“It’s the Thursday before our long weekend! Leave the twelfth century literature alone. We’ve got four days without classes, and we’re going to make the most of them. I have a full schedule of sight-seeing planned for us. And don’t you remember it’s the ball tonight?” Ellie held a faux diamond necklace against her neck and peered into the carved mirror above their chest of drawers.

“I guess we should get ready.” Gwen snapped her book shut and rolled onto her back. She thought about her dress without enthusiasm then felt guilty. She heaved herself off the bed. “There’d better be other people dressed up tonight,” she warned.

Ellie clucked her tongue.

“Don’t fuss. Tamara and Braden and Jessica all have costumes.” She discarded the necklace and picked up another, this one with peacock feathers and beads. She stopped and whirled around to face Gwen.

“Gwen. Do you have that sketch of your mother with you?”

“What?” Gwen was taken aback. “Why?”

“Please, can I just see it?” Ellie said. “I want to check something.”

Confused, Gwen opened her drawer and dug around her underwear and bras. At the bottom her fingers touched raspy paper and she gently tugged the

sketch out. She carefully opened it and handed it to Ellie. Ellie took the picture gingerly, Gwen was pleased to note, and peered at it.

“Wow.” She exhaled sharply. “That is so weird.”

“What?” Gwen was more than curious. Had Ellie seen someone? Someone who could be her mother? Her guts clenched involuntarily.

Ellie shook her head in amazement, handing the sketch back to Gwen.

“Corann always wears this locket around his neck. Well, last time we went out, I asked him what was inside. He gave it to me to look at.” Gwen stared at her, impatient. “I opened it, and there was a little portrait inside. It was a perfectly painted miniature of a woman’s head. She looked so familiar at the time, but I couldn’t place her. Then,” she said triumphantly, “I remembered. It was a dead ringer for your mother.” Ellie winced. “Sorry. Maybe a poor choice of words?”

Gwen stared at Ellie, at a loss for words. Finally she blurted out, “How— why did he have the picture?” Her mind was chaos. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“I’m sorry. I guess I just forgot.” Ellie looked contrite. When Gwen didn’t respond, she continued. “I asked him who she was, and he said she was the ruler of his realm.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Gwen felt cheated and a little panicky. The mystery of her mother, long since relegated to the unsolvable category in her mind, suddenly loomed large. She tried to control her breathing, closing her eyes to calm herself. She couldn’t let go now, not with Ellie in the room.

She opened her eyes. Ellie looked at her with wariness and sympathy, and said, “I know, right? I mean, the only ruler here is Queen Elizabeth, who’s at least three hundred years old.” She paused, and said, “But look, I’ll ask Corann for more details, okay? I promise.” She took Gwen’s hands in hers and shook them for emphasis. “I promise we’ll find out what’s going on.”

“Thanks,” Gwen whispered.

Ellie gave her a big hug, and said, “Come on, let’s get ready. It’ll be time before you know it, and we haven’t even done our hair yet!”

As Gwen applied makeup in the carved mirror, she tried to make sense of what she’d heard. She couldn’t reconcile the fact that her mother, the ethereal and perfect mother living in her imagination, could be embroiled somehow with creepy Corann. Gwen’s mouth twisted in disgust. Something wasn’t right with him. Her gut told her that the way Ellie acted around him was more

than puppy love. The personality change, the vacant eyes—it wasn't right, and it wasn't Ellie. And why hadn't Ellie told her right away about the picture in the locket? Something was not right at all. Gwen had never let herself consider that her mother would be less than perfect, and that only the gravest circumstances could have made her leave her baby. But now that Corann might know her, and know her well—Gwen's mind floated in a sea of unpleasant new possibilities.

“Hey, we're in luck.” Ellie turned her back so Gwen could lace up her dress. “Corann's coming tonight, so I can ask him about your mother then.” Gwen's fingers paused at the laces. Her first reaction was to question Ellie again on the wisdom of encouraging Corann. That urge was quickly drowned out by an overwhelming desire to find out about her mother. She swallowed her reservations and continued lacing.

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The great hall dazzled with lights. Sconces on the walls flickered, bringing tapestries to life, and a central chandelier illuminated the swaying dancers below. A band was set up on a dais above the dance floor. Although dressed in costume, the performers were belting out contemporary covers. Ellie looked disappointed.

“I thought they'd have period music,” she said, sticking out her bottom lip.

“Yeah, but nobody knows how to dance Shakespeare-style,” Gwen said, laughing. “Oh, except you.”

Ellie sniffed then pointed at a small crowd against one wall.

“Let's see what's happening over there.” She pulled Gwen forward by her arm.

Gwen might as well have been naked as they crossed the room. Her embarrassment was almost as large as her billowing dress, which trailed long green sleeves lined with fawn-brown velvet. She knew she was being silly. She and Ellie were not the only ones dressed up in historical costumes. Ellie glanced at her face and must have guessed her thoughts, because she leaned close and whispered, “You look beautiful—honest.” She stepped back and said louder, “And who is your seamstress? She did an excellent job.” They giggled together and Gwen relaxed a little, despite the disquiet in the pit of her stomach that had been her companion ever since Ellie mentioned the

locket. Her mind kept fretting over questions like a dog worrying a bone.

There were gasps from the crowd in front of them, and then applause. Curious, Gwen and Ellie nudged forward to see. In the center of the circle stood Aidan, dressed in a short black cape with silver stars woven at intervals across the fabric. He wore a solemn, mysterious expression which didn't entirely hide the spark in his eyes. A blue flame flickered in the center of his palm, similar to the flame he had given Gwen on her walk up the castle drive. He raised his hand and the flame trickled down his arm like water, without setting his sleeve alight. He let it run behind his head, bending his neck and moving his shoulders to let the flame travel to his other arm, where it ran down to his outstretched palm. He held out his arms and Gwen clapped along with the others, marveling.

He put his hand out as if to stop their applause then threw the flame high into the air. Gwen was still trying to figure out the physics of that when Aidan threw his head back, opened his lips, and caught the flame directly in his mouth. He gave an exaggerated swallow then stuck out his tongue for inspection. More applause and Aidan bowed, smiling. Then he frowned, clutching his stomach. Gwen and Ellie looked at each other, alarmed. Aidan's body heaved once, twice. The third time he opened his mouth.

Flames spurted out high above the crowd. Girls screamed and there were shouts of astonishment. Then, as Aidan raised his arms in presentation and grinned at them all, the crowd cheered wildly. Gwen released Ellie's hand from a death grip and cheered with the rest. Aidan bowed his way out of the circle, and Gwen turned to Ellie.

"That was incredible. How on earth do you think he did it?"

Ellie's excited face started to answer, but then her eyes caught something behind Gwen. Gwen watched in alarm as Ellie's expression drained away, replaced by a vague blankness. Gwen turned, unsurprised to see Corann directly behind her with eyes only for Ellie.

"I'll catch you up later, hey?" Ellie said as she moved past Gwen toward Corann.

"Ellie." Gwen grabbed her arm. "Don't forget to ask him about—you know." The possibility of finding her mother burned in Gwen bright and hot.

"Sure sure." Ellie's eyes weren't looking at her, but at Corann. "See you later."

Gwen was hardly appeased by this half-hearted reply but let Ellie go. She

watched as the two made a beeline for the dance floor. Suddenly she fervently wished she hadn't worn the stupid costume.

"Gwen?" said a tentative voice behind her. She turned around to see Aidan in his star-strewn cape. He looked taken aback and a little vulnerable as he looked at her. Maybe the dress wasn't so bad after all. "You look—amazing." He collected himself and cleared his throat. "So. Surprised to see me?"

She laughed.

"Yeah. They mentioned we'd have entertainment, but I had no idea it'd be you. And those tricks—that was incredible." The blue flame flowed down Aidan's black sleeve in her mind's eye, filling her with a strange longing. "I'd love to be able to do that. Where did you learn?"

Aidan shifted his feet.

"Oh, here and there," he said evasively. He looked around the hall. "I'd better go do some magical mingling. I'm on the clock for another hour or so. But will you stick around until I'm done? I'd love to have a drink with you."

"I'll be here," she said, gratified, and he grinned and left. She looked at Ellie again, sighed, and went to find some of her classmates.

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Across the room, Gwen could see Ellie with her new flame. Or, more correctly, Gwen could see Ellie's hair and the laces of her costume back, with Corann's hands roving up and down. Gwen gave a sigh.

"Oh, lighten up," Aidan said with a grin as he joined her with two glasses. "So she's having a bit of fun."

"I guess. Thanks." Gwen took the offered drink, still looking toward the opposite corner. The cold condensation on the glass brought her back to attention. "What's the drink?"

"Relax, it's just juice. Although it wouldn't kill you to have one beer, you know. You're not a recovering alcoholic or something, are you?" He glanced at her sideways, eyebrow raised.

She gave a short burst of surprised laughter.

"No, nothing like that." She sipped her drink to cover the awkward pause. "So, are you all done with the gig?"

"Yeah. They only paid me for the first two hours. Now everyone's too pissed to fully appreciate my talents." He flashed Gwen a smile. "Except you,

of course.” He reached into the drapes of her costume’s sleeves and pulled out a slice of lime, which he carefully balanced on the rim of her drink.

Gwen laughed and bumped his shoulder with hers playfully.

“Nice one. Do you have a whole pantry hidden in your cape or what?” She took a sip from her glass. “So, are you waiting to be discovered? Why aren’t you in the big time? You’re awfully good.”

Aidan laughed.

“You think I should be the next David Copperfield? Poor man, I couldn’t do that to him. I’d hog his audiences, I’d steal all his groupies—no, I’d better leave Davy in peace.”

Gwen giggled then glanced back at the pillar hiding Ellie and Corann. Ellie dangled a flask in her right hand, her left supporting herself on Corann’s shoulder. She looked confused, and gazed straight through the pulsing crowd as if the hall were empty. Corann bent down to whisper in her ear. She nodded, eyes glazed, and took Corann’s proffered hand. Corann led her past a suit of amour and out into the night. Gwen grabbed Aidan’s forearm.

“Did you see Ellie? She didn’t look well.”

Aidan’s forehead creased. “I agree. I wonder...” He left the sentence dangling.

“You don’t think—he drugged her?” Horror swept through Gwen’s gut. Terrible images flashed through her mind—Ellie unconscious, beaten, Corann on her... “I’m following them.”

“I’m sure she’s just a little tipsy.” Aidan gazed toward the door. “But maybe checking on her is a good idea.”

Gwen barely heard the end of Aidan’s sentence as she trotted to the open door. Peering out into the blackness, she opened her eyes wide, willing herself to adjust to the dark. Through the dim she spotted Ellie’s sky blue gown shimmering between trees, a dark shadow accompanying her.

“Well, come on, then,” Aidan said beside her. She turned in surprise.

“You don’t have to come.”

“I’m not going to let you go out there on your own with some potential weirdo on the loose. That sort of thing looks bad in the tourist pamphlets.” He grinned. “Come on.”

They ran down the steps and across the lawn to the forest. Already the dew was thick, and Gwen could feel it soaking into her cheap cloth shoes. She had just lost sight of Ellie when a pale light flickered to life ahead of

them. Gwen and Aidan stopped immediately.

“What’s that?” Aidan said quietly. The light flickered like a fire, but glowed with a pale white-yellow gleam. At the sight Gwen recalled the sickly light of a chemical fire in her chemistry class, a sort of unearthly, unwelcoming light. She wondered if that was what marsh gas looked like, lit up.

“I guess Corann has lit our trail for us. How thoughtful of him.” Aidan moved forward toward the pale flicker. “Come on, or we’ll lose them.”

They moved forward into the woods more carefully now. There was no path in this area of the forest, and they had to pick their way over fallen logs and rustle through dead leaf litter. Gwen cursed inwardly at her floor-length gown as it caught on yet another sharp branch. An uneasy sensation began tingling in her chest. She attributed it to worry for Ellie.

“The light’s stopped,” Aidan said suddenly, drawing up short.

Gwen wavered for a moment.

“Maybe we should stay quiet and have a quick look. Maybe she’s fine.”

“Yeah, I doubt she’d thank you for interrupting if she’s actually here of her own accord.” Aidan glanced at Gwen and smiled wickedly, and she found herself blushing and glad for the darkness.

“C’mon. I’ll be as quiet as I can in this infernal dress.”

They crept forward again until a clump of hawthorn blocked their view of the light. Gwen got on her knees and shimmied forward until she had a view of Ellie and Corann. She tried to ignore the tingling now in her arms and torso. Aidan hesitated a moment then bent down and followed suit.

Ellie was in a shallow depression beside a steep slope, a hedgerow nearby flickering with movement in the unearthly light from Corann’s lantern. The light caught the edges of a crude stone doorway. Aidan stiffened beside her.

“This is Glengarry barrow,” he breathed. Ellie stood still, arms down and palms up, as if in supplication. Her eyes were closed and her chin lifted, expressionless.

“What does that mean? And what is Corann doing?” Gwen whispered back. Corann ignored Ellie, instead pacing back and forth in front of the doorway behind her, his face frowning in concentration. After a few paces, he stopped and stared at the sky, where a waxing moon rose above the horizon. Corann gave a satisfied smile, and turned again to the doorway. He placed the lantern on the ground and reached one hand to each of the doorway’s top

corners. Immediately the impenetrable darkness within the doorway glowed with the same light as the lantern, which flickered weakly as if in response. Corann lifted his hands in triumph and turned to Ellie, who remained unmoving. The light grew brighter and brighter.

Gwen found herself squinting, shielding her face with her hand against the light.

“What’s going on?” she said to Aidan, her heart pounding. She didn’t understand how Corann had made the doorway glow, or why Ellie was motionless in the clearing. Gwen heaved herself up, eyes shut tight against the light, and brushed away Aidan’s restraining hand on her arm. She stumbled around their protective bush toward the other two, leaving Aidan behind. “Ellie! Ellie!” she yelled as she tripped over her hem and sprawled headlong on the grass. She squinted toward the barrow. Ellie and Corann’s silhouettes grew smaller as they walked into the light through the doorway. Gwen closed her eyes in pain at the brightness. Seconds later, the light disappeared and darkness reigned at the silent barrow.

*Want to find out where Ellie went? Buy **Mark of the Breenan** right [here](#).*

Dear reader,

I hope you enjoyed reading this teaser of *Mark of the Breenan* as much as I enjoyed writing it. Gwen and her friends were bouncing around in my head for quite a while before I finally let them out on paper. I'm so glad I did!

If you did enjoy Gwen's adventures in the Otherworld, *Mark of the Breenan* is available on [Amazon](#), as is the rest of the series, *Garden of Last Hope* and *Realm of the Forgotten*. Keep an eye on the newsletter for news about my releases.

Happy reading!  
Emma Shelford

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