Standing Stone

Part One: A Novel

Stepping Stones To Standing Stone

Part Two: Critical Commentary for Standing Stone – A Novel

Jan M. G. Nerenberg
# Table of Contents

Title Page 1  
Table of Contents: Part One of Two 3  
Declarations 7  
Summary Sheet 9  
Acknowledgements 11  
*Standing Stone*: A Novel 13  
Prologue 15  
1-Today-Astoria, Oregon ~ Nightmare 19  
2-October's End-Astoria, Oregon ~ Assignment 23  
3-October-Astoria, Oregon ~ Fly Away 29  
4-1457-York, England ~ Kaleb Kahl Artur 37  
5-1463-York, England ~ Dare 41  
6-1863/66-Little Rollright, England ~ Fiona Middleton 45  
7-1867-Little Rollright, England ~ Child No More 51  
8-Today-Aberystwyth, Wales - Settling In 55  
9-Today-Aberystwyth, Wales ~ Warning 59  
10-1474-York, England ~ Fourth Son 63  
11-1482/85-York, England ~ Opportunity 65  
12-Today-Chipping Norton, England ~ Changing Plans 71  
13-1871-Long Compton, England ~ Whispering Stones Festival 83  
14-Today-Long Compton, England ~ For Luck 87  
15-1485-Knaresborough, England ~ Tryst 93
16-1871-Long Compton, England ~ Through the Looking Glass
17-Today-Chipping Norton, England ~ Mrs Rowling
18-Today-Chipping Norton, England ~ Amulet
19-Today-Rollright Stones, England ~ Samhain
20-1485-Knaresborough, England ~ Gaming
21-1485-Knaresborough, England ~ Plans Gone Awry
22-1871-Rollright, England ~ Nursery Rhyme
23-Today-Chipping Norton, England ~ Mrs Rowling Revisited
24-Today-Aberystwyth/Wales ~ News from Home
25-Today-Astoria, Oregon ~ Birth Records
26-Today-Astoria, Oregon ~ Bequest
28-1871-Rollright, England ~ Allan Middleton
29-Today-Astoria, Oregon ~ Promise Ring
30-Today-Astoria, Oregon ~ Plans and Farewell
31-Today-Aberystwyth, Wales ~ Return
32-1871-Rollright, England ~ Memories in an Elderwood Box
33-1485-England ~ Marcus Brown
34-Today-Aberystwyth, Wales ~ History Lesson
35-Today-Aberystwyth, Wales ~ Luncheon with a Lord
36-Today-Aberystwyth/Wales ~ Charlie
37-1485-Aberystwyth, Wales ~ Escape
38-1485-Wales ~ Murder Most Foul
39 -1486-Knaresborough/England ~ A Death and A Birth
40-1871-Rollright, England ~ Grimoire
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Event/Story</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Aberystwyth, Wales</td>
<td>Friend or Foe</td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>Aberystwyth, Wales</td>
<td>Palimpsest</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>Rollright, England</td>
<td>Incident in 1865</td>
<td>271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>Near Knaresborough, England</td>
<td>Seek My Revenge</td>
<td>277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>Knaresborough/England</td>
<td>Ursula</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>Aberystwyth, Wales</td>
<td>The Ring</td>
<td>289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>York, England</td>
<td>The Marriage of Tobias Shipton</td>
<td>293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>Rollright, England</td>
<td>Ritual at the Stones</td>
<td>301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>Aberystwyth/Wales</td>
<td>Threat</td>
<td>311</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Prelude to a King</td>
<td>317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>The Would-Be-King</td>
<td>323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52</td>
<td>Wales</td>
<td>Devil's Bridge</td>
<td>335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>Aberystwyth, Wales</td>
<td>Questions</td>
<td>341</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>Long Compton, England</td>
<td>Birth Ritual</td>
<td>345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55</td>
<td>Long Compton, England</td>
<td>Treasure</td>
<td>353</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56</td>
<td>Long Compton, England</td>
<td>1885 Confession</td>
<td>355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57</td>
<td>Aberystwyth, Wales</td>
<td>Brother and Sister Act</td>
<td>361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Revelations</td>
<td>371</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Escape</td>
<td>379</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Circle Ceremony</td>
<td>387</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Wisdom</td>
<td>397</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62</td>
<td>Epilogue</td>
<td></td>
<td>403</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Mandatory Layout of Declaration/Statements**

**Word Count of thesis:** ......................... (115K approved by the English Dept.)

**DEclaration**

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Signed ................................................................. (candidate)

Date .................................................................

**STATEMENT 1**

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Where *correction services* have been used, the extent and nature of the correction is clearly marked in a footnote(s).

Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

Signed ................................................................. (candidate)

Date .................................................................

[*this refers to the extent to which the text has been corrected by others]*

**STATEMENT 2**

I hereby give consent for my thesis, if accepted, to be available for photocopying and for inter-library loan, and for the title and summary to be made available to outside organisations.

Signed ................................................................. (candidate)

Date ................................................................. NB:

Candidates on whose behalf a bar on access (hard copy) has been approved by the University should use the following version of Statement 2:

I hereby give consent for my thesis, if accepted, to be available for photocopying and for inter-library loans after expiry of a bar on access approved by Aberystwyth University.

Signed ................................................................. (candidate)

Date .................................................................
SUMMARY SHEET:

This summary sheet should be completed after you have read the guidance notes. The completed sheet should be submitted by you to your Department/School/Institute at the time of submission of your work and the supporting documentation.

Candidate’s Surname/Family Name ………Nerenberg……………………………………

Candidate’s Forenames ………Jan M. G…………………………………………………………

Candidate for the Degree of …………PhD…………………………(PhD, MPhil, LLM(Res) etc.)

Academic year the work submitted for examination………2014-15…………………………


Summary:

Standing Stone, a novel, and the accompanying commentary, Stepping Stones to Standing Stone, form this thesis. The title, Standing Stone, refers to both the Rollright Stones and the journey to self-actualisation of the American protagonist, Barbara Shaunaky, as she gradually develops inner strength and independence. In seeking to understand the mystery shrouding her birth, Barbara travels through contemporary Wales, back in time to nineteenth century England and earlier still to the fifteenth century and Mother Shipton to whom myth credits the formation of the Rollright Standing Stones. The maid/mother/crone triptych as archetype forms a repeated thread throughout the novel as an ancient choice affects consequence influencing each succeeding time period.

The commentary seeks to understand and classify Standing Stone within works of fiction. The nature of story is explored by examining what story is and how Standing Stone is positioned in relation to genre – specifically historic, supernatural, and magical realism as well as classification – particularly Young Adult, Adult and Crossover fiction. In doing so I explore the relation of plot and theme, language, symbols, archetypes, as well as fore- and backshadowing. Standing Stone is analysed by comparing the works of Charles Dickens, Virginia Woolf, J. R. R. Tolkien, J. K. Rowling, Kate Mosse and others.

My intent in both Standing Stone and its accompanying analysis, Stepping Stones to Standing Stone, was to understand the concept of story; the classifications of story; and to examine and understand the term ‘Crossover’ in relation to fictive genre literature.
In spite of the fact that writing is thought to be a solo endeavour, it is replete with many helpful hands. I, therefore, would like to thank the following abbreviated list for helping me complete Standing Stone.

To Drs Rosie Dub, Pauline Beard, and Katherine Stansfield – Thank you for your encouraging words, patient mentoring, and for your invaluable advice; the English Department: Julie Roberts and Dr Anka Furlan for their support; Dr Neal Alexander for allowing extra words so that Standing Stone can breathe a bit; and to Joy Cadwallader and the Hugh Owen Library staff, who saved my bacon more than once. Diolch yn fawr to the Welsh Department for clarifying my nearly non-existent Welsh. I would like to express sincere thanks to Uncle Jack, my Cookie cousins, and the staff at the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation for believing in me and funding my dream, which is now a reality. And last but not least for our Wednesday PG group. You know who you are!

To my characters, who led me on paths that I did not know and places I had never seen previous to this incredible journey.

And mostly to my family - my mom, who gifted me with magic and curiosity; my dad, who taught me the power of words; my children, who encouraged me to dance; and my husband, fy nghariad, who kept saying that he knew I could accomplish this.

Thank You
Barbara stopped. Raised voices filtered through her father’s office door. She could see
the door was slightly ajar, but couldn’t believe that her parents were arguing.

“I won’t have Barbara repeat… ”

Repeat what? Barbara strained to hear but the balance of the sentence was
muffled. Her mother must have turned away.

Ignoring Lena’s oft spoken words about eavesdroppers never hearing anything
good about themselves, Barbara leaned in closer, peeking through the crack until she
could see her parents standing across the room near her dad’s desk.

“Harve,” her mother said, “I know she’s starting college but she just turned
fifteen. She tries too hard to fit in.” Lena paused, “It’s a recipe for disaster and she’s
already been through so much.”

Why can’t she be happy for me? Barbara felt her temper rising as old doubts
began to assail her. She strained to listen.

Her father sighed. “I haven’t forgotten her tears and the tantrums after we
returned from the UK or the months of therapy that followed. I never thought we’d be
a normal family, but we worked through it. At some point, Lena, we’ve got to let her
grow up.”

UK? When had she ever been abroad? Barbara’s question was swept away by
her mother’s outburst. “Harve, how exactly do you expect her to cope? She’ll be with
kids who’re five to ten years older than she is.” Lena’s voice quavered, filling with
tears. “She’s only fifteen. Think of the temptations she’ll face. I couldn’t bear it if…”
Her mother’s words were lost again as Lena covered her face.
“Sweetheart, she needs to find a way,” he said. “We can’t wrap her in cotton wool forever.” The conversation paused again as Barbara watched Dad pull her mother into an embrace then tip her chin up as he looked into her eyes. “She’s got top marks in everything but life, Lena. You’ve got to let her find her own way.”

Go dad. Barbara cheered inwardly.

“Harve, if you won’t agree to a private tutor,” her mother said, pulling away, arms folded across her chest. “Let me at least see that she’s properly chaperoned.”

Barbara had heard enough. It’s not my fault that I’m smart. She wanted to scream but stifled the impulse. Turning toward the stairs, she remembered the endless I. Q. tests and her mother’s delight in telling people her daughter was ‘especially gifted’. I just want to be normal, and always being escorted to my classes is not normal. The idea that it would continue was… well, it sucked.

Taking the stairs two at a time, she almost slammed her bedroom door, but closed it softly at the last minute to avoid alerting her parents that she was home. Barbara leaned against the door before crossing the room to toss her computer case on the bed. Nothing changes. No matter how hard I try to prove myself, to fit in, Barbara ranted silently, I’ll always be different. Look at me. I still live in a little girl room, white furniture and pink ruffles.

She automatically reached for the locket that hung from her neck, twisting the aged chain around her finger. It was warm from the heat of her body. Barbara slumped into the cushioned window seat and began to rhythmically rock back and forth, idly rubbing the locket between thumb and forefinger. She couldn’t remember why it comforted her, only that she’d always worn it, never taken it off. As she stroked the locket, Barbara waited for the silence that heralded the sing-song memory
voice, as familiar as her face yet search as she would she could never trace its origin.

She only knew that the words brought solace.

“Maid turns Mother begets Crone

Greening, harvest, winter’s bone,

Novice, fecund, wisdom grown,

Maid turns Mother begets Crone.”

On the other side of the world, an old woman, wrapped in a faded paisley shawl, studied the journal in her lap. She whispered the words of the protection spell as her gnarled finger traced the incantation on the page. The ancient spell held but she felt it weakening. The cycle had begun again and as before it all came down to choices. She sighed, straightened her shoulders, and sipped her willow-bark tea.
Today ~ Astoria, Oregon ~ Nightmare

The crone creeps toward me, a wraith. Her tightly curled hair is dusty heather, the colour of faded violets. Her eyes hold me bound. They are the grey of the Columbia River on an overcast day; the irises are light almost disappearing between the withered folds of her half-closed lids.

Beneath my feet, small pebbles crumble and slide. The weight of the monoliths encircles me. Behind and to the side, my world dissolves into darkness. I am trapped. My breath catches in my throat and burns my lungs. There is no escape.

The incongruous rhythm of Westminster Chimes floats toward me, distant, soft, insistent. They echo again and again, louder at each strike.

Barbara cracked open an eye and slid a violet-enamelled fingernail across the slide-to-open on her iPhone. The alarm fell silent. Once again she was glad she’d thrown out her old alarm clock with its jangling buzzer in favour of the new app, which woke her to the music of her grandmother’s mantle clock. With a soft shudder, she released her breath and rubbed her eyes, trying once again to ferret the meaning of the phantom that stalked her sleep. The dream shifted, grew vague, and again refused understanding, leaving behind a taint of unease.

“Good morning, Babsie.” Lena set a glass of milk and a flaky croissant on her daughter’s bedside table.

“Morning Mom,” mumbled Barbara, ignoring the usual offering of breakfast. “And, please don’t call me Babsie. I’m not a child.”
“Bad night? You didn’t have that dream again did you?” The morning sun highlighted the streak of silver in Lena’s dark hair as she pulled back the window drapes, lifted aside the lace-edged curtains, and opened the window a crack.

“No, Mother,” Barbara lied. *I’m nineteen, working on my master’s. When will she ever see me as grown-up?* The humiliation of being walked to her undergrad classes when she was fifteen still stung, as Barbara remembered the stares of the older students, the normal students.

“How about some eggs and bacon? Maybe cereal instead?” Lena arched an eyebrow, hopeful.

“No, Mother.” Barbara looked up in time to see her mother’s face close, disappointment evident. Repenting of her sharp retort, Barbara offered, “Mom, I’m fine really. Just not very hungry this morning.” Barbara was rewarded with a smile.

“Dad’s car is in the shop and I’ve got meetings later so no car for you. I guess I’m your chauffeur today. I already called Dan at the magazine to tell him you’d be in a bit late this morning.” Before Barbara could reply, Lena turned and left the room.

“Great,” she murmured, idly scratching Nieko’s head, who was stretched out beside her. The Siamese cat closed her starburst eyes and purred. “First that stupid dream and then mother calling my boss.” She cradled the cat’s face. “I don’t care if they’re friends; I hate when she arranges my life. At least dad likes Ken or I’d never have a social life.” As Nieko’s tail curved into a question mark, the cat stretched, jumped to the floor, and slipped out of the room. Barbara raked her fingers through her dark auburn curls, plumped her pillows, and once settled, checked her messages.

Ken had tickets for the Oregon State game on Saturday. Would she like to go?

“Thanks. Time?” She hit send, omitting her usual heart emoticon. She was upset with Ken’s flirting with Jillian but not enough to say no to a great game.
Jillian, her cube-mate at the office, and most-of-the-time best-friend, wanted to know what was up with the unopened letter from the UK. It was marked to Barbara’s attention but Uncle Dan had picked it up just moments after it had been delivered. Jillian’s text was followed with a colon and a p, her standard raspberry symbol. Barbara twisted her mouth in thought, then sent her reply. “Not sure. B n late. Mother!!”

A text from her editor, Dan Doyle, followed. “Hey, Babs, babe. Your last story hit the mark so I’m enlarging your current assignment. It will knock your socks off. See me.” The smiley face did nothing to soften the underlying demand nor the anxiety his words raised. Barbara frowned. Uncle Dan, as the staff called him, was editor-in-chief for a reason. Whether it was his years of experience or an innate sense, he could always suss out newsworthy stories; but his ideas were sometimes risky; and, after Mexico, her Mother had insisted that she never travel alone again.

“Well, at least he always sugar coats the first part before he delivers the punch,” she commented as her five-toed cat stalked back into the room.

“Hungry?”

Nieko cocked her head, meowing loudly. Turning, she gave her mistress a look that clearly demanded immediate attention, mainly, her breakfast.

“Hey Nieko.” Barbara climbed out of bed and called to the cat’s retreating back, “Maybe I should research the psychology of dreams instead of Dan’s next assignment.”

An errant breeze billowed the long gauzy curtains against her bare legs. Barbara froze in mid-stride, remembering the dream… The eyes, they were grey.
October’s End ~ Astoria, Oregon ~ Assignment

“You want me to go where?” Barbara leaned forward from her perch, the edge of a leather chair in front of Dan’s cluttered desk. As managing editor, he’d taken a chance on a seventeen-year-old and awarded her the coveted internship at History Speaks. Now nineteen and soon-to-be a doctoral candidate, Barbara had been promoted to a staff position although it remained part-time during the school year.

“Wales,” he threw it out like it was a walk around the block. “It’ll be a great story. Think about it. A mysterious dead body, well, skeleton, unearthed inside castle ruins. This is an anthropologist’s dream.”

Barbara opened and closed her mouth like a fish, exhaling in a soft puff.

“Uncle Dan, what about the story you’ve already got me researching. I don’t see how this will dovetail with the early findings I’ve published, and Aber-what’s-it isn’t even on my list. I’d planned on Stonehenge and its relation to several smaller sites, like the one in Rollright. That one hasn’t had too much attention.”

With effort, Barbara forced her eyebrows into their normal graceful curve. She closed her eyes, trying to think what this offer meant. The research was tempting but she’d have to travel alone again. Mom would have a fit, she mused, but Wales isn’t Mexico. Barbara was already planning how she would present this to her mom after the debacle of her first out-of-country assignment. Her shoulders tensed at the challenge. Could she do this? What if she failed? She hated last minute surprises and being pushed past her comfort zone. Worst of all, there was no time to think or prepare.
“Well?” Dan paused. “I need a story on the final disposition of the human remains found at Aberystwyth Castle. This is a hot topic what with the discovery of Richard III’s remains located under a parking lot in Leicester. This may be another royal and we’ve got the inside track. Maybe the body links to the stone circle inside the castle grounds, although the stones look fairly recent but I’m not the expert. You are. That’s why I promoted you.” He paused to let his words sink in. “Your passport’s in order, isn’t it?”

Barbara nodded. “I’m just not sure…”

“Not sure? This is a slam-dunk. Are you still worried about that little mix-up in Mexico? Babs, that’s ancient history. And you got out unscathed.” Barbara inwardly rolled her eyes. *Unscathed is not being followed to my hotel and having the police come cart away the guys who tried to break down the door. How was I to know eye contact translated into a party invitation? Mom still hounds me with ‘what if’ questions.*

Dan pulled a letter on heavy cream coloured paper from the file on his desk.

“And why, may I ask, did Lord Stanley request you for the interview? Keeping secrets,” he winked. “Holding out on your old uncle Dan?”

“What?” Again Barbara’s eyebrows twisted, the crease deepening between them. “I’ve never heard of anyone named Lord Stanley?”

“Hmm, thougt you could tell me, Babs baby. What little I could find from a quick Google search is that he’s an earl in the UK. He apparently keeps a low profile but he’s got money and he wants you. Bit odd you don’t know him?”

“Dan, really I’ve never even heard of him. He’s not on the list of people I hoped to interview for my thesis.” Barbara played with her necklace, sliding the locket back and forth between her index finger and thumb. *I can’t do this. Mom’ll*
have a fit and tell me I’m not ready. But, she argued with herself, it’s a major break.

It could get me into an early PhD slot.

She hazarded a look at Dan. He smoothed his grey moustache, circled his mouth and pinched his lower lip. Barbara knew that move. Dan was thinking. Would he retract his offer? He restacked papers on his desk. Barbara squirmed in her seat. Sit still. Think. What happens if I don’t do this? Would I lose my position here?

Dan’s voice pulled her back to the conversation.

“Babs, I thought you’d jump at this. I’ve already got Jillie working on your tickets. You’ll fly on Tuesday to O’Hare, from there to Dublin, and then into Cardiff International. You can take the bus or train from there into Aberystwyth. Easy peasey. Jillian’s making the arrangements, so off you go and pack what you need for a week, ten days at the most.”

“Ten days. With travel that’s two weeks.”

“Yeah, Babs, my dear.” He winked. “Thought I’d do you a favour. Give you a bit of extra time, maybe some on-site research for your thesis. Consider it a gift for the last minute notice.” He laughed again but the smile quickly faded from his eyes. He leaned towards her and lowered his already deep voice.

“Look, Babs. I need to keep this under wraps for now. When it leaks that I gave this cherry of a story to a junior member of the team, I’ll be up before the firing squad, especially since your dad and I were college chums. So it’s nix on the red tape to request an international phone for you. Grab a monthly throw-away there and keep in touch. Use my private number,” he handed her a small card. “And don’t give that to anyone.”

Barbara looked up to see him studying her over his wire-rimmed glasses.
“Dan, it’s Monday. That’s not even a two-day notice and you want me to fly to the other side of the world. How am I supposed to pack, prep research for this story, and…” Barbara felt her stomach clench as the list grew in her head. She looked at Dan’s carefully coiffed grey hair.

“Welcome to journalism,” Dan said. “Babs, the henge has been done. This is new, well at least within the last few hundred years,” he chuckled at his own joke, “and if you push, you can get your preliminary article in for our winter issue.”

“But…”

“No buts. Lord Stanley wants you.”

“And that doesn’t seem weird?”

“What?”

“That a perfect stranger would request me?”

“Perhaps weird, but then again, why not. The last article you published got some serious attention. Listen, you’re our resident expert on this and if you can tie in a stone circle so much the better, especially in a county without any. Come on, a skeleton, a castle ruin. Americans eat up mysteries, especially when they come wrapped in a British accent.”

He stood and closed the office door, returning to his seat behind the desk.

“Look, I didn’t want to get your hopes up but I got a call this morning from National Geographic’s Traveller magazine. They may be interested in buying this story outright; and running it, giving us credit for the find if it amounts to anything. Seems like this Lord Stanley, who helped finance the dig, turned them down flat for the interview. This could put History on the map and I think you know what that would do for your CV. Babs, you’re it. No pressure, but we’re all relying on you to get this right.”
Barbara tried to think but her thoughts broke as surely as a cue ball hitting a set. If she truly had an exclusive, if this lord actually had information that could help launch her career, but Wales. Crap, what about Mom and Dad’s anniversary in ten days? Double crap, what about the football game on Saturday with Ken? Serve him right, she mused. She was getting tired of his Ken and Barbie jokes and his flirting. And then there was Mom, always trying to keep her in a cocoon, while Dad encouraged her to stretch her wings.

Her phone vibrated. Touching the pad, she saw Ken’s message. “So I can count on you for the game, Barbie Doll?”

The message, the mystery, the possibilities, or maybe it was the infuriating nickname. Her spine stiffened as she looked into Uncle Dan’s grandfatherly face.

“I’ll do it.”
October ~ Astoria, Oregon ~ Fly Away

Checking her texts, Barbara fiddled with her left ear. Wishing she’d worn her usual turquoise bangle earrings, she took some comfort in the pearl studs her parents had given her just before she’d left. Dad had merely smiled while Mom lectured about dressing the part and first impressions.

The first leg of her trip complete, her Aer Lingus international flight was still sitting on the runway at O’Hare. Barbara checked her texts. With no time to grab a warm meal between flights, she was munching on one of the granola, fruit and nut bars her mom had shoved into her bag while dropping her at the airport.

“Just in case,” Lena said when Barbara had rolled her eyes.

“Mom, when will you accept that I’m an adult?”

“Why, sweetheart, you’ve grown so fast and I guess I just haven’t had time to get used to it yet.”

“M-o-m.” Barbara groaned before noticing the moisture in her Mother’s eyes. Wishing she’d been more gracious, Barbara patted her mom’s arm. “Sorry. Pre-travel jitters. I really appreciate the energy bars and you, too.” Her mom smiled and kissed Barbara on the cheek. “I promise I’ll be fine, Mom. Please don’t worry,” Barbara whispered, returning a kiss.

Sitting on the plane and reviewing the interchange, Barbara still didn’t know whether to be irritated with herself for not thinking ahead or just grateful that her mom had. She sighed at the thought that once again it was Mom to the rescue.
Barbara checked her texts. There was a new one from Ken. Opening it, she hoped that he wasn’t still miffed at her last-minute cancellation. With the secrecy Dan had imposed on her and Jillian, she couldn’t explain why she had to break their date, stating only that she’d been called out of town on school business. Not a lie exactly but it was a stretch.

She scrolled through the series of texts to the most current. ‘Hey, doll. No worries. I asked Jillian if she wanted your ticket. She’s wild to go to the game.’ Barbara frowned. They’d all been undergrads together but why Jillian? She always seemed to be near Barbara’s desk when Ken came downstairs from his cubicle in Marketing. Maybe the rumours were… no, she wasn’t going to walk down that path. _Blond hair, sky-blue eyes, Ken’s a good guy, popular, but at twenty-five a bit too old for Mom’s taste_, she considered, _and he’s certainly entitled to take a friend to the game._ Still she was uncomfortable that her last words to him had stretched the edge of truth.

A new text blinked on the screen of her iPhone. It was from her mom. “Be careful and don’t forget to call when you get there. Miss you already.”

The plane began to roll backwards and she hurriedly sent a smiley face to her mom, turned off her phone, and bent to place it in her new leather bag. A last minute purchase, the main shoulder strap unzipped up the middle and converted it to a convenient backpack.

“… tray tables… upright position… seat… correctly fastened.” There was static over the intercom. Barbara nervously looked around but no one seemed to notice. “… electronic… turned… Thank you for flying Aer Lingus.” Everyone was reading, adjusting their pillows to sleep, or looking out the window as the plane
moved forward. She unclenched her fingers from the armrests and felt for her locket beneath her cowl-neck sweater.

*Lord, what am I doing?* She forced down a sudden desire to stop the plane and get off. *You're going to Dublin and then to the UK, an enchanted, fairyland, land of King Arthur and all the books that you've ever loved, where you're going to research a dead man and write a brilliant essay. Besides, you always wanted to return after the class theatre tour three years ago. Maybe you'll even have time to squeeze in a trip to the Rollright Stones.*

A child in the back of the plane cried. Barbara drummed her fingers on the armrest. *What if mom's right and I can't do this?* Her stomach gurgled, rebelling at the Spartan fare. Evidently the energy bar hadn’t been quite enough. *Well, at least I'll know the language this time.* Holding the thought like a security blanket, Barbara smiled as the plane became airborne.

Clouds covered the view out of the window. She reached for her laptop to double check her to-do lists and hopefully get in some research on the thirteen hour flight, only to find the battery was near dead. She’d forgotten to recharge it. Self-doubt descended again as Barbara realized that she’d packed the charger in her checked luggage. She began another dialogue with herself, trying to talk herself through her nerves when the small screen in the seat back in front of her blinked on. Perhaps a movie would quiet the chatter in her head.

Scrolling through the list, she found three that looked interesting and pressed play. Dinner was served during the first, a round of juice drinks during the second, and ten minutes before the third movie ended, the intercom announced their arrival in Dublin and the screen went frustratingly blank.
At touchdown in Dublin, Barbara gathered her belongings and joined the queue exiting the plane. It was only a short flight to the UK and Cardiff International. Still, it was a bit of a shock that the airport wasn’t actually in Cardiff. Claiming her bright pink luggage, she was directed to a connecting bus, which deposited her in a cluster of tidy houses. Barbara was sure some mistake had been made until she heard a train whistle sound. With relief she spotted a small sign, which pointed the way to Cardiff, Shrewsbury, and Aberystwyth. She exhaled slowly, unaware that she’d been holding her breath.

*There must be an easier way to get to Aberystwyth,* she thought. Tired, alone, and hungry, her thoughts were followed by visions of the mayhem she’d torture Jillian with when she returned. Barbara forced herself to take a deep breath, then rolled her luggage upright and shrugged her shoulders to release the knots. The Bristol Channel sparkled at the bottom of the hill. *Coward,* she chided herself. *Always worrying about connections. I should be enjoying myself. I’m back in the UK, just like I’ve always dreamed and I’m flying solo. I CAN do this.* Barbara jumped as a train whistle sounded in the distance. *I’ve just got to remember to breathe.*

The fields on either side of the train spread like a green velvet quilt thrown over a child’s misplaced toys. The rolling inclines were dotted with sheep. Barbara drifted into sleep only to startle awake in wonder at the sight of a medieval church tower in the distance. Once, as her head jerked up, a castle appeared just to the right of the tracks. *It feels like I’m going back in time,* she mused.

“Birmingham,” the conductor called.

Barbara juggled her oversize suitcase and her backpack off the train, wishing she hadn’t packed so much. As she stepped down to the platform and asked for
directions to her Aberystwyth connection, a middle-aged man in a green uniform pointed to the far end of the station.

“That’s the Aber train miss, but you’d better hurry. You need the first two cars. The train splits in Shrewsbury.”

Adrenaline sped her rush forward as the sound of the conductor’s shrill whistle pierced her ears. Waking nightmare, she thought. Beautiful country, but travel’s a nightmare. Jillian must have been having one of her ‘blond’ moments when she made these arrangements. I’ll strangle her when I get back. If I get back. And then I’m going to kill Dan for putting Jillie in charge of transportation. Thoughts of impotent mayhem filled her as she trundled down the walkway, sprinting the last hundred feet.

She counted the cars trying to gauge the break between the second and third cars. When the whistle sounded again, she stepped through the first open door, pulled her suitcase and immediately trapped its wheels firmly in the gap she’d tried to avoid. She tugged and pulled, lowered the incline and pulled again. It wouldn’t budge.

Teeth clenched, frustration began to replace Barbara’s panic. They must see my suitcase lolling like a great pink tongue from the side of their train. As if in answer, the conductor blew the third warning on his whistle.

“Come on.” She’d pulled, down and in, almost falling backward as the heavy bag dislodged itself and rolled docilely toward her feet as if that had been its plan all along.

Safely aboard, Barbara was confronted with mounds of suitcases blocking her entrance. Guess you’re not in Kansas anymore, Dorothy. She winced. I’m beginning to sound like Mom.

Leaving her suitcase in the vestibule, she stepped gingerly toward the only open seat next to a porcelain-skinned girl with soft, ginger-coloured hair.
“Is this place taken?”

“No. Help yourself?” The girl offered a warm smile with her reply.

“Going to Aberystwyth?”

“Yeah. I study history at uni. You?”

“Anthropology, but in America. I’m here for a bit of research. Barbara paused and decided to go for a long shot. “Do you know anything about the history of the castle?”

“Like what?”

“You wouldn’t know anything about the stone monoliths inside the castle ruins, would you?”

“Oh, yeah, they’re Bardic stones, one for each of the original counties in Wales. Got put in place for the Eisteddfod.”

“The what?”

“It’s the Welsh celebrating being Welsh,” she laughed. “Lots of singing, drinking, dancing and storytelling,” she paused. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, thanks. It’s just… I hoped they were much older,” Barbara glanced out the window, trying to rethink the story angle she’d planned for Dan. If the stones were new, the skeleton couldn’t be tied to the stone circle.

The train slowed and pulled into Aberystwyth station.

Barbara stood, gripped her bag, and was propelled forward in the flow of the bustling students, who all seemed to know exactly where they were going.

Stepping off the train, Barbara looked around slowly. *I’ve done it. I’ve walked through the wall and landed at Hogwarts.* The train station was a step back in time complete with Victorian curlicues, metal arches and struts. Weak evening light shone through the translucent roof. She wondered idly if the panes were some sort of
Plexiglas or real glass. It was hard to tell. Everything was surreal and her tiredness did nothing to dispel the impressions flooding into her.

A short man in a green uniform held a sign with her name printed on the surface.

“I’m Miss Shaunaky,” she offered.

“Well, then, this ‘er is fer you.” He handed her an envelope with directions to Lon Hendre House and a key marked number one. He pointed over his shoulder to a cabstand and disappeared into the station office.

Down the ramp, around the corner and out to the street, Barbara turned right, stopped, and stared. There before her was the architecture of Charles Dickens burnished in the rosy glow of the setting autumn sun. Except for the dress of the passersby and the noisy students, she had, indeed, stepped back in time.
Young Mol hurried from the room carrying bloody rags. Ulf could smell fear on her and saw how she avoided his eyes, but he let her pass as he paced, afraid to ask how his wife fared. Mid-stride, he turned away from the long corridor and entered the small turreted antechamber off his wife’s bedroom.

Ulf, knight turned earl, a title won for backing York over Lancaster, strode across the room and stood before his wife’s small prayer altar. A piercing cry tore though the heavy door and forced him to his knees. He had stood watch each of the ten times that his wife, Ellyn was taken abed, but it had never been like this. There had never been a ring of terror in her lyrical Welsh voice, only strength as she brought his children into the world or sorrow when she buried them under the oak on the hillside. Two boys and a girl had died in their struggle to be born. Small Fergus had shown promise for he had learned to run before a fever took him, along with his two newborn sisters. But Magnus, Ansgar, and Jarl, bless God, were strong and the joy of his eyes next to his Ellyn, who alone held Ulf’s heart.

“Foolish man I am. A fool in love but a rutting swine to plant my seed in her again and again.”

He shook his head, leaned forward on the tapestried altar cloth, and rested his chin on his clasped hands. He seldom prayed or fussed with religion for it was Ellyn who saw to the religious needs of the house. Ulf hadn’t much use for the local priest, in fact, thought him a scoundrel for not acknowledging his own bastard children. Nevertheless, in spite of his disgust, he had listened to Ellyn’s entreaties and promised
their second son, Ansgar, to a life of service in the church. Now Ulf pondered what he owned, considering what he might barter for his wife’s life?

Another scream clawed at his heart, wrenching his gut.

“Let her live.” The plea came hard to his lips. A shaft of moonlight reflected off the illuminated letter in the book that lay open on the altar cloth. He ran a calloused hand gently along the border hardly daring to touch the scribed letters of the costly gospel. The calfskin page was smooth, as soft as Ellyn’s inner thigh. His face softened at the memory of their lovemaking until her agony again tore though the nail-studded oak door, raking his soul with renewed fear.

Tears slowly filled his eyes as realisation dawned. He knew what would be a fit offering for Ellyn’s life, but how, he argued, could he barter the stillness of the night when he held her, or the smell of new hay and her encouraging laugh in the loft of the barn, or spooning together, cradling her heavy breasts under a bearskin together when the winter wind howled and screamed. It was too much. He would die of his need for her.

Her scream shattered the air, twisting the dagger of fear deep within his bowels.

“Spare her, dear Lord, and I’ll not touch her again. Never.” Tears ran down his face at the enormity of the promise he offered. He had no idea how he could keep such a pledge.

A shriek rent the air, strangled halfway through.

“I swear. I swear. Only spare her, God in heaven, save her.”

Silence and then the mewling of a child drifted on the still air.

Ulf rose from his knees, trembling. He noticed the black calligraphy on the open page was marred, the letters damaged by his tears. He wiped his face and stood
waiting, but none came to inform him of a successful birth. Unable to withstand the lack of news, Ulf strode into his wife’s bedchamber.

The bedclothes were streaked in crimson. A dog lapped at the spill from a bowl of rose-coloured water, tipped and fallen among the rushes. A silent figure lay upon the bed, white legs akimbo stained with congealing crimson. Old Mother Dickens, her arms slick with gore, waved him away.

“You cannot be here. 'Tis bad luck. You’ll bring the evil eye upon us.”

Uncertain of himself for he’d never entered a birthing room until summoned, Ulf asked, “How does she?”

“She’ll bide and the bairn too, but you must go.” The eyes that studied him were flint. “Now.”

The word was quietly spoken but commanded his attention. He clenched his fists, turned heavily, and caught sight of young Mol standing in the corner holding a bundle. Her face was chalk-white as she shushed the struggling, screaming infant. She had obviously never assisted at a birth before.

“Tis a bonny wee boy, your lordship,” she managed. Eyes downcast, she dipped a small curtsey then returned to comforting the swaddled child, his newest son.
“What are you doing up there, you little flit. Stay still and I’ll come up and get you.” Magnus looked up at his youngest brother, who was far too young to be standing on the ridgepole. Broad shouldered and well-muscled, Magnus turned his towering bulk toward the two lads behind him. He was sure they were the perpetrators of this most current debacle.

“All right, which of you did it?” He searched his brothers’ faces. “Who dared him to walk the beam?”

He watched the excitement drain from Jarl’s young eyes.

“What difference does it make, Magnus?” Jarl shrugged, palms out. “Ansgar says he’s only spare parts at any rate.”

Magnus swung at his scowling brother, knocking him to the ground. “You said that. You dolt, Ansgar. You’re a… I haven’t even words to describe you.” Ansgar returned his elder brother’s glare with cold eyes as he wiped blood from the corner of his mouth.

“Have you, either of you, anything to say?” he raged before turning back into the nearly completed outbuilding. “He’s only seen six summers. You want him to join the group up on the hill under the oak?” Magnus thought of the seven graves on the hillside, the newest one set with a fresh stone a little over a year ago.

Pointing at Jarl, he commanded, “Run get Da. Maybe he can talk him down.” He shouted to Ansgar, “Come help me with the ladder and you’d better pray he’s down safe before Da gets here.”
Turning again to the unroofed building, he called out, “Kaleb, don’t move boy. I’ll come up for you.”

He positioned the ladder against the end wall. Looking up, he could see terror in Kaleb’s eyes, then horrified, he watched helplessly as the expression in his brother’s eyes changed to one of determination.

“Don’t move, Kaleb Kahrl,” he shouted again as he began his ascent. The ladder wobbled.

“Ansgar, hold the ladder, damn it.” He looked down. Ansgar stood against the far wall, his tongue stuck out of his mouth, taunting.

A scream pierced the summer day as Magnus watched his brother’s look of derision change to surprise and then fear. Magnus just had time to see the small figure plummet to the ground and with a soft bounce, lie still.

Ansgar ran from the building as Magnus jumped from the ladder and rushed to the still form.

Relief flooded him, when with a ragged intake of breath, the crumpled figure let out a low moan.

“Kaleb, lie still, little man. Da’s coming.”

“Did you see me Magnus?”

“Yes, I saw you.”

The older boy surveyed the damage, alarmed that his little brother didn’t seem to feel much pain. Kaleb’s right leg was twisted into an unnatural position. “Whatever possessed you to climb up there in the first place?”

“They said I was a baby for cryin’ about Mam being dead.” His eyes filled again. “I’m not a baby, am I Magnus. I just miss her somethin’ terrible.”
“No, Kaleb, you’re no baby but you are a little fool. You could’ve been killed.” He paused, feeling the twisted leg. “Does it hurt bad, boy?”

“My head hurts a bit.” He reached up to rub the back of his head. “Looks like I landed on a bit of straw. But did you see. I walked the length. Well, almost the whole length.” He pulled his hand away and saw the blood. “Am I bad hurt. Magnus, will I die?”

“Just lie still, child.” Magnus tore a strip of cloth from his shirt hem and bound Kaleb’s head. *Please, Lord, let Jarl find Da quickly,* Magnus prayed silently as the minutes crept past.

At last a thunder of hooves announced Ulf’s arrival. He swept Jarl from the saddle, leapt from the horse and ran into the open building.

“Magnus?”

“I don’t know, Da. His head’s just a bump, a bit of a bleeder is all. But his leg’s broke.” He lowered his voice, “He doesn’t feel it, Da.”

Ulf’s face a mix of guilt and pain, he cried, “This is heaven’s punishment. I broke my word and your mam is dead with the last bairn. I broke my word. ’Tis all on me.”

Magnus remained still. He’d heard his father talk like this before but only when he’d been drinking heavily. He didn’t understand his father’s guilt any better now than he had over the last year. All he knew was the persistent grief in his da’s eyes and the scalding anger when any of his sons were caught in a lie.

“We’re going to plank you, son, and carry you home. Do you understand?”

Magnus pulled a wide timber about five feet long from where it leaned against a nearby wall and gently helped Da slide it under Kaleb. The child only moaned once. An hour after they settled him on the dining room table, the surgeon arrived and reset
the broken leg. Kaleb didn’t cry out during the procedure nor when he was moved to an alcove in the great room near the fireplace and made as comfortable as possible with cushions and a feather comforter. He fell asleep while Magnus sat nearby and kept watch. Jarl had been sent to bed. No one had seen Ansgar since the accident.

“Drink?” Lord Artur asked as he filled two goblets.

“Yes, thank you,” replied the healer, standing by a deep casement window.

“Well. Why can’t he feel anything? What’s wrong with my son?”

“He’s obviously broken his leg and possibly concussed his head but he’ll get over those. He’s young. Probably what saved his neck.” He raised his glass and drank before he continued cautiously. “But he’s also damaged his spine. It’s pretty badly twisted.”

“And?”

“There is no ’and’, Lord Artur. His spine is not broken and he is quite young. We shall have to wait and see how he heals. At best his gait will be a bit off. At worst, well,” the healer paused, searching for answers as he gazed at the starry night. He turned toward the distraught father. “He may never walk.”

Ulf stared into the healer’s eyes. “Use whatever means you have, but my son will walk again.”
Gran rotated the pestle around her granite mortar, reducing dried flowers and leaves to powder. The calming scent of lavender dominated the diverse herbal fragrance that filled the stone room. Garlic ropes hung from pegs on the wall. Comfrey (Gran called it knitbone) had soaked for days in oil. Fiona gave the muslin bag another twist to strain the last precious drop into a white porcelain bowl, ready for Gran to combine it with melted beeswax. A series of clay pots sat on the marble counter top waiting to be filled with the healing salve. It mingled with the lingering aroma of bitter golden seal for coughs and colds, the syrup already safely stored in corked bottles.

Fiona loved to help Gran renew her herbal hoard. The people living in the area of the Rollright Stones from Little Rollright to Long Compton and as far away as Oxford and Stratford-on Avon, depended on Gran’s skills as a healer, midwife, and wise woman in spite of her changeling granddaughter. Fiona had heard the whispers that she was fae touched, a changeling, saw the children point to her forehead, snigger, and run away. Some whispered, others called names, but, Fiona noted, all came to receive Gran’s help in troubled times.

“Gran,” Fiona began, trying to keep the longing out of her voice. “Mother’s been gone now for nearly a year. Fiona watched Gran square her shoulders. “She told me stories about the stones before she died.”

“Did she?”

“Yes. And she said that I needed to be prepared to take my place.” Fiona saw the pestle slow before resuming its circular rhythm. She inhaled deeply to settle her
nerves before she proceeded. Fiona knew Gran loved her but part of her grandmother was private, hidden away, sacrosanct, even from her. “How will I know what my place is?”

Gran tapped the pestle on the edge of the stone bowl, laid it on a clean, folded muslin cloth, and placed her heavily veined hands on the table before her. Fiona held her breath.

“You are twelve in two months, are you not?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Fiona felt a tremor of electricity run across her shoulders, the light hair on her arms stood up.

“Did your mother, rest her soul, tell you to prepare for your birthday questions?” The old woman, head bent, continued to study the herbs before her.

Fiona twisted a stray copper-coloured curl round her finger, searching her memory. Under her grandmother’s scrutiny, Fiona felt the heat rise in her cheeks, moving upwards toward her birthmark.

“No, Gran.” Fiona hastily added, “But she did say I asked a lot of questions.”

Gran’s mouth twitched toward a smile, then settled in a straight line. “Not everyday questions, child. She pulled her hands from the table, rolled down her sleeves, and buttoned her cuffs. “I mean stone questions. Did she speak to you of the stone questions?”

“No, ma’am.” Fiona’s heart beat faster. How could Gran know it was the mystery of the stones that intrigued her? Or that her mother had always changed the subject when Fiona asked about them?

The older woman walked to the door, pulled her shawl from its peg, and settled it about her narrow shoulders. “Walk with me, child.” Fiona lifted her wrap from the back of a chair and followed Gran out the door.
Fiona, who usually skipped ahead exclaiming over discoveries, walked sedately beside the older woman. She did, however, keep a mental tally of a patch of nettle, past flowering and suited to make rope, a new growth of mushroom, and observed that the chestnuts would be particularly abundant this year.

Over the hill and across the fields, lay the circle known as the Rollright Stones. The day was chill and overcast; however, upon coming in sight of the white monoliths, the afternoon sun speared through a tattered cloud and picked out each weathered stone. Gran reached out and held her granddaughter’s forearm.

“What do you see, child?”

Fiona, confused as to what her grandmother expected in reply, felt she was being tested. Biding her time to carefully consider her answer, she stood silent. High overhead, a goshawk cried out, then dropped with talons outstretched toward a subtle movement within the circle. Fiona’s heart raced at the beautiful cruelty of nature, wishing the small creature to safety. Ten feet above the ground, the hawk flapped its wings, rapidly regained altitude, and soared away until it was only a pinprick in the sky.

Fiona exhaled, but before she spoke, she felt her grandmother release her arm and stand alone. “You are young, perhaps too young, but you are ready.” Waving her hand in an arch, Gran indicated the stones collectively. “Each year you will come here with me and ask one question.” Gran placed a feather-light hand under Fiona’s chin, lifting it until their eyes met and locked. “Only one question is allowed so you must contemplate what is most important to your understanding. Each woman’s path through the stones is different. Each is altered irrevocably in her guardianship so you must ask well.”

“Can’t you just teach me what I need to know?” questioned Fiona.
“No, I cannot.”

“How old must I be to understand?”

“Understanding takes a lifetime but sometime before you are sixteen, you should be a woman. When you change and leave your childhood behind, you will form a blood-bond with the stones.”

“Will it hurt?”

“Don’t be foolish, child,” Gran’s voice held a sharp edge. “Come, it’s time to return. Think carefully about the question you will ask on your birthday.”

Two months later on her twelfth birthday, Fiona asked which was the centre stone. It seemed a good starting point. Her grandmother pointed to a medium sized stone with a hole burrowed through it. It was bordered by two larger stones and formed an altar of sorts.

“One can see the fairies play when looking through a hag stone,” Gran offered. Looking through the gap, Fiona could see the moon rise, and wondered why she had never noticed the hole before. She didn’t tell Gran that she saw no fairies.

On her thirteenth birthday, she asked if the legend was true. Had a witch turned living men into stone? Gran replied that the monoliths held secrets, power, and were treasured by the women who understood them, then she walked away. Fiona felt she must have asked foolishly. At fourteen, she wondered how the rings around the moon affected the standing stones. Grandmother smiled and whispered a cryptic verse,

“Two rings of the heart
and one of the moon,

blood red for binding,

...
without seals one’s doom.”

As Fiona’s fifteenth birthday approached, she began to doubt both the power of the stones and if she would ever forge a connection to them. She always left the circle with more questions than when she arrived. It was, she reasoned, almost the end of the Nineteenth Century, maybe this was just another old wives’ tale. Yet, she loved her grandmother, and Gran took the circle seriously. Fiona pondered which question of the many she’d considered would be the most appropriate. She thought about the last conversation she’d had with her mother as she lay dying and for the first time actually felt prepared with a proper question when her birthday dawned.

Arriving at the stone circle, Fiona turned to her grandmother. “Mother whispered to me that the true secret of the standing stones is that they are magic but that the magic is in the counting. Is that true?”

“The counting is more augury to show the way, than magic, which is the work of fools. My daughter was…”

Fiona waited but Gran remained silent.

“Gran, that doesn’t make sense. None of this makes sense. The legend says that they can never be counted three times with the same total. The baker tried it by putting a loaf on each stone but every time he came up with a different number. Every child in the village has tried to count them. I’ve tried to count them. How can counting stones in a circle be magic?”

Gran frowned at her.

“Or a portent?” Fiona continued. “They’re just stones, aren’t they?”

“Is that another question, Fiona?”

“Yes. I mean, no. It’s just that this whole thing doesn’t make any sense. Mother made Da promise to keep the stones safe in the family before she died. She
was frantic until he promised but she wouldn’t tell me why. You tell me riddles and rhymes but I’m no closer now to understanding than when I was twelve. How am I ever to understand?"

“Patience, my child. No good can come of forcing life. You must allow it to unfold. On the day you step through the threshold to become a maiden, we will bind your essence to the stones, then, if you choose, your journey will take you to your rightful place as guardian. Blood on the stone brings understanding to the heart.”

Her grandmother turned away. Once again Fiona had more questions than when she had arrived. She hurried to catch up to Gran, taking her arm and assisting her home across the darkening field.
Fiona rolled over as the morning sun streamed into her room. Relieved that the pains that had twisted her stomach into knots the night before had faded to a dull heavy ache, she threw back the duvet. A faint copper smell wafted up from the bed as she slid her legs from the warmth into the chill bedroom air. Her muslin nightshirt clung, riding up and pulling at her buttocks when she stood. Pulling the light cloth free, she felt a thin rivulet of warm liquid trickle down the inner thigh of her left leg. Blood. She whirled around. The bed sheet was bloody.

“Gran,” she screamed. “Gran, help me.”

Fiona slid back into the bed, tucking up her soiled nightshirt; wadding it between her legs, she slid the duvet over herself. Moments later the door handle rattled and Gran’s grey curly head peeked around the corner. Behind her, the door was pushed further open and her father loomed in the hall outside her room. Fiona pulled the bed covers over her face.

“Allan, away with you.” Gran said pushing Fiona’s worried father back into the hall. “This doesn’t concern you.”

“But she screamed.”

“‘Twas only a young girl’s nightmare.” She shoved him away from the door. “Go down to your breakfast and I’ll see to Fiona. She’ll be just fine.”
Fiona heard her father mutter something about being surrounded by hysterical women as he turned into the hall and stamped down the wooden stairs toward the kitchen.

The door closed with a soft snick of the latch. Fiona pulled the cover from her face.

“Gran. I…,” she began, unable to put her fear into words. “Gran,” she tried again, “I may be dying.”

“And why would a healthy girl, who walked to Long Compton and back over hill and vale yesterday, be dying today?” Her grandmother walked across the room and sat on the edge of Fiona’s bed.

“I’m,” Fiona began. “I think I’m ill.” She dropped her eyes unable to continue.

Gran put a hand on her granddaughter’s brow. “You’ve no fever, child.” She put her hand under Fiona’s chin and lifted her troubled face. “Tell me what troubles you, child.”

Tears sprang to Fiona’s eyes. “There’s blood. I’m bleeding.” She turned away her face, screwed her eyes closed, and swallowed the fear in her throat. “Shall I die?”

Fiona felt her grandmother reach out to hold her hand. Though Gran’s hand was gnarled, the veins like purple ropes twisted and woven through a field of brown stone-shaped blotches, it always held comfort and healing.

“You’ll not die, my heart. Today you’ve become a woman.” Fiona saw emotion flit though her grandmother’s eyes, kindness, acceptance, even humour as a slight tremor crossed Gran’s shoulders, and a fleeting smile touched the corner of her mouth.
“But, Gran, I’ve seen the sheep, even Daisy before she had pups. I know there has to be blood but,” she paused, “there’s so much. I stood and it ran down my leg.”

“Tis just the way with some.” Gran stood, crossed the room to a brass-edged steamer trunk, sprung the lock, and lifted the lid. From it, she pulled out a package wrapped with string, which she laid at the end of Fiona’s bed. Untying the bundle, she lifted out rectangles of folded muslin stuffed with fleece.

“This,” she held up a pad and a belt-shaped device with pins, “you’ll wear under a fresh chemise after you clean yourself.” Gran patted Fiona’s shoulder, straightened, and walked to the door. “Come now. Up with ye.” She reached for the door handle. “I’ll bring you some breakfast. Once you’re sorted, you’ll eat and stay abed to rest today.”

As she walked through the door, she turned, “Tonight we visit the stones.”
Today ~ Aberystwyth, Wales ~ Settling In

The rosy glow that bathed the town faded as the cab climbed the hill toward Lon Hendre House, where Jillian had arranged Barbara’s stay in Aberystwyth. Doubling back around a corner, Barbara’s heart lightened as she saw a cosy cottage complete with double dormers and a tidy garden. It looked a perfect British bed and breakfast. The cabbie drove past, stopping in front of a square white stucco building, the lawn a bit unkempt but a plaster gnome under a stunted tree showed that someone cared. Barbara’s eyes widened as hope for a warm meal and comfortable bed grew.

“Lon Hendre House,” the driver announced, stepping out of the cab and lifting Barbara’s suitcase from the boot.

“You right, miss?”

“Um, yes, just tired.” Barbara fitted the key in the door to Flat One and though it stuck, the lock eventually gave way. Handing the driver a five-pound note and waving away his offer of change, Barbara opened the door of her room. Tears pricked her travel-weary eyes as she stared at peeling paint and cracked plaster in the tiny sitting room with attached bedroom. “I’m not at Hogwarts. I’m in hell,” she whispered.

“Do you need any help?”

Barbara jumped at the sound of the voice. Leaving her suitcase lodged halfway through her open door, she turned, her eyes meeting those of a woman, standing in the doorway to an adjacent flat. She was tall, full-lipped, and her accent wasn’t
fully British. It carried an exotic softness. Barbara placed her age in her mid-thirties although an attractive streak of grey showed in her straight black hair.

“Sorry, m’ lovely. Didn’t mean to give you a start. Just wondering if you need anything?”

“I’m not sure. The key fits but this can’t be One Lon Hendre?”

“Well, there’s a two on the front but you’ve unlocked Flat One, Lon Hendre House. They name the buildings here. Bit confusing at first. I’m Tao by the way,” she added, holding out her hand, which was cool to the touch.

“I’m Barbara, Barbara Shaunaky,” she replied, wheeling her luggage into the center of the room. “It’s just not quite what I was expecting in a bedsit, but I’ll probably be fine when I can connect to the Net.”

“Um, sorry, love. Storm yesterday took the wireless down and the Porter’s Lodge for the three houses is closed for the evening so they can’t set you up till tomorrow.”

“You’ve got to be kidding. I was told…”

“Yes, bit of a shock I imagine, but we’ll get you sorted soon enough.” Barbara couldn’t place her accent. It was almost British but had a slow unhurried, almost silky feel to it.

“But I’ve got to let people know I’ve arrived.” Barbara thought of her parents, waiting expectantly for her call. “I don’t have a phone for the UK yet and was depending on the internet to contact home.” Barbara felt the stirring of panic as her chest tightened. Why did I agree to come? This is not adventure. I hate travelling alone.

“Bless you, you must be knackered.” Surprised at the jargon but assuming it must mean tired, Barbara looked into the slow smile that crept into the woman’s dark
chocolate eyes. Tao stood in Barbara’s doorway, continuing to hold the door open.

“You’re welcome to come by my rooms and use my mobile to Skype your people in the US. You’re American, aren’t you?”

“Um, yes. But I couldn’t… I mean… if you’re sure… Thanks, that would be great. I’ll pay the charges. Well… tomorrow when I get some British cash.” Barbara realized she was rubbing her locket, forced herself to stop, and dropped her hand to her side. “Where did you say you were from?”

“I didn’t, but I’m from Barbados. The manager was called away on an emergency, which is why I’m here, but she’s due back sometime tomorrow. She mentioned there might be a late arrival when she left on the fly,” Tao said. “Are you hungry? I’ve got a lamb stew on the hob in Mrs Pugh’s kitchen.”

Barbara’s stomach grumbled aloud.

“I’ll take that,” she pointed to Barbara’s midriff, “as a yes.” She chuckled; her laugh was infectious. Barbara smiled, feeling some of the tension leave her shoulders. Beaten by the hours without sleep, the challenges, and her own anxieties, she allowed herself to be led across the hall where she tapped in her parents’ number, and with a smile glued firmly to her face, told them that she had arrived safely in Wales and it was beautiful.

The warm dinner and an appointment with Tao to get her ‘sorted’ in the morning helped calm Barbara’s nerves before she returned to her empty rooms; the bedsit had a private bedroom and bath off the sitting area. In spite of the general run down condition, Barbara was pleasantly surprised on entering the bedroom to find a flower-sprigged duvet, pillows, and two fresh towels on her bed. The toilet was, however, sans paper. She was glad Tao had placed a “just-in-case” roll in her hand as she was leaving. What had Jillian been thinking when she booked this place? But then
Jillian doesn’t speak Welsh any better than I do, Barbara reasoned. I wonder why the owner was called away?

Although near ten PM in the UK, it was still biologically two in the afternoon for Barbara, so in spite of over twenty hours of travel, adrenalin began to replace weariness. Sorting through her bag, she found a small, framed picture of her mom and dad, which her mother had apparently slipped in at the airport. Arms around each other, her parents smiled into the camera much as they smiled at life. That’s what I want someday, she thought kissing her index finger and touching their faces. Barbara picked up her phone, now just a handy camera and photo album, saw Ken looking back at her, remembered his last text about taking Jillian to the football game, and turned it off, not taking the time to scroll through the pictures she’d taken on the trip. She was still irritated he’d asked Jillian to the game. Mom always worries too much and Ken never seems to worry enough, just assumes I’ll be there whenever he calls. Maybe I should surprise them both and start calling my own shots.

It took a few minutes of pulling various overhead strings to get the shower’s hot water to work but the heat sluicing over her body helped relax her travel worries. Rubbing a towel through her dark hair, she wiped a hand across the mirror and saw green eyes staring back at her from the steamy looking glass. Wonder why they always turn from hazel to green when I get emotional. She changed into her pyjamas and climbed into the bed. Still not sleepy, she nestled under the duvet, recorded her impressions of the day in her online journal, then read a bit. Finally weariness caught up to her and at midnight, she turned out the light and sank into sleep.
The crone approaches, wraithlike. Her woolly hair a dusty heather, the colour of faded violets. The eyes are Columbia River grey, reflecting an overcast day; irises almost disappearing between the withered folds of her half-closed lids.

Scrambling to keep my balance, small pebbles crumble and crunch beneath me. I stumble and the stone monolith scrapes painfully against my flesh. Behind and to the side, my world dissolves into darkness. There is no escape. I am trapped. My breath catches in my throat and burns my lungs.

A withered hand, clawlike, reaches out, turning at the last minute to reveal a glint of silver.

“Beware…”

Soft noises - a rustle of paper and the snick of a lock, added to Barbara’s confusion, as she started from her troubled sleep to find herself in complete darkness. The dream faded quickly as it always did, leaving behind only a vague sense of unrest, of questions asked and unanswered. Muzzy headed, she looked toward the luminous dial of her travel clock as it slowly ticked toward four AM. Barbara rolled over and pulled the duvet over her head as she had done since she was a child, finally sinking into a dreamless oblivion.

The raucous gwacking of hundreds of unseen birds pulled her from sleep as she reached out to stroke Nieko, only to touch empty air. Disoriented, Barbara opened her eyes to bright sunshine streaming between the partially drawn curtains of a strange room. The bedside clock, hands at attention, showed it was noon. Blinking,
Barbara remembered she was in Wales and someone was tapping insistently on her door.

She slid on her robe, crossed into the front room, and looked through the peephole before removing the latch to admit Tao. The sound of ripping paper made her pause.

“Hang on, Tao. Something’s caught under the door.”

On the floor lay the edge of a crumpled envelope, torn, a thin translucent page visible through the jagged rent. She bent, wiggled the envelope free and invited Tao inside.

“What is it?”

“Not sure,” said Barbara, tossing the damaged envelope on a stack of mixed papers and detritus she’d pulled from her suitcase the night before.

“I’m sorry I’ve overslept a bit,” she said, blushing. “I’ll be ready in a minute.”

Barbara hurried into the bedroom and slipped into a pair of jeans, running shoes, and a bright pink Portland sweatshirt. She checked her satchel for her wallet, passport, and slid in her laptop. She heard a shush of papers cascade to the floor in the next room. As the bedroom door closed behind Barbara, Tao stood and replaced the stack on the table.

“Sorry, m’ lovely, clumsy of me.” She extended the envelope to Barbara. “It’s a letter. There’s a ‘B. S.’ and a damaged smudge,” said Tao. “Aren’t those your initials?”

Barbara took the torn envelope. “Hmm, they are.” She examined the handwriting. Although no longer legible, she could tell from her studies that the name had originally been written with a deep flourish in a calligraphic script. Copperplate
or Broadhand, she thought, recognising the style with its swooping thick and thins, the swirling curlicues now long outdated.

Almost no one knew she had arrived in Wales and as she hadn’t even notified Dan, she couldn’t think of anyone who would try to contact her yet. Barbara tapped the letter against her chin. Perhaps his Lordship had sent her an itinerary? That made sense, but how would he know she had arrived? Barbara felt an odd tingle of anxiety. *Get a grip, girl, you’re beginning to act like your mother. It’s just a letter.*

Barbara pulled the single sheet of paper from its damaged envelope.

“This must be some kind of joke.” She handed the page to Tao. “I can’t read this. It looks like gibberish.”

Tao frowned as she studied the circular writing. “Let me see. Oh, bless. It’s Welsh.”

“Really? What does it say?”

“Well, I don’t read Welsh very well. And it’s oddly written, spider-like. But it says, *‘dawnsio ar y dibyn.’*”

“And that would mean…?”

“That’s the odd bit. It’s quite old fashioned. A Welsh expression for ‘dancing on the edge of a cliff.’” Tao’s forehead wrinkled as she looked from the note to Barbara.

“Today we’d simply say it’s a warning about ‘playing with fire’.”
The fourth son of Ulf Artur was a wastrel at seventeen, albeit a good-looking one. Of medium height, he was slim hipped and wide in the shoulders, the slight hitch in his gait barely perceptible, while a mass of curly dark hair fell across his eyes charmingly. When deep in his cups, Kaleb Kahrl Artur was wont to quote his brother, Ansgar, and say that he was merely spare parts, a replacement if one of his older brothers died before reaching their majority. The oldest, Magnus, always Kaleb’s champion, mild mannered and fair, would inherit their father’s smallholding and if he married well would enlarge it. Ansgar, the sly second son, with his overly dour demeanor and soft hands was well suited, though chafed at his life in the clergy; while his third brother, Jarl, Ansgar’s shadow although taller and muscular, was already training as a soldier and eager to seek his fortune in the world.

Martinmas was approaching. The cattle, herded from their hillside pastures and swine from their pens were turned into nearby compounds for the yearly slaughter. It promised to be a bountiful year. Having gained land and title, Lord Artur called his family together prior to the butchering and feast days to come.

“This year we’ll celebrate proper.” He sat in his seat at the head of the hall, smiled and raised a hand toward his son, Magnus. “I’ve signed the contract with John Stanley of York. After the meat is put by for the winter, we will feast for three days and see the joining of Artur and Stanley lands. We’ll not butcher the bull though,” he slapped Magnus on the back, causing him to choke on his mead. With a ribald wink at
his son, he continued, “We’ll need the bull hale and hearty for his wedding night with
the fair Rhiannon.” Coarse laughter filled the hall.

He grabbed a pewter goblet from the long table, “A toast to a bountiful crop
come summer. The girl looks fair breeding stock, wide in the hip, long in the leg, eh,
Magnus?”

His laughter echoed around the table as all joined in the merriment except
Ansgar. “Come Ansgar, not so sour now. No wedding bed for you, of course, but
you’ll lead the way as we begin our fast for Advent. You have purpose as will Jarl
and we’ll even find something for you Kaleb, my wayward son. Drink. Everyone
drink and make merry for we have cause to celebrate.” He raised his cup to all
gathered, drained, and refilled it yet again.

Ansgar’s nod was barely perceptible as he raised his goblet to his lips but did
not drink.
Kaleb watched from his corner by the fire. Rhiannon was finally with child yet again. He knew his eldest brother, Magnus, wanted, no, needed a son to carry on his legacy and make his position secure. His wife had produced two boys but both lay within the iron fence under the great oak, one had lived a week, the other had offered a mewling cry to announce his early arrival and had struggled no more. Two ginger-haired girls, resembling their mother, played near Kaleb’s feet with a kitten and piece of thread.

“Kaleb,” Ulf’s booming voice broke the silence in the smoky room. All faces turned toward him, speculating. Under their scrutiny, Kaleb sat a little taller in his chair and straightened his tunic, trying to hide a newly acquired wine stain. Near twenty-five, he felt he was no more than a hanger-on, and with the Proclamation last year that all men were free and should be paid, he felt he’d been demoted from son, even a lowly fourth son, to servant. He needn’t be paid for he was exempt from the new law. He was tired of wheedling coin from Rhiannon since his father had cut his credit with the Hound and Hare.

Kaleb gritted his teeth, wondering what being singled out would vouchsafe this time, what odious task needed doing. In his heart he doubted that the long-awaited rise in rank to assist in running the farm or of a successful marriage would ever happen while Magnus held out hope of a successful heir. He winced as he wondered if word had somehow gotten back to his father of his one-time dalliance with his sister-in-law. He still could not look Magnus in the eye although Rhiannon had sworn that his failure to pull out had not resulted in anything unwanted.
“Yes, father.” Kaleb stood, stepped carefully past his nieces, and presented himself before his father.

Ulf studied his fourth son, disappointment evident in his pursed mouth. “The sheep are sheared as you well know.”

Kaleb stood mute, remembering sweat dripping from his narrow nose and running down the small of his tightly muscled back as he fought the heavy animals, removing their winter coats. He forced himself to look interested in the back-breaking farm work he despised.

“Magnus feels ‘tis past time for you to earn your keep. I have to agree. You’re to have your chance to prove yourself.” Kaleb’s eyes slid to his older brother, but Magnus stared steadily into the fire. Rhiannon tipped her head lower over her needlework; a faint blush crept becomingly up her slender neck from her tall collar. Kaleb felt his loins grow warm as his mind wandered. He hurriedly focused his attention back to his father as Ulf recited Kaleb’s sins.

“You, of course, know that I’ve had enough reports of your gaming and wenching?” He stopped, pleased as Kaleb opened and closed his mouth like a fish pulled suddenly free from its watery world. “Do you think I don’t know what you’ve been about?” His words were tinged with anger at this son who threw away his promise of cleverness and disgraced the family name. Sowing one’s wild oats was nothing Ulf objected to, it was the public acknowledgement and the private payoffs that stoked his anger.

Uncomfortable under his father’s disapproving scrutiny, Kaleb’s eyes wandered about the room. Unsettled, he saw a look of unveiled hunger pass over Ansgar’s face as Kaleb’s priestly brother studied Rhiannon’s profile. The look, fleeting in nature, changed to disdain as Ansgar shifted his heavy-lidded eyes, boring
into Kaleb’s soul. Afraid to look at their sister-in-law, Kaleb wondered, fear knotting his stomach, at just how much his father knew or perhaps how much Ansgar guessed.

Conciliatory, Kaleb, dropped to one knee. In this setting, he knew that appeasement was his only option. “I am sorry father. Please forgive my waywardness. I have been a fool.”

“Well, at last you show some sense.” Ulf paused, carefully considering his next words. “Our wool goes to York each year and I’m entrusting you with a cartload, only twenty bundles, to trade in Knaresborough. They’re not as large a market as York but they’ve begun producing a fine quality cloth and we should get a good price. You should get a good price. You, who can talk a bird out of a tree and convince any woman into lifting her skirts,” he grimaced, “Perhaps we can put your natural talents to good use.”

Kaleb had the good sense to avoid denial and chose instead to invoke his aptitude for flattery.

“Father. Magnus.” He tipped his head to both. “I thank you for your forgiveness and trust. I vow that as the prodigal returned, so I shall return and make you proud.”

At that moment, little Alys started to whimper, as her older sister, Grace, proclaimed, “Alys smells like slops.”

Kaleb, not wishing to be upstaged in his moment of success, bowed his head and asked, “Bless me father that I might serve the house of Artur well and bring home treasure in the process.”

“The blessing will come with your successful return. You leave at first light.” Ulf waved his son away.
Dismissed, Kaleb bowed toward Magnus, noting that Ansgar was no longer in sight. Kaleb allowed himself a brief smile as he passed out of the room on the heels of his sister-in-law. Busy with the squirming toddler, Rhiannon nonetheless glanced up in time to see Kaleb wink at her as he strode out the back door, whistling softly under his breath. Neither saw Ansgar scowl as he watched, hidden within the shadows.

Rhiannon produced a healthy dark-haired boy, Euan, who secured the male line and was the delight of his grandfather. Eighteen months later, Ulf was buried under the oak tree beside his beloved Ellyn, surrounded by their children and grandchildren. In the following weeks, Magnus, struck down by fever, left Rhiannon a widow while Ansgar advised and controlled the estate until Euan could reach his majority. Jarl continued to hone his war skills, continuing a slow but steady rise within the King’s service. Kaleb, however, thrived as he bargained, ever increasing the family wealth but never returning home for long, except to bestow tokens on Rhiannon’s children, always favouring Euan. Ansgar, alone, watched and waited, ever alert for opportunity as his suspicions grew. If past observations proved true, Rhiannon would eventually turn to Kaleb. Ansgar’s plans to command the family’s wealth would be thwarted if this alliance were allowed. Ansgar vowed this would never happen.

“Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.” The male voice, deep in timbre, had a dangerous quality that unsettled the priest. “My last confession was… ,” the voice paused, “never.”

Lifting the crucifix to his lips, Ansgar recognised the answer as the code Jarl had promised, but still he had to be sure. Confession was required only once a year.

“Never is a long time, my son.”
“Never is my answer, priest.” The voice was cold, emotionless.

Ansgar knew this was the man he’d asked Jarl to send.

“Am I to presume that you aren’t squeamish about… how shall I say this?”

Ansgar continued, “Delicate matters?”

“Depends on the price,” the voice replied.

“You would dare to profit from Mother Church, when I hold charge of your immortal soul?” Ansgar did not like being challenged or charged.

“My soul?” Low laughter came through the confessional screen. Ansgar recognised this was no novice.

Having for some time suspected Kaleb of double-dealing his contracts, Ansgar wanted a spy in place to report on his brother’s business transactions before Kaleb left tomorrow for Knaresborough, but Ansgar wanted an informant he could control. His jaw clenched, he placed a small leather bag on the sill. Sliding it halfway under the screen, it disappeared from view. Ansgar waited.

“This will do,” the voice replied.

Ansgar whispered his orders in the silence of the confessional. Curtain rings clacked together as the heavy cloth was pushed aside allowing his hireling to depart.

“Ego te absolvo. Vade in pace,” Ansgar whispered automatically and then wondered whom he was absolving.
Although Barbara had crumpled the disconcerting letter, thrown it in the trash, and said it must be some kind of joke, she still worried the words like a sore tooth. Who would have sent it? And why? Was it a warning, a threat, or someone’s practical joke meant for another? There was much about this assignment that needed to be ferreted out but for now she decided to push it from her mind.

She had enjoyed exploring Aberystwyth as she and Tao wandered up and down narrow streets, pausing before the clock tower just across from a metal signpost pointing the way to areas of interest – Castle Ruin, Information Center, Market, Prom and Harbour. Blue skies brightened the day as they visited tiny specialty shops. In a corner grocery, Barbara had been amazed that the eggs were not refrigerated; the bacon, called rashers, had minimal fat; and portions of everything were mini-sized. Walking past a butcher shop, the sense of slippage in time was enhanced when she saw fresh meat hung from hooks and displayed in the shop window. She’d also been surprised at how ‘green’ the Welsh were when she had to purchase shopping bags for her few selections.

General sightseeing and their few errands accomplished, Barbara tucked her new pay-as-you-go phone into her satchel. She didn’t look forward to discussing with Dan the growing list of mix-ups and delays, not to mention that the stone circle tie-in to the skeleton was a dead end. Her mouth quirked at her unintentional pun. The mysterious Lord Stanley would surely make things clear once they had their meeting tomorrow.
By way of thanks for the tour and general help in getting settled, Barbara bought them both a late lunch of Dragon Curry at Wetherspoons. A short walk through the castle ruins followed by ice cream down at the Royal Pier gave them a break to sit on the dragon benches and watch the gulls dip and swoop over the harbour.

“There’s so much to learn. I never dreamed it would be so different. I mean I always thought that British English was just American with an accent.”

A precocious gull landed within three feet of their bench and was quickly followed by several of its colleagues.

“Well, not quite,” Tao screwed her mouth sideways and chuckled. “Bit more of a difference, I should think. Watch this.”

Tao sucked the last of the melting cream out of her cone and tossed it skyward. The gull took flight above their heads, snatched the treat in mid-air and flew off, trailed by half dozen other squawking birds.

With a sudden intake of breath, Barbara watched their practiced acrobatics.

“Do they do that often?”

Tao looked at Barbara’s startled face and commented, “They can be quite aggressive at times when it comes to what they want.”

Barbara continued to watch their mid-air fight for possession of the prized cone while Tao stood, gathering her few purchases. With a sideways glance, Tao spoke, “Didn’t mean to get your knickers in a twist, but perhaps you should be careful here… in Aber.”

Barbara wondered at Tao’s words. Were they a second warning?
Late that afternoon, Barbara wrestled her packages through the door while Tao held it open with her foot. The entrance hall table had fresh flowers indicating that the elusive Mrs. Pugh had returned. Tao rifled though the small stack of mail, while Barbara struggled to open the door to her rooms.

“Oh, just mostly the local adverts again. Some good sales at Lidl’s and Store 21 if you decide to stay. If you do, Mrs. Pugh allows some of her long-term guests access to her kitchen.”

At the base of the stack, Tao pulled out a heavy crème-coloured envelope.

“Oh, you must know a toff.”

“A what?” Barbara turned as she set down her packages.

“A gentleman, m’ lovely.” Tao balanced it on her fingertips as if on a silver slaver. “See. Miss Barbara Shaunaky. Even has your right address.”

Curious, Barbara settled onto the end of the geometric patterned sofa. She eased open the flap and withdrew a heavy vellum page.

Dear Miss Shaunaky:

I apologise for bad form but due to unforeseen events I have been called away on urgent business and must necessarily cancel tomorrow’s interview. I shall return next week Wednesday at which point I will reschedule an interview at your earliest possible convenience. The details of the research upon which you have been called to embark are of a delicate nature and I wish to discuss them in person rather than rely on other means of communication.

To ease the discomfort of my unavoidable absence, I have arranged for you to meet Mrs. Rowling, of Chipping Norton. She is a noted authority on the Rollright Stones, which I understand you are also interested in investigating during your stay whilst in the United Kingdom.
Barbara wondered what Lord Stanley meant by *delicate nature*, while an uneasy feeling traced tiny footsteps across her shoulders. She shrugged when she saw the look of open curiosity on Tao’s face.

“I’m sorry, Tao. The… what-did-you-call-him. *Toff*? He was called away so our interview is postponed. The good news is that I get to do some on-site research for my thesis, kind of like I won a research holiday.”

“Holiday?”

“Yes,” Barbara smiled. “I came to do one story and now it seems I’m part of another. Looks like I’ll be staying for longer than a week.”

As Lord Stanley had promised, Ian Williams, the chauffeur, as Barbara promptly dubbed him, rang her bell at precisely 8:30 AM Friday morning. He was punctual and everything she had imagined a British chauffeur would be, except for his age, mid-twenties she guessed, close to Ken’s age. She’d always seemed to gravitate toward men her mother proclaimed too old for her. In appearance, Ian was tall and broad shouldered, with a Welshman’s coal black hair and fair complexion.

He was polite to a fault, including a bow and a ‘Good morning, Miss.’ Barbara hardly knew how to respond to the position of authority he immediately placed her in. He presented identification and a duplicate itinerary, then placed himself at her disposal. She was impressed, perhaps even a little in awe of his presence.

Excited to see Stratford and to finally have someone share her travels, Barbara was disappointed when, after an hour and a half of travelling through Welsh countryside, she had elicited only silence or one-word responses from Ian. Frustrated, she asked to stop for a moment to stretch her legs and climbed out of the back seat of the BMW sedan. Two black and white birds swooped through the air in the field
beyond the petrol station. Not really expecting much in the way of a detailed answer, she nevertheless asked Ian what they were.

“Magpies.”

Assuming nothing more would be forthcoming, Barbara was surprised when after a moment or two, Ian continued. “You might not know it but magpies mate for life. Mum always said that if you ever see a solitary one, you should greet him with, ‘Hello, Mr. Magpie.’ He pointed to where the birds had circled out of sight and were returning across the field. In a soft sing-song voice he recited the poem Barbara assumed he’d learned as a child.

“One for sorrow
Two for mirth
Three for a wedding
Four for a birth
Five for rich
Six for poor
Seven for a witch
I can tell you no more.”

“You speak,” she said, marvelling at this break in his taciturn silence.

“What?” He cleared his throat. “Of course I do.” A hint of red bloomed just above the collar of his tweed jacket and Barbara liked him more for his obvious discomfort. He reached to open the rear door for her. After a moment’s pause, she pulled open the front passenger door and climbed in. She wanted a bit of friendly companionship rather than the ‘Upstairs, Downstairs’ attitude that permeated the car.

---

1 Old English rhyme, which is incised on Morecambe Pier, located in Morecambe, England.
“I’d really like to sit in front if you don’t mind.” She thought she heard him mutter something about irregularities before settling into his silent driving mode.

“Your secret is safe with me,” she began.

“Secret?” Ian’s knuckles turned white where he gripped the steering wheel.

“Mr Williams, it’s not really a secret that you don’t talk much. Anyone spending more than five minutes with you knows that, and another thing, Mister is just too formal. Can I call you Ian?” She hurried on before he could object. “And please stop calling me Miss. Just Barbara will do.”

“Just Barbara?” His hands relaxed on the wheel and a smile played in the corner of his mouth.

“No, not “just” Barbara. Barbara will do fine.” She was rewarded with a full-blown smile. *He is almost handsome when he smiles*, Barbara mused.

Following the light banter, Ian relaxed and pointed out some places of interest as they moved cross-country. However, her attempts to engage him in conversation regarding Lord Stanley continued to prove fruitless. His elusive employer was definitely off limits but Ian warmed to her questions about the countryside and its history. She pondered as to how she would describe him in her journal, perhaps: taciturn with an odd mix of Celtic mythology.

Upon their arrival in Stratford, they settled to a lunch of hearty sandwiches, followed by peppermint tea and cakes at Macdonald Swan’s Nest. Once finished and with hours before the production of *Hamlet*, Barbara asked the desk clerk about local sites.

“The town itself is a great walking tour, the new theatre, Shakespeare’s grave at Holy Trinity Church, and if you’d care to walk further, you can visit his home.” He handed her a brochure with a map to Anne Hathaway’s house and gardens and a small
bag of stale bread crumbs. “For the Queen’s swans when you cross the Avon,” he replied to her questioning look.

Barbara turned to Ian. “So, do you fancy a walk?”

“As you wish, Miss.”

Barbara rolled her eyes.

“Barbara,” he corrected.

The day proved cool with scattered grey clouds. Crossing the Avon, they stopped to throw crusts of bread to the swans drifting across its surface.

“They’re lovely,” she said. “Oh, look, a black one. I understand that all swans in England belong to Her Majesty, the Queen. Is that really true?”


Admiring the stone architecture of the small town, they soon left its environs and found themselves before an open field. Barbara drifted along the narrow path in silence. *Will Ken have as much fun with Jillian tomorrow as I’m having with Ian today?* For a moment, she felt a twinge of disloyalty then Shakespeare’s home appeared across the field.

The gardens of Hathaway House were sparsely populated when a sudden downpour forced everyone inside. The female guide, dressed in old-fashioned garb, complete with a shawl and chatelaine keys, encouraged Ian and Barbara to sit in an empty straight-backed bench near the fireplace before she began her lecture on the house and its furnishings.

Daydreaming about what Ann Hathaway’s life had been like in a home with such compact spaces, Barbara suddenly realized the room had gone quiet and looked up to discover she’d been asked a question. “Pardon me?”
“I said, have you felt anything while you’ve been sitting on the settee?” The hostess clasped her hands and looked hopeful. Barbara felt as if she had come into the conversation sideways and wondered what in the woman’s speech she had missed.

“Hmm, no.” Barbara’s voice rose as if asking a question. “Was I supposed to?” She glanced sideways at Ian.

“Well, it is said by some that the room is haunted and that when lovers sit by the fireside…”

Ian looked as if he’d been prodded with the poker lying on the hearth. Barbara felt heat creep behind her scarf and flood across her face. The hostess, realising her blunder, quickly pointed out the history of the pewter and china plates adorning the opposite wall, trying to deflect the sound of tittering among the other tourists. Ian excused himself to Barbara, hunched his shoulders and walked outside.

Barbara completed the house tour in silence, her mood as subdued as the weather when the sun suddenly cut through the small windows. Deciding to visit the willow bower in the yard, she entered and listened to recordings of some of her favourite sonnets, wishing she could share this moment with someone. She wasn’t sure why she felt so disappointed that Ian had chosen to wait outside. She thought of Ken and the Oregon State game. Maybe it’ll rain on them, too, she mused. Not very nice; Jillian’s your friend, she scolded herself. Then why did she accept Ken’s invitation? Listen to yourself. You not only talk to yourself. You answer. You’re in England. Live in the moment.

Disgruntled, she got up from the bench and went to find Ian in the gift shop. He wasn’t there. Following the attendant’s pointing finger, Barbara saw him standing just outside the window, cap pulled low over his ears, talking animatedly to someone on his phone. As she rounded the corner, he looked up and abruptly ended his
conversation. She thought better of commenting about the mistaken relationship, choosing instead to walk back to town, again in silence.

Early the following morning they drove amidst intermittent snow flurries to Chipping Norton and checked in at the Crown and Cushion. Walnut-panelled wainscoting, a slate entryway, a cozy reading room, well appointed with books, and a cheery fire greeted them. Past the reception desk, a pub and dining room sported another fireplace. *It’s like being in a Dickens or Austen story*, thought Barbara, totally charmed. It was the perfect movie setting for a British country inn and pub and so much nicer than her accommodation in Aber.

While Ian arranged a lunch basket, Barbara climbed the narrow stairs to her room, fixed a cup of chamomile tea and relaxed, enjoying the view of the downtown. The roof line across Chipping Norton’s main street varied up and down with a sag and a twist in the slates, looking much like the buildings had been smashed together by a playful child. The morning weather had slowed and settled to a grey drizzle though which breaks of blue gave intermittent hope that the day would clear.

Barbara watched a single magpie fly past. “Hello, Mr Magpie,” she murmured remembering Ian’s words. Then she recorded Friday’s events in her laptop journal. The trip to Stratford from Aberystwyth had been pleasant after Ian had warmed to her questions. Vistas of emerald velvet spread across undulating hills, broken by green-black and brown hued hedgerows, and sprinkled with small puffs of white sheep sporting either marks of pink or blue paint on their backsides, which she presumed were the identifying marks of owners. Pausing in her record, Barbara tried to decide on a colour that would describe yesterday’s skies. Painfully blue, she typed, then chewed on her lip musing over her choice of words.
The discomfort caused at Hathaway house had been replaced with a relaxation of tensions during the evening’s play and a bit of camaraderie was restored over dinner at The Dirty Duck, a local attraction in itself.

Barbara sat back from her computer entries and turned her attention to Lord Stanley’s letter, which lay open to the left of her computer. She reread his regrets, a brief introduction of Ian, put a tick mark next to Friday’s itinerary and moved on to reread what Saturday would hold. In spite of his generosity in entertaining her, she began to have a niggling feeling that Lord Stanley was somehow manoeuvring her. Don’t be silly, she chided herself. You’re having a great time. Ian is interesting and the UK is nothing like Mexico. Barbara sighed. I guess extending my trip isn’t so bad, especially since the standing stones are now part of the itinerary. Odd though, that Stanley knows so much about my research. I wonder if Dan knows something he’s not telling me. She dismissed the thought and scanned the balance of the letter, reviewing the plans for today.

Saturday, 3 November - Rollright Stones – After breakfast at Swan’s Nest in Stratford, Ian will drive you to The Crown and Cushion in Chipping Norton. Dating to the 15th century, it was constructed originally as a coaching inn. After your arrival and time to refresh yourself, Ian will supply a hamper as well as any measurement tools and/or assistance you might need for your research and accompany you to the Rollright Stones. Mrs. Rowling will be pleased to entertain you for late tea at 4:00 PM when you return from your on-site visit.

Sunday, 4 November - Samhain festival by the Cotswold Order of Druids will be held during the evening shortly after 3:30 PM at the Rollright Stones.
Monday, 5 November - Mrs. Rowling has graciously extended an invitation for a one o’clock luncheon on Monday to answer any questions you may have regarding the Festival. When finished, you will be returned to your lodging in Aberystwyth.

I hope this meets with your approval and in some way makes amends for my regrettable last-minute cancellation.

My most sincere apologies, Stanley

Barbara again thought of Tao’s words and had to agree, Lord Stanley was ‘a bit cheeky. But definitely a toff.’

She smiled and decided to check her emails before Ian arrived with the hamper. Dan’s latest email stared from the backlit screen. It had been sent over eight hours ago and was typical, “I need a story. If you can’t tie the skeleton to the stones, get something. Make this trip count.”

What more could she say. She’d forwarded the itinerary she’d been given and told Dan that her visit to the Ceredigion Museum confirmed that the standing stones at the Aberystwyth castle ruin were actually Bardic stones, installed during a late twentieth century Eisteddfod festival. The skeleton’s identity was unknown and further information was in the hands of Lord Stanley but he’d been temporarily called away and was unwilling to discuss his request except in person. She wondered again what he meant by delicate nature.

A bit irritated that she was being pushed into a situation not of her making, she quickly typed, “Off to Rollright Stones. Will look into possible story on Druids,” hit send, and rose to answer a polite tap at the door. Glancing at her watch, she smiled. Ian was always punctual. As she shrugged on her coat, she realized that she was looking forward to spending the day with him.
Long Compton’s Rollright Stones Festival was held on the summer solstice rather than the turn of the year. The villagers agreed that the warmer June weather encouraged more visitors from neighbouring communities as well as allowed interested tourists to attend and empty their holiday pockets. They reasoned that if their festival dovetailed with Stratford’s plans to build a permanent memorial theatre to house Shakespeare’s plays, the shared trade would enrich both communities.

Little was said or advertised about Mother Shipton or her part in the Rollright Stones, but the myth clearly stated that the witch’s spell could only be broken at midnight when the old Norman Church rang its bells, ushering in a new year. It was only in those few moments, tradition claimed, that the King Stone, his granite men and the Whispering Knights could have their living flesh restored and resume their interrupted journey.

No official commemoration was announced on New Year’s Eve, but locals gathered in the pubs, and a few hearty, somewhat fortified souls at the Rollright circle itself, waiting to see if the stones would regain their mortal forms. Would they leave the fields where they had stood sentinel for hundreds of years, perhaps enter Long Compton to share a drink, and then march forward to continue on their quest to conquer all of England? It was just a myth, the residents reasoned. Yet when gathered in small groups each year, they still spoke in guarded tones.
At the summer festival, however, the locals merely laughed aloud, plied their wares, and never mentioned the New Year’s bells to fair-goers, for there was work to be done and their visitors had money to spend.

Business was brisk outside the Crown and Cushion where Fiona Middleton sold a new British delicacy, fish and chips, to hungry passersby, raising much-needed funds for the small village library. She gingerly handled a steaming newspaper, cooking oil already staining its surface, and exchanged it for some coins from a rosy faced man.

“Next, please,” she sang out, smiling.

Turning with another wrapped package, she found herself looking into a soft, grey suede vest, its gold watch fob winking in the afternoon sun. Her eyes rose slowly past the burgundy cravat and into the clear grey-green eyes of Iain Stanley. Her smile faltered.

“Iain . . .” Her voice was barely audible. She wished she were anywhere but here with her memories colliding, calling out like a clamour of rooks flushed to flight. Fiona looked down, trying to control the shaking of her hands and the rising colour in her cheeks.

“Well, it’s nice to be remembered by at least one… friend?” The corner of Iain’s mouth twitched, a sign that he was teasing, perhaps hoping to bridge the history that separated them.

He took the package from her hand, laid a coin on the counter, and handed the meal to a young boy, the last in line behind him. The boy’s sun-darkened face split into a grin as he accepted the bounty, pulled his forelock in thanks, and turning, rushed away toward a gathering of friends.
Curious at Iain’s sudden generosity and his emphasis on the word ‘friend,’ Fiona looked up, noting a touch of gray in his hair. Was he lonely then after his wife’s death and his long absence from the village?

“You’ve changed Fiona. A bit taller. Not so gangly. You were all arms and legs as I remember.”

“I’m surprised you remember me at all.” She crossed her arms, willing her heart to slow its rapid pace.

Iain rolled his eyes and extended his hand. “Walk with me, Fiona.” As was typical with Iain, his question was more a demand than a request.

“But I’ve hungry customers to tend,” she said, hoping to excuse herself.

“I just fed your last customer and ol’ Bob can feed the rest.” Before she could protest, he pulled three shillings from his pocket and took her hand. Her heart raced at his touch as he pulled her around the makeshift counter. “That should top up your library fund.” He winked at Bob, who stared round-eyed at the coins placed in his hand, then smiled gap-toothed from the pub’s open door.

Threading her arm through his, Iain escorted her into the square. Heads turned and whispers rippled in their wake as they made their way through the maze of tables and booths. Fiona, her heart a turmoil of conflicting emotion, made the occasional introduction as Iain led her past displays of colourful quilts, cakes, pies and preserves, delicate lace, and assorted trinkets. She pushed away memories of the ache she’d felt as a child when she’d waited for Iain to return home from boarding school. He’s no longer a part of my life and it’s foolish to remember what could have been, she chided herself.

As they’d neared completion of their circuit, Fiona saw her father step through the door of the Red Lion. She prayed he’d not been drinking but as he stumbled down
the stone step, she knew her prayer had been denied. She watched him look toward her former station in front of the Crown and Cushion and not seeing her, begin to scan the square.

On the distant side of the fair near a display of pots and small earthenware bowls, a tall, spare man in homespun walked around the village clock tower and came into view. His halting gait and shaggy black hair told her it was Michael. She wondered what he would think of finding her arm-in-arm with Lord Stanley’s son, Iain. Her next thought was no less disconcerting. How could she explain her deepening relationship with Michael to Iain? What did Iain want from her? Suddenly she felt torn between the men in her life, unsure of how she felt about any of them.

“Iain, thank you for escorting me.” She carefully pulled her arm free before he could protest. “But I must excuse myself.” She resettled her shawl around her slim shoulders, turned, and hurried away, cutting off his objections.

Crossing the square, she placed an arm around her father and led him homeward. In her hurry to remove her father, she didn’t see Michael’s wave of greeting. Nor did she see the slow lowering of his arm as his eyes met those of Iain Stanley.
Barbara zipped her black down-filled jacket tighter around her neck and adjusted her striped wool scarf snug against her ears. Saturday’s sky was now fully overcast, the ground damp from an earlier rain. She turned to look down the hill toward the gate where the hedgerow blocked the view of the Rollright Stones across the road. Her eye followed the gentle slope up the hill to the King Stone, twisted and pitted with age and held captive within its protective iron barrier. Barbara imagined the torture of an ambitious man struggling against his fate. What she couldn’t understand were her own feelings.

Two years ago on a class theatre tour from London to Stratford, the bus driver had announced a spontaneous side-trip past the Rollright Stones. She’d only glimpsed the monuments for a few fleeting moments but stories had flashed through her mind, impressions she’d tried to record in her small, pink travel diary. Today, she’d felt little of the inspiration experienced previously. The ideas generated still intrigued her but her original intense connection had somehow diminished. No. Not diminished, she thought, but definitely changed. Why do I feel like I belong here?

Further up and topping the crest of the hill was David Gosling’s newly placed art installation, a lifelike twisting of tree limbs forming a witch with an outstretched hand. A shiver ran across her shoulders as she studied the hag’s twisted wand, eerily stretched toward the King Stone. She almost felt tied to the myth. As on the train to Aber, she again felt a slight doubling, a shift that disappeared even as she tried to
focus. *It’s England*, she reasoned as she shook her head, turned away and looked out across the hills toward Long Compton in the distance. *I’ve been bewitched in fairyland.* She wondered if the witch had really lived or was she just a local fable?

“More hot chocolate. There’s a bit left in the thermos.” Ian had learned that Barbara preferred chocolate to tea. He continued gathering the picnic leavings, clotted cream, cakes, and a partially eaten package of Hob Nobs. When she didn’t answer, he looked at her and waved his hand.

“Hello, Barbara. Where’ve you gone?”

“Me. Oh, yes. I guess I was daydreaming. Ian, do you believe in past lives?” she asked, pulling her eyes from the King Stone to see Ian’s startled expression.

“No, I do not.” His words abrupt, he capped the thermos, picked up the basket, and started down the incline toward the parked car. “I’ll just stow this whilst you finish your thoughts,” he called over his shoulder.

“I don’t mean reincarnation but like a genetic memory of our ancestors,” she called to his retreating back. *He is so unpredictable,* she thought, another mystery to unravel.

Barbara sat on the heavy plaid blanket of blue, green and yellow placed over the longest of the five stones surrounding an unused fire pit. No evidence of yesterday’s snow flurry remained, though the ground was still a bit damp and cold. Proud of the progress she’d made with Ian, his moods still confused her. They’d shared an affable lunch but some of her questions were met with a firmly closed door. She wondered idly what Lord Stanley’s instructions to him had been.

Her mug of hot chocolate warmed her hands while she reviewed the pages of her old diary. Packed on a whim, it now lay open on Barbara’s lap revealing her long ago entry.
‘The standing stones were placed upright in the low valley long before the
time of scribes, their story told in whispers through the ages. With each
telling, the storyteller added embellishments seeking to please the
gathered listeners as sparks flew up chimneys and roaring fires were
reduced to glowing coals. Only three parts of the story remained constant
– the women guardians, the magic, and the fact that if thrice counted, the
stone tally would not match’.

Today, revisiting the stones that had sparked novelistic ideas a few years
earlier, she remembered her parents’ less than enthusiastic response to her thoughts on
becoming a writer. Nevertheless, when the journalism internship at History Speaks
was posted, she’d been the first to apply. Her father had surprisingly approved, based
on the upscale status of the journal and his longtime friendship with Dan, the editor.
However as she warmed to the writing assignments, her parents worried. “Teaching is
more suited to earning an income,” they’d said. “Anyone can write a story but
someone has to be responsible to pay the bills.” Her father, who taught anthropology
at the university, was pleased when she decided to follow in his footsteps. During her
BA she found that she enjoyed studying ancient people. Just past seventeen, her
proposed master’s thesis, “People of the Stone,” was accepted.

Barbara took another sip of her cooling chocolate, remembering that her
mother had finally stopped escorting her to school but had continued to fuss over her.
Barbara frowned. Yes, her mother worried. Still and all, she thought, I’m here, mom,
and I survived the trip. Just barely but I’m here.

Again she wondered about her whirlwind trip to Wales and the elusive Lord
Stanley, a continuing mystery. How had he known I was fascinated with the Rollright
Stones? Did I mention them in one of my articles? Perhaps he’d made inquiries. Dan.
No, Dan said he didn’t know the lord. A chill raised the hair on her arms. I’m just cold, and being rather ridiculous, becoming caught up in the mysteries I’ve always attached to the UK. It’s not such a great leap from stones in the castle ruins to stones elsewhere and it’s no secret what my research interests are. Besides the coincidence of Mrs Rowling and the Druid festival made Rollright a likely choice, didn’t it?

An eeriness settled about her shoulders. Barbara looked toward the wooden witch sculpture. The twist of the wood seemed to create eyes and a screaming mouth.

She turned as the sound of whistling broke the spell. It was Ian, returning with a black umbrella. In his unguarded moments, he continued to pleasantly surprise her. The melody stopped when he caught her looking at him. He’d actually be quite good looking if he wasn’t so… what. Distant. Formal. She wished she could break the barrier he so carefully maintained.

“Bumbershoot?” Barbara said hopefully.

“That’s actually an Americanism. We just call it an umbrella,” he said, the corner of his mouth lifting in a smile. As the first drops of rain fell, he stooped to pick up the plaid picnic blanket, offered his arm, and commented, “If you’re ready to go, I’ve located three stores that carry the china pattern you mentioned you hoped to find while in the UK.”

Two hours later Barbara was ready for her meeting with Mrs Rowling. Exchanging her Portland sweatshirt for a shirt, pale green sweater and short skirt, she stood before the looking glass in her hotel room, pondering the conversations she’d had with several of the shopkeepers in Chipping Norton. They’d seemed genuinely surprised that she had secured an interview with the reclusive Mrs Rowling. One in particular, a cheery little woman with bright eyes finished wrapping the willow-patterned teapot Barbara had purchased, but in handing back her change, had pressed
a small delicately woven amulet suspended from a black silk ribbon into Barbara’s outstretched hand.

“For luck, deary.”
The eighteen miles to Knaresborough had left Kaleb dusty, cross, and in need of a drink. It was unseasonably warm for this early in spring. For two years the bargains he’d struck, first with wool and then with leather merchants, had made his father money enough that Da mostly turned a blind eye to Kaleb’s continued peccadilloes and occasional losses at the gaming tables. Kaleb was always mindful of his family’s portion, he just never felt the need to explain the better bargain he often arranged nor the bit of extra cash that always came his way before any goods exchanged hands.

He’d made a particularly satisfying sale this afternoon after which he ordered the farm’s freemen to sleep with the cart and animals for the night. They were directed to see to the delivery of the leather hides the following day, pick up the cloth and household goods Rhiannon had requested, and return home at first light after loading the agreed upon supplies. Pressing business would hold him in York until the day after next, or so he told them, all the while knowing that the remainder of the time in Knaresborough was his own, and Kaleb had plans for enjoying himself.

“Sweet Agatha,” he murmured to himself as he rode down the village street toward the Dragon’s Head Inn. The proper starched cap she always wore under her veil on market days never seemed to contain her golden hair. A few wispy curls with a glint of copper highlight charmingly escaped their prim confinement. He couldn’t wait to watch her unpin it again, to see its fullness cascade around her shoulders like water over a weir. He thought back to their first meeting at the Textile Guild, where he’d prearranged a shipment of wool for a dealer in London. Agatha was Edwin
Southill’s only daughter. Fifteen and seemingly shy, she’d dropped a pert curtsey and disappeared through the shop’s side door, which led to the family apartments overhead. He hadn’t heard her step climb the stairs, however, and wondered if she waited, listening, behind the closed door. When he’d returned, two days later, he’d been a bit unsettled, then intrigued when her dark eyes returned his appraising look. That had been all the encouragement Kaleb needed.

Discreetly attentive in front of Edwin, Kaleb had voiced interest in a possible purchase of land, suggesting he might settle locally, before he’d politely asked permission for young Agatha to show him more of the town. He smiled as her fool of a father allowed his little lamb to show him the cathedral and sights along the River Nidd. Proper during their first walk, Agatha had teased and held his arm, successfully blocking his advances. On the second, he’d pulled her under the willows that thickly lined the riverbank. She offered a token resistance but returned his kisses with eagerness, and then pushing escaped curls back into place, had run back to the public walkway, but not before peering out of the dense foliage to make sure it was deserted. Coquettishly, she’d laughed at his inability to join her until his ardour had calmed. On their third walk, she had led him deeper into the copse to a small deserted fisher’s cottage across the bridge and away from prying eyes.

He inhaled sharply, remembering the scent of lavender on her skin. Virgin she was when they’d entered the small croft, not so when they returned from that day’s walk among the willows. Thoughts of Agatha, sloe eyed, eager, her mouth the colour of a sun-red poppy, heightened Kaleb’s desire again. He moistened his lips and resettled himself in the saddle as he felt the heat of memories stir within him.

This won’t do, he thought, and it was far too late to call upon her without raising suspicion. Besides, he reminded himself, he had to keep his wits about him if
he hoped to settle the debt with Rob Mason, who’d won Kaleb’s entire profit from his last trip to Knaresborough. Anger at his gaming loss diminished his ardour allowing him to dismount without embarrassment. He brushed at the road dust that had turned his cloak grey, threw a copper to a small boy, and ordered him to stable his horse while he entered the Dragon’s Head.

“Ah, Master Artur, is it. Good to see you again, sir.” The proprietor was round faced, balding, and quick to see to the comfort of a frequent guest. Lifting down a key, he presented it. “Corner room just as you like. Had it done up fresh, today being market day.” He smiled revealing a missing tooth. “Dinner?”

“What’s on tonight, Tom?”

“Got a roast on the spit and some pasties. Oh, and a new barrel of Martha’s best ale.”

“That’ll be fine, Tom. I’ll be down in a bit but first want to scrape off some of the road dust.”

“As you wish, sir.”

“Game tonight as usual?”

“Yes, sir. Back room of the pub. Usual crowd will be there.” Tom paused, studying his guest. “Anything else you shall be needing.”

“Yes, send the boy up. I’ve a letter to deliver.”

An hour later, bathed and message dispatched to Agatha for a tryst tomorrow, Kaleb sat in front of the remains of his meal at the long table. Tom’s wife, Martha, brought over a pitcher of ale to top off his mug. Bending low across the table, she revealed her ample cleavage. “Anything else you see that you might like,” she leered a bit.
Kaleb stood, smiling. “Why, Martha, you shock me?” His eyes laughed as he gave her ample rump a sharp pat. “You know you’re too much woman for me.” This sent her into gales of laughter, her loose breasts rippling beneath her cotton shift. He entertained the thought for only a moment, knowing there’d be the devil to pay for a dalliance. Though Tom was lumpish looking, he doted on his outspoken wife and only put up with her ribald banter because it was good for business.

“I’m off to the game, Tom. Better keep a close eye on Martha. She seems a bit frisky tonight.” She swatted at Kaleb with her wipe-rag before she waddled away with his dinner service, throwing the remains of his trencher to the dogs.
The young hazel-eyed woman stopped to scan the rolling hills, then proceeded furtively along the untrimmed hedgerows, heavy with spring growth, tiny white flowers, and black bryony. The varied green leaves created not only impenetrable barriers for the livestock but as the summer deepened also provided sanctuary for nesting life. The morning was unusually cool, the ground fog not yet burned away. As Fiona pulled a light cape closer about her shoulders, she startled at a sudden rustling near her feet. Frozen, her heart pounding within her slight frame, she exhaled in relief as, with a flick of its tail, a coney disappeared into the safety of a hole beneath the dense hedge. She scanned the open fields once again, comforted when only sheep returned her gaze with disinterested expressions. While settling the soft grey hood a bit higher on her head, she smoothed her copper curls hair back within its folds, hiding her identity. The early morning mist slowly dissipated, drifting in wispy tendrils, ghostlike in the pre-dawn light.

Cautiously, Fiona continued across the quiet hillside, trailing in the footsteps of her father. She kept close to the hedgerows, trying not to be seen. Why had he left the house and turned away from the barn to cross the field? Why did he suddenly disparage her friendship with Michael after all his generous help about the farm? Something was not as it should be and she traced the change to last month’s festival. What was Da planning?

Then there was Iain. Since they’d renewed their friendship at the fair, he seemed to appear everywhere she went – shopping, crossing fields; again last
Tuesday, he’d intruded at The Crown and Cushion, the small coaching inn which housed a limited collection of books in a cheery side room. A volunteer reader, she’d been surrounded by a circle of eagerly listening children. Her voice rose and fell with the cadence of the nonsense rhyme…

“‘Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.”

The goggle-eyed group of youngsters sat entranced before her. No one spoke until the youngest, a girl, her braids adorned with bows, broke into a smile and began clapping. The children all joined in the applause.

“All right, children. Shhh now, and thank you,” she smiled. “That’s the end of Jabberwocky but we’ll return to Mr. Carroll’s adventures with Alice next week.” She dismissed her mixed class of five through eight year olds, closing Lewis Carroll’s newly published book, Through The Looking Glass and What Alice Found There.

Feeling eyes on her, Fiona looked up through curls that had tumbled free and fallen across her forehead and found Iain Stanley studying her from across the room. Sweeping back the copper curls, she pinned them neatly in place, purposely leaving her birthmark exposed. He didn’t look away but walked across the room toward her. Fiona regulated her breathing, seeking a calm she did not feel. Turning back to the antiquated oak cart, she began organising the village’s precious books.

Why was Iain being so persistent? There would surely be talk when his attentions were noticed. What did he want? She only knew that he hadn’t left the village after the Festival as she expected, but had stayed on in his manor house. Gran
would have known what to do, would have told her what was needed. But Gran was dead and Fiona was unsure of the path that lay before her. 

“You read quite well,” he said, taking the book from her hand and setting it aside. “You’ve become a teacher?”

“I just read to the younger children from the village.”

“Well, teacher or no, at least my tutor didn’t waste his time on you.”

The comment stung. Her brother, Johnny, in spite of Gran’s admonitions and tales of nobility in their bloodline, had never taken education seriously, but Fiona had been eager to sit in on Iain’s summer lessons with Johnny. Family privilege gone to a distant male cousin and left with only the family crest, Gran, nonetheless, remained proud of her heritage and augmented Fiona’s desire to learn, teaching from her small hoard of books: Shakespeare, the Holy Bible, and a dog-eared copy of Pride and Prejudice. Even Fiona’s mother had enjoyed listening to weekly instalments of the stories Charles Dickens wrote. Her mother had never learned to read well, claiming that the letters moved on the page, constantly rearranging themselves.

_I won’t rise to your bait_, Fiona vowed, returning from her reverie. Refusing to meet Iain’s stare, she continued to look down until her heart regained its normal rhythm. _Damn_, she thought in very unladylike fashion. _How can he still affect me like this?_

Iain stooped and picked up several discarded books from the settee. Fiona reached for them, but he didn’t release his grasp on them immediately. When Fiona continued to avoid eye contact, Iain finally relinquished his hold. She arranged the books on the cart and turned to wheel it back to its place in the corner.

“How about lunch?” He reached out and held her arm, the warmth of his touch travelling upward to colour her cheeks.
“Iain, I’ve errands to run for Da, preparation for the children, and …” She began to pull away.

“I checked. You’re done reading for the day.” He continued to hold her arm, not exerting pressure but not letting go either.

Fiona considered her options. Iain Stanley, nearing thirty, was not only heir of the wealthiest family in the county but was already a widower. She’d heard rumours his marriage had been forced. His bride, wealthy and young, had died in premature childbirth seven months after the nuptials. The late Mrs. Stanley and her stillborn son were buried within a private iron-fenced enclosure near the Parish Church of St. Peter and Paul.

Iain, always handsome and well dressed, continued to turn heads when he walked into a room. His well-earned reputation as a ladies’ man had not diminished. Excited gossip followed in his wake, including a brief dalliance following his wife’s death with the newly widowed Lady Tydfil, now reported to have left for an extended tour of the Continent.

Fiona gently pulled her arm free and clasped her hands behind her back. She could not deny the flutter of attraction nor the curiosity she felt. Tongues would wag, even if everyone in Long Compton already knew of their long-standing family relationship. But would one meal really damage her reputation? She was hungry and surely Michael would not object to her taking lunch with an old friend. The in-house pub was located just across the hall from where they stood in the cosy library. Still, she hesitated.

“Why, Iain? Why do you want to have lunch with me?”

“Because it’s time for lunch. I’m hungry, you’re free, and I presume that you are going to eat so why not share a meal with me?”
When she said nothing, he continued, “Come with me for old time’s sake, Fiona. You owe me one for shaming me in front of my friends by skipping that stone seven times.”

“Iain, that was eight years ago.” Her voice was serious but the corner of her mouth turned up at the memory of besting him in skipping stones. Had he changed since his ill-fated marriage? Were current rumours true? She’d liked him once, even though herself in love with him. She had looked forward to the summer excitement he brought into her quiet world. Then the accident that injured Michael had changed everything. But could Iain be blamed for the actions of his officious father?

Curiosity overcame caution. The children had already seen Iain speaking to her and the glass windows of the small room fronted the high street. *In for a penny, in for a pound*, Fiona reasoned.

“But I’ve brought my lunch with me,” she said, pointing to her basket in the corner. She watched his eyebrows bunch in the middle. “I’ll share it with you, if you’d like.”

His brow relaxed and he lifted the basket and set it on a side table near her, then stepped across the hall from the one-room library to the pub and ordered tea while she finished setting the classroom to rights. Returning he held a ladder-backed chair out for her. Fiona sat, still feeling a bit unsure of her decision but curious as to what kind of man she now faced. As they shared memories over a simple lunch of bread, cheese, and sweet chutney, Fiona felt herself relax, slipping into the excited ease she’d felt around him as a child. Their conversation remained light, touching on his travels and the modernisations and additions to the town. She felt herself being charmed again as he politely asked about her life, her father, and as he offered his condolences on the loss of her mother and grandmother.
“And what of Michael. I supposed he’s married and a father by now?” Iain spooned some chutney onto his bread and cheese obviously enjoying the simple fare.

“Michael?” Fiona placed her hands in her lap, colour spreading upwards from her collar once again.

Engaged with his food, Lord Stanley failed to note her reaction. “Bit of bad business that accident. Always had a certain promise about him but then your brother did get to take his place and go to school with me that year.” He dusted the crumbs from his fingers and dabbed his lips.

Fiona clenched her hands beneath the table, stunned by how casually he asked questions about a life he had helped ruin. How could he be so callous, so cold. She reached for her teacup and knocked it over.

“I’m terribly sorry,” she mumbled, pushing back her chair. “Clumsy of me.” She mopped at the dark spill as it ran in all directions, refusing her attempts at repair.

He looked up at her stricken face.

“Fiona, are you quite all right?”

“I… I’m sorry,” she stammered. “I completely forgot about the time and must be going. Please excuse me.”

She backed away from the table, pulling her shawl on as he rose.

“Let me at least walk you home.”

“No, Iain,” she replied. “Thank you, but it is unnecessary.” She turned and rushed from the room, forgetting entirely her unfinished chores.

In the days since, Fiona had tried to avoid Iain, shocked at the evidence that Iain had become as unfeeling as his predecessor. Yet, in spite of her best efforts, he continued to cross her path.
She felt alone, wishing Gran were still alive to help her sort the morass of emotions that plagued her. How could she truly love Michael yet still feel a tenderness for Iain? How could Iain not know of the aftermath of Michael’s accident? Hadn’t his own father, Lord Stanley, refused to make things right? Anyone with eyes could see that Michael had been left with a crippled leg?

Fiona blended invisibly into the hedgerow that bordered and divided Da’s land from the uphill slope of pasturage that belonged to generations of the wealthy Stanley family. Pushing aside her memories and questions, she continued to follow her father across the hills. Weak rays of morning sun began to burn through the rising mist and promised a clear day, but Fiona knew it would remain cool. She pulled her soft green cloak tighter around her slight frame seeking a warmth that the cape could not provide. It seemed to her that the life of the community, her life, Michael’s and Johnny’s began and ended on the whims of a Stanley.

As Fiona came abreast of the wooden stile, she stopped as still as stone. Past the hedge and further up the hill Sir Iain Stanley stood, elegant, completely at ease among the ever present yet always indifferent sheep that dotted the land. She inhaled sharply against the sudden, erratic beat of her heart.

He was dressed in fine Donegal tweed, his hand casually holding the reins to his latest thoroughbred, a stallion, brushed to a warm ebony glow in the morning light. He stood next to another man, shorter, slightly bent, and withered within his worn and patched great coat. Why was Da meeting privately with Iain? And why furtively at dawn? This could only mean more trouble for her.

A murmur of low voices drifted toward her. Fiona leaned into the hedge, trying to catch their words. A dead twig snapped, the broken branch pressing into her
cloaked shoulder. Iain’s horse laid back its ears and pawed the damp turf. Fearing a
move to relieve the increasing discomfort, Fiona dared not breathe. In spite of her
pain, she held her place. Iain reached up and gentled his horse as the capricious wind
returned the men’s voices to Fiona. Straining, she could just make out what was being
said.

“Middleton, the papers are drawn up, I understand Abbot’s Field and Simon’s
Spring but why you want those worthless stones . . .” Iain’s voice trailed off as the
wind continued to shift, bringing their conversation in bits and starts. “. . . should be
turned into a proper visitor attraction, pull in some money from the Oxford trade.”
Struggling to control her emotions, Fiona clenched her teeth as again Iain’s words
were borne away only to return once again in her father’s voice.

“. . . won’t lose but it will all come right. You’ll see.”

Cautiously, Fiona leaned forward slowly, increasing the pressure from the
broken branch. Still unable to understand the meaning of their meeting, she pulled the
soft wool hood back from one ear careful not to release any of her telltale copper
curls. She cupped a hand around her ear.

“Fiona’s headstrong . . . like her mother . . . that whole line of women,” her
father paused, hitched up his shoulders, and continued, ‘She’ll do what I . . .”

Her father looked around, took off his neckerchief, wiped his brow, and retied
it around his neck once again. What were they bargaining for? Why was her name
part of this meeting?

“Was there something else?” Iain stood radiating a calm self-possession while
her Da shifted from foot to foot. The thoroughbred nickered.

Fiona watched both men, examining their movements. Was Iain enjoying her
father’s discomfort?
“It’s set then … Johnny … You’ve arranged his release from jail?” The words spilled out of Da’s mouth in a pleading rush. Fiona drew in an audible breath, clamped a hand over her mouth, and prayed that neither man had heard or seen. The next words were lost once again as the fickle breeze shifted to the south. She stood, carved in granite as the minutes ticked slowly past. Her brother, Johnny, was in jail?

The two men shook hands. Iain mounted his horse. She caught the end of Iain’s parting remark as he rode off, “… just convince Fiona.”

Allan Middleton, stood staring as the rider topped the hill and rode away, then slumping down even further in his great coat, he strode back across the hillside toward Little Rollright.

Alone, Fiona’s thoughts whirled as she pulled slowly back from the hedge, the pain at release from the broken twig surged through her shoulder but was soon forgotten in worry about her future. Why Abbot’s Field and Simon’s Spring? Why now? She thought her father had given up his dreams of expanding his holdings, his hope to someday re-enter the gentry, of creating a legacy for her brother. But the Rollright Stones. Did her family no longer possess them? The idea was unthinkable. Da had sworn an oath at mother’s bedside to keep them in the control of the Shipton women, as they had been for generations. As far back as she could remember, Gran had warned that the standing stones must never leave the family but must be protected at all cost for they were themselves protectors.

It can’t be true. Her heart sank within her as she realized Gran had tied her irrevocably to the stones for good or ill. She shuddered when she remembered the ritual she’d undertaken just before her sixteenth birthday, the oath she had sworn not fully realising the import or what was expected of her. Nonsense, she argued with herself. It’s just an old wives’ tale. The stones circle is just a crumbling Druid
monument and nothing else. Britain has hundreds of them. Da would never bargain
me for Johnny, would he? What does Iain want? Could they be talking of marriage?

Fiona thought of Michael, of his kisses, of how he always stood beside her,
protecting her from the world with its constant pain and loss. I love Michael, she
mused. I told him I loved him and that I’d marry him, didn’t I?

Yet, she reasoned, what if Gran is right. What if the stones do hold power,
offer protection for the women in our line, for the land we call home. She closed her
eyes. This is too much to ask of me, she argued.

Her questions continued to buzz like hungry midges. Then she remembered
her brother’s green eyes, so like her own. What of Johnny? Johnny’s eyes always
radiated laughter, as if he knew some secret joke. She remembered how he had sung
to her in his clear tenor when she couldn’t sleep after their mother had died, had said
her birthmark was not a curse as the village children taunted, but only where the
fairies had blessed her with the sight. Hadn’t it been Johnny who had always let her
tag along through the long summers he shared with Iain? How could she blame him
for simply being himself? It was Iain Stanley who should be blamed, she decided.
Johnny’s childhood friend, their childhood friend, who had taught Johnny everything
he knew about gambling, drink, and women.

Fiona felt a knot grow across her shoulders, the pain radiating, even the dull
morning sun was beginning to hurt her eyes. She put her hand to her throbbing head.
It was Iain she should blame, not Johnny, never Johnny, she mused.

But how had the stones passed into Iain’s hands? It was impossible. She must
have misunderstood. Unless, she considered in shock, they were forfeit for Johnny.
What had her brother done that Da would bargain with the stones? Impossible. She
clenched her fists in frustration. Then she felt herself slump as she realized that
nothing was impossible when it came to Da’s love for his son. But would he sacrifice me? No, the thought was too onerous.

Her mind reeled at the enormity of this news. Yet bits and pieces of the last year began to fall into place. Last spring Lord Stanley had pastured his sheep in their field but there was no receipt in the household accounts. Why hadn’t she seen what it meant? Johnny’s gambling, his going away, the whispers in the village, and now the unthinkable… could Johnny really be in prison? Was Da using her to buy a title and bring Johnny home? For a moment she hated her brother, cursing him as feckless, a do-nothing, a troublemaker. She stood silent, rooted to the ground, tears blurring her vision. Blinking them away, she looked down as she unclenched her hands, saw the tiny rim of blood where one fingernail had pierced the flesh of her palm.

One feeling persistently haunted her, weaving through all her unspoken questions. Why did she now feel like a pawn in a larger game she could not see or understand? Was she being manoeuvred like Alice? She would have none of it. But, she asked herself, how could she learn the truth and protect her happiness?
Saturday was still overcast, the rain had stopped but the air was heavy with a promise of more. Barbara watched Ian move quickly yet gracefully from the driver’s side of the car to open her door. I’m such a klutz and he moves like… what? A jungle cat. He’s not predatory but there’s an unconscious grace to his movements, natural, purposeful but not practiced. She blushed, hoping he wouldn’t notice her stare. He’s just graceful in an unassuming way unlike Ken who takes over any area he enters. She sighed, uncomfortable with how often she compared one to the other. Ken is a good man. My folks adore him. Well, at least dad does and he makes heads turn when we’re together. She winced at her acknowledgement that it was Ken and not her that made people sit up and pay attention.

Ian opened her car door, reached for her hand, then escorted Barbara through a stone arch, across a tiny, pebbled path into a miniature garden that must have been jewel-like in the spring. The bushes were manicured and tiny winter crocus, or at least their English cousins, gleamed violet and mauve, snug in well-tended beds. The carefully fitted stone cottage had a slate roof from which droplets of water still fell. Ian rang the bell and upon being admitted took Barbara’s down-filled jacket. She nervously tugged at the French cuffs of her shirt, freeing them from under her sweater. A short, tidy woman, bringing with her the smell of fresh baked scones, escorted Barbara across the hall, while Ian slipped into the kitchen. Tapping on the door, the housekeeper stepped aside to admit Barbara to the tiny sitting room.

“Your guest is here, Ma’am.”
“Thank you, Brae. You may serve tea when I ring.”

Barbara started across the room, her hand half extended in greeting, when she noticed Mrs Rowling wordlessly pointing to the tufted settee opposite the glowing fireplace. Barbara dropped her hand, a bit unnerved. Tugging her skirt toward her knees, she sat, introduced herself, while observing the carefully appointed room.

Diminutive, it was like a beautifully crafted doll’s house. Heavy tapestried drapes hung near each window well, presumably to keep out drafts. Paintings, books, and artfully arranged dried flowers adorned the bookshelves and mantle. A coal black cat, resting near the hearth, opened first a yellow eye, then a green. Barbara, a bit unsettled by the mismatched pair, was subjected to the cat’s close scrutiny. She was apparently deemed harmless as the cat placed its tail across its nose and resumed sleeping.

Mrs Rowling sat quite upright in her antique oak rocking chair. Although the room was quite warm, a throw covered her legs, the tips of worn purple slippers peeking from beneath. Barbara settled herself and pulled out her journal, pen, and list of questions. Ready to begin the interview, she looked up to see Mrs Rowling studying her.

“So much alike… “

“Pardon?” Barbara replied, unsure of what she’d heard.

“Just the musings of an old woman, child.”

“But…”

“It was nothing, my dear. Shall we start?” Barbara bit back her curiosity, as Mrs Rowling continued. “I understand that you are interested in our Rollright Stones and their history.” She rang a small silver bell, replacing it carefully on the oval table at her left. Brae bustled into the room, bearing fresh scones and an assortment of teas.
Balancing a cup of peppermint tea in one hand and her notebook on her lap, Barbara realised that the interview had begun but she was definitely not the one in charge.

Mrs Rowling occasionally paused for effect in her storytelling, the gentle creak of her rocker going silent as if to punctuate her tale. Pleased with Barbara’s attention, the old woman would again resume the rocker’s slow back and forth journey. The folds of a worn paisley shawl, its colours muted, were tucked securely around her thin narrow shoulders, releasing a barely discernible scent of lavender whenever she adjusted it. Her pale eyes reflected deep thought, searching for their own answers as she responded to Barbara’s questions with new stories, for her answers were all given in story form. With the exception of her gravelly voice, Barbara had warmed to the odd woman, beginning to feel a sense of connection as she listened.

“A would-be king,” Mrs Rowling continued, “his knights and a priest crossed the Cotswold Hills one day. A woman, some say a witch, asked for a copper coin for showing them the way.”

Unable to stop herself, Barbara asked, “Was the witch a woman named Mother Shipton? I’ve noted her name keeps popping up in my research of the stones.”

Mrs Rowling raised her right eyebrow ever so slightly at the interruption. Embarrassed at the silent rebuke, Barbara found herself looking away. Frail as she might appear, Mrs Rowling exuded the aura of a powerful woman. Once again it was obvious that although Barbara had come to inquire, Mrs Rowling was firmly in control of their conversation, directing the flow of the interview through her answers. Regaining her composure, Barbara saw that the old woman’s eyes were once again inviting, soft, though still veiled.
As if no interruption had occurred, Mrs Rowling continued, changing her voice to match the characters in her narration.

“Rebuffed, the woman looked at the would-be-king, shrugged her shoulders, drew herself erect, and said, ‘Well, then I shan’t tell you your way.’ Mrs Rowling shook her head. “A fool, this knight was.” Her voice rose as if she had experienced the insult herself. “He ignored her words and continued to press her for knowledge. Seeming to relent, she finally whispered that she knew how to help him gain all of England.”

A wry smile crossed Mrs Rowling’s face before she recited the singsong verse that Barbara had seen in a brochure at Wyatt’s gift shop earlier that day.

“The Witch cackled ‘Go forward’
Seven long strides shalt thou take.
If Long Compton thou canst see,
King of England thou shalt be.”

“Well, as you can imagine, the reckless knight had thought to take all of England *a’i wynt yn ei ddwrn.*” Mrs Rowling saw the confused look on Barbara’s face and explained, “With the wind in his fist. In a hurry, my dear.”

She continued, “Separated from his knights who stood in a nearby field, he sought to cheat the woman of her due. It was not a wise choice.” She winked at Barbara and continued, “He strode up the hill toward Long Compton, which he believed could easily be seen from the rise of the gently sloping hillside. As he climbed he boasted and called over his shoulder, *‘Stick, stock, stone, as King of England I shall be known.’*”

---

“The woman frowned thought the knight didn’t see. Next she smiled as the hillside shifted before the knight’s eyes. An ancient burial barrow blocked his view of the distant town. He turned, surprise and fear etched in his features as he listened to her last words… a whispered curse that rang through his very bones.”

Mrs Rowling looked down at a worn leather journal in her lap, and smiled herself, catlike. She was enjoying both her story and her audience. She slid the journal into the folds of her shawl. As she looked into Barbara’s eyes, she recited the last of the ancient song. Even though Barbara knew the ancient poem, Mrs Rowling’s rendition sent a thrill through her.

“As Long Compton thou canst not see
King of England thou shalt not be.
Rise up stick, and stand still, stone,
for King of England thou shalt be none.
Thou and thy men hoar stones shall be
and I myself an elder tree.”

Silence. The crackle and shush of a log crumbling in the fire brought Barbara back from her dream state. Was eldern an elder tree? Didn’t the elder carry some meaning? What did Mrs Rowling know about the mythology surrounding elder trees? What of the soldiers and knights? Question chased through her head but she didn’t dare interrupt again although her chest tightened with the desire for answers. Barbara reached for her locket, decided against it, and waited for the story to continue.

“The king’s men hearing their leader’s strangled cry for help could not respond for they themselves had become rooted to the earth, their flesh slowly turning to the very stones that now form the circle. In a nearby field, a small handful of four or five knights had held back from the main body. Some say that they had stopped to
whisper plots against the king. Some claimed that a priest among them had only stopped to pray for the safety of his liege-lord. However, when discovered by the witch as she was returning to Shipton-under-Wychwood, they were also turned to stone. Some say that finished with her curse, she was exhausted by her powerful witchcraft and turned herself into an eldern tree.”

Mrs Rowling paused, rearranged her shawl, pulling it higher on her neck, and took a small sip of her chamomile tea.

“An eldern tree?” Barbara tried to contain herself as she slipped carefully into the pause. “Is the eldern tree the same thing as an elder tree? I haven’t done much research on them yet but aren’t elders supposed to be special?”

Pale eyes searched Barbara’s face, looking deep into her soul. She shifted, felt uncomfortable, naked, as if she were being weighed up, balanced, and possibly found short. Mrs Rowling raised her eyebrow again, smiled at the young journalist, then nestled deeper within the folds of her shawl, again pulling it closer about her shoulders and fingering the leather-encased book she clutched. Receiving no further answer, Barbara knew the interview had come to a close and she now had more questions than answers.
Later that evening Barbara typed up her notes, pausing often to ponder Mrs Rowling’s words. The old woman’s memory and knowledge reached back through time almost as if she had lived the tales herself. Yet Barbara couldn’t shake the feeling that something was purposely being kept back. Why had Mrs Rowling ignored her question about Mother Shipton, a local wise woman who online sources tied to the formation of the stones? Were there other women? Possible descendants? Internet research hinted at tantalising clues about women associated with the stones but there was nothing concrete that Barbara could use. It was all subjective innuendo. She needed facts if she was going to use this in her research paper or for an article suitable for History Speaks.

Her thoughts circled in on themselves always returning to the conclusion that Mrs Rowling was avoiding something. What was she so reticent to tell? Hmm, a story that not only involved standing stones but also involved a local woman in the myth. Where can I find the definitive connections? She felt a tingle of excitement, a journalistic approach to the mid-place between history and myth. She’d try again to pin down Mrs Rowling on Monday.

The Druid’s Samhain ceremony tomorrow would hopefully shed some further light on Barbara’s unanswered questions. It was a long shot but maybe her side trip would ultimately produce a story interesting enough to satisfy Dan. Tying the threads together would take enormous research. When she returned to Aber, she’d do a genealogical search at the National Library of Wales to find if Mother Shipton had
any living descendants. She’d started to free associate ideas in preparation for further research when she noticed the time. It was already well past two in the morning. She needed sleep. Reluctantly, she hit the save button, turned off her computer, and went to bed.

Sunday dawned dark and forbidding. Peeking out the window, Barbara saw that it had rained but in the distance, the clouds were thinning. Perhaps it would clear by midday. She munched the last buttermilk scone from her scant breakfast while she searched key words and again scanned promising web sites. There were variations to Mrs Rowling’s report but the rhyme was hundreds of years old, the story even older.

Computer research was much faster that thumbing through books but it was much like following the trajectory of scattershot. Mother Shipton’s name continued to appear speculatively. Other sources reported that one’s fate could be overheard if one listened near the Whispering Knights. Several links commented that when the old Norman Church rang the New Year, pints were raised in local pubs, toasts drunk, and eyes watched the door. Would the curse be broken, the living men return to conquer all of England? It was a delightful myth, perhaps embellished for tourists, but something in the research continued to touch a chord deep within Barbara.

She stopped for a moment and rotated her shoulders several times attempting to relax her tightening muscles. The last thing she wanted was a tension headache, which sometimes came on when she immersed herself in her work, trying to tease out truth between conflicting facts.

Scrolling down her list of possible sites, she saw the word eldern again and typed that into Google, seeking images. The witch of the myth had turned herself into an eldern tree. Eldern or elder wood. Naturally, I knew they had to be connected. She
wasn’t prepared, however, to find that elder trees were associated with portals. Another source stated they had the best wood for making magic wands. *Very Potteresque,* she mused. Some people cut and placed bundles of fresh twigs in the home to prevent evil from entering. Another cited the protective qualities of elder wood used in the making of personal wards. She clicked on a promising link and scrolled through pictures of amulets for sale online displaying various combinations of knots and patterns, each created for a different use or protection. Barbara stopped. One was a ward against dark witchcraft. She reached into her purse and pulled out the gift from the shopkeeper. It was identical.
Comfortable in the cozy sitting room, Barbara knew the staff would call her when the table she’d reserved by the pub’s crackling fireplace was ready. A cup of peppermint tea and two scones had sufficed for breakfast. Busy with research she hadn’t taken time to eat more. Ravenous now, Barbara looked forward to having a proper British breakfast for lunch. Fortunately the pub was used to catering to the needs of its guests.

Eight hours behind in Pacific Standard Time, her folks were still asleep. They would soon wake to walk along the early morning beach, a traditional feature of their anniversary. Dad had mentioned surprise theatre tickets to *Wicked* in Portland on Wednesday in his latest text. Mom would enjoy the delicate tea set Barbara had purchased though she’d worry at the cost but Dad would appreciate that her mother was secretly pleased. Their lives were so predictable, so simple. Barbara thought of Ken – popular, exciting, but often late for a date. She wondered if he’d been late picking up Jillian and how their afternoon had been spent. An online check revealed that Oregon State had won. Did they go out for celebratory drinks afterward?

Barbara caught the reflection of her disapproval, distorted in one of the antique bullseye windowpanes. Life was taking unexpected turns on both sides of the Atlantic. She was used to research leading into unknown areas, it was part of what drew her; however, while she felt comfortable with ancient burial mounds, standing stones, puzzles and myth, it was witches and the occult which gave her twinges of unrest. *What would Mom say. ‘Careful, sweetheart. Remember whose daughter you are. Say your prayers. Nice girls comport themselves properly at all times.’*
Grimacing, she thought of Ken, Jillian, and Ian, the amulet, and the enigmatic Mrs Rowling. Her mother’s admonitions returned: *Colour within the lines, better safe than sorry, curiosity killed the cat. Yes, Barbara thought defiantly, but finding out brought him back.*

She decided to explore the hotel instead of continuing to worry about possibilities over which she had no control. Perhaps it could offer a segue into her story, if she could pull the disparate pieces together.

Everything about the hotel was tiny and compact, from the rough-formed slate entry floor to the dark coffered panelling. An oil painting stood opposite a larger photograph of the inn circa the early 1900’s. The receptionist signaled from behind the original reception desk to tell her that her table was ready. The clock struck. Ian walked through the door. Barbara smiled, proud of her persuasive ability. She had convinced him to eat with her in the Crown & Cushion before they set off to view the Cotswold Druids perform their Samhain ceremony.

Warm from a traditional British lunch of frothy chocolate topped with whipped crème and caramel, rashers, sausage, a grilled tomato, beans, mushrooms, and a fried egg with toast, they returned to the stone circle. Barbara wanted to double check some measurements, try to recount the stones, and explore the Knight’s Stones in more depth.

Upon entering the park, they circled the stones in opposite directions. Counting the stones, their individual tallies were interrupted as snow began to fall. Heavy wet flakes. Barbara was entranced but grateful for the umbrellas Ian always seemed to have at hand. She wondered if the Samhain ceremony would be cancelled,
though as was often the case, the air seemed warmer now that it was actually snowing.

As they were among the first to arrive at the stones, Barbara wanted a few more close-up pictures of the Whispering Knights. They walked around the field, the pathway surprisingly firm after the earlier rain and snow. When asked, Ian explained that the black lace pattern she noticed in the sodden grass was actually a ground stabiliser.

“You Brits are quite clever,” she laughed and continued forward. Barbara recorded the monument from different angles, commenting on a collection of coins lying on a fallen stone within the enclosure. “It is said that if you stand still and listen, you can hear the Knights tell your fortune. Looks like people are now petitioning with money.”

Ian looked where she pointed. Using a heavy accent, he quipped, “That’s a two pound piece, lovie. Someone must have wanted a proper outcome to their plan.”

Barbara laughed softly, evoking a smile from Ian. Looking past his shoulder, she noticed a dark silhouette with a carved staff slowly tracing the path toward them.

I wonder if he’s a Druid? Barbara watched, curious, as the man approached, circled the Knight stones, stopped to reach across the iron fence, placed his hand on the fallen stone, and incanted something in a low sing-song murmur. Barbara felt like an intruder. The old man apparently lost in private contemplation walked to the side of the enclosure and stared contemplatively across the open fields toward the darkening horizon.

As the sun journeyed toward evening, the intermittent snow stopped. The sky darkened slowly and a waning gibbous moon crept above the horizon. Ian and Barbara silently followed the stranger’s steps back toward the Rollright stone circle.
Three-thirty came and went as people arrived, greeted friends, clustered in small groups or walked among the stones quietly. Barbara photographed and spoke to several of the more flamboyantly dressed, learning that the ceremony wouldn’t start until the sky faded to darkness.

At the appointed moment, two druids crossed wooden staves, creating a portal into the stone ring. A woman, her hair flowing and streaked with silver, ordered a line to form and, ducking under the arch, crossed into the circle. The murmur of private conversations, whispers, and a few scattered giggles were subsumed in the chanting of the druid leader, the solemn beat of drums, and the rattle of timbrels as the line dipped below the arch and spiralled into the circle.

Barbara looked around nervously and realized that Ian was nowhere near. As the last participant passed through the arch, the Druid she had seen at the Knight’s Stones looked directly at her, a questioning look on his face. Suddenly uncomfortable about joining the circle alone, Barbara shook her head and seated herself just outside the circle on a fallen stone, reopening her notebook to record the ceremony.

Her research had prepared her for the white sheets that hung to one side, symbolic of the separation of worlds but the line of followers did not pass through them as she expected, instead walking reverently past. She looked at her notes surprised at her use of the word *reverent*, but that was the feeling the ceremony invoked. Words drifted to her on the night air. “Hail and welcome… Stag of fire, bear of earth… Barbara strained to hear but it was as if an unseen barrier muffled the sounds. Each of the four compass points was called and portals between the living and the dead were ordered open.

She shivered and then felt a light blanket drape itself around her shoulders. Startled, she looked up into Ian’s face.
“Your lips are positively blue. I stepped away to the car to get you a rug,” he whispered. “Why didn’t you join them inside the circle?”

She shook her head, not knowing how to say that, though intrigued, it somehow didn’t feel right. Her emotions were running riot. She once again concentrated on the ceremony, watching as the participants held hands.

“We are the spirit of the ancient Celts.” The incantation continued, “The day of harvest is past.”

“Welcome. Hail and welcome the dark days.” Words and phrases floated across the cold night air. They spoke of death and change, earth, water and blood, a hooded horse that chases, the soothsayer spirit that prophesies. The leader approached the central fire and commanded the future be revealed. She passed her hand over the flames. The tongues of fire leapt skyward hungrily, bathed in blinding iridescence. Though mesmerised, Barbara recognised the use of various chlorides and sulphates to colour and artificially enhance. It was a cheap parlour trick but effective. However, the next words pulled her from the smug world of science and sent her spiralling deep within the ceremony. The cloaked leader invoked the spirit of the witch, “the creator of the stones, which cannot be counted.” Barbara shivered, searching the gloom for Ian’s familiar face. Around the other side of the stones, he was a dark silhouette shifting against the deepening gloom.

As if the air itself spoke in whispers, the names of the dead were recited by the participants. Barbara listened to an almost surreal recounting of the loss of loved ones, children, lovers, the elderly. Each name offered up as a prayer. Remembrances were punctuated with the rattle of an unseen talisman passed from person to person.

Barbara’s nerves stretched; her body grew numb. She could no longer feel her toes and gripping her pen was becoming difficult. Cold. She was so cold. When asked
to think of her departed before the ceremony began, Barbara felt grateful for she could think of no one who had died in her lifetime. Still the pathos of the participants’ loss stirred within her soul. She reached up and idly fingered her locket.

Medieval music slid through the air further intensifying Barbara’s awareness. Three women, hair unbound, removed their ankle-length cloaks. Dressed in flowing gowns, they began to rhythmically move together and apart. One dressed in blue with silver lacing down her back wore fairy lights entwined in her long flowing hair. A light burned in each of her palms. The trio danced, undulating slowly, the music of “My Lady Sleeps” haunting. Barbara shivered. The music entered her. She began to sway. Side to side. Her pen slid from nerveless fingers as she balanced herself by pressing her naked hand against the stone beneath her. Her head felt light as if she were drifting. Spellbound, her vision doubled. She watched the dancers move to the eerie music, while an old woman shimmered, transparent, before her, withered hand outstretched, beckoning.
1485 ~ Knaresborough, England ~ Gaming

Walking down the narrow corridor, Kaleb smelled the back room before he reached the entrance. Tendrils of aromatic smoke slipped around the iron-banded door. The smell intensified as the combination of stale mead, spirits, and the sour stink of unwashed bodies assailed his senses upon entering the room. Kaleb noted that the smouldering fire was not drawing well tonight; the air was a cloying blue-grey.

The closeness of the room faded when his eyes met those of Rob Mason, sitting across the timbered room at the corner gaming table. The man, unperturbed, returned his stare. Mason’s head sat like a small boulder on work-enhanced shoulders. His simple brown homespun tunic bulged over his right bicep; carving and fitting stone for most of his forty-odd years had created a bull of a man. Kaleb knew from their last game, however, that the oafish countenance hid a surprisingly shrewd mind.

“Greetings to ye, Master Artur,” called the Miller brothers, Mark and Tam. Always cheerful, their corpulence attested to the success of the granary and mill they ran together.

“Come join us,” echoed Edwin Barbe. The town’s physician and undertaker motioned to an empty chair at the table.

The two other men who sat at Mason’s table, were unknown to Kaleb. One had a lute strapped to the back of his chair. A rent in his grease-stained cloak attested that he was not a popular jongleur. The other, whip thin and dressed in leathers, scrutinised him noncommittally. Kaleb guessed him to be a mercenary for hire.
“Good evening, gentlemen.” Kaleb pulled out the proffered chair and sat.

“What are we playing tonight?”

“Bone Ace, now you’re here,” said Mason, dropping the knucklebones he’d been demonstrating into a worn leather bag. “You want to save time and give me your money now?” Kaleb clenched his fist at the sneer in Mason’s voice as well as his deep-throated chuckle. Seeing the mercenary’s eyes on his, he passed off his display of pique by pressing against his knuckles with his other hand, causing a series of pops as each joint released its tensions.

“Why not the bones, Mason?”

“Tom said ye were coming and I thought we’d continue where we left it last time. Any objections?” Mason stacked the French deck in the center of the table.

“None at all,” Kaleb replied smoothly. “Gentlemen?”

Each man drew a card and turned it over. Mark Miller drew low card and became dealer.

“One way to lose money is as good as another,” quipped the musician. “What are the rules here?”

“Face cards count ten, the rest as they’re numbered,” said Dr. Barbe.

“The ace gets one or eleven until your hand totals thirty-one,” finished Tam.

“Ah. I know this game. It’s One and Thirty,” said the mercenary. “Never heard it called Bone Ace before.”

“Bets on the table, please.” Each man threw coins into the centre of the table.

Mark dealt three cards to each player, flipping the last to reveal its value. He waited while each man checked his hand.

Mark turned to his left and asked Rob Mason, “What’s it to be?”

“I’ll stick.”
Kaleb raised an eyebrow. He knew the man was a liar but it was early in the night for such a gambit or, perhaps, he'd been dealt three court cards. The jack was face up in Mason’s stack and his face was smug, deep-set eyes offering a challenge. Kaleb studied him for a moment more trying to ferret out any emotion. Nothing obvious presented itself.

The mercenary tapped the table softly. Mark Miller dealt him a card from the bottom of the deck as was normal, flipping it face up so all could see it was the three of clubs and placed it next to the two exposed cards. “Again,” he said. A nine followed by a three and a seven. A total of twenty-four lay exposed before the soldier stated sotto voce, “I'll bide.”

“Any for you, Kaleb?”

Kaleb looked at his set. A queen and ace lay under an exposed ten of hearts. Kaleb placed his hand over the top of his stack. “I’ll stick,” he said softly, trying to keep his face impassive.

The jongleur asked for five cards. The last card placed was a seven. He threw his original three cards on top of those exposed and said, “I’m out.”

Dr. Barbe and Tam each asked for three cards. Both withdrew from the game when their hands totalled more than thirty-one.

Mark looked around the table at Mason, the mercenary, and Kaleb. “Anyone want to sweeten the pot?”

Mason threw in two heavy coins, the mercenary three to equal the stakes. Kaleb matched their money.

“All right now. Expose your cards and see who gets the winnings.”

Mason turned his cards, revealing a ten and a queen. “Thirty,” he said, “Try 'n top that.”
The mercenary revealed a two and a four. “Seems, I’ve matched you.”

All eyes turned to Kaleb, who allowed himself a smile as he revealed first his queen and then the ace. “Thirty-one,” he said. “I believe the pot is mine.” He glanced at the faces around the table as he drew the coins toward himself. Rob Mason returned his look, eyes smouldering with unveiled hatred.

Some hours later, the room empty but for the gaming table, Tom bustled into the room bringing yet another pitcher of ale. Spotting the growing mound of coins near Kaleb, he quipped, “Winner paying for the last round?”

“Why not?” Kaleb, feeling generous, settled the bar bill and continued, “As Tam’s nodded off and our good minstrel is once again reduced to singing for his supper, I fear gentlemen that I shall be away as I’ve a pressing meeting tomorrow.”

“Wouldn’t be with old Southill’s daughter, would it?” Mason, visibly drunk, pushed for a fight.

“A gentleman never tells,” Kaleb replied evenly. He swept his winnings into his purse after tossing a few coins to the surprised jongleur. “Perhaps a new string for your lute,” he called to the now grinning man.

“So ye’re just going to take our money and run. Ye like to take what isn’t yours, don’t ye?”

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about,” Kaleb lied. He’d seen the lust on Mason’s face last month when walking Agatha home across the bridge but never believed the man had any actual feelings toward her.

The mercenary put his hand on Mason’s shoulder. “Leave it, man. He won fair enough.”

Mason struck the mercenary midway in the chest, knocking him forcefully to the floor, all the while struggling to his own feet. Kaleb saw the dull gleam of a blade
as Mason shoved aside the oak table as if it were a child’s toy and lurched forward. The table slammed into Tam snapping a rib. Mark pulled the table from his brother’s chest, fear etched in his corpulent face. Dr. Barbe held his hands up placatingly.

“Rob, put that knife away before you do further damage. You’ll have the constable down on us all for gaming.” Mason, eyes bloodshot, lashed at the doctor, tearing his fur-lined cloak. The room descended into chaos.

Rob Mason lunged at Kaleb, knife glinting wickedly in the firelight. Turning to avoid the blow, Kaleb felt a searing pain in his back a moment before the weight of the builder’s body forced him to the ground. A guttural cry deafened him before his vision narrowed into night.

Kaleb lay face down, unable to move, his breath coming in ragged gasps; voices ebbed and flowed around him like a swarm of midges.

“Is he alive?”

“Yes, but hurt by the looks of it.

“What about Tam?”

“Broken rib would be my guess. He’ll live to tell the story to his grandchildren.”

“Don’t know if this is a story as should be repeated.”

“You there, minstrel, help me with the body.”

Disoriented, Kaleb finally drew a deep breath as a great weight was shifted from his back. He tried to inhale deeply only to have pain lance down his ribs and sear into his consciousness. He moaned as many hands rolled him to his side.

“Help me sit him up.”
Kaleb clenched his teeth, biting back the pain that enveloped him as he was pulled into position on the floor. His chest was wet, the cloth of his shirt stuck to his flesh, the pain renewed each time he moved. Nonetheless, he reached to assess the damage and pulled away a hand slick with blood.

“Steady him.” It was the physician’s voice. Hands supported him as Kaleb vomited, then cried out again when a new wave of pain sliced through him.

“Steady on, lad.” Barbe’s voice came again, soothing. He offered an arm to Kaleb while other hands assisted him to a wooden bench. The surgeon examined the wound. “You’re a lucky one. I’ll stitch it and you’ll carry a nasty scar but Mason’s blade just scored across your ribs. He didn’t get a chance to push his blade in any deeper or we’d be having two funerals.”

“Funeral?” Kaleb’s head felt muzzy. “Who’s having a funeral?”

“He must have hit his head when Mason fell on him,” a deep voice spoke.

“What do we do next?”

“There’ll be hell to pay if it’s found we were gaming.”

“You’re worried about gaming. There’s a man dead.”

Kaleb’s head spun again as whisky was lifted to his lips. “Drink this, boy.” He opened his mouth and swallowed. The liquid burned its way down his acid-ravaged throat. Another, followed by a third. His world blurred, the room tilted sideways, language shifted, broke, and fell meaningless on his ears. Dull pain coursed through Kaleb while a hot needle pierced his flesh, pulling it tight. He blessed the oblivion that claimed him.
Crocus and the last of spring’s daffodils still dotted the ground, while forked leaves of new green, woven with a lacework of white and pink flowers, filled the air with sweetness and the promise of a bountiful harvest come autumn. The trading season was upon them in earnest and Kaleb’s welcome visits would gain a regularity Agatha ached for. She’d feared sending a letter to York at his recent delay, afraid that unknown eyes might pry or reveal her news in an untimely manner. However, the tentative tap at the door last night heralding the arrival of the boy with Kaleb’s letter, a declaration of love, sealed and setting their tryst, brought her joy and peace of mind. All would now be well. There was nothing to fear and tomorrow she would give Kaleb the tiny portrait her father had commissioned for her. She had retired to bed excited, waiting for the new day to begin.

When the morning sun fell in streaks across the bed, slanting into her waking eyes and warming her where it fell across her bare skin, Agatha smiled, her heart fluttering. She reached under her pillow, withdrew, and kissed Kaleb’s love note. She’d see him today and tell him everything. Her hand slid down under the covers and rested a moment on her belly, then slid further down. No, she told herself. *Wait for Kaleb. It will be all the sweeter.* Smiling she withdrew her hand, pushed back the covers, then rose to dress herself.

Sparks of pain exploding along his frame, Kaleb guessed he’d been beaten, perhaps robbed. His hand slipped to his money pouch, which was surprisingly full. Shielding
his eyes, he cracked them open, winced and blinked in the ambient light streaming through a canvas covering and examined his surroundings. He was in a wagon wedged between bundles of sweet hay, their scent cloying.

“Where am I?” He groaned then tried to sit. A hand pushed him back down.

“Be still if you want to live,” a voice hissed in his ear.

Kaleb was once again thoroughly confused. His mouth felt full of fouled wool scrapings, an anvil beat regular time behind his left temple. He closed his eyes and swallowed his rising gorge. With great effort Kaleb turned his head and looked into the eyes of the mercenary from last night’s card game.

“Who are you and what do you want from me?” He whispered, trying to control both his stomach and the fear that squirmed inside him like an eel in a tin bucket.

“I’m a friend and we’re leaving Knaresborough.”

Kaleb started to raise an eyebrow in question but stopped in pain. He had never hurt this badly in his life, not even when he had fallen as a child, not even during the months of torturous work his Da had insisted upon to ensure he would never limp.

Three taps of a whip handle sounded from the direction of the driver’s perch just before the jostling of the wagon drew to a halt.

The mercenary from last night’s game, Marcus, if Kaleb remembered right, held his finger to his lips. Kaleb closed his eyes and strained to listen to the muffled sounds of the drover in conversation with another man, whose voice carried the bite of authority. The canvas cover was shifted, letting in fresh air, but the accompanying light lanced into Kaleb’s eyes painfully. He tried to remember the night before. He’d been winning. Mason’s eyes were bloodshot from too much to drink. We all had too
much to drink, he thought. A fight. There had been a fight. Snatches of muffled
conversation returned to him. He remembered a knife, pain, a weight bearing him
down and then only nightmare images. Have I killed someone?

The wagon’s covering dropped back into place, shutting out the blinding light
and intensifying the emetic air.

“Get a move on then.” It was a command not a suggestion.

With a lurch, the wagon rolled forward along the rutted road. Kaleb clenched
his teeth, fighting the waves of pain and nausea.
1871 ~ Rollright, England ~ Nursery Rhyme

Half moons, the colour of crushed blackberries, stained her eyes, attesting to Fiona’s sleepless nights, her dreams filled with confusions. Gran had again beckoned to her, while she whispered unintelligible words. Fiona felt that her answers lay in the missing commonplace book, which Fiona had seen Gran study, write in, and treasure, but which had not been found in the still room after her death. Gran’s secrets were lost with her journal. Fiona felt trapped in an endless maze of twists and turns, her way to safety frustratingly unclear.

She stretched cramped muscles, banishing the night’s frustrations, then, throwing back the warm duvet, began dressing for the day. From a porcelain ewer, painted with cheerful daisies, she splashed cool water into its matching basin and scrubbed away the lingering phantoms of her night.

The first rays of morning slanted into the kitchen as Fiona set the kettle on the hob, having encouraged the banked coals into flame with a supply of fresh kindling. She cut thick slabs of bread and set them on the table, while rashers spat and curled in a cast iron pan. Fiona gently cracked and dropped in eggs, then sliced and added a few mushrooms from her stores before she heard her father’s tread on the floorboards of his room. She slid the hot food onto her grandmother’s china plates, setting them at the table’s end as her father entered the kitchen.

“G’ morning,” he said as he sat in his usual chair. “Tea?”

“Right here, Da.” She placed a steaming mug before him, along with a blue bowl of pale yellow butter.
Fiona joined him, wondering when her father would speak of his meeting last
week with Iain, yet fearing what she would learn when he did. Breaking a corner from
her bread, she punctured the sun-like yolk of her egg, watching its contents deflate
and slide across her plate. She took a small bite and pushed her plate away, hands
cradled around her steaming mug.

“Not hungry?”

“No, Da. Not particularly.” Smiling, she slid her plate toward him.

“You sure,” he questioned. “You’re not getting sick?”

“No, Da. Just not hungry this morning.”

“You should eat,” he said. Using his buttered bread as a sop, he cleaned the
second plate. Wiping the grease from around his whisker-stubbled mouth with the
back of his hand, he drained his mug, and rising, pulled back from the table. “Off to
work then, lass.” He bent to kiss her head.

“Da?”

“Yes.” He paused as he pulled his greatcoat from its peg by the backdoor.

Fiona paused, not sure how to voice her question or even if she truly wished to
learn the results of the secretive meeting. “Nothing,” she replied, suddenly
remembering that she was not supposed to know about Da’s meeting with Sir Iain
Stanley.

After clearing up breakfast, Fiona spread quill, ink, and account books across
the kitchen table and began to decipher the seasonal ebb and flow of goods and cash.
They were woefully low on cash but if the market held, and if her father relented and
allowed Michael to help, the wool from their little flock should see them through the
coming winter. She recorded the various lists she’d made of supplies in the cold
storage room. Another month would see baskets of apples, healthy potatoes stored in
straw, braids of onion and garlic, along with turnips, carrots, and parsnips. Both
garden and orchard were doing well. Their dry crops of oats, rye, and wheat promised
to be enough to see them through if she was careful and the cats kept the mice at bay.
She listed the herbs growing or already harvested from her kitchen garden and the
nearby forest and fields: dried calendula flowers for salves, chamomile, echinacea,
dried elderberries, and ginger root. Fiona tallied the decoctions, ointments, and spices,
including a small clay pot of dried peppercorns. Her collection of medicinal herbs had
grown over the summer, each pot labelled. Bundles of cooking herbs hung from the
rafters completing their drying process before going into small clean jars standing
inverted on the cold room shelf.

Fiona smiled down at her records, each row neatly written in a clear hand,
pleased with what she had accomplished in the absence of a mother. And of Gran, she
amended.

The table cleared of her accounts and fresh bread rising, Fiona set out across
the field to bring luncheon to her father. She’d packed bread and goat cheese, a small
packet of currents, some meat pie, and a stoppered bottle of cider. The day had
warmed and her way was clear. *Perhaps,* she thought, *I’ve misinterpreted what I
heard. Da said nothing again this morning. Surely, he wouldn’t keep something this
important from me.* She breathed deeply of the fresh meadow air and began to hum a
melody Gran had taught her when she was small.

Fiona found her da in the low pastures near the stone circle; an injured lamb,
freed from the brambles that caught it, would need to be carried home so Fiona could
salve its cut leg.
Allan Middleton did not look up from his silent meal until he swallowed the last of the mead, replacing the bottle in the empty basket at Fiona’s feet.

“You’re a good daughter.”

She stood to follow as her father lifted the injured lamb and settled it across his shoulders.

“Fiona, Lord Stanley’s son, Iain, has asked for your hand. I can’t force ye, but I told him you’d abide by my word. Once married, Johnny’s to come home.”

Fiona stiffened, felt cold creep up her spine and squeeze her heart. Da turned to look at her. “Come along then, girl. This lamb needs tending to.”

He strode across the pasture toward home. She quietly shook her head. Struck dumb, and positive she had misheard her future spoken with such finality, questions and arguments filled her mouth. However, afraid to speak words she could not call back, she picked up the depleted basket and mutely followed his retreating form.

While her father settled the lamb in a holding pen, Fiona gathered the golden seal ointment from the house and returned to the barn.

“Da,” she began.

Before she could proceed, he cut her off.

“You’ll see. It’ll all turn right. Forget that farm boy now. You’re not to see the Connaught boy again.” He turned to look at her but dropped his eyes before continuing. “I forbid it.” He patted her shoulder and turning, left the barn. She could hear the scuffle of his heavy footsteps receding into the distance.

Fiona stood stone-faced, her unspoken emotion draining from her like sands in an hourglass. The bleat of the lamb calling its mother drew her back to her task. She quickly tended the wound, her mind a merry-go-round seeking a brass ring, an answer to stop this madness. Surely Da will not force me, she reasoned. It is 1871, women are
no longer forced. But Johnny. He’s my brother. What of Iain? Could I learn to forgive him for marrying another and then plotting with Da to win me as a prize? And Michael. I’ve promised. She buried her face in the lamb’s wool, holding its soft warmth to her as she would a lifeline. The touch of the fleece stirred a memory: sitting on her grandmother’s bed, stroking her tightly curled hair, listening to the stories she never tired of hearing, of the stones and of the fanciful mysteries they contained.

Fiona hurried to the house, put the jar of ointment on the table and, hitching up her skirts, ran up the stairs to her bedroom. She knelt beside her clothes cupboard, pushed a latch, and opened the little hidden compartment in the back. Fiona pulled out a rectangular, elder wood box. It felt immediately warm in her hand. She smiled as she stroked the three small animals delicately carved into its lid. The paint, once bright, was now worn to a transparent lustre, the grain of the wood showing through in small places.

“Oh, Gran, why did you have to die?” she despaired. “I don’t understand anything yet.” Running her fingers over the intricately wrought herald, she gazed at the three familiar animals depicted in the pattern: a ferret, a weasel, and a badger intertwined across the top and dancing around the sides. Fiona studied the box, turning it over and over, searching for answers.

The morning Gran died, Fiona had sat by her bedside pleading for more time to understand her secrets, but her grandmother had merely smiled and patted her hand. She’d spoken in a barely audible whisper. “The badger, child, stands for courage and bravery in defending one’s home. The ferret knows the hidden meaning of things.” Gran had lifted a worn hand and had gently brushed Fiona’s curls back from her forehead before continuing, “The little white weasel, an ermine some call it, is a
symbol of purity, preferring death to dishonour.” She’d closed her eyes, her breathing shallow.

Fiona had leaned forward, “Gran. Oh, Gran. Don’t leave me alone. Please.”

Her throat felt tight. Her voice stretched thin.

Gran had smiled, patted her cheek and whispered, “All three animals hold special meaning to the women in our family, Fiona, but I’ve taught you all I can.” She closed her eyes again. Her last words lingered in Fiona’s memory, “Everything you’ll ever need waits for you in the box.”

Exhausted, Fiona sat on the floor and leaned against the cupboard. Resting her head against its solid doors, her mind spun as she searched for answers to her unanswered questions, for help in solving the dilemma that faced her. She closed her eyes for a moment and found herself unconsciously humming a childhood melody.

She jerked upright, her eyes snapping open. The tune was a song Gran had taught her as a child. As she sang it aloud, she re-examined the box in her hands. The words suddenly took on new meaning.

“Three went out to play one day
Over the hills and far away.
One stood guard at the stoney door,
Three formed a ring on the cold, cold floor.
The last stood alone and watched his mates,
Knowing how they would meet their fates.”

Fiona stopped in amazement. Could the silly rhymes, riddles, and songs Gran had made her learn as a child hold the answers she sought? Was it possible to uncover the wisdom of the stones through child’s play?
She sighed. Unsure, yet determined to seek for answers, Fiona opened the box and took out the faded blue ribbon that was looped through her mother’s wedding band, a small, carved ring with a signet in its centre. Kissing the box for luck, she slipped the ribbon over her head and replaced the box within the cupboard. The ring nestled between her round breasts where it warmed immediately.

Pulling her shawl from its peg, she left the house humming the nursery rhyme, giving no thought to the words of the chorus.

“Count the stones,
Count the stones,
Count the stones,
Beware.”
“Are you sure you’re alright?”

Barbara nodded, refusing to meet Ian’s eyes. She wasn’t ready to tell anyone about her vision at the Stones nor her dawning fears that it might be connected in any way to her night terrors. *There can’t be a connection,* she mused. *The dream is years old. I started having it…* When? She began toying with her locket. *What does it mean? These things don’t happen to sane people.*

“Penny for your thoughts?”

“Hmm. What?” Barbara looked up toward Ian, who had stopped the car and was pulling the safety brake on.

“I said, ‘Penny for your thoughts,’ but they’re obviously worth more than that this morning.”

“They’re not really worth anything,” Barbara mused, realising that there was no one to talk to about her experience, especially not her parents. Her mother would say she was working too hard and press her to return home immediately. She briefly considered talking about her fears to Ian but dismissed the idea immediately. She didn’t want him to think less of her. *If he thinks of me at all,* she concluded, confused at her growing attraction toward him. *My life is getting way too complicated.*

“What’s next?” said Barbara, turning toward Ian.

“Barbara, are you quite well?”

Barbara looked up into Ian’s concerned face, one eyebrow arched in question. *He’s so good-looking when he does that, a bit more approachable, not so staid.*
Ian pointed out the side window. “We’re here. It’s Monday. Your follow-up interview with Mrs Rowling.” He searched her face. “Barbara, it’s not my place to pry but I can see something is not right. We can cancel this meeting if you’d like. I just thought you were keen on seeing her again and we’re right on time for luncheon but if you’re not well…” His voice trailed away in question.

Barbara took a deep breath. “Really, Ian. I was just wool-gathering.” She tried to suppress a laugh, then continued, “You don’t get it do you. Wool-gathering. American for daydreaming but we’re here in the UK. Sheep. Wool-gathering. Funny, don’t you see?”

When he offered only a tepid smile, her face reddened. “Ian. Really, I’m okay. Just a bit of jet lag. I’m quite fine.” She bent down to extract her notebook from her bag. A corner caught on the ribbon looped through the wooden amulet. She hastily pushed the necklace back into the depths of her bag.

Stepping out of the car and coming round to her side, Ian opened the door. Barbara muttered to herself, “It really was a bit funny.” She felt her face turn warm when Ian just shook his head. They walked in silence toward Mrs Rowling’s cottage door

Ian rapped three times, waiting, but the house showed no sign of life. He pulled the sleeve back on his tweed jacket and checked his watch.

“Nice watch,” Barbara commented then exclaimed, “Is that a Rolex?”

Ian shrugged his sleeve back into place. “Gift,” he muttered. He knocked louder on the wooden door.

A shuffle of house slippers and the click of a lock heralded the opening of the front door. Brae stood within the door’s frame, dabbing at reddened eyes with the hem of her apron.
Instinctively, Barbara slid into the opening and embraced the distraught woman. Her simple act of kindness overcame the housekeeper and Brae slumped forward, weeping openly.

Ian, responding to Barbara’s spontaneous action, moved them into the vestibule, and helped the housekeeper into a chair.

“What has happened?”

“Tis the Missus. She’s been taken quite ill. Gone to hospital late in the night. Still and all, she said to tell you she was sorry to disappoint. Said you were such a lovely young lady. Put her in mind of someone she used to know.” She straightened her shoulders, wiped her tear-stained cheeks again, and made as if to stand. “I’ve made a proper luncheon as she wanted. If you’d care to sit in the parlour, I’ll just make some fresh tea?” Brae signalled to the open door, drew a deep breath, and sighed. “She was so disappointed she wouldn’t see you again.”

Barbara could think of no rejoinder and listened mutely as Ian questioned, “Is there anything to be done then?”

Brae shook her head, her tears threatening to spill again from her overfull eyes.

“We’ll go then,” said Ian. “Lord Stanley will be in touch, I am sure.”

Brae seemed comforted by his words.

Barbara felt Ian’s hand cradle her elbow as he gently turned her back toward the open door and the car. Disappointed and shocked at the news, she, nonetheless, felt a surge of warmth travel through her body at Ian’s touch. Upon reaching the car, Brae’s words came back to her, echoing those of Mrs Rowling. *Who do I remind her of?*
Later that afternoon back in her room at the Crown and Cushion, Barbara replaced her laptop in its BookBook case then slid the whole into her weekend bag. She checked the closet, pulled her jacket and scarf from a wooden hanger, and laid them over the back of an empty chair. Twisting the ring on her thumb, she sat to wait for Ian, then stood to check the closet again as well as the bathroom. Her anxiety was rising. First her meeting with Lord Stanley had been delayed, followed by Mrs Rowling’s sudden illness, not to mention her otherworldly experience at the stones. Then there was Ian. How did he fit into her life? Her world felt cracked around the edges. I’m a mess, she thought. Worrying about Ken and Jillian while I’m creating fantasies about Ian. What would Mom say?

Pushing aside her unwanted thoughts, Barbara suddenly wanted nothing more than to get back to her room in Aberystwyth and visit the Welsh National Library to seek the origins of the mysterious Mother Shipton. The notes from Mrs Rowling suggested several spellings for her name from Ursula Southeil to Sowthiel or Southill from Yorkshire. Whoever or whatever she was, her past was chequered as a witch, wise woman and prophetess, perhaps even a British Nostradamus. Minimal research had revealed intriguing leads from her birth in a cave near waters that supposedly petrified to her marriage to Tobias Shipton, a carpenter. Shipton-under-Wychwood stood near the Rollright Stones. Were they all one and the same woman? Would she have travelled that far?

Picking up her notebook from the small table by the window, Barbara flipped through her research notes. The reports all called Mother Shipton ugly, witch-child of the devil with a teenaged mother named Agatha Southill. Barbara scanned what she had written, noting a quote that described Shipton as having ‘a frightening visage, and
an unusually long and crooked nose.’ The bottom of the page was bent at the corner, holding it together with the next.

Startled at a sudden knock at the door, Barbara dropped the notebook. It fell open, the two pages coming unstuck.

“May I come in?” Ian peered around the edge of the door. “I’ve heard that Mrs Rowling has been sent down to London. It was her heart but she’s expected to be…” he stopped in mid-sentence. “You look as if you’ve seen a ghost. Whatever is the matter? The old girl will be fine you know.” He crossed the room toward her, stooping to pick up her fallen workbook.

“Didn’t know you could sketch,” he commented, smoothing the damaged page to study the drawing of an old woman, her thin nose a bit crooked, pale hair tightly curled around her longish face. “Looks like something out of a nightmare?” He offered her the book.

Barbara stood staring dumbly at the likeness.

“Who is it supposed to be?”

“I’m not sure,” she said closing the cover with a shaking hand. *I’ve never seen it before and I don’t remember drawing it. What’s happening to me? Maybe I should have listened to my mother and never come on this trip.*

She shrugged on her coat. “We really need to go, Ian. I’ve got to get back to Aber to the Welsh National Library. Today’s been a total loss and I’ve tons of research to do. This trip has given me a whole new level of research in addition to the one I’d planned. And then there’s my meeting with your boss on Thursday.”

She tucked her computer case under her arm, stepped past Ian and his confused expression, and hurried down the stairs toward the car.
Ian settled her bags near the sofa, offering Barbara the key as he turned to go. He said nothing, which perfectly matched the nothing she had said the entire trip back to Aberystwyth. Guilty, she looked into his face but couldn’t read the emotion behind the mask. He was once again the perfect British chauffeur. Her heart twisted but she couldn’t bring herself to speak of her experience at the stones nor of the question as to how that picture got into her notebook nor yet again of who Mother Shipton really was. Each question led to another until hundreds of questions, sharp as needles, plagued her. How could a nightmare so quickly become a reality? Perhaps her mother was right with her oft quoted Shakespearean phrase, “Things sweet to taste prove in digestion sour.” A constant warning as she grew up to avoid all things she didn’t understand or that might prove dangerous.

“Right, then.” Ian slid the house key onto a side table.

“Look, Ian, I’m…” she looked down at her feet. Silence stretched across an insurmountable gulf. “I’m sorry. I’m just… .” She wanted nothing more than to feel his arms around her, for him to say he somehow understood, for him to reassure her that she wasn’t slipping off the deep end. You’re a fool, she chided herself. However much she argued with herself, she couldn’t force her heart to expand into the words she wanted to say.

“I… when will you come get me on Thursday to meet with Lord Stanley?”

“I believe he said half twelve for lunch.” He put his hand on the door latch. “Was there anything else I might help you with?”
Barbara inhaled as if to speak, shook her head no, and slowly released her breath. “Thank you,” she murmured as he walked through the door, closing it behind him.

Moments later, Barbara jumped at the sound of a knock at the door.

“Just a minute,” she called. She dabbed a tissue at her eyes, ran a hand through her hair, and walked to the door, positive Ian had returned. She’d decided to tell him everything. She needed a friend and he’d been more than kind.

“I’m so glad you’ve come back,” Barbara exclaimed as she opened the door.

“Come back. I’ve not gone anywhere,” replied Tao, confused.

“Oh. Hi, Tao.” Barbara hastily stuffed the Kleenex into her pocket and smiled.

“I thought you were someone else.”

“That good looking bloke?” She arched her brow. “He’s already off down the drive.” Tao searched her face. “You two have a tiff?”

“What makes you think that? He’s just Lord Stanley’s chauffeur bringing me home.” Barbara pointed to her bag. “Tao, I don’t mean to be short but I’ve got to unpack and I’ve at least two hours of sorting notes before dinner. Can I help you with something?”

“Just dropping off this message. Ms Pugh asked me to give it to you as soon as you got in. Said it was important.”

“Did she say who it was from?” Barbara pulled her cell phone from her bag. The ringer was off. Remembering she’d turned it off just outside Mrs Rowling’s to avoid interruptions, she clicked it back on.

“It might be from my editor.” Barbara looked up into Tao’s expectant eyes.

“Sorry for being short. Thanks for this.”
Barbara slid her finger under the envelope’s flap only to find that it wasn’t sealed. She pulled the note free just as her phone rang.

Dan’s voice greeted her as her eyes scanned the hastily printed note she held in her hand.

“Barbara. Thank God. Where have you been?”

**Regret to inform you... car accident...**

“I’ve been trying to reach you for an hour.”

“**Critical condition of your father... mother in a coma... do not delay.**”

“Barbara. Barbara, speak to me.”

Her hand came to her mouth. *What? How? This isn’t happening.* She looked dumbly at Tao. A voice called her name. The phone shook in her hand. No, it was her hand that trembled. She stared at it dumbly.

“Dan?”

“Barbara. Barbara, is there anyone there with you?”

“Yes, the woman next door.” Her voice was wooden, detached. It wasn’t her speaking. This wasn’t happening. Her world was dead. Her parents. *Oh, God, let this not be true. Not true. Not true. Please, not true.*

“Barbara. I’ve got you a ticket on the next flight home.” He paused. “Babs, doll, do you hear me?” He couldn’t see her mute nod.

“I’m sorry. I don’t have all the details yet but we’re doing everything we can at this end. A car...”

Her hand lowered to her lap. Impossibly, Ian walked through the door that Tao had held open. As if in a dream, Barbara watched as he moved about the room gathering up her bags and rushing them back to the car. She’d never seen Ian like this, his formality gone as he took charge.
“May I?” Ian asked when he returned. He took the phone from Barbara’s hand. “Hello. To whom am I speaking?’’

“Who the hell are you? Where’s Barbara?”

“I am Lord Stanley’s chauffeur, Ian Williams… I presume this is Daniel Doyle, her editor?” Ian listened. “Yes, Lord Stanley informed me. The arrangements have been made and I’m to take Miss Shaunaky to Heathrow immediately.”

Their voices blurred, a bumblebee hitting a window again and again in a fruitless effort to escape. The buzzing in her ears escalated. After last night’s heightened awareness, she felt hollow, scooped out, a black emptiness in the centre of her soul. This had to be an extension of her nightmare. The one she couldn’t remember. The one she didn’t want to remember.

No.

This time it was real.
The funeral was a quiet affair, mostly teachers, church friends, and a sprinkling of students. Of those only a dozen had come to the house to murmur personal condolences, to offer help, or to share memories at the buffet. She made a mental note to write a thank you to her mother’s church society for providing the luncheon. Dan had arrived with Jillian, who, teary-eyed, had reached as if to hug Barbara, stammered a garbled mix of sympathy and apology for the botched travel arrangements, then burst into tears again. Dan, seeing Barbara’s stricken face, quickly steered Jillian away.

“Have a drink, Barbie. You look done in.” Ken poured some Jack Daniels into a glass on the sideboard and offered it to her.

She woodenly accepted the glass Ken offered and raised it to her lips. “Gross, Ken.” She forced the glass back into his hand. “You know I don’t drink, especially now.”

“Just trying to help. You want something to eat. There’s enough funeral food in the house to feed an army.” He put his arm around her slender form and pulled her to him. The smell of alcohol made her stomach lurch. Pushing away from his embrace, she walked down the hall away from the murmur and condolences of her guests and entered her father’s office.

This isn’t right. How can Ken drink knowing it was a drunk driver…. How can Daddy be gone leaving his man-cave behind. A wan smile played at the corners of her mouth at the memory of how her father always referred to his study as his man-cave.
As a child, he’d always played growly bear whenever she came in and disturbed him at work. Barbara looked around anxiously until she found the bear picture frame she’d made for her father when she was ten. It was on the shelf, just behind his reclining desk chair. Her father’s face smiled back at her from within the paws that hugged the frame. Nestled safe within the circle of his arms, her child-face giggled in perpetual delight.

"Gone. Dad, you can’t be gone. I didn’t get to say goodbye. Daddy, can you hear me. Dad. I love you."

A week ago, I was in Wales, driving to a Samhain ceremony to honour the dead, Barbara mused. Now I’m driving to the bank to clear a safety deposit box.

Pulled out of her reverie, she thought she heard Ken ask a question. “Hmmm. What did you say?”

“I said I’m sorry, Barbara. I don’t know what you want. I’ve apologised a dozen times for my behaviour at the funeral. I’m taking my vacation time to be with you. I’m trying to help. Just tell me what you want. Okay?” He rested his hand lightly on her thigh. She looked at him in silence until he removed it.

“Look, Ken,” she said, taking a deep breath. “I’m not dealing very well with any of this. I’ve lost my dad. Mom’s in a coma.” Her voice rose. “There are bills to pay. Attorneys to see. Reports to fill out.” She started to cry. “I can’t even yell at the drunk who killed them. He’s dead. He lost his job, his wife left, and he went out to have a drink. And then he killed my dad and… and ran his car into oncoming traffic and killed himself.” Openly sobbing, Barbara stopped to blow her nose and whispered, “Ken, it was their anniversary.”

“Barbie.” He placed his hand over hers. “You’ve still got your mother.”
“She’s in a coma! Barbara yelled, jerking her hand away.

Ken remained silent as he turned into the parking garage, driving up five floors to find an open slot. As he helped her from the car, she stood and buried her face in his chest. Unsure, he patted her back.

“Just hold me, please.” He slipped his arms around her as she started to weep again. “Just hold me. I’m so sorry. I’m not mad at you. You’ve been so good to me. I just can’t handle this. I don’t want to handle this. I want things to go back to the way they were.”

Holding hands, they rode the elevator down to the bank’s lobby in silence. Ken took a seat while Barbara was ushered into a small private office. After forty minutes of paperwork, Barbara returned to the waiting area. Ken looked up from a sports magazine.

“Ken, if the magazine is any good, enjoy it or maybe take a walk, get something to eat. I’m sorry but this may take a while. I’ve signed the papers, shown my power of attorney, everything, but you won’t be allowed into the safety deposit box area.” He placed the magazine back on the table and stood near her, placing his hand under her chin.

“Would you like me to bring you something?”

“I’d die for a hot chocolate with whipped cream and maybe some caramel sauce.” Memory of a happier time played around the edges of her consciousness.

“Miss Shaunaky. We’re ready for you now.” Two bank personnel dressed in matching blue suits waited quietly behind the bank representative. Ken brushed her cheek with a kiss before she turned and walked away.
The vault was cold, silver gray metal from floor to ceiling. The walls were lined with endless rows of square box-fronts, each sporting a double lock, each holding the secret lives of their owners. Businesslike, impersonal, the entire room stood behind double, sliding, metal-barred doors.

Barbara had been relieved to escape the morgue-like central room and travel down a carpeted hall to a simple, elegantly understated antechamber with cushioned chairs, an oak table, and a more comfortable temperature.

She sat before her parents’ double-sized box; the key discarded under the mound of papers Barbara had removed: mortgage, bank accounts, stock portfolio, will, and provisions for a living trust, just in case. They appeared to have thought of every eventuality to protect their beloved daughter. They’d gone to great lengths to secure a solid financial future for her. Properly managed, she found herself with a great deal of money, not wealthy, but certainly far more comfortable than she had ever dreamed of becoming. She was stunned at the meticulous care they had taken.

Everything appeared in order, neat and tidy. Except it wasn’t. Just when she thought her world might stop spinning out of control, when she had accepted the gift that her parents had prepared for her, she found at the bottom of the metal container a child’s shoe box tied with a faded pink ribbon.

Opening it, she smiled at a pair of satin baby slippers, a button missing from one. Nestled under the childhood memento was a carved box made of a dark, ebony coloured wood. As Barbara lifted it and stroked its surface, a subtle fragrance reached out to her. How odd, she thought. It smells of charred wood but there’s no damage anywhere. Forest animals gambolled across its surface. Flecks of bright paint peeked out of the pattern’s deeper incisions.
As she examined the curious wooden box, she noticed a manilla envelope at the bottom of the shoebox. It was plain and unmarked. Pulling its papers free, Barbara unfolded a notarised document listing her adoption to her parents when she was two. It was wrapped around a birth certificate, a girl, Selah Babette, born in England on her birthdate, but born to a total stranger.

She felt as if she had been physically struck. The sound of pain that escaped her lips resounded from the expressionless walls. She shook her head as if denial could halt the barrage of emotions that clamoured for her attention – fear, loss, anger, betrayal. Once again her world reeled with unanswered questions.
Sitting next to her mother in the hospital, Barbara mentally ticked off the list of things she had accomplished. Making and completing lists ordered her life, giving comfort when multiple tasks confronted and stressed her. She had signed her name to many more documents than she dreamed were necessary, but she was now executor of a living trust for a six-weeks-dead father and a comatose mother. Despite the IV and feeding tube, her mother was shrinking, disappearing from her life inch by inch.

What else? The evidence of holiday rejoicing spilled from every shop window and street lamp. Hoping tradition would assuage grief, Barbara had attempted to decorate, putting up the pre-lit silk tree. The ornament boxes still sat unopened beneath the bay window overlooking the Columbia. I’ll put the ornaments away later. The tree is fine with just the lights. Symbolic, really.

Dan and the staff at History Speaks had sent a blood-red poinsettia, which sat on the windowsill of her mother’s hospital room. She’d returned Dan’s phone, telling him she was taking a leave of absence from school and work. Dan said he understood and to take her time. He’d try to keep the position open for her. She didn’t know if she wanted to go back. You haven’t written his story though, have you. Barbara sighed. I’m my own worst enemy.

She shifted in her seat, easing the arm that held her mother’s hand. “Why, mother? Why didn’t you ever tell me? Did you think I’d stop loving you?” She murmured her daily litany.

She sighed and changed tactics. The doctors said that sometimes a familiar voice helped coma victims. *But I’m the victim, the one left behind, the one left to clean up this nightmare. Who will talk to me?*

“Mom.” The word scraped against her uncertainty, causing it to bleed anew. “I went to Wales and I survived the trip. I met a man with coal black hair, who told me all about magpies. I met a strange old woman…. She stopped. If her mother could hear, she didn’t want to alarm her. She still hadn’t heard the outcome of Mrs Rowling’s illness. Barbara started again. “I met a woman named Tao. She was from the Caribbean. You met her on Skype when I arrived in Aberystwyth. Remember. Do you remember the energy bars? They came in so handy.” Her voice broke. She reached into her shoulder bag and pulled out a small silver bell in the shape of a Christmas angel. The clapper sounded tinny and wrong in the hospital room.

“Mom. See. I brought Clarence. You remember. We always watched *It’s a Wonderful Life* and rang the bell. Please don’t leave me. Oh, mom, what shall I do?” Barbara suddenly missed the minutiae of her mother’s constant instructions. She’d always seemed to know what was needed, what path Barbara should take. Confident. Protective. *Smothering, you mean. She meant well,* Barbara argued with herself.

She leaned down to kiss her mother’s forehead. “I’ll come again tomorrow, mom. I love you.” Straightening, she shrugged on her coat. At the door she turned, “Merry Christmas, Mom.”
Barbara sat in the silence of her father’s study at his oversized desk. Weak January light slanted through the windows, back-lighting the computer’s monitor. Occasional deer stepped gingerly from the overgrown and untended garden just past the borders of the manicured lawn. Beyond that she could see river traffic coming and going passing through the harbour’s mouth on their way to and from Portland.

The bubbles of her screen saver drifted aimlessly across the beginning of a prologue. She had thought to put together a short article on the research she’d done. After all, she’d reasoned, Dan was still out of pocket for her ticket and expenses in Wales.

As she mused, the front bell rang. She closed her fleece robe, ran her fingers through her hair, and glancing at the clock, saw it was past eleven and she wasn’t dressed for the day. Opening the door, she signed for a small package before the driver rushed down the stairs, climbed back into his brown truck, and hurried along his route. She read the foreign address and wondered if Ian had forgotten to put something in her box of left-behind belongings that had arrived several weeks ago.

Closer inspection showed it was from a solicitor’s office in Oxfordshire. Barbara held the package, reluctant to open it. She wanted to leave the past in the past. Her relationship with Ken had settled during the holidays. He’d even hinted at a real future together. A letter from the university agreeing to a full reinstatement in the fall lay open on the corner of her desk. She’d be twenty, a woman of substance. Her mother had stabilised, but not come out of the coma, and had been moved to an extended care facility. Barbara’s search for her birth mother had borne no fruit so, locking the pain of discovery deep inside, she’d told her family attorney to stop any further inquiries. She didn’t want any more complications in her life. She slid the package to one side and went to the kitchen for a cup of hot chocolate.
The following morning, she woke to snow and cancelled her plans to drive into Portland. She loved the clean white beginning that was snow. It invigorated her. She smiled for the first time in months as she walked down the stairs, trying to avoid stepping on her cat, and turned into the sunlit office.

“Today, I write,” she proclaimed. Nieko, who had followed, expecting breakfast, promptly jumped up onto her desk. Papers drifted to the floor followed by a dull thud. “You know, for a Siamese cat, you can sure be clumsy sometimes.” Nieko appeared suddenly absorbed in washing behind her ears.

Bending to gather up the scattered work, Barbara hefted the slim package in her hand. “Might as well see what this is,” she said to no one in particular.

Moments later waxy green wrapping paper lay torn on the floor at her feet. Numbly she stared, tracing her finger across the outlines of miniature animals that formed part of what looked to be a family crest of sorts. The ancient embossing was worn almost to invisibility on the journal’s age-softened surface. It looked familiar, as if she’d seen it before but couldn’t quite place where. A memory tickled the edge of her consciousness. Barbara placed the book in the middle of her desk.

“Okay, cat,” Barbara said, stroking her pet. “You tell me, where did this come from?” Nieko merely purred. “Perhaps, why might be the better question?”

Barbara rummaged through the paper at her feet, searching for an explanation. “I must have missed something, a message explaining, asking, telling, anything to shed light on why this was sent to me.” She stared at the leather cover and a memory sprang fully formed into her mind. She could almost hear Mrs Rowling’s raspy voice, scratching at her ear and tickling her memory. She had last seen the journal cradled in the old woman’s arms as she slowly rocked back and forth while relating the story of the Rollright Stones.
The brightness of the morning sun deepened the shadows in the journal’s embossing. The soft leather did not lay quite flat. Nieko nosed at the little bronze paw-shaped clasp that held the book closed. It sprang open, sending the cat skittering off the table, as the corner of a richly textured envelope slid from under the cover. Once free, Barbara noticed that there were actually two letters, a smaller one hidden beneath the first.

The larger, written on heavy paper matching the envelope, was dated four weeks earlier.

   Dear Ms. Shaunaky,

   I am sorry to acquaint you with the knowledge that Mrs Rowling passed on December 12th, 2012. Just prior to her death, I was engaged to settle her affairs and execute her last will and testament. She has left the proceeds of her estate to the Friends of the Rollright Stones. Her few personal effects were left to various friends and her housekeeper, Ms Brae Yates. Mrs Rowling made especial note of your interview and interest in the Rollright Standing Stones when you visited her last November. It was her request that this journal and the enclosed letter be passed to you upon her demise. I regret I have no further information and that in the delivery of these items to your hands, I have now concluded my final obligation as Mrs Rowling’s solicitor.

   Sincerely,

   David Mumford, Esq.,

   Barrister,

   Chipping North, Oxfordshire, England
The faint scent of lavender reached out to Barbara as she opened the thin envelope containing the second letter. Its paper had the consistency of fine tissue and was written in an old fashioned cursive script, each letter beautifully formed, spidery-delicate, revealing a bygone era. The handwriting seemed vaguely familiar but Barbara dismissed the thought as her eyes moved across the page.

My dear Miss Shaunaky:

Your interview has stirred memories, reminding me that my tasks are not finished. I regret that our time was short and I was unable to answer your questions fully. However, my doctors inform me that I should “place my affairs in order.” Since I have no living heirs I care to acknowledge, I am sending you my journal for safekeeping in the hopes that you will come to understand and accept your gift.

Sincerely,

Mrs F. Rowling

Barbara felt a welling of tears. She had only met this unusual woman once, yet felt an inexplicable loss. Why send me your journal as a remembrance? I barely knew you. What is it you want me to know, to understand?

The clock struck nine AM.

Time.

That was the answer. There’d been no time for Mrs Rowling to reveal the secrets Barbara had felt she’d kept hidden during their interview.

Disjointed fragments, ghosts of unanswered queries, floated through her head. Barbara realized that this book possibly held the answers to questions she could no longer ask Mrs Rowling. Did it contain reference to the history of the stones? Perhaps there were notes about Mother Shipton, or facts to explain why the totals never matched when the stones were counted more than once.
Her curiosity piqued, she opened the journal only to be confronted with empty pages. The journal was completely blank.

“What’s this?” Barbara ran her locket back and forth along its chain, trying to understand why she’d receive an empty journal from a woman she barely knew. Nieko, who had resumed her place on the desk, stared at her with starburst sapphire eyes, her tail twitching.

Barbara placed the opened book before her, stared at the unmarked pages, and traced the smooth texture of the vellum with her fingers. A sudden wave of nausea engulfed her as her vision darkened at the edges, shifted and doubled. The blank sheet before her shimmered in and out of focus. She blinked again and yet again, unbelieving. Hovering over the surface, a transparent hand held an old-fashioned writing quill. The scritch of pen on parchment filled the room as words formed, delicate, looping, weblike in structure.

Vaguely familiar yet incomprehensible words appeared in the wake of the pen—*Ceisia dy wirioneddd*.

“But what does that mean?” No sooner had she spoken than the writing faded, letters dropped away and others re-formed. In moments, the writing again settled, clear and sharp on the page.

“Seek your truth.” As Barbara repeated the words aloud, the writing once again faded from the parchment and was gone.
“What do you mean, Mistress Martha can’t be bothered?” Agatha hissed. She lifted her hand to strike the filthy urchin but stayed it when he raised a bony arm in protection over his head.

Cowering, the child peered up when the proffered blow did not land. “I means, Mistress Southill, that old Tom said he knew nothing and his misses knew less ‘en him and that he couldn’t spare her on account of they just butchered the sow.” Although it was obvious that the child’s dirt-streaked face contained no guile, Agatha refused to pay for an errand without a pleasing outcome.

“Off with you then. You’re no good to me.” She slammed the door in the boy’s miserable face.

Climbing the steep steps to her upper apartment, Agatha slumped into a tapestried chair. A weak tendril of smoke floated up the chimney from the ashes of last night’s fire. She pulled Kaleb’s missive from a small wooden box in her desk drawer, searching through the words of love for something she might have missed. Why hadn’t he kept their tryst? Where was he? What had changed his mind?

She stared miserably out of the window, considering her options. Her breasts ached and she’d missed her moon days twice but with the arrival of Kaleb’s letter, she assumed all would be well. She would be safe from detection, if they married soon. It was whispered that first babies often came early, or so said the old wives’ tales. It was only the later ones that took 10 moons. She’d visualised how she would tell him, waiting, of course, until after she lay with him again. She wanted his mood to be right
for her news and, she considered, she just wanted him. The memory of a smile faded from her face.

Now he was missing and she’d had no further word. The innkeeper and his wife, Martha, evidently knew nothing, only that he had gone. The only other person she could have asked about Kaleb’s business travels was her father, but he’d left before dawn on the day Kaleb had set for their tryst at the fisher’s cottage. She’d been excited at her gift of freedom. Now, however, she was just vexed. Her father would be in London for the next fortnight, maybe even a month, seeing to the affairs of the Textile Guild.

Agatha considered what options lay open before her. Reaching back into the open box within her desk, she lifted a satin pouch and slid Kaleb’s heavy signet ring into her cupped hand. The carnelian stone had cracked, making it unusable as a seal, but Kaleb had given it to her in exchange for her mother’s ring, which she usually wore on a chain around her neck. She’d told no one of the promises the exchange implied for they had remained unspoken. Had she been duped? Bought with a damaged ring? No. She fought the hollowness beneath her heart.

In that moment of doubt, her world turned, shifting her from child toward woman. She would journey to York and seek his family, show them the signet, claim her rightful protection, and prevent the bastardy of their unborn child.

“You may think her a comely enough lass, Jarl, but I’ll not allow Kaleb’s by-blows to be recognised by the House of Artur. How many shall there be?”

“But the ring?” Jarl countered with upturned hands. “She has Kaleb’s ring, brother. I saw father give him the red signet.”
A momentary smile slid across Ansgar’s face. His eyes studied his younger brother, now grown tall, well muscled, already making a name for himself, fulfilling their father’s hope of a distinguished career in the king’s service. Searching an inside pocket of his full cleric sleeves, Ansgar pulled out his hand, slowly uncurling soft white fingers to reveal the signet ring he held clenched within. The impression of the damaged signet pressed into the doughy flesh of his palm.

“You mean this ring?” His eyes were depthless, calculating.

“But she brought you that ring as proof, Ansgar.”

“Did she now?” Ansgar re-crossed his arms across his chest, sliding his hands and the ring back within the sleeves of his priestly grey tunic. “I intend to pronounce the child nullius filius.”

“Nobody’s child. But that would brand her a whore.”

“As you say.”

Agatha, waiting in the small family chapel, carefully fingered a well-wrought tapestry, admired the intricate altar cloth, and gazed at matching silver candlesticks. She knew that Kaleb’s mother, Ellyn, had died when he was a child. Was it Ellyn or some other, she wondered, who had made and gathered the rich appointments within the small room?

Agatha turned at the rustle of skirts and a gentle cough. Flanked by two sombre girls, a tall stately woman held the hand of a young boy. The woman’s eyes searched Agatha’s face, weighing her, asking and answering silent, unspoken questions.

“Who is she, mama?” asked the oldest girl.
Agatha’s heart constricted in her chest as a cloud shifted, uncaring, in the heavens, and a shaft of light played on the smallest child’s features.

“Kaleb,” Agatha whispered, quickly placing her hand over her mouth as if to call back the name. She studied his face, so like the one she sought. His eyes, shaped like his dam’s, were clear and innocently questioning. They displayed none of the struggling emotions at war within his mother’s unsettled look.

“Grace, take Euan and Alys.”

“But, mama, who is she?” the girl questioned again, swivelling her head while leading her siblings from the room.

“She is no one.” Her hand flicked toward the door, hurrying them. “Go children. I shall join you in my rooms shortly.” The door closed behind them.

“Where is he?” asked the woman.

Confused, the question startled Agatha. However, it was the mixture of unveiled longing and hate emanating from the questioner’s eyes that shook Agatha. Standing mute, Agatha unconsciously placed one hand protectively over her belly, the other risen to her throat.

Another door opened to admit the priest and a nobleman.

“Ah, sister dear.” Ansgar scanned the room before continuing in a silken voice. “What are you doing here, Mistress Rhiannon?” He may hold power as a cleric, Agatha realized, but he was not above being unctuous before the mistress of the holding.

“I was here for my mid-day prayers, brother dear.” Acid tinged her endearment.

“You will excuse us, dear sister.”
Ansgar nodded toward the far door, inviting her to leave. “This will only take a moment and we would not want to sully your ears with this disagreeable matter.” Jarl took his sister-in-law’s arm and escorted her to the door and gently closed it behind her, returning to stand behind his brother. Ansgar stepped forward and faced Agatha.

“Agatha Southill, presumed to be from Knaresborough,” he intoned. “We have examined your claim and pronounce the child you carry, if there be a child, nullius filius. We furthermore,” he made the sign of the cross in the air before her, “in the name of Holy Church, declare you wanton and a whore.”

Agatha reached for the corner of the prayer bench, steadying herself.

“But my proof. We exchanged rings. We are betrothed.”

“What proof have you?” Ansgar’s eyes challenged her with an icy brittleness.

“Kaleb’s ring.”

“Ring?”

“I gave you Kaleb’s ring, his promise. Please give it back to me.”

“You are dangerously close, woman, to being condemned as a liar as well as a wench.” Ansgar’s voice carried a flint-edged hardness. Agatha saw doubt flit across Jarl’s face before its lines hardened into an unreadable mask.

“But I came in faith, expecting welcome from Kaleb’s family in the joy of a child, seeking for the father.” Stony silence met her entreaty. “At least a coin to see me safely home,” she pled.

“A coin.” Ansgar’s face suffused with indignation. “This is the end then. You come to defile our family with your loose ways and then you plead for our money to assist you in your evil. Away from our door, sinner.” He signalled his brother forward. “Jarl, throw her back into the gutter from which she crawled.”
Releasing her grip on the oak bench beneath her, Agatha struck tears from her pale cheeks, the knuckles of her hands white against the rising colour of her face. She lifted her head to her full height, feeling resolve flood her core, straighten her spine. Jarl paused before the outrage in her eyes.

“Touch me not,” she said drawing back.

Agatha’s eyes sought and held those of Ansgar. “I’ll go to the Lord Abbott and tell him of your cruelty and your theft.”

A flicker of doubt was swiftly replaced by granite loathing as Ansgar fought to hold his fury in check. His voice, cold and hard, filled the room. “Speak one word of your filthy lies and I’ll proclaim you witch from the pulpit. The seed you carry is devil’s spawn.

His words penetrated like a stab of iced steel, chilled her core, and sealed all feeling from her heart. “Then,” she cried. “I curse you.”

Ansgar recoiled, making the sign of the cross.

Emboldened by his action, Agatha raised her hand forming the sign for eternity to seal her words upon the heads of both brothers. “The child I carry shall revenge the father upon your black hearts, while stones weep blood.” As her words echoed against the vaulted ceiling, Agatha turned away and head held high, swept from the room.
August pushed into September. With a secret kiss from Michael still warm on her lips, Fiona walked across the newly harvested field toward home. She again questioned her decision not to tell him about Da’s marriage arrangements for she knew Michael would never go against her father’s wishes. But, Fiona reasoned, there was still time since Father Mark hadn’t spoken to her yet nor was a date set to publish the banns. Business had taken Iain to London. The only change in her life was in her father. Never gregarious, Da had seemed more introspective than normal. Perhaps, Fiona hoped, he was reconsidering. Surely he wouldn’t force me, even for Johnny.

Entering the kitchen, Fiona hung her shawl on a hook and took down her apron to prepare a late evening meal. She cut portions of meat from a lamb shank and placed them between thick slices of buttered bread; setting a small bowl containing the last of the rhubarb cobbler on the tray, she added a small jar of heavy cream. A mug of ale stood half full on the small table beside her father’s chair. Da sat before the hearth, his stockinged feet pointed toward the fire, while he puffed absently on his pipe. The big toe of his right foot poked through his woolen socks. She set the heavy tray on a chair-side table, returning to sit by her father with her mending basket.

Da suddenly looked old to Fiona, aged beyond his years. He had been, in fact, much older than her mother when they’d married. Now at sixty-seven, his thinning hair was almost completely white. When, she asked herself, had his great coat become too large? The collar high enough to partially cover his ears? Fiona knew he had come to depend heavily on her since her mother had died eight years ago,
followed by the loss of her Gran last year. She’d naturally taken over the cooking and cleaning and had moved on to managing the household as well as the farm accounts. Da ran the farm but she knew from chance remarks and most recently from her hedge-side eavesdropping that he again harboured dreams of expanding the sheep folds and of obtaining Abbot’s Field, which was bordered by Simon’s spring, a fresh water stream that would increase his land’s productivity and possibly move him and his son back into what he considered the gentry. For Fiona the days of the gentry class system, of finding a Fitzwilliam Darcy and a Pemberley, of living happily ever after were a thing of romantic novels, which she had given up when Iain had originally married. She knew that regaining the family’s lost status was something her father took very seriously, but where is my true heart, she wondered.

She set the thick sliced sandwich on the table near Da’s elbow, having spiced the lamb just the way he liked it with plenty of black pepper, mace, and a bit of savoury thyme from their garden. He looked up at her slowly, his rheumy eyes unfocused, clouded with his memories of the past.

“Mary…” He fell silent, shook his head, then looked back at her with recognition. Glancing down at the sandwich, he smiled, “Plenty of black pepper as your mother used?”

She nodded, bending to pull his damaged sock free. In spite of the fire, his feet felt cold. She placed a plaid rug over his legs, then inserted a darning egg into the damaged sock and threaded a needle.

“Fiona, you’re a good girl to your ol’ Da,” he said. “Leave that be for now and come, sit by me. I need to talk to you.”

Fiona pulled down a cushion from the faded green and gold floral sofa, knelt on the colorful braided carpet, and settled next to his chair. She laid her head on her
up-drawn knees and watched the fire within the heavy iron grate, occasional sparks ascending. The andirons were shaped like badgers, her family’s symbol of courage and protection. They seemed to dance, the firelight undulating through their filigreed bodies. Da ran his calloused fingers through his daughter’s copper curls gently, feeling the loops and swirls slide through and caress his work-worn hands.

“Fiona, you are so like your mother. Mary’s hair was the same colour as yours the first time I saw her. It looked like she had a halo of fire surrounding her face as the sun struck her hair. You’ve always been a good daughter to me but it’s time to think of your future,” he paused, shifted in his chair and continued, “I know about your meetings of late and I want you to know that I think he will make you a fine husband.”

“Oh, Da, I’m sorry I went behind your back.” Her heart raced with hope. Had her father really changed in his feelings toward Michael? “You really like him. You’ll approve?”

“What’s not to approve? He’s educated. He’s a bit older but that shouldn’t make too great a difference. I was fifteen years older than your mother and it worked out well for us. Yes, I think Iain Stanley is a good man and you could do far worse. He has history in the community, he has position, and he has money.”

“But, I…. Her heart began to flutter. He’d not mentioned marriage for weeks. She’d begun to hope that he had somehow, someway, broken off his agreement with Iain.

“He’s not like that nobody, Michael Connaught. I mean the Connaught boy is good-natured and somewhat educated, but as poor as they come. He’d be totally unacceptable as a husband for you. We’re mebbe a bit of a stretch for Iain socially; but, remember, your mother and gran had a family coat of arms, even though it dates
back generations through the Shiptons. Your family genealogy is something to be proud of and you have proof in your mother’s ring. I can’t have my only daughter marrying beneath her. Besides young Stanley presses me. I can’t put him off much longer as you dither in your answer. I need your word you will do this. Stanley needs a wife and heir, and he quite fancies you.” Allan paused, coughed, and continued, “I have discussed terms with Stanley as well as given you fair time to think on it. I must talk to Father Mark soon.”

“But, Da,” she pulled back, her heart crumbled as her hope proved false and was crushed to ashes. “I don’t love …. She found she couldn’t finish the sentence.

“Fiona, you must trust me in this. I shook hands with Sir Iain. He’ll inherit the title when his da passes.” His eyes narrowed. “Love does not fill a belly nor keep your head dry when it rains.” He relit his long pipe and inhaled deeply. Minutes passed in silence as Fiona struggled within herself trying to find a way that would release her from her father’s words.

In a voice, soft as the smoke that accompanied it, her father whispered, “Johnny’s to come home. He’ll take his rightful place with the gentry. You’ll see. He’ll make us all proud.” His voice swelled with pride as he spoke of a future greatness his fallen son would achieve. As he did so, he could not see that the badger andirons had blurred before his daughter’s overflowing eyes.

Pleading a sudden headache, Fiona climbed the stairs, entered her room and turned the key in the lock although she knew her father would never intrude on her privacy.

“Oh, Gran,” she sobbed. “I had so hoped this was all a bad dream; that if I said nothing it would all go away. Why can’t Da see me?” She tugged at the ribbon about her neck and felt her mother’s wedding band slip free. Lifting it over her head, she
fingered the soft patina of the ring’s engraved surface, then set it on her bedside table.

“What shall I do?”

Nothing came to her. In the stillness of the room, she felt painfully alone, much like Alice grown too small to see her way clear. Rising she walked to her cupboard and retrieved the carved box her grandmother had entrusted to her care. Fiona replaced the beribboned ring within the wooden chest, closed it, and changed into her nightshirt. Settled under her quilt, she studied the small line of animals cavorting around the outside edge of the carved elder wood, hoping for a clue, a sign of where her path lay, of what she should do. The pattern of weasel, badger, and ferret repeated itself as they danced in harmony across the surface. Then, in the glow of her oil lamp, she noticed that one little figure stood out from the others in their frolic.

“Funny little ferret,” she said, “why is your tummy so much rounder than your fellows?”

Holding the box closer to the light, Fiona noticed that the ferret’s carved outline was actually formed by a deeper cut. However, the work was still fine enough as to be almost indistinguishable from its neighbours.

“How very odd,” she said.

Pressing on the incised image with her thumb, her efforts were rewarded as her thumb slid inward; the wood gave a muffled click; a drawer, hidden in the base of the box, slipped open, revealing its lost contents.
Today ~ Astoria, Oregon ~ Promise Ring

“Why now, Barbie? Things are just getting good for us.”

“Because I need to go, Ken, that’s why.”

Barbara lifted her head from his shoulder, trying to look into his eyes. The hearth fire had burned to glowing coals, an occasional flame spiralling up, yellow-blue. The remains of chocolate-dipped strawberries and heart-shaped cookies sat beside crystal flutes, their rosy contents almost drained. A bottle of cranberry-apple Martinelli’s rested upside down in her parent’s silver ice bucket. Barbara still refused to have alcohol in the house since her father’s funeral. Sheltered under a bouquet of roses was an open ring box, the sky-blue velvet cover almost a match to Ken’s eyes.

He kissed her lightly on the lips then pulled her back down against his chest, stroking her hair and staring into the fire. “Barbie, it’s Valentine’s. Do we have to talk about this right now?”

The last thing she wanted tonight was a disagreement. She wasn’t even sure if Dan would approve her idea or if History Speaks would still be interested in the project. Still and all, she wanted to explain, to trust that Ken would understand her need to complete what had been started. Don’t tell him about the journal. He’ll think you’re chasing ghosts. Nausea threatened as she remembered the scritch of pen on parchment. Maybe I am a little, she thought, not for the first time.

“Are you going back because I’ve got an assignment in DC?” Ken asked when she remained silent. He lifted her hand and admired the promise ring she now wore.
The antique copper wire of the nouveau-Celtic design twisted back on itself, forming a curved braid, one end finished with two matching spirals. The other held a green orb, which glowed with spots of blood red in the firelight. When Ken had presented it, he’d said the old woman at the gift shop had assured him that a Dragon bloodstone was the perfect gift to bind a promise.

“Don’t you think this little swirl of red almost looks like a Welsh dragon. Perhaps it’s a portent.” She slipped her hand out of his and sat sideways on the sofa. “And, no, I’m not going back to Wales just to fill my time while you’ll be gone.”

“I’m crushed.” Ken mimed an arrow through the heart, but Barbara noted a touch of hurt in his voice.

*What am I doing? How can I make promises to Ken when I’ve made plans to return to Wales... and whatever else it might hold?* She began to spin the new bloodstone, round and round her thumb.

“Do you know what a *tell* is, Barbie?” Ken asked, then continued before she could answer. “A tell is a little unconscious habit. We all have them. Very useful to observe, especially when playing poker or any high stakes game.”

“Great.” Barbara crossed her arms, tucking her offending hand safely away from sight.

A hint of a smile touched Ken’s mouth. His shirt collar was open revealing his blond chest hair, burnished silver in the firelight. Dating Ken had been not only flattering but encouraged by her dad, and although Ken had been much more attentive since the accident, she was having a hard time letting anyone get close. Her pain was too raw. She briefly wondered at the promise Ken had asked her to make, or even worse, what she might be opening herself to if she continued seeking answers to the questions that plagued her.
Again touching the braided band with her index finger, Barbara glanced up to see Ken studying her. His normal poker face was beginning to crumble as frustration and doubt crept into his eyes. She drew a deep breath. Forging ahead, she chose her words carefully trying to avoid the argument that danced around their conversation.

“Ken. I do love the ring and everything it means. It’s beautiful. Really.” She looked up into his eyes, trying to find her way. “I may even be falling…. She couldn’t bring herself to say the word. Love, she thought. It’s called love. Except I don’t know, do I. She closed her eyes trying to block the nattering voice in her head. Her life was no longer a pre-arranged, straightforward path. Her checklist to happiness. School, career, fall in love, marry, perhaps children, certainly children, grow old together. Normal. A life like her parents had. Except their life wasn’t normal, was it? She no longer knew what she wanted from life or from Ken.

“But?”

“I don’t want there to be buts or questions or lies.” Barbara looked into Ken’s eyes and saw conflicting emotions as he tried to understand what she was trying to say. She continued to push ahead.

“I showed you the little carved box from the safe-deposit box and it replicates the embossing on Mrs Rowling’s journal.” She paused to be sure he was listening before continuing. “Why do they match, Ken? I’ve got to know. Is it such a long stretch that these match and that the name on my birth certificate is Shipton?” She looked down. Had she said too much? Was she assuming too much, trying to make sense of all the disparate pieces of her life? “And what about this?” She pulled her locket free, holding the face for him to study.
Ken sat up from his slouch and leaned forward. “It’s an S for Shaunaky like you always told me.” He looked at her face. The frustration in his eyes was replaced by shock as his eyebrows rose. “Tell me you’re not considering an alternative?”

“Is it so hard to believe that it could stand for Shipton?”

“Barbie, finding those documents was a shock. That I understand, but you don’t for one minute think that there is a connection between you and that old woman, that witch or prophetess or whatever? Barbie doll, this is crazy. You’re chasing four-hundred year old fairy tales. You aren’t serious, are you?” His lips were pulled tight, his jaw clenched, and his eyes held more than a question. In them she saw disbelief and something she couldn’t decipher.

“She’s not a myth. Ken. The Welsh National Library located her records and sent me copies.” She remembered opening the letter, NLW stamped on the letterhead, turning the page, seeing Ursula Shipton’s name recorded as the wife of Tobias. “She lived. I saw her marriage and birth records. She was a real woman.”

Facing his challenge, she again reached for her locket, saw the ring on her thumb, and dropped her hand into her lap. “Ken, I thought I’d put this behind me. I tried to put it behind me. I thought I just wanted my old life back, to be normal again. Now I don’t know what normal is.” She reached for his hand. “I’ve got to know how this all ties together. I’ve got to know who I am.”

“You’re determined to do this, aren’t you?” He paused, looking at the open ring box on the table. She saw questions in his downturned lips and an unknown emotion in his eyes. She started to slide the woven ring from her thumb.

“What are you doing?”
“I’m giving it back,” she said, her heart in a turmoil. “How can I promise you anything if it means you must promise not to move forward in your life until I know what I’m doing? I’m letting you out of your promise. Isn’t that what you want?”

“Hell no.” He took her hand and pushed the band firmly back into place. “I think this trip to Wales is a snipe hunt. I don’t understand why you’ve spent good money on private detectives, only to have them come up empty-handed. I thought you’d given up on this search. You’re just going to be hurt all over again.” His voice rose. “Why can’t the name and everything else just be coincidence, Barbie?”

Barbara suddenly recognised the emotion she’d missed. Fear. Was he afraid of losing her? She considered explaining everything, but couldn’t bring herself to tell him what she’d felt when she’d opened the blank journal and seen its cryptic message. Based on his reactions to her decision to return to the UK, she was glad now she hadn’t told him. How could she explain the double vision, being in two places at once, the nausea, the fear, the growing connections? The situation was crazy but she didn’t think she was.

“Ken.” She leaned forward and placed a hand over his heart. “I’ve got to know.”

He stared. His silence deafening. Barbara pulled her hand away.

“I’ve already bought my ticket.”
Unsure where her research would ultimately lead, Barbara was positive of only one thing. If *History Speaks* was still interested, she felt she had to write the story on her own terms. Dan Doyle had required almost no convincing, especially when Barbara offered to finance her return flight; the tricky part had been to tell him she wanted autonomy with the story.

“Why do you want to do this, Babs?”

“Because it’s not done yet. Isn’t that reason enough? I said I’d write the story, and I left it unfinished.” She paused. “Has Lord Stanley withdrawn his offer?”

“Actually, no, he hasn’t.” Dan pulled out a file from his desk drawer and opened it. “I just got another letter from m’ Lord,” he hammed, “asking if you were coming back.” He paused. “He even offered to pay your fare.”

“Curious, but, no, I want to do this on my terms, but why didn’t you call me?”

“Babs, my dear girl. You really haven’t been in any condition to accept this kind of offer.” He stopped when he saw the shadow cross her face. “Look, I’m sorry I didn’t call you but I didn’t think you ever wanted to go back again. Not now.” He tapered off into silence, then asked, “How’s your mother doing?”

“About the same. The doctors have stabilised her. No more weight loss and they’re continuing mild therapy to help prevent atrophy,” she paused before continuing. “Dan, they don’t know if she’s coming back. There’s just no response to anything yet. A blip now and then but they say that’s normal and nothing definitive,
nothing to show she’s trying.” Barbara leaned back in her chair, raking her hand through her hair as she had done all her life.

“Sometimes I feel that she’ll just open her eyes and be there with me. Mom always was the proverbial optimist. She must have rubbed off on me. I don’t know what to expect at this point, but I’ve got to get my life back, to find some semblance of normal.”

“I understand, but, Babs, why do you need this story? Aren’t you pretty well set?”

“What?”

“Look, Babs. I didn’t mean to pry,” he hesitated, “but I understood your parents set things up pretty sweet for you. I mean financially.”

“But how?”

“Ken must have mentioned something. I’m not sure,” he said. “But, if you need a job?”

“Dan, that’s generous but just completing the assignment will be great. I’ve been accepted back to finish school this fall, if I want. I’m not doing this for the money. I’m fine that way. I just need to get away for a bit. Get sorted as the Brits say. Decide what’s next.”

She smiled across the desk, wondering how much she should tell him. She hadn’t revealed the journal’s existence to Dan nor its connection to Mrs Rowling and possibly Mother Shipton. Too many secrets, she thought. But they were all she had. She felt as if she’d been reborn into a world of secrets, Alice slipping through the looking glass and finding everything backwards or inside out to what she’d always accepted as the truth.
No, it was better that he knew nothing about the journal’s existence nor the similarities between it and her parents’ carved box, which Barbara now knew was made of elder wood. It was the smell, the odour of burning, charred wood that had helped to identify it. She’d been surprised when the arbourist at the university pointed out this singularity. His pronouncement had added impetus to her plans by giving her yet another reason to proceed with her research to find the connections between all the seemingly fragmented parts of the puzzle that lay scattered around her.

“Pardon?” She was sure she’d heard Dan speak but had missed his meaning.

“I said, when do you leave? Or better yet, when do I tell his Lordship you’ll be arriving?” He reached into his drawer again and pulled out a small packet. “You’ll need this.”

“What is it?”

“An international sim chip for your iPhone. This time stay in touch.”

“But how? I mean, when did you get this for me?”

“Does it matter?” He winked at her. “I had a hunch, Babs. I just had a hunch.”

Standing at the doorway, Barbara watched her mother breathe. Lena Shaunaky, five foot four, one-hundred-thirty pounds, now only one-nineteen but stable, Barbara knew the statistics as well as she knew her own. Her mother’s chart didn’t state that Lena’s hair had turned silver overnight following the accident nor that she had adopted a daughter years ago.

“No change,” Dr Price reported, patting her shoulder. “She’s holding her own though. No further weight loss. We have time on our side.” He smiled at her as he stepped past and walked down the hall, continuing his morning rounds.
No change. Barbara mulled the words over in her mind. Could he not see the change? Her mother had always been a vital, active woman, heading up this or that committee at church, involved with the university as a professor’s wife. She abhorred being a lay-a-bed as she called anyone who stayed under the covers past seven in the morning. Barbara sighed. Her mother was just a patient to the staff at Riverside Extended Care. She’d arrived in a coma. She remained in a coma. No changes to report to next of kin.

Barbara pulled up a chair and sat beside the bed.

“Morning, mom,” she began. Barbara looked at her list, reciting well wishes from neighbours, greetings from friends at church, she’d had the clothes dryer repaired, the cat was being boarded at the vet’s, and, she hesitated for a moment, “I’m leaving to return to Wales. “

“Mom,” she continued. “I want to tell you something.” Barbara drifted, unsure if she really wanted to share her thoughts. She’s in a coma. Do you expect her to tell you that your plans are crazy? To leave well enough alone? To apologise for letting you face this by yourself? Barbara winced, took her mother’s hand in hers. It was limp but blessedly warm unlike the cold clay feel of her father’s hand in the mortuary.

“I met an old woman in England. She sent me her journal but I don’t know why. I think it may be a grimoire. Mom, I have no one to talk to, no one to tell.” She bent her head low resting her forehead on the back of her mother’s hand. Barbara wondered if Lena could hear her, if any part of her mother remained, listening, trying to find her way back through the corridors of her mind.

“I’ve told Dan and Ken I’m going back to sort out my research, to finish what I started. Ken’s the only one who knows about my birth certificate and adoption. Did I tell you he gave me a promise ring?” She unconsciously held it up before her
mother’s face, only to sigh and lower her hand back to the bed. “I can’t tell him the real reasons I have to go back. He thinks it’s a wild goose chase.”

Barbara paused.

“Mom, I’m afraid. The journal pages were blank, empty of anything, and… and… then they weren’t. The writing appeared as I sat there wondering why Mrs Rowling would send me an empty journal.” Barbara shuddered, forcing herself to speak her fear. “I see words form. It’s a story about a woman who lived over four hundred years ago. It’s about the Rollright Stones. There’s so much more I don’t know. Why is this happening to me? You’re the only one I’ve told, the only one I can.”

“Is this why you didn’t tell me I was adopted? Was my birth mother schizophrenic? Did she see things that couldn’t exist? Were you just trying to protect me?” Barbara paused. Her fears were real but somehow lessened a bit by sharing them with another, even though the other remained silent.

Barbara rested by the bedside, exhausted. She never looked up. Never saw that the monitors were in silent mode. She didn’t see the spike in heart rate. The nurse at her desk in the hall, talking to her boyfriend about where to go for dinner when she got off shift, didn’t see the altered brain fluctuation either. No one saw until it was too late.
Today ~ Aberystwyth, Wales ~ Return

At twenty after five the train from Birmingham pulled into Aberystwyth. More confident and with Lord Stanley’s newest itinerary memorised, Barbara walked four blocks to the Prom, turning left toward the large slate rock that marked the entrance to the Gwesty Cymru. She climbed the tightly wound oval stair padded in thick purple carpet and was pleasantly surprised to find her third floor suite beautifully appointed – ancient exposed beams paired with modern chrome radiators. *Lord Stanley’s trip advisor certainly has better connections than Jillian*, Barbara considered.

A half hour later Barbara stepped out of the waterfall shower and shrugged into a heavy terry robe. After towelling her hair dry, she leaned into one of the deep set windows, straining to see the castle ruins down the street on her left. A view of the Prom and Royal Pier filled her with a sense of peace, rather than dredging up painful memories of the loss that had called her home from Wales late last year. The evening sky turned peach, pink, and gold, the setting sun melting across the surface of the Irish Sea before slipping into dusk.

*Well, I’m certainly not the scared little girl I was when I first arrived.* Her thought comforted then spun away as she brushed her hair and slipped into a tee top and sweat pants. Crossing to the leather sleeper sofa, Barbara gathered up her satchel and headed toward the inviting comfort of the king size bed. She looked forward to a traditional British breakfast tomorrow morning before making a trip to the library and another to the Ceredigion museum.
Opening her laptop case, Barbara pulled out a slightly squashed sandwich and the packet of HobNobs she’d purchased on the train, then opened and unzipped the inside pocket and slid out Mrs Rowling’s journal, placing it next to her notebook. She glanced across the room. The key was in the locked door. Dan had been texted as well as Ken to tell them she’d arrived safely. The rest of the evening was her own in which to relax and consider her research options. Soon, however, the downy softness of the feather bed coupled with the soothing sound of the not so distant surf caused her eyelids to droop. Setting the journal and notebook on her bedside table, Barbara slid off her promise ring and watch and placed them on top of the worn leather binding of the journal. She flipped off the light, slid between crisp sheets, and immediately fell asleep.

Cold grey eyes stare from the crone’s withered face, irises almost disappearing between the withered folds of her half-closed lids. Tightly curled hair snakes out from the confines of her hooded cape, mimicking the fingers of mist that caress my skin and raise gooseflesh.

Pebbles crumble and slide beneath my feet. The pitted stone monolith oppresses, captures and holds me. There is no escape as my world dissolves into darkness. I am trapped. I cannot run.

A clawlike hand, knuckles knobbed and bent, reaches, turns, opens at the last minute to reveal a glint of silver. A key and a chain?

The whisper is sibilant, almost inaudible as I fearfully stretch my hand to receive the offering.

“Beware.” Wasted fingers strike at my wrist, encircling, forming a manacle of bony flesh. I am dragged closer.
My breath catches and burns my throat, my lungs, as a scream struggles to break free.

Barbara gasped, clutching her constricted throat. She opened her eyes, confused by the unfamiliar room and the too familiar dream. Ambient moonlight threaded ghostlike through the windows. Her travel clock glowed four-thirty. Shivering, she sat in the bed hugging herself, the touch of flesh on flesh strangely comforting. *It’s only a dream,* she reassured herself. After straightening the twisted duvet, Barbara used the bathroom then washed her face and hands in warm water, rinsing away the clinging terror.

As Barbara stood in the doorway, her hand on the light switch, the luminescence behind her picked out a pale page of her journal. She thought she’d closed it before deciding to sleep; yet it now lay open on her bedside table. Glancing at the clock, she did a quick mental calculation and realized that had she been in Oregon, she would have slept the day away. It was almost nine PM at home.

The duvet still held some of her body warmth as she settled under the covers and switched on a reading lamp. In the circle of light she could almost recognise the small Welsh dragon in Ken’s ring. She slid it onto her thumb and pulled the journal to her lap then gasped when a box of tight spidery script appeared on the centre of what had been a blank page. It formed a beautiful but nearly illegible pattern. Not for the first time she wondered what unknown power controlled this book. Blank pages suddenly filled with script; brown, blue, and black ink; different hands, and various font styles from different historic periods. She’d already noted the monastic Uncial and Carolingian; some ancient runes which had a Celtic flair; now this page written in copperplate. The loops and swirls were unusual in that they were tightly packed,
crowding and overlapping each other and forming a beautiful but indecipherable design.

Barbara lay back against the heavy pillows, the journal upright on her bent knees. She ran her hand over the surface, barely touching, seeking to discern the texture, to understand the meaning of the patterned page. Under her hand the page grew warm, shifted, the words expanding, drifting across the border and onto the surface of the duvet. She felt nausea choke the back of her throat as her stomach seemed to constrict, bile ascending, vision narrowing. Trying to understand, she swallowed hard against her rising gorge. A car horn on the street below broke her concentration and she stared once again at the intricate design with its wide blank border, the image sealed from understanding.

She closed her eyes and tipped her head back, inhaling deeply, seeking to calm her nerves and clear her head. *What are you doing, Barbara? Leave well enough alone.* She could almost hear her mother’s whisper. Frustration, then anger welled within her.

“Why didn’t you tell me, mother?” She bit off the last word. “Why did you keep secrets? Who am I?”

She gripped the edges of the book, resettled herself, and focused on the writing, willing her mind to settle. Again tendrils of scribed ink began to slide across the page, unwinding, forming loops and whorls, thick and thin as words began to unfold. She fought the sudden onslaught of nausea with anger, holding her breath, forcing her diaphragm down. The edges of her vision darkened. The room grew close, the air heavy. Barbara felt her vision slide between two images, the journal page she held, covered with writing, and a blank page upon which a hand, a woman’s hand, held a quill and wrote, forming each letter meticulously.
The chimes of her cell phone awoke her at seven-thirty. Muzzy headed, Barbara winced at a sharp pain in her neck. She’d fallen asleep in a near sitting position at the head of her bed. Rubbing the crick from her neck and shoulder, she ruffled her hands through her hair and looked for Mrs Rowling’s journal. It had slid down toward the foot of the bed, closed and harmless once again.

_Nightmares, cryptic patterns, and moving messages? Maybe Ken was right and I need some serious help._ Her stomach rumbled, breaking into the doubts crowding her thoughts. _Breakfast, what I need is a Welsh breakfast: egg, sausage, rashers, baked beans, grilled tomato with mushrooms, and mashed potatoes._ She considered the cholesterol comment Ken would surely make if he were here, but unworried, she smiled and looked forward to her meal.

Slipping her watch on, Barbara threw back the duvet, spilling her notebook onto the floor. As she reached to pick it up, a page fell open to crisp new writing, a riddle. Barbara read the words aloud.

“To Awaken the Stone

A maiden’s journey through blood is borne,

A child’s home given, rosey and warm,

An’ last the crone, life’s wisdom born,

Will seal the life of hearth and home.”

Barbara remembered the drawing of the old crone that had appeared among her notes while at the Crown and Cushion, and just as then, had no memory of how this entry had come to be. Confused, she sat down and pulled Mrs Rowling’s journal toward her, allowing it to fall open. The identical riddle stared up at her, written again and again, layering over itself, repeated in different directions, forming a patterned
square but surprisingly, it was completely legible to her now. She took a deep breath, trying to ferret the meaning of the rhyme before her.
Fiona leaned forward and placed her grandmother’s box in the centre of her bed, the faded colours on the box blending with the soft patchwork design of her quilt. She stared at the partially opened drawer as if it were a snake, coiled upon itself and ready to strike. Both alarmed and curious, she knew if she proceeded, her life would change irrevocably.

Now nineteen, she considered how Gran had taught her bits-and-bobs about the myths, the stones, and the legends of her family. Upon her twelfth birthday she’d started the question game with Gran. Fiona pondered what she knew and what she wanted to know throughout the year, trying to come up with the right inquiry so she could learn from and bond with the stones when her time came. She’d spent time within the stone circle, trying to understand their mystery, to hear what Gran promised they would tell her. She’d walked the stone circle counting, picking a different stone to sit upon each year as she formed each question; she’d even knelt once and prayed, feeling foolish, hoping no one would see or report her to Father Mark. She’d heard nothing at the stones nor in the quiet of her room.

Nothing. No revelations. No insights. She never mustered the courage to tell her grandmother that the stones were silent with her, that they had not accepted her, that somehow the binding ritual of her first blood had failed. Fiona felt slow tears fill her eyes as unbidden memories crept forward of that fate-filled night.

“I don’t want to remember,” she whispered aloud, but the night replayed itself unbidden.
The evening of her first menses, Gran had slipped Valerian root into Da’s tea. Seeing the alarm in her eyes, Gran whispered, “It will only help him sleep tonight, child. We cannot be bothered by men inquiring into business which is beyond their ken.”

Fiona watched a new moon rise as the bucket of water she’d been asked to draw from the well bumped against her leg, wetting the edge of her cloak. Gran was silent, her vein-knotted hand hooked through her granddaughter’s arm. Under her arm, Gran carried a small bundle tied with twine.

As they reached the stone circle, Gran bade her place the bucket in the center of the stones. Once placed, Gran reached in her apron and pulled out a handful of elder twigs which she dropped in the still water. She then untied the string and removed Fiona’s bloody nightshirt.

“Take this shirt, child, shake it out, then dip it three times into the water while you repeat these words exactly as I’ll tell you.” She offered the folded nightshirt to Fiona, which Fiona dutifully shook free, shuddering at the deep rusty crimson stain. Gran placed a hand on her arm. “There’s nothing to fear. This day you leave childhood and become a maid of promise. I only wish your mother were here to join and complete our circle but it cannot be helped.” She reached into her pocket and removed a ribbon from which hung a signet ring. “Your mother’s wedding ring will represent her presence.”

The hoot of an owl, followed by the swoosh of heavy wings broke the stillness.

“Are you ready?”

“I think so.” Fiona held the nightshirt over the pail of clear well-water.
“Good. Then dip the shift three times and repeat these words.” She leaned forward and whispered the incantation into her granddaughter’s ear.

Fiona slowly lowered the garment into the chill liquid, submerging it.

“Child of the earth, child I was…” She lifted the sodden cloth, watching as the stain spread across the cloth and turned the water a pale rose colour.

Immersing her shirt into the water a second time, she pulled it free and saw with a start that the stain was fading, streaking toward the hem as if seeking the water from which it had been pulled.

“Novice of the blood, maid I am…” Fiona watched the water in the pail turn a translucent shade of raspberry wine.

She plunged her dripping nightshirt a third time and pulling it forth, said, “Maiden of the stone, seal me thine.” Her voice quavered on the last line as she saw the water turn blood red, while the garment in her hand shone with a bridal-white lustre.

Fiona, eyes wide and not comprehending what she was witnessing, looked up at her grandmother, who’d somehow aged before her eyes, diminished yet powerful in a way Fiona could not understand. Gran placed her finger to her lips, then held her hands out for the glowing nightshirt. As Fiona laid the garment across her grandmother’s outstretched hands, she saw that it had impossibly become dry in the damp evening air.

“Remove your cloak and dress and slide this over your body.”

Fiona did as she was bidden. A shiver ran through her but she could not discern if it was the night’s chill on her bare skin or the pervasive stillness within the stones. Even the darkness seemed to hold its breath. Gran untied a small enamelled cup from her apron.
“With your right hand fill this cup from the bucket and follow me. Do not spill any liquid on the earth.”

Again she signalled Fiona to silence as they walked toward the altar stone. Gran placed the ribboned ring within the cleft hole, then walked around to the outside of the stone circle and slid her left hand into the tiny opening. Her hand inside, she grasped the signet ring. Fiona watched the attached ribbon move slightly and then lie still as it hung down against the rough lichen surface.

“Place your left hand on the altar over the spot where I hold your mother’s token, and pour the contents of the cup over our hands joined in and on the stone.”

She paused to study the white face of her granddaughter. “You remember the words you must speak?”

Fiona nodded, placing her hand on the stone.

“A maiden’s journey through blood is borne,

A child’s home given, rosey and warm,

An’ last the crone, life’s wisdom born,

Will seal the life of hearth and home.”

She poured out the ruby contents of the cup and stared mutely as crystal clear water splashed over her hand and was absorbed by the stones.

The impossible magic of her initiation was swiftly followed by her overwhelming loss only weeks later as she knelt by Gran’s bedside. The noises of the farm, the twittering of birds, the rush of wind through the trees, and the plaintive bleat of a lamb did not intrude on the profound silence that descended with her grandmother’s last breath.
Sitting on her bed staring at the patterned box with its now open secret drawer, Fiona scrubbed at her face, trying to wipe away the distressing memories and to comprehend what Gran had tried to teach her. She had never confessed her feelings that the stones had never fully accepted her.

She tilted the partially open box, freeing the drawer from the folds of the quilt, filled her lungs to steady her hands, and pulled the drawer open. Inside, fitted perfectly within the boxlike compartment, was Gran’s missing leather-bound journal.

*Why had Gran hidden her common book?*

Holding the journal to her heart, Fiona felt both a sense of connection and of renewed loss. The death of her grandmother had left her a lone woman adrift in a man’s world. She placed the book in her lap and slid a finger beneath the cover when a subtle wave of guilt washed over her. These were Gran’s secrets. *But do they hold the answers Gran promised I would find. Am I ready?*

Fiona opened the journal and stared.

She remembered the intricate watercolours, the delicate loops and swirls of Copperplate script, neatly written, filling each page from side to side, top to bottom. Now the book sat open in her lap, blank, empty, its vellum scraped clean as a palimpsest from its original text. An aura of expectancy hung in the air, a thickening of atmosphere, awaiting only a single shard of lightening that would reveal all.

The hour sounded; its music drifted through the still house. Fiona counted ten strikes from the mantle clock. Had it already been an hour since she’d sat by her father, staring into the blue-orange flames of the fire. Hope surged and melted away as she contemplated her need to understand coupled with the mystery of the journal. Her questions had led to an answer that was in itself another mystery.
Kaleb sat on the edge of the inn’s rope bed. His long under tunic was dotted with spots of fresh blood, the result of the night’s attack from resident bed bugs. In frustration he gingerly pulled his tunic off, held the lint dressing to his wounded side with one hand, and shook the long shirt violently with the other. He inhaled sharply through clenched teeth as his newly knit muscles rebelled at the sudden motion, then gently bathed his bites in the small basin of less than clear water. He hated staying in disreputable taverns but with the violent death of Rob Mason, he’d quit Knaresborough in a panic, throwing in his lot with the mercenary, Marcus Brown.

When? He tried to count the days but his memory was still fuzzy. They had travelled, perhaps, for a week, maybe ten days, surely no more than a fortnight. Was it too late to return? What of Agatha? He studied the diminutive ring she had given him as pledge. The red streaks in the stone reminded him of blood, of Mason. His stomach clenched. If he wrote, Agatha might get caught up in the trouble. No, best to let things settle and then he would send word, he reasoned. For good or ill, he’d bide with Brown at least until he could remember what had happened in Knaresborough.

The early morning light streaked through a crack in the still closed window shutters, throwing a shard of brilliance over his hands. His eyes were drawn again to study the stone of the ring Agatha had given him in exchange for the heavy signet he normally wore. He thought of her while he thumbed the ring around his smallest finger.
“Agatha,” he whispered her name like a prayer. “What have I done to you?” He shook his head, wishing again he could remember the sequence of events that had brought him to The Magpie’s Inn.

Brown walked into the room carrying a pitcher of cider, a fresh baked loaf, and a small quarter-round of goat cheese.

“Breakfast,” the mercenary said. He opened the shutters and settled the tray on the windowsill, then lounged against the window jamb. “Have you thought any more on my offer to join the garrison at Aberystwyth Castle? There’s rumour that Tudor is marshalling men to overthrow Richard, the hunchback king.”

“I don’t know.” Kaleb harboured no visions of himself as a soldier like his brother, Jarl. With his recent success in trade, Kaleb dreamed of a possible future as a merchant, maybe even setting himself up with a wife and a small holding in Knaresborough.

“Do you think we can go back?” Kaleb, hope in his voice, looked at Marcus. “Has there been any gossip about… ?” He couldn’t bear to speak Mason’s name. “Are they looking for me?”

Marcus Brown studied the play of light and shadow on the half-clad man before him. Whispers in the common room that morning had been of the master builder of Knaresborough. Rob Mason, found drowned in the millpond, his body caught in the mill wheel and badly torn. Drink was blamed as the likely cause most agreed. The town was seeking a replacement stonemason to continue repairs on the castle. No mention was made of the card game nor of the sword wound that had pierced and stopped Mason’s heart.

Brown shrugged, folded his arms across his chest and remained silent until Kaleb looked away, his question unanswered.
“If I were you, I’d keep my head down. A mason is an important man in any town and Rob was well known. As I said, we can go on to Aberystwyth Castle and wait. No one questions a volunteer and the pay can be negotiated. You know how to use a sword, I presume?”

Kaleb’s broad shoulders drooped. “I guess I’ll have to go with you then. After all, I owe you my freedom.” Kaleb stopped short of asking again about the sequence of events on the night of the fight. His memories were still muddled, although the bruise on his head was fading. He remembered Mason’s look of rage, turning to escape, searing pain, but couldn’t remember anything past the oblivion that followed. His train of thought was arrested as he shrugged on his outer tunic, biting his lip when his muscles fought against the movement.

*If I was turned away from him, how did I kill Mason?*
Today ~ England & Wales ~ History Lesson

Lord Stanley, a touch of grey dulling his ginger hair, was still a commanding presence as he gazed through the tall library windows across rolling English hills and greening hedgerows, his eyes finally coming to rest on black-faced sheep in the distance. Floor to ceiling bookshelves stood sentinel on either side of the drawn tapestried drapes. The afternoon sun picked out gold embossing on countless leather spines, their hollow backs turned to the opulent room where a small brass clock chimed the half hour. In opposition to Stanley’s impeccably groomed appearance, an ornately carved mahogany desk was littered with assorted deeds, maps, and letters. The thirteenth Earl of Comptonshire turned, frowning, and strode to his desk. He lifted a dog-eared manila folder.

“In spite of the unfortunate interlude caused by her parents’ accident, it is our good fortune that Miss Shaunaky has returned to us.”

“How so?”

“Our plans can now proceed with little noticeable variation.” Lord Stanley opened the folder, his eyes scanning the contents, although he had already committed every line to memory.

“Our?”

“Watch yourself, boy. Your interests are being served as well as mine. Don’t go soft on me or forget you’re next in line and,” he paused, "as deep in this as I am.” Lord Stanley’s eyes narrowed, assessing the younger dark-haired man before him.
“Your seaside cottage in Wales is secure thanks to your mother’s family, but the funds to maintain it and support your current lifestyle depends entirely on our Yorkshire family holdings.”

Lord Stanley abruptly closed the file and set it on the table before continuing, “If I’m right… .” He slammed a hand on the desk. “Our position and all you’ve come to enjoy depends on what that cursed book contains.”

He picked up another manila folder, his visage changed as he thumbed through the pages. “Letters are interesting things. One never knows what nuggets of knowledge they will disclose.”

“Whose is that?”

“A distant progenitor.” He slid the papers back into the well-worn file before he continued, his voice hard. “You will proceed as directed. Discover if she has Rowling’s journal. If she does, hopefully she doesn’t understand what she possesses or how to use it.” His voice held an edge of ice. “She’s young and naïve, but she’s not a fool.”

“Any word on Rowling?”

“She’s gone and the devil take her, but we have reason to believe she sent the book to the girl through her solicitor. Blast him. Wouldn’t confirm or deny anything. Who ever heard of an honest lawyer? Fortunately his secretary thinks herself underpaid and for a small consideration, was more than willing to talk. She obviously doesn’t share the same scruples as her employer.

“And the rest?”

“I suspect you’ll know what to do when the time arrives, Ian.”
Barbara sat on one of the deep blue, wrought-iron dragon benches on the Prom, wearing her suede jacket and a harlequin-patterned scarf. It was not cold enough for a heavy jacket as there was very little breeze and it was blissfully not raining. Her satchel rested against the slatted wooden seat, its strap draped securely around her shoulder. She drew out her notebook and flipped through pages of notes and a few sketches until she found her copy of last night’s mysterious journal entry.

‘To Awaken the Stone

A maiden’s journey through blood is borne,
A child’s home given, rosey and warm,
An’ last the crone, life’s wisdom born,
Will seal the life, of hearth and home.’

In spite of a warm breakfast and a brisk walk, Barbara felt old doubts resurface as she considered the rhyming riddle. Perhaps Ken was right, and this is a fool’s errand. Maybe grief is making me oblivious to a hopeless cause. She watched the mesmerising sea wash across the pebbled beach. What am I doing? She asked herself yet again. I’m meeting a mysterious man, a generous, pleasant Lord by all accounts, who for some reason has taken a liking to me, or my work, I’m not sure which. Why do I feel so unsettled about his request? Maybe, Barbara, because you don’t really know what he wants yet.

Dismissing her circling doubts, she looked down at the words written in her workbook, still at a loss as to how the writing had come to be. Perhaps… . No. I must have copied it myself when nearly asleep and just forgotten. At least she now had a permanent legible copy of the mysterious riddle that had appeared in the Rowling journal as if it had a life of its own. This morning the Rowling journal had been as
blank as a California sky. *How can this be... even in the land of Merlin, Arthurian legends, and the people of fae?*

“How can this be... even in the land of Merlin, Arthurian legends, and the people of fae?

“Penny for your thoughts?”

Startled by Ian’s voice, Barbara closed her workbook as she looked up. The sun created an aura around his dark curly hair, highlighting the angles of his face. She raised her hand to shield her eyes and returned his smile, as old emotions flooded her and new emotions vied for attention.

“Ian, it’s great to see you again.” She opened her bag and slipped her notebook inside, refastening the catch. Smiling, she patted the seat beside her. “Please, sit. As to the penny, my thoughts still aren’t worth nearly that much. Mostly a muddle at the moment.”

“Care to talk about it? We’ve time before I take you to Y Ffarmers.”

“Pardon.”

“Oh, sorry. The Farmers. It’s a little pub in Llanfihangel-y-Creuddyn just a few miles out of town. Good Welsh cuisine and it’s quiet.” Ian paused, studying her face. “Miss Shaunaky...”

“Barbara. I thought we were past the last name game.”

“As you will. Barbara.” He stopped and seemed to search her face. “I’m so incredibly sorry for your loss.” He lifted a hand as if to reach out and touch her but clumsily withdrew it, placing it instead along the back of the bench.

“Your mother,” he began again. “How is she faring?”

Barbara looked away. She appreciated Ian’s open offer of sympathy but was tired of giving voice to the situation she’d left behind. “She’s holding her own,” she said mechanically. “No changes now in months. Well, at least nothing that offers much in the way of hope.” She thought of the email she’d received when she’d landed
in Birmingham. There had been an erratic pattern recorded on her mother’s monitors but the doctors weren’t sure what it meant, if anything. Another brain scan was being scheduled. Barbara realised with a start that she had stopped talking and had drifted off, watching the sea roll across the beach pebbles, grinding them ever so softly against one another, the susurration of the water mingled with the distant cry of gulls and the subtle clicking of tumbling stones.

“I imagine you know of Mrs Rowling?” Ian changed the subject.

Barbara studied his profile; his eyes squinted as he looked out over the Irish Sea. His mouth was pulled into a line, a frown hidden in the corners as if he’d tasted something bitter. Why does he look so troubled? Perhaps he wishes to be elsewhere… with someone else. Her heart pulled a little, uncertain as she looked down at the braided ring she wore. Looking up, she met his eyes.

“I’d heard that she had passed away and her property was given to the Rollright Trust.” Barbara stopped, unsure of how much to reveal of what she knew. “Did Lord Stanley or you attend the funeral?”

“Hmm, odd thing that.” He turned to study her face. “She didn’t have one.”

“What. How can one die among friends and not have a funeral or memorial service?”

“It was her wish, according to Brae. There was nothing. It was almost as if she were here one moment and then as if she never existed. Brae lives in the cottage now and pays a nominal rent to the Trust. Guess until they decide what to do with it, the old housekeeper will keep it tidy and have a place to live. Everyone seems satisfied with the arrangement.”

“Still, it’s odd, don’t you think?”
Ian stood and offered his hand. “Well, as no one asked me, I guess I’ve no opinion. Shall we go?”

“I thought we had another hour before our meeting. Has the time changed?”

“No, but Lord Stanley wanted me to acquaint you with some points of interest before we join him. He especially wanted you to see the murals.”

“Murals?”

“Yes, at the base of the castle ruins. There are numerous alcoves and most have a tile mosaic depicting an event in the history of the castle. You, of course, know that it was an Iron Age fortress, originally.”

“Ah, a history lesson. Why didn’t you say so?” Barbara rose and slid her arm through his, feeling the wool tweed of his coat tickle her wrist. Walking along the Prom past the Royal Pier, Ian pointed out the various stages of the Old College.

“You say it started out as hotel venture, went bankrupt, and then became the foundation for Aberystwyth University. Why a grand hotel with Aberystwyth so isolated?”

“Trains were supposed to connect the whole of Wales and meet here, only the dream of connecting trains died and most Welsh roads still follow the old Druid trails.”

They walked in silence toward the lookout over the Irish Sea where Ian guided Barbara across the narrow road to a deep recess undercutting the castle mound.

“These are the beginning of the mosaics that Lord Stanley wanted you to view.”

Barbara went immediately to the left, which depicted a skeleton with the date 1988 and the inscription, ‘Skeleton found in castle, sgerbwd yn y castell, Amgueddfa Ceredigion Museum.” She ran her finger over the mosaic’s uneven surface.
“Are these weapons pictured with him or... no, wait, they look like trowels?”

“Yes, they’re trowels. He was found during an archaeological dig in the castle proper, not the normal place to find a body, I understand. A definitive cause of death remains unknown due to the state of the skeleton when exhumed; but, I imagine, Lord Stanley will discuss the technical findings with you.”

_Curious. How does Lord Stanley fit into this?_

Ian pointed behind them. “This far one is of the Eisteddfod held here in 1916, 1952 and again in 1992. As you can see, these other two are just general information.”

Ian guided Barbara back across the street and around the corner.

“The murals are lovely, Ian, but why,” she smiled, “is m’ Lord so interested in my seeing them?”

“M’ Lord?” Ian smiled back. “Getting quite British aren’t we?”

“I thought you always were,” she quipped as they visited the remainder of the little arch-shaped recesses, each holding a mural that led them back through time. One depicted the 1642-49 Civil War; another dated 1637 commemorated the castle as a royal mint under Charles 1st; a 1405 treaty with France; the capture of the castle in 1404-08 by Owain Glyndwr; a depiction of the town walls in 1277, and a final one showing ownership of the castle by Edward 1st also in 1277.

They climbed up to the war memorial overlooking the sea and the town.

“Do we have time to walk through the ruins before heading back to the car?”

“Certainly, if you’d like.” He led her through the old bailey into the courtyard.

“These are the Eisteddfod stones, each bearing the inscription of one of the thirteen original counties in Wales.”
“Yes, I learned that on the train during my first trip. I’d hoped the stones were in some way connected to the skeleton.” Barbara thought back to the young ginger-haired student who had answered her questions in what seemed another lifetime.

“I was terribly disappointed that the stone circle was rather recent, but I guess that can’t be helped.” With her free hand she waved across the lawns. “Do you know where they unearthed the body?”

“It was over here, I believe.” He pointed to a spot across the sodden green turf. “At the time it caused quite a flurry although interest has died down. Still, some want to see him given a proper burial.” He took her elbow and directed her steps across the lawn. “The old stables were right about here, I’d say. They never put up a plaque. Don’t know why.”

As Barbara stood still between the ruined walls, the nausea began to climb slowly from her stomach, constricting the back of her throat with a taste of bile. She watched, helpless, while in her vision, the stone wall seemed to grow taller, offering a translucent view of St. Michael’s to the northwest. A shimmering light swam before her eyes as if projected across a second transparent screen. A gentleman or at least a man of minor rank judging by his clothing, lay crumpled near her feet. A rictus of horror spread across his features for Barbara could see that he was quite dead. His face, bloody, had been bludgeoned. He wore a heavy wool cloak with a brass clasp, leather trews, and on his little finger a diminutive dark stoned ring. Other hands, transparent, methodically stripped away his clothing, boots, and jewellery, and adjusted his limbs. A palm slid over his staring eyes, closing them before wrapping his naked form in a winding cloth. The ends were knotted before he was placed into a shallow grave.
Overwhelmed, Barbara sat down heavily on the ruined stone wall and watched the dirt and loose stones fall upon his shrouded face.
Today ~ Aberystwyth, Wales ~ Luncheon with a Lord

Barbara’s vision of British nobility shattered as Ian ushered her to a table near the inn’s fireplace. Lord Stanley, true to her imaginings was impeccably dressed, including cufflinks featuring a serpentine motif, which peeked out from under his Harris Tweed jacket cuffs. Past that, her American based ideas of British aristocracy were completely overhauled.

As Ian pulled out a chair for her, the Earl of Comptonshire stood until Barbara was settled. Lord Stanley appeared to be just under six feet, perhaps five foot ten, but his height was offset by sheer bulk. She had a hard time seeing him as a wrestler but he had the look of a once muscular man who now enjoyed food and drink with impunity. The buttons on his vest strained ever so slightly over the suggestion of a paunch. His ginger-coloured hair, a bit grey at the temples, was beginning to thin. The pallor of the north countries lay upon his skin, liberally sprinkled with freckles and a few dark moles. Studying him, she could almost make out a constellation on his right cheek. Barbara, you’re a hopeless romantic to think he’d be dashing. He looks more like the proverbial bull in a china shop, though he uses his body like one trained in dance.

“Do I pass muster, then?” he queried with a slight edge to his otherwise well modulated voice. “Everything where it should be, I presume?”

“I’m terribly sorry.” Barbara blushed as if a chastised child. “It was quite impolite of me to stare.”
“Not an issue.” His pinched smile revealed uneven teeth, resting like weathered stones beneath a pencil thin moustache.

“No need for you to leave, Mr Williams,” he said as Ian turned toward the door. “You will join us for luncheon so I may advise you of your further duties.” It was an order not a request. “If Miss Shaunaky has no objections, of course?”

*Odd man,* thought Barbara. *Apparently used to getting his way.* Her curiosity piqued, she glanced up at Ian and noticed his face was as impassive as a mannequin’s.

Before Barbara could respond, Lord Stanley signalled the waitress, waved away proffered menus, and ordered meals for them all. *What an odd mix,* she argued with herself. *Ian looks more like my idea of an Earl than Lord Stanley.* Barbara was pulled from her assessment by Lord Stanley’s modulated voice.

“I thought you might enjoy a bit of Welsh cooking done properly. And, of course, the meal comes with chips to give you a taste of home.”

“Chips?”

“You call them French fries,” interjected Ian, “although I don’t understand why.” Barbara smiled, again wondering how countries with such similarities could evoke so many subtle differences.

“Miss Shaunaky, I understand from Ian that you have been to the castle ruins as well as the Ceredigion Museum and have seen what the locals like to call “Charlie.” Barbara nodded.

“May I ask, what you have learned thus far?”

Barbara pulled her notebook from her bag and began riffling through the pages. Before she could give a full report the waitress arrived with their meals: savoury Penlan pork and apple pie, a carrot, broccoli and turnip medley, and the promised chips. Barbara jockeyed her notebook to the side, quickly dating the page
and noting the inn as the place of interview. Lord Stanley watched her careful arrangement of necessary items, enabling her to both write and eat. He nodded approvingly.

“I shan’t delay your meal. We can eat and then continue with your findings,” Lord Stanley nodded toward Barbara. He watched her taste a bite of each item before asking, “Everything is to your liking?”

With the exception of the Gwesty, which served gourmet meals, Barbara’s past experience with UK food had found it filling but bland except for their curry, which was quite flavourful. “It’s delicious, thank you. Your choices are great.” She noted that her flattery pleased him as he returned to his meal, using both knife and fork British style.

She glanced across the table only to find Ian staring at her as if to assess the interaction between his employer and herself. His face slid back into an unreadable mask. Disconcerted, thoughts flashed through her mind. Don’t get too comfortable, Barbara. Something isn’t right. Think. What are you missing? The burial at the castle... No. Don’t think about that. She took a sip of water to distract her thoughts from both Ian and the haunting vision.

Lord Stanley spoke, “Do you feel comfortable now sharing what you’ve learned so far?”

Barbara, reaching for her last chip, instead shifted her hand toward her journal.

“I’m afraid it’s not a great deal past the commonly known things.”

She avoided his eyes, unsure of how much to reveal of what she had experienced at the castle and now felt she knew about Charlie’s burial.

“As you probably already know from the clippings you sent Dan, the skeleton, Charlie, was found in an archaeological dig in 1988 and measured close to six foot,
maybe five foot eight or ten. He was also in reasonable health, had better than average teeth so must have had a steadier and fairly nutritious diet as a child.” Barbara looked up adding, “At least better than most for the time period. I presume this might point to his family being either successful tradesmen or that he may have been attached to some branch of a minor royal line. There doesn’t appear to be any obvious records as to who he might have been as no formal archaeological paper was published. At least I’ve found nothing yet.” She studied her notes, confused when Lord Stanley contributed nothing to the conversation. What is his interest in all this? What does he expect me to find?

She looked at Lord Stanley, hoping he would shed light or at least point the way to what he wanted from her, but his face remained composed. Before she could ask for his help or even for a declaration of what his interest in her research centred around, the waitress arrived to clear their dishes, returning a moment later with individual desserts, coconut meringue topped by a scoop of ginger ice cream and roasted pineapple, drizzled with a lime butterscotch sauce. Barbara sampled her confection, marvelling at the combination of tastes. Finally, the waitress returned with coffee for the men and a small porcelain teapot of aromatic chamomile for Barbara.

“You enjoyed your meal then, Miss Shaunaky?”

Barbara replaced her cup in its saucer and smiled, “Yes. Thank you very much. I did. The dessert was heavenly.” She noted that Ian hadn’t really eaten his, just chased it around his plate.

“Shall we return to the matter at hand, Miss Shaunaky?” Lord Stanley’s voice revealed little if any emotion, merely a professor questioning a student, although he smiled at her compliment. Barbara wondered briefly at their strange conversation but patiently proceeded.
Turning the page, she continued through her notes. “His burial was unusual in that it was within castle walls and therefore in unconsecrated ground, which is quite odd with St. Michael’s only a stone’s throw from the internment site.” Barbara paused. “I’m also curious about the circumstances of his death, Lord Stanley. If it was a hasty burial, why were no jewellery or clothing remains found with the body?” She kept silent as to what she had seen at the ruin. Barbara folded her fingers over her thumb to stop herself from spinning her dragon-stone ring. “Could he have been stripped to hide his identity? You, of course, realise that determining who he actually was automatically becomes more difficult to establish without finding any nearby artefacts. Too bad his physical defects were of a fairly ordinary nature, just enough to show that he’d had an interesting though short life,” Barbara concluded.

“Physical defects?”

“Like Richard III,” Barbara answered. “I presume you’ve aware that his bones were recently located beneath a parking lot in Leicester under what used to be Greyfriar’s Church, currently a parking lot. Not only was it buried where research indicated but the identification was made easier because the skeleton had marked scoliosis as well as having part of its skull sliced off, which matches the historic account of Richard’s death in 1485 at Bosworth Field. He was called ‘the hunchback king’ I believe.”

Barbara looked up to see Lord Stanley’s face return to that of placid listener but not before she’d glimpsed a look of intense scrutiny, as if he were trying to determine the threat of a strange insect. Again, she wondered what he wanted from her. And once again she fingered her ring, remembered Ken’s comment about a tell, and forced herself to place her hand in her lap.
“You’ve made a nice start in your research, Miss Shaunakay.” Lord Stanley paused. “I think you’ll do quite nicely.” She blushed at the praise, unsure of where he would take their conversation next.

Lord Stanley placed his coffee cup on the table. Reaching beside his chair, he lifted a slim attaché case and pulled out a file folder. “Shall I tell you what I know?”
Sitting on a bench in the castle ruins tucked away from the ever-present wind, Barbara looked out over the Irish Sea. She watched the water withdraw from the darkened shoals, tendrils of green seaweed clinging like half-forgotten memories. The tide was out but would return, perpetually trying to reclaim the centuries’ old sea wall.

*Patience. Anything worth anything demands patience.* Barbara sighed remembering her mother’s mini-lectures.

At yesterday’s luncheon, Lord Stanley had confirmed what Barbara already knew, revealing only a few additional bits of information gleaned from the original forensic papers he somehow had access to. Close examination of the skeleton revealed that Charlie also had a childhood spinal injury, but it had healed leaving only a slight twist, perhaps a limp. His skull had been found in fragments but the archaeologists were not willing to list that as the cause of death. And his left arm was more developed than the right. *Charlie was a south-paw,* she mused. *Maybe good with a sword. Could that help in dating him to Richard III? Would the records of recruits list hand preference? But why was he buried here?*

The new details aided her fieldwork, but each time she grasped at one piece of information, trying to make sense of the entirety, understanding slipped away. *Why did I see the hurried burial yesterday? Barbara, you’re thinking too hard,* she chided herself.

She filled her lungs with brisk sea air and walked slowly up the incline to the fallen stone wall and Charlie’s place, as she called it. His remains on display at the
Ceredigion Museum, the actual gravesite had been purposely obscured with a layer of gravel; small clumps of grass, dandelion, and English daisy had continued the task of camouflage. Standing in contemplation, her mind jumped from fact to fact. Burials were almost unheard of within castle walls. The internment was also suspicious due to its non-Christian north-south orientation. Conjecture abounded but Barbara had seen the quick internment, accomplished in a stable with secrecy rather than in the King’s Hall as some believed. She sat down abruptly on the nearby wall. *Was it a horrible accident or could it have been murder?* Because the body was stripped of all it possessed, identification would be next to impossible. It also gave credence to her vision.

*Barbara, are you seriously going to trust these visions as a research aid?*

Shocked at the thought, she pondered her question curiously but had no ready answer.

Returning to her kaleidoscopic thoughts, Barbara pulled out her notebook to record her questions. *Why were the original findings never written up, never submitted to a professional journal? Why were DNA tests never ordered? It just gets curioser and curioser.* She smiled at the line from a childhood favourite, rubbed her forehead, then ran her hand through her wind-tossed hair, tucking it behind her ear so she could see. “And, finally,” she said aloud, her words snatched away by the wind, “what does Stanley hope to gain?” She wrote and underlined the last and then gazed out across the sea. “Perhaps I’ll know when I unravel your puzzle, Charlie.”

As a distraction, Barbara began to sketch the view across the bay and the various incarnations of St. Michael’s Church. One had stood on the shoals according to Lord Stanley, another in what was now a playground bisected by a narrow walkway. Across the path the engraved headstones had been gathered from their resting places and rearranged into a stone border. The dead moved to another location,
a carpet of manicured grass now covered the original cemetery plots, allowing picnickers to gather under the spring sunshine, to walk the peripheral paths, or to create rubbings of the aged stone markers.

The shadow of a gull floated across her open page. As Barbara looked up, an errant breeze flipped the leaves of her book. They came to rest at a paper-clipped page with the black and white photograph Lord Stanley had presented at yesterday’s meeting. A signet ring, pictured alongside a ruler, its relative size indicated a woman’s ring or, perhaps, a man’s pinkie ring. The stone insignia was fashioned with two ‘u’ shapes, a darkened inner within a sharply cut outer. Three serpentine lines were incised across the nested letters. Ancient looking, the band was scarred with a patina of constant use. It appeared to have a tiny chip in one corner.

Barbara pulled a small flat credit-card sized magnifier from her wallet and held it over the photo trying to decipher what looked like linked symbols around the band. Although she could discern a repeat pattern of three, the ring was so badly worn, it was impossible to determine what the artisan had originally designed them to be.

Lord Stanley had intimated that the ring was important. But how? Another puzzle piece. A blind alley. How many clues must I discover before I begin to find answers... or before I go completely mad... or perhaps...? No, she decided. I’ll not give up and go home.

Barbara looked at her promise ring. Swept up in events of the last few days, Barbara tried to remember what Ken had said when he’d placed it on her thumb. What kind of stone had he said it was? Yes, a dragon bloodstone. Odd name, but then Ken knew her fascination with all things mythical.
Studying the swirl of red in the green stone, she wondered what Ken was doing right now. A glance at her watch revealed he’d be eating yoghurt after his morning run, or perhaps just stepping out of the shower. It was seven in the morning in Washington DC. She blushed at the visual image she’d conjured, then glanced seaward, her thoughts flying west across the Irish Sea toward home.

Looking out across the white-capped waves, discouraged with the enormity of her double tasks, Barbara spun her ring round and round, wishing she could make sense of the past and put the seemingly unconnected pieces together into some semblance of order. Not for the first time, she wished she had never opened her parents’ safe-deposit box.
Marcus paced back and forth on the ramparts of Aberystwyth Castle, while Kaleb sat chewing his lower lip, staring across the Irish Sea as it relentlessly pounded the shore. Undecided as to what his next move should be, he wondered if he dared return home to York. Kaleb wanted the comforts of his former life and not this half existence filled with questions.

The muddy roads of late spring had dried into the promise of a dry summer. The two-hundred-mile journey home teased, then became a torment to Kaleb. They had travelled mostly on foot, careful to stay off commonly used roads to hide their escape route if a murder investigation indeed followed them. His memory of their flight from Knaresborough and subsequent escape to the Welsh coast still came only in bits and pieces, random thoughts, and even once or twice in violent dreams. Marcus always seemed near enough to pull him from his night terrors when Kaleb, drenched with sweat, woke screaming.

Now, contemplating the sea, Kaleb regretted his decision to leave everything and everyone behind. He ran his hand through his thick black hair. Why had no one returned his letters of inquiry?

“Henry Tudor will arrive in August to marshal his forces, reclaim the throne and remove the hunchback. It’s time a Welshman ruled, don’t you think? Are you in or not, Kaleb? When will you sign enlistment papers and commit?” Marcus demanded.
Kaleb’s physical injuries now healed, his temper grew short with Marcus’ pressure to join Tudor as well as his constant dire warnings of the wrath of the Stone Worker’s Guild. Frustrated, Kaleb continued to worry his memory much as a tongue seeks out a chipped tooth.

“I’m still not decided, Marcus. Why should I care who sits on the throne?” Kaleb knew he was no soldier, like Jarl, nor was he a politician as was his priestly brother, Ansgar.

Glancing up at Marcus, he again felt a disquieting feeling that had crept slowly into their friendship. What was Marcus’ real interest in him? He’d begun to feel uneasy at the mercenary’s constant presence, the ever-assessing looks. His discomfort was complicated for he knew only too well that Marcus held knowledge of the secret murder. But was it truly a murder?

Kaleb looked down at the stitching on his boot. He’d done a poor job of mending it. The repair lacked the neat stitches a woman would have made. His thoughts drifted to Agatha and the delights of their lovemaking. The local doxies in the village satisfied his lust when drink and loneliness overtook him, but recently he’d taken to relieving himself as three men in the garrison had come down with the pox.

As Kaleb dwelt upon his time with Agatha, he’d begun to realise that he might actually be in love with her. Appearances had been deceiving. Prim and proper at first, she had surprised him with her ardour in pleasuring him. It was this combination of seeming innocence and wanton willingness to experiment that had captured his imagination. Perhaps it was because she was like-minded and enjoyed walking on the edge of danger with him, despite the thirteen year difference in their ages. He’d never found her like in any other woman, but he also felt a gnawing fear. What did she think about his unexpected and abrupt departure on the heels of a love note setting a tryst?
Would she simply find another? Surely she couldn’t feel betrayed, but why hadn’t she answered his letters? He’d written three so far, no, maybe it was four. He still had problems with his memory and simple tasks, which was why he’d accepted Marcus’ offer to find someone to carry them to Knaresborough and another to his brothers in York. Marcus seemed to know everyone and made friends easily. But why had there been no reply in the six weeks since they’d fled? Surely summer travel would have gained him an answer by now.

“Well?” Marcus stopped in front of Kaleb, blocking the sun.

Kaleb looked up. He was in no mood for a confrontation or anything involving decision-making. He wanted news from home and was worried something was amiss despite his companion’s assurances that his missives had been safely dispatched in the care of Welsh merchants carrying goods to York and Knaresborough. Was it possible his letters had never been received? Or, had they cut him off for gaming against the King’s law? And what of Agatha? The thought of another man touching her turned his bowels to jelly. His nerves on edge with unanswered questions, Kaleb snapped.

“Must you have a decision right now?”

Marcus stood silent, observing, backlit by the early morning sun. An aureole of light surrounded his shadowed visage. His chiseled looks and taciturn nature brought to Kaleb’s mind the image of a fallen angel. Kaleb dismissed his discomfort as nerves.

The mercenary reached down, pulled his boot knife free, and began to pare his nails. Seeing the knife, Kaleb hoped that Marcus wouldn’t demand another sparring match to help restore Kaleb’s skills with knife and sword.

Being born left handed had been a natural handicap when Kaleb had been forced into the role of sparring partner for his brother, Jarl. He carried several small
blemishes as the result of these bouts, but Jarl also bore a thin white scar across the back of his right hand, which he quickly deemed a lucky stroke after disarming his younger brother in that particular practice round. Nonetheless, Kaleb had learned to hold his own; as his market travels had increased and his father’s holdings grew, so, too, had Kaleb’s skills with knife and sword. Fairly adept, he nonetheless relied heavily on his father’s men in the guarding of trade goods.

Now, sorely out of practice, Kaleb accepted the duels with Marcus as a means of both passing time that lay like lead on his heart as well as a means of regaining his dexterity. He had recently, however, come to view the sessions with loathing. He ached only to return to a life of trade, travel and Agatha — a normal life. Kaleb cursed quietly at his lack of ability to remember.

“Well?” Marcus asked again as he leaned back against the crenellated battlement. Knife blade glinting in the sun, Marcus studied his nails and apparently satisfied, casually rotated the blade between his fingers. Fastidious almost to a fault, Kaleb had never met a man quite like Marcus.

The soldier studied Kaleb through his dark heavy lashes.

Uncomfortable under the close scrutiny, Kaleb felt a debt to the older man. Hadn’t Marcus saved his life?

“I suppose I might throw in my lot with Tudor but I’m no soldier, Marcus. You know I can hold my own in a one-to-one but I’m no match for you, let alone in a battle. I’m beholden to you but…”

“But what?” Marcus slipped his knife back into his boot. “Are you still mooning over that little tart you keep writing to? Isn’t no answer, an answer?”

“Don’t call her a tart. She’s not like that.”

“Didn’t she give you a good tumble whenever you came calling?”
Kaleb bit down a sharp retort. He blamed himself for confiding his affair to Marcus when they’d been drinking heavily. He inhaled sharply and stood to go, then stopped, turned, and said, “Don’t ever mention her name again, Marcus. Ever again.” His hand, palm down, sliced across the air.

The mercenary stood, a slow smile spread across his face but his black eyes remained inscrutable. Kaleb stared back, trying to understand if they held a threat? If so, what? Kaleb knew Marcus wasn’t interested in his money as he had none of his own left, and unless he returned to work soon, he would have nothing of his father’s either. A steady losing streak had reduced his purse to a dangerous level, effectively preventing his gaming. He looked away, again feeling uncomfortable as if he were being weighed and measured, assessed for a task he didn’t understand. All he knew was that he didn’t like the invasive feeling and needed to get away. He turned on his heel and made his way alone down the east tower. Striding across the courtyard, Kaleb approached the stable. Maybe it was time for one last gamble. He would quit this place and return home, make up some lie that would advance his cause, perhaps explain he’d been set upon, attacked, and injured. No, he decided. He’d been gone too long without a plausible explanation for his overlong absence. If he went home, he’d arrive without purse or plea. He’d be lucky if his family allowed him to work as a stable hand, especially with Ansgar as guardian of his nephew’s rights.

“Kaleb. Perhaps I misspoke. Let’s ride out and give these horses a run.” Marcus, his voice conciliatory, had followed him into the stable.

Kaleb wanted to be alone to think but it was their job to exercise the castle horses. He grunted a half-hearted answer and saddled a short stocky cob, grey with a coal black tail. The Welsh breed was docile, compact, but its stamina on the rolling hills and on a battlefield made it a favourite of the militia. Marcus saddled and
mounted a dun-coloured gelding. Together they rode out of the northeast gate, onto the shingled beach, past St. Michael’s, and up the coast. Climbing a nearby hill, they skirted Ceredigion Bay as they continued north. Kaleb took the lead, leaving Marcus in his wake as he drove the small horse into the wind. Hair and cape streaming behind him, Kaleb pushed onward till his eyes burned.

Miles up the Welsh coast, Kaleb turned inland along the Afon Mawddach, slowed the horse to a walk and allowed it to cool down. Dismounting, he tied the pony to a stand of trees and sat on the hillside looking across the estuary. Low, scattered clouds matched his mood as they mounted along the horizon.

“Damn, Agatha, why won’t you write? I want no part of battlefield glory like Jarl nor am I a mumbling priest like Ansgar, who desires only intrigue and power,” he muttered. “It’s Magnus, first born and favourite, whom I betrayed. An honest man and brother, he’s always defended me and I… .”

His words, carried away on the wind, were answered instead by a lone screech followed by the shadow of a gull, floating free on the air currents that circled high above. Kaleb looked up, longing to return to his old life, cursing his own feckless behaviour, his birthplace of fourth, which earned him nothing but leavings, and his misfortune of ever crossing Rob Mason’s path.

“This is my punishment,” Kaleb finished.

“Punishment?” The echo was deep, guttural, with an oily sheen.

Kaleb spun around at the sound of the familiar voice. Deep in thought, he had not heard Marcus’ approach as he caught up, his horse’s footsteps muffled in the tall turf.

“I’m going home, Marcus.” The words were out of his mouth almost before the thought had formed in Kaleb’s mind.
“To face a hangman’s rope?” Marcus dismounted and tied his horse to the small copse of trees. Striding confidently forward, he was a dark outline against a backdrop of gathering storm clouds. Kaleb stood and walked toward his horse.

“To face what I must.” Kaleb’s voice held a tremor. He coughed and continued, his words gaining strength. “I’m tired of waiting around for letters that never come and I don’t want to fight another man’s war.”

The older soldier raised an eyebrow, his eyes filled with darkness, the pupils over large.

Kaleb reached for the reins of his mount, preparing to leave.

“Why in such a hurry, boy?” Marcus leaned in, placing his hands on Kaleb’s shoulders. Kaleb knocked his hands away.

“Because I want good English soil under my feet. I want Agatha and I want to be rid of…” Kaleb’s words trailed off. “Besides, there’s weather coming in and I don’t fancy being caught in it.”

The small cob began to dance away, pulling at its reins. Kaleb tried to quiet the horse as the evening breeze intensified, pushing storm clouds before it until the sky blackened.

“Fancy,” Marcus replied, his voice low. “It’s not what you fancy that matters.” Marcus drew closer, pressing Kaleb back toward the trees. Lightning flashed in a brilliant arch across the darkening sky, turning Marcus’ face into a grotesque mask.

“Your fancy has never been my concern, lad,” Marcus pressed. “I was sent to watch you and report and now I’ve my orders.”

Another blaze of lightning tore the darkness and glinted off the knife that suddenly appeared in Marcus’ hand. Stepping forward, Marcus slid a deft leg behind Kaleb’s, and pushed. Kaleb hit the ground, forcing the air from his lungs.
The horses bucked and plunged, their eyes circled in white, as the night sky thundered around them. The wind shrieked, tearing at the trees above. Kaleb tried to roll away as the rain pelted down. What was happening? Who wanted him dead? Screams of the horses matched his shouts of rage and fear. Suddenly a hoof struck him in the jaw, the agony of pain lasted only moments before he surrendered to the well of darkness that claimed him.
Kaleb swam into consciousness, rising from a deep pool of borderless black. An explosion of pain ricocheted through his skull as a ray of light pierced his barely open eyes. He shut them but the pain had reached his consciousness and refused to be budged. Kaleb felt as if he’d been bludgeoned.

Forcing his leaden arm to respond, he raised a hand and touched his face. He felt only bandages.

“He lives.”

Voices, muffled, sounded distant, disembodied. A bustle of activity surrounded him, gentle hands touching, seeking to comfort. A wine-soaked cloth dripped a few drops of precious liquid into his mouth. It tasted odd, bitter. Wine laced with opium. Praying for death, he swallowed. The pain intensified before the narcotic welcomed Kaleb back into oblivion.

Time held no meaning. His life was measured in the arrival of the opiate-sodden cloth and the blessed relief it brought.

Days passed in a haze of pain and drugged sleep. The sound of barely audible whispers drifted in and out of his consciousness….

“He still holds to life in spite of his broken jaw and fever.”

“Will he live?”

“Only the Lord knows, Brother Thomas.”

Kaleb groaned as the disembodied voices reached his consciousness.

“Can you hear us, young sir?”
Kaleb hesitantly cracked open one eye, fearing pain. The room was gloomy, lit only by a candle flame. The voice seemed to emanate from deep within the cowl of a robed figure.

“Wine. Brother Thomas, bring some plain watered wine.”

The pain in his jaw was intense but bearable. The room was spare, bare stone, a plain plank table and two chairs. Two robed figures stood, one on either side of his bed. His blanket was woven of homespun wool, serviceable but itchy. The pewter chalice was cold on his lips as gentle hands supported his back and lifted him. The wine was weak but Kaleb found he could now swallow enough to relieve the dry, sour taste in his mouth.

“Where?” Kaleb’s tongue felt thick, wooden in his mouth.

“You are at Cymer Abbey in Llanelltyd. Do you know how you came to be here?”

Kaleb, muzzy headed, moaned again.

“Brother Thomas, the cloth.” The younger monk raised an eyebrow.

“Yes, with laudanum this time. Poor boy, doesn’t know who he is yet.”

Kaleb struggled to decipher the voices before the blessed oblivion of the laudanum carried him once more into a sea of darkness.

Light entered his world, piercing into the room through the window opening.

Birdsong, raucous gwarcks and screeches, prefaced the greeting of dawn by the local rooks.

Kaleb moved slowly, slid up on an elbow, and tried to lever himself into an upright position. His head ached at the effort but the pain was quickly forgotten as he
looked down at his wrist and hand. The bone was clearly defined, the sinews and muscles gaunt. How long had he lain abed? What had happened to him?

A white-robed monk, his black scapular draped over his ample belly, entered the room carrying a tray. Cistercian, thought Kaleb. The white monks of Cymer Abbey were noted for providing horses to the crown, austerity, and their vow of silence. Kaleb shook his head and regretted the action. Where had the whispering come from that had plagued him in his delirium? They were also vegetarian, he recalled, which explained the watery porridge and coddled egg set before him.

“How long?” he managed to croak.

The monk set the tray on Kaleb’s bed and held up ten fingers, closed his hands and extended four more.

“A fortnight?”

The monk lifted a spoon of porridge, offering to feed him.

“No, brother. Thank you. I think I can manage.” Kaleb’s hand shook as he lifted the watery porridge to his lips. Though he had trouble swallowing, Kaleb could feel the strength begin to seep through him. As he finished the egg, the door opened again and an older monk entered the small room as the younger removed the tray and closed the door soundlessly on his way out.

Hands folded beneath his scapular, the aged monk stood beside Kaleb’s bed, observing him silently. When he finally spoke, he measured out his words carefully.

“What do you remember, Kaleb?”

Surprised at hearing his name, Kaleb touched the bandages swathed around his face.
“Broken jaw.” The words, quietly spoken, hit Kaleb like a thunderbolt. Memories began to flood through him. The night. Lightning. Pain. One of the horses must have kicked him fracturing his jaw.

He tried to puzzle out how he had arrived at the monastery. A rush of faces shifted and reformed in his mind. His father. Brothers. Agatha. He looked down at his hand and saw only a band of white flesh where her ring had once circled his finger.

Marcus Brown. A deluge of emotions besieged him as the floodgates of his memory opened and refused to close. Fear. Escape. The gaming night. Rob Mason’s taunt and threat. Pain and a heavy weight knocking him to the ground. Voices, and finally Marcus wiping his blade clean of blood. Kaleb had not killed Mason. He was no murderer.

Relief softened his features for a moment before other emotions rose to the surface. Betrayal. Anger. Finally rage turned his face to stone at the enormity of the lies he’d been forced to believe and the loss he had suffered. Revenge filled his thoughts for another fortnight as he struggled to regain enough strength to return to Aberystwyth Castle.

At last ready, the journey took most of a day but thoughts of vengeance drove him on despite his pain. As he topped Craig-glais, he paused and looked down at the castle. Stripping away the bandage that had protected his jaw against the motion of the horse, he rode down the hill slowly and entered the castle beneath the still-open portcullis. The setting sun glinted off a small signet worn by a watcher on the parapet who had observed Kaleb’s slow descent toward the castle.

Kaleb entered the stable, unsaddled his cob, and proceeded to curry its fine grey coat. He wanted time to think. Now that he was actually within the castle, all his plans for revenge seemed flawed.
“Kaleb, my boy. You live.” A familiar voice broke the ambient noise of horses shuffling and nickering to each other.

Kaleb spun around, dropping the curry brush, scanning the gloom to see if anyone else had entered with Marcus. By the set of the sun, the evening meal was being served in the kitchens and all would be gathered there except those on duty.

“Yes.” Kaleb noted Agatha’s ring on Marcus’ finger. “I see you’ve protected my property from thieves,” he said, pointing to Marcus’ hand.

“I removed it when I brought you to the good monks at Cymer Abbey. They were sure you would die and I wanted to send it on to your family.” As he spoke he removed the small signet, and tossed it toward Kaleb, who slipped it back on his own hand.

“You look remarkably recovered for a dead man,” Marcus grinned, although there was no mirth in his eyes.

“Yes,” Kaleb replied. He looked around the stable again, noting that somehow Marcus had closed and barred the entrance. Kaleb’s hand closed upon the hilt of his knife.

“I remember… ,” he said, “everything. You killed Robert Mason.”

“I saved your life, boy.”

“You stole my life.” Kaleb drew a deep breath. “You tried to murder me.” Drawing his blade free, he searched Marcus’ face. “Why?”

Marcus held his hands up in surrender, then slowly drew a tightly folded missive from his vest. “The letter you sent Agatha declaring your troth was important… to your brother. He apparently doesn’t want loose ends or questionable progeny in the family.” Marcus slowly unfolded the parchment he held. “This one
orders your final disappearance.” He raised his eyes to study Kaleb’s confused expression. “It seems that your past has caught up with you.”

“What?” Kaleb lunged for the letter but failed to see the mercenary pull a club from his belt.

“It’s signed with an A,” Marcus taunted before he lunged. “For Ansgar,” he finished, as the blow dropped Kaleb to his knees.

Kaleb lay dead, his head crushed. Marcus worked quickly. He couldn’t allow the horses time to react to the smell of blood. He dug a shallow grave in an empty stall, stripped the body, and placed the small signet back on his own hand. Wrapping the body with strips of linen used to bind poultices on injured horses, he knotted the ends, and placed Kaleb into the open trench, then covered his body with dirt, rubble, and straw.

Checking that no evidence of Kaleb’s existence was left, Marcus opened the stable door, his lone shadow joining the night.
Autumn passed and with it Agatha’s father, Edwin Southill. Without Kaleb’s carnelian ring as proof of their secret promise, the only evidence Agatha could produce was her burgeoning belly, which only served to condemn her of fornication. It was fair to say that Southill loved his only child in that he petted and gave in to her fancies after her mother died, but his daughter getting with child while unwed had ramifications that nearly cost him his standing in the Guild. He chose, instead, to banish her from his house, relenting only to install her in the little fisher’s cottage off the Long Path near the River Nidd. She could live well enough, he reasoned, without being reduced to beggary, in itself a punishable offence.

As All Soul’s Day approached, it snowed, covering reality. The night before Agatha’s father died, he cried out for her, she came, ordered everyone from the room, and stood beside his bed. Feverish, he shook a long bony finger admonishing her to give up the name of the father.

Agatha wilfully arranged her face to show no emotion and replied just as she had to the town magistrate months before, “There is no father.” Her words, chips of razor sharp obsidian, tore her soul with their lie. She hardened her resolve remembering the words of her curse and Ansgar’s threat if she ever spoke. She couldn’t risk being denounced for the sake of her unborn child.

The elder Southill fell back on his pillows, exhausted. “Blasphemy, girl,” his voice rose. “No good can come of this. The devil’s the father.” His accusing hand dropped to the bed.
“So be it,” whispered Agatha.

Turning toward the door, she saw it was open, the nurse entering. She wondered for a moment what the woman may have seen or heard.

Before she returned to her cottage, Agatha slipped unseen into her father’s private offices on the first floor. She slid open a concealed panel and lifted out a heavy leather pouch stamped with the Guild’s insignia. Agatha paused only a moment before she carefully transferred some of the sovereigns it contained into a smaller bag that held Edwin Southill’s private fortune of smaller coins. Secreted beneath her skirts, the heavy bag swung against her legs as she journeyed back to her cottage. The snow turned to rain, washing away her footsteps, erasing her childhood. She hid her theft behind the waterfall, deep within the cave near her cottage. She knew no one would dare venture into Dropping Well.

The year turned.

“You’re well on now, child.” Granny Wise, the midwife, wiped Agatha’s brow and pushed back the damp curls that clung to her face.

Agatha screamed and clawed at the bedclothes. “Where are my friends?”

“I sent those foolish girls home as soon as they helped you here from the cave. What were you thinkin’? You weren’t, I tell ye. Trying to hide havin’ a babe in a cave and with those ninnies for help.” Granny shook her head, muttering about the turn of the year and snow on the ground.

“Noooo.” Agatha’s eyes went round as Granny approached her, a wickedly sharp knife in her outstretched hand.

“Foolish girl, have no fear. Didn’t yer mam teach ye anything about birthin’?” The old woman rested one hand on the bedstead and with a muttered incantation, slid
the knife under. “It will cut the pain for ye.” Granny Wise turned to the fire in the hearth and with a taper lit a small bundle of clary sage and waved it about the room, passing it over Agatha’s belly. “Breathe it in, girl,” she ordered. “It will purify you from the evil eye,” she continued.

Agatha’s eyes again went round with fear as another contraction tore at her, agony radiating across her lower back.

“Granny,” Agatha panted. “I think I shall die of the pain. Surely this can’t be normal.”

The wise woman lifted the kettle and poured steaming water into a mug containing crushed golden seal and white willow bark. She stirred it slowly adding a drop of henbane. When it had cooled a bit, she slid several teaspoonfuls into Agatha’s mouth.

“What will this do?” Agatha coughed at the bitter taste.

“The golden seal will make you cramp and the bark and henbane will relieve the pain.” The old woman ignored the fear in Agatha’s face, turned to her open kit and pulled a crochet hook from among her pots and potions. Soaking a cloth in wine, the midwife scrubbed dried blood off the hook and approached the bed.

“On your next contraction, I’m going to check the baby to see what’s holding it back.”

Agatha felt the pressure build as her belly tightened, compressing into an impossibly tight ball. With deft fingers, the midwife searched the birth canal, rapidly retreating when Agatha thrashed in pain, kicking with her legs.

“Stop your foolishness, girl, or I’ll leave you to it alone. Then we’ll both see how you fare.”

“First, sit higher in the bed and hold the bed rail. When the contraction comes on, don’t let go.” She walked to her kit and returned with two short lengths of rope.

“What are you doing?” Agatha’s eyes radiated fear.

“I’m going to tie your feet. I’ll not have you kick me when that babe comes.”

The old woman tied first one ankle, threw back Agatha’s sweat-soaked nightdress, and pulling her legs apart, tied the other. “I told you I should have sent for an assistant but you wanted this your way. ‘Keep it a secret,’ you said. Did you expect those silly girls to keep your secret? A baby’s no secret, child. Now we’ve got troubles and we’ll finish my way and pray that we end with both of you on this side of the grass.”

“When the next one comes, stop struggling and breathe. The baby fights to pass your barrier. I must break it and let the water out so the babe can come on the tide.” She stopped and studied the soon-to-be mother.

“Do you understand me?” she said, hands on her hips.

Agatha nodded, pulling against her restraints.

“Don’t struggle.”

Agatha’s exposed belly began to harden under the midwife’s manipulations. Just as the contraction passed its crescendo, the old woman pushed hard forcing the baby’s head down the canal, then reached up with the crochet hook and snagged the membrane, tearing it. Blood and water spurted, covering her arm with gore.

“Well done but not done.” Though her voice still held a grim edge, if Agatha had been able to look, she would have seen fearful determination in the old woman’s eyes. “This time push, Agatha. Push as you’ve never pushed before.”

“I can’t.”
“You can and you will.” Agatha’s belly tightened again. Her ankles strained against the rope bindings, chafing the skin of her ankles, tearing the soft flesh. Granny Wise watched the baby’s head descend and crown. It had black curly hair like its mother.

“You’re almost there, girl. Take a deep breath and send me your child,” she crooned.

Agatha inhaled, bore down, and felt as if her insides would tear in two. The pressure was unbearable. No one could survive this.

With a rush between her legs, the pain stopped and a cry filled the air.

Agatha fell back against the pillow, her head lolling to one side. Granny Wise wiped the struggling baby clean and bound the small girl in swaddling bands, arranging her arms and legs as best she could so they might have a chance to grow straight and strong.

The child was deformed. The head was oversized and elongated. Her eyes were swollen shut, the colour of overripe plums, and her long nose was pressed flat and bent sideways. The skin on her face was mottled purple and red, a deep swarthiness not normal to a newborn. When she cried, the midwife saw small sharp teeth glinting in the reddened mouth.

“Lord, save us. Sinners all,” she whispered to no one in particular. She looked at Agatha, comforted that the girl had fainted and would not yet have to face what lay ahead.
“A grimoire?”

Fiona’s voice, a whisper, was fraught with fear and shock at the realisation of what she held. She threw the empty book across the bed as if her fingers had been burnt. Heart pounding, Fiona hugged herself to contain the chilling tremor that ran through her core.

“How can Gran’s common book be a grimoire?”

She rubbed the back of her neck, remembering Gran in the cold room, carefully copying down recipes for tinctures and ointments, household tips, the proper rotation of herbs in the garden, or planting by the proper phases of the moon. She’d watched Gran write, had even observed her record the eight stages of the moon, including its apparent absence, and its conjunction to stars, adding runes that held no meaning to Fiona. She’d seen drawings of ways to birth a baby, set a bone, and even watched as Gran painted various watercolours of the stones themselves. Some of the innocent rhymes Fiona had learned as a child were recorded on the borders of Gran’s paintings. Everything had been normal. Nothing magical.

However, because Gran had never let her play with the common-book, Fiona knew it to be a prized possession. It contained her Gran’s knowledge of life and herbs, but Fiona had never considered magic a part of her grandmother’s life. The ritual at the stones was just a family tradition, a rite of passage, surely not magic, she reasoned. Besides it hadn’t worked. Nothing had happened. Gran didn’t work magic. She couldn’t... because... she was just Gran. Wasn’t she?
If the book was supposed to contain answers, how could it be both full and empty at the same time? Fiona desperately wanted answers to her questions but as she stared at the book, she realised that discovery might bring its own challenges. What price had Gran paid for her knowledge?

She thought again on Gran’s last words, “Everything you’ll ever need waits for you in the box.” Gran had never lied, perhaps prevaricated at times or told a small white fib or two, but Fiona had never caught Gran in a lie, especially concerning the stones. By finding the secret compartment, Fiona now had the journal. It lay before her on the bed, its blank pages staring like dead, upturned eyes. But how was she to unlock it? She searched her memory for rhymes, riddles, or songs but nothing came to answer her question.

“Oh, Gran. Who were you? What were you?” Fiona shuddered and drew in a long slow breath. She remembered only a white-haired, gentle, grey-eyed woman, but her Gran had been much more than that if she could command the secret of words that appeared and disappeared at will.

Curiosity and her need to understand drove her on. Fiona’s eyes fell on the wooden box. Perhaps there were other clues to discover. She lifted the box and pulled the drawer fully open. The space, smelling of burnt wood, was empty. The book had been a perfect fit and left no extra room for anything else. Removing the drawer, she turned it upside down and was startled to see that someone had carved two small images into the bottom. They looked like a circle overlapping a book but a dark rusty smear covered and almost obliterated the shallow scratches. Curious but unable to discern any meaning, she slid the drawer back into place, then lifted the lid and examined the contents of the upper chamber.
It was filled with trinkets Fiona had treasured as a child: a blue feather lining a miniature nest and a small hag-stone Johnny had found and brought back from Oxford. On the day he’d given it to her, he’d said she could peep through the opening and see fairies, perhaps the very ones who had danced on her brow when she was born, leaving their mark. Gran said that at the altar stone, she remembered. Her fingernail caught on a brittle daisy circlet. Years ago, she’d pressed it in Gran’s copy of *Pride and Prejudice*, between the pages where Darcy proclaimed his love. Once dried, the token had been placed safely in her box. Now it was as brittle and broken as were her long-ago summer dreams. *And, yet,* she thought. *No, it’s too late. I’ve promised Michael. How can I break my word and wed Iain?*

Fiona slid a slim rectangular metal object from its within its velvet-lined case. It contained a daguerreotype of her mother and father’s wedding day, her grandmother standing in the background, looking stern. She studied the image. Contemplating the picture of a happier time, she realised that nothing was as it appeared. This harmless likeness had always brought Fiona comfort, a keepsake from her mother and Gran but now its silvery reflective surface felt fraught with hidden meanings as the angle of light shifted the surface between positive and negative images.

Returning the picture to its case, Fiona set it next to the nest and hag-stone. Within the box, she spied a yellowed bundle wrapped in a soft woollen cloth, which had been concealed beneath the likeness of her family. “How did you get in here?” she said, lifting out the small package. Fiona hadn’t opened the box since before Gran’s death and wondered what Gran had hidden for her.

Carefully unfolding the delicate cloth, Fiona found that it protected a small engraved locket she’d seen her mother wear on a tarnished silver chain but which
she’d believed had been lost. It was engraved with a floral and quite stylised ‘S’. The second item, slightly larger, was a small vellum-painted likeness of a beautiful woman. A brooch, its miniature portrait was set in a casing surrounded with tiny pearls. The third discovery was a thaumatrope, a child’s spinning toy. The last two items, new to her, were obviously old. The painting reminded Fiona of portraits found in illuminated manuscripts, while the toy appeared to have been etched with a series of strokes. Fiona had no idea what they meant, only that her grandmother intended for her to have them. Setting the three items aside, she unfolded the delicate woollen cloth they’d been wrapped in and discovered it was a very old baby bonnet, the edging worked with a delicate ivory lace. It seemed over large and odd shaped for a newborn but the design was clearly intended for an infant.

The near empty box now held only the broken daisy chain and the small signet wedding band of her mother, which had slipped to the bottom of the box. Disappointed at finding nothing she thought would be of any help in unravelling the mysteries of the journal, Fiona lifted the ribbon from which her mother’s wedding band hung suspended. She leaned back against her pillows, holding the ring above her head. Slowly it twirled, the small, carved signet reflecting the glow of her lamp. Tiny veins of red gleamed, woven deep into the lustrous green of the stone. She felt her frustration lessen. Calm now, serene, she began to drift, dreamlike. An image formed in her mind of a quiet waterfall. She almost heard the sound of distant water as it slid across a smooth rock face and dripped almost noiselessly into a pool of stone.

Fiona sat up suddenly, swinging her feet to the floor. She clutched the ring between two fingers and held it close to the flame of her oil lamp. Her suspicions heightened, she turned toward the bed, searching for the painted miniature. Fiona cradled the portrait in the palm of her hand. A beautiful young woman stared back,
her golden curls swept away from a face with an aquiline nose, her hand rested comfortably against her swanlike neck but it was the ring on the woman’s finger that caused Fiona to gasp. The portrait clearly showed a beautiful stranger wearing her mother’s signet wedding ring.

Placing the ring and portrait side by side, Fiona picked up the toy meant to entertain a child. The thaumatrope was a round flat disk, a bit larger than the portrait. She’d seen one before with a bird painted on one side and an empty cage on the other. When spun, the bird appeared to be sitting in the cage.

The thaumatrope she held was made of a thin slice of bone, perhaps ivory. A large Roman letter ‘U’ was carved on one side, an undulating line floated across and above the letter. The other side showed a small offset ‘u’ with three serpentine lines waving vertically through its carved center. A thin string was attached through a tiny hole near the edge of the disk, one on either side.

Hardly daring to breathe, Fiona held a string in each hand, pulled it tight and began to twist, rubbing the ends between thumb and forefinger. Slowly the disk began to spin. Faster and faster, until the U ceased being a letter in a child’s alphabet. The sides blended, the two surfaces revealing a whole. Before her astonished eyes, there appeared a picture of a cave, complete with waterfall and a rippled pool.

Fiona slowly lowered her hands to her lap, the toy hung suspended from her reddened fingers. She placed the thaumatrope on the baby bonnet, resettled herself at the head of the bed, and studied all that lay before her, trying to piece together all the disparate parts.

“Gran, what do these things mean?”

Fiona lifted the toy again but there were no markings to indicate what it signified or where the cave was or even if it existed in reality. She placed the items
carefully back in the box, then leaned back against her pillows and studied the woman in the tiny painted portrait. The quality was excellent.

“Are you a long ago ancestor?” Fiona said. “Why do you wear my mother’s ring. What have you to do with the journal?”

Overcoming her fear that Gran’s common book might indeed be a grimoire of magical proportions, Fiona squared her shoulders, pulled the journal to her, and bravely riffled through its pages.

Nothing happened. Feeling even more frustrated, she left the blank book upon the bed, set the painted likeness on the book’s leather cover and stood to ready herself for bed.

Fiona washed her face and brushed her hair one hundred strokes, then observed herself in her mirror. She slipped the ring on her finger and posed with her hand resting near her throat. *We do have the same long neck and curls.* She observed. *Different colour, of course. But it’s the same ring, though I’m nothing like the beauty in the portrait.*

Settled under her comforter once again, Fiona set the beaded brooch aside, focused on the conundrum she faced, and pulled the journal onto her lap.

“I wish I understood the truth,” she said, as she opened the journal and stroked the pristine page.

Her hand froze as if turned to stone. There beneath her fingertips, words formed, hazy, smoky grey, rising slowly to the surface as if through a mist. The writing cleared, became black, now bold and legible. Fiona’s heart beat a tattoo as she carefully lifted her hand, afraid of what she might learn, frightened the writing would somehow disappear, excited that the answers she needed might now be within her grasp.
Crisp words stared at her from the page and in the light of her oil lamp, she read…

‘The story of the stones begins

when rock overcomes water.

This is the Book of Standing Stone.’
“Well?” Lord Stanley’s voice remained well modulated as always. His pacing was the only indication of his disquiet.

“I don’t know, father. I haven’t been able to ascertain anything for certain yet,” Ian said.

“How can you not know? He accented the last word as he stopped in front of his son’s chair. “You were with her all day. You’ve certainly had time to observe… inquire… ascertain… something?” He stroked his moustache, frowning. “Have you at least advanced your relationship?”

“I don’t know.” Ian straightened in his chair, not meeting his father’s eye. He decided not to mention that he’d seen a new ring on Barbara’s hand but hadn’t asked what it meant.

“You were with her for over three hours at luncheon,” Ian said. “Why didn’t you learn anything?”

“I beg your pardon. How dare you be insolent to me, young man?” An unpleasant smile slithered across the older man’s mouth. “As a matter of fact, I did observe quite a bit. This American girl is no one’s fool. She’s bright, clever, and not only knows how to ask questions but she seems quite capable of ferreting out her own answers. She also bears a strong resemblance to a particular line,” he said, “as I originally thought when I saw Barbara’s picture a year ago.”

“You suspected a year ago?”

“Yes. Why do you think I requested her?”
“A resemblance to what line, to who exactly?”

“A miniature.” Stanley raised a smug eyebrow in response to Ian’s look of uncertainty. “Miss Shaunaky resembles the woman in my miniature. Same hair, same neck, and something about her eyes.” He paused in reflection, stroking his moustache again. “She sees… perhaps too much.”

Lord Stanley strode to the bookshelf behind his desk and pressed the small royal crown on the spine of Burke’s Peerage. With a click and a soft whirring, a section of shelf disengaged itself, slid out from the wall, and slowly lowered itself and its selection of books, revealing a small digitised panel attached to the wall. Stanley pressed a coded sequence. The cleverly concealed wall-safe swung open. Reaching inside, he removed a velvet box.

“What the bloody… ?” Ian’s eyes went wide in surprise as he stood and walked toward his father. “When were you going to tell me about this?”

“Everything in good time.”

Ian thought of objecting, realised it would accomplish nothing, and followed Lord Stanley to his desk. Lord Stanley lifted the lid of the hinged receptacle; a small delicately painted oval brooch was revealed. Ian looked at his father, who gave an almost imperceptible nod. Permission granted, Ian lifted the brooch, cradled it gently in his palm, and studied it with a magnifying glass, while holding it under the desk lamp. The likeness, painted on what appeared to be either vellum or parchment, was contained within a burnished silver frame. Circling the likeness, tiny seed pearls were set within its filigreed border.

“Odd. The hair colour seems to change depending on how it’s held under the light.” Ian looked at Lord Stanley, then returned to study the image from a different angle. It could almost be her,” he paused, “but there’s subtle differences.”
“Yes, quite.” Lord Stanley replied. “What would you say they were?”

“It’s very hard to tell,” Ian said, setting down the likeness. “The woman in the portrait looks somehow unsettled, as if she holds a dangerous secret although I don’t know if I can explain why.”

“If this woman is who I believe her to be, she is a threat.”

Barbara had spent most of the morning and afternoon doing research at the National Library, gaining a few leads on Mother Shipton, her birthplace and the environs of Knaresborough, including a reference to an unusual well and waterfall on its borders. The well, renamed three times over the years, was said to be one of England’s oldest tourist destinations because of the water’s remarkable mineral content. Dripping Well had been feared in the 1400’s, but by the early 1600’s it was considered to have healing properties. It was renamed Dropping Well sometime in the 1800s. Barbara wondered if she could arrange a visit. Knaresborough was not too distant from York cathedral, which might yield vital records. But it was the well that intrigued her.

The water, fed from an underground aquifer, rose from a mile underground through a hillside, slid across a stony escarpment, and dribbled into a deep well below. As the water was exposed to the outside air, it formed calcite, solidifying whatever it touched, much as stalactites are formed. A line of small teddy bears and other artefacts were strung along the fall’s face, each slowly turning to stone, the perfect souvenir for tourists, who came to see the unusual well and walk the shaded paths. Magic and mystery are powerful magnets, Barbara mused. I’ll bet the cute teddies cost a small fortune.

Immersed in her research, Barbara had jumped when she felt someone touch the back of her chair. A few heads turned in the quiet of the library.
“Sorry,” Ian said, “Didn’t mean to give you a fright. May I take you to lunch?” He offered his hand to help her up.

Barbara, frowning, waved to the open books and papers that littered the desk in front of her.

“They’ll be fine. A study carrel has been arranged for you.”

Barbara’s eyebrows furrowed in a question. “But how?”

“Let’s just say that my mother’s family have lived in Aberystwyth for generations. And,” he added, “it’s easy when you know who to ask. We can drop your things off there, go to the cafe downstairs and when you return you’ll have some privacy for your work,” he said. “Besides you need a break.” She ran a hand through her curls, tipped down her laptop screen and slid it into its case along with her notebook. Lunch made sense as she was hungry. As Ian pulled back her chair, Barbara could hear a small scattering of shushing around them. Embarrassed, she was glad to gather her documents and escape the public study room.

Seated in a corner of the Pen Dinas Café, Barbara finished her stuffed jacket potato and sipped her frothy hot chocolate.

“So how’s the research coming. What are you working on today?”

“Are you asking on behalf of Lord Stanley or just curious yourself?” Barbara knew she was flirting but enjoyed the brief discomfort that flitted across Ian’s face.

“Aren’t you aware by now that I hang on your every word?” His retort, given with a light chuckle, matched her playful attitude. When he slid his arm across the table and took her hand in his an electric thrill ran through her. Pulling away, she cradled her cup, allowing its warmth to calm her racing emotions.
Barbara laughed. “Ian, I’m glad we’re finally past formalities.” *What are you playing at Barbara girl? Why don’t you tell him about Ken?* She brushed away her unwanted thoughts as he spoke again.

“So what are you researching now. Can’t you tell me?”

“Why so interested?”

“I could ask, why are you so secretive?”

“Well, for one thing. I kinda work for your boss. Or at least I did and I feel I owe him my results first. But beyond that, I just keep finding bits and pieces that don’t really add up to much of anything. I’m trying to sort out a pattern.”

Barbara considered telling Ian about her visions. She’d not told Ken about the visions either, only her mother, and she wasn’t really sure what her mother had understood. A recent doctor’s report said they had found an unexplained blip on her mom’s monitors. It had not been repeated, but Barbara had finally put the dates together, realising that the anomaly had occurred on the day she’d said goodbye. She had wondered if it had been her revelation about the manifestations she was experiencing that had somehow sparked a response in her comatose mother.

She set her cup down and idly twisted her ring.

“Ian, Lord Stanley gave me a picture of a signet ring at lunch. Do you know if he has the actual ring?”

“Chauffeur.” Ian said, “Remember. But I can ask?”

Barbara blushed. “Yes. Sorry. It’s just… I don’t know. You seem closer than employee/employer.” Glancing at her watch, she interrupted her own train of thought.

“Ian, thanks for the lunch and the unexpected visit but I’ve got to get back to work. We’ve been here over an hour.”
“You are so… American. Always in a hurry.” He placed his hand over hers again, “How about Devil’s Bridge tomorrow maybe? It should be a nice day and you need to learn to relax.”

The word ‘no’ hovered on her lips, until she looked into his eyes. “Tempting.” She hesitated. “Can I confirm in the morning?”

“As you wish.”

Barbara zipped her fleece jacket against the freshening breeze off the Irish Sea. Alone with her thoughts after a lengthy day of research, she sat at a picnic table on the Royal Pier; the other visitors had re-entered the arcade to game or attend to their individual dinner plans. As the sun began its descent, she twisted Ken’s ring on her thumb, trying to sort the jumbled emotions her day had brought.

Scattered clouds and a low fog promised a spectacular sunset. Barbara wasn’t disappointed as she watched the sun slide into the misty horizon. Melting, its gold flowed across the sea, lifting fingers to stain the low hanging clouds with a brilliance of peach, yellow, and rose.

Barbara continued to idly spin Ken’s ring as she tried to centre herself. She was missing a connection. It felt close at hand but she couldn’t grasp what it was she sought. Deep in thought, she watched the sky around her change and darken, as the colours softened into cobalt, deepening into a rich navy and the final midnight blue appearing black as stars began to appear.

A rumble from her stomach pulled her from her trancelike state into an awareness of the waves lapping softly under the pier and of the muted laughter from the arcade, now filling with college students bent on enjoying a night out. Voices called to each other in the early dark, friends greeting friends on the Prom. The sound
of a skateboard rumbled over the pavement. Barbara stood, slipped the strap of her satchel over her head, and turned to find her own dinner at the Gwesty Cymru. As she walked toward the rising noise of the arcade, Barbara failed to notice the dark shadow wedged into an unseen corner of the building nor was she aware that she was being closely observed.

At the Gwesty, she ordered a house specialty - cod with a delicate Welsh seasoning of Shitake mushrooms, seaweed and Halen Môn. The meal came with chickpeas dressed with lemon, spinach and fresh chili, served with a tomato and basil salsa that was excellent. Barbara hadn’t met the cook but had been favourably impressed with the quality of the meals served at the beachfront bed and breakfast. A small empty bowl stained with the remains of a blackcurrent sorbet sat before her as Barbara sipped an Elderflower drink. The taste was new to her, refreshing, flowery, and non-alcoholic.

Barbara tucked her satchel under her arm, thanked the waitress and headed up three flights of circular stair to her loft room. As she stood on the landing and fumbled for her key, her bedroom door opened.

“Tao?” Barbara stared in shocked surprise as the older woman pulled the door further open, stepping deeper into the room to allow Barbara entrance.

“Why, m’ lovely. You gave me quite a start, you did.”

Pulled back into a tight ponytail, Tao’s hair slipped forward over her neck as she bent to retrieve a plastic bag and a used towel from the floor. Barbara thought a bit of colour crept up Tao’s neck but dismissed her observation in the light of Tao’s slow, relaxed smile which replaced the startle in her eyes.

Entering the room, Barbara threw her satchel on the bed, and quickly scanned the room. “Tao, whatever are you doing … in my room?”
Tao held out the bag and crumpled linen, shrugged her shoulders, and said, “I work here.”

“I thought you mentioned you worked at the university and sometimes helped with Mrs Pugh?”

“I did. Well, I actually do,” she quickly amended, “but I know the owner here too and I help out now and then when they’re short-handed.” Tao tucked the nearly empty bin bag under her arm and pointed into the room. “Just turned down your bed and straightened up a bit, fresh towels, too. Sorry I forgot to bring up the mint for your pillow. Not a regular at this.” Tao shrugged; her voice had a slight edge to it rather than its usual soft quality. “Sleep well, my lovely… Barbara, right?” She moved toward the door.

“Yes, of course.”

“Sorry, but it has been ages since I’ve seen you and I’m frightful with names.” She stopped. “How thoughtless of me. How is your mother?”

“My mother?” Then Barbara remembered. Tao had delivered the message that had changed her life. “She’s holding her own. Thank you.”

Tao slipped through the door but once on the landing, stopped, paused, and turned toward Barbara. “Might I ask you a small favour?”

“If I can,” Barbara said, still a bit uneasy finding someone in her room. Had her bed been turned down the night before? She couldn’t remember.

“Could you, perhaps, not mention that you caught me?”

“Caught you?”

“I’m supposed to be invisible to our guests,” she said. Her soft throaty chuckle returned, followed by a wink before Tao continued in a theatrical whisper, “They’re supposed to think the fairies have come and gone, setting things to right.”
Barbara nodded, unsettled by Tao’s surprise presence, but found herself reflexively remembering her manners. “Good to see you again,” she said politely, stepping forward to close the door on the retreating figure.

“I’m off to finish my rounds. Sleep well.” Tao threw the comment over her shoulder as she hurried down the winding stairwell.

Suddenly curious, Barbara stepped outside her doorway, leaned over the rail and noticed that the pony-tailed housemaid didn’t stop and enter any of the other rooms on her way down the three flights toward the street.
Barbara, her hair still damp from a hot shower, sat in bed still unsettled from finding Tao in her room. The encounter, though easily explained as the mere replacement of an absent employee, had felt odd, invasive somehow. Certainly Tao had only been kind, a lifesaver to Barbara’s jangled nerves upon her arrival in Aberystwyth last fall, but she always seemed to ‘just be there’ as if waiting for something. You’re being paranoid, Barbara chided herself. Work, I need work to distract myself.

She pulled her satchel across the bed, unzipped the inside compartment containing the Rowling journal and removed both it and her notebook. Setting them to the side, she propped her laptop on her satchel and glanced at the bedside table. This morning she’d scrawled some notes regarding research ideas and a few errands, but once at the library, realized she must have left them behind. However, the table was empty and a new liner stared back at her from the waste basket.

“Crap.”

Barbara shook her head and sighed in frustration. It must have gone with the trash when the maid cleared up. Tao. She wondered, then dismissed the few tissues and her to-do list as unimportant to anyone. Closing her eyes, she meditated, visualising the handwritten note. The ring. There was something about the ring and its signet stone. Had she written anything about the Rowling journal or her visions? She didn’t remember doing so but she couldn’t be sure.

Making a mental note to be more careful, she powered on her computer with one hand, then thumbed through her notebook until she located the picture Lord
Stanley had given her of the signet. What had he said? ‘It finally came back into the family about one hundred and fifty years ago.” She remembered thinking his phrasing was odd, stranger still that he didn’t elaborate on how it had been lost or the story of its return. In spite of the lack of information from Lord Stanley, it was the stone itself that held her current focus.

She looked closely at the picture. Grateful for the photo’s high resolution, she nonetheless got out her magnifier and held both under the bedside light. Upon closer inspection the incised stone wasn’t onyx or obsidian as she’d previously thought. It appeared slightly mottled and adjusting the magnifying card, Barbara confirmed the stone had two tones; however, being a black and white photo, the colours could not be verified. Just as she thought she’d reached another dead end, she noticed a line of writing along the inside edge of the ruler. *Gold band with repeat pattern of three. Signet of unknown origin. Stone - Heliotrope.* Turning on her laptop, she pulled up several sites on gemstones and found heliotrope, a deep green stone with flecks of blood red. Surfing through a few more links revealed the history as well as archaic and traditional uses. It was also called by another name. Bloodstone. Some referred to it as dragon bloodstone.

Barbara sat back against her pillows and stared at the ring on her thumb. Ken couldn’t possibly have known the history of heliotrope, that it was, among other things, supposed to enhance bravery, give protection, and encourage intuition. Several sites referred to magical overtones. Barbara wondered at the coincidence that it was the same type of stone as that in Lord Stanley’s ring.

She glanced at her watch. It was still early afternoon in Washington DC. Perhaps Ken wouldn’t be too busy to talk. She needed to unburden her heart about the visions. Maybe he’d just listen and understand. She punched in the international code
and his cell number. Voice mail picked up the call as Ken’s voice proclaimed, “You
know the drill. Leave a name and number and I’ll call … eventually.” Barbara could
hear his laugh just before the beep sounded to accept her recording.

“Hi, Ken. Just missing you and wanted to say…”

“Barbie doll,” Ken broke in. “My pocket was vibrating. Thought it was my
heart, thinking of you.” He laughed and continued, “Look, I’m just between meetings.
Hang on.” She could hear him call to an invisible other, “Tell Jillian I’ll be there in 30
as soon as I finish meeting with Hal. Yeah, I’m on long-distance. See you in 2.”

“Hey, Barbie. You caught me at a really bad time. I’m up to my neck in
alligators.” He laughed at his tired joke. “Is everything okay by you?”

“Jillian is there?”

“Yeah, Dan sent her out to help with the paperwork for a month. She’s been
great about the temporary reassignment. You know Dan. He can be very persuasive.”
He paused, “Look, I’m really sorry, I’ve got to go. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes, Ken, I’m fine. Just wanted to say hello.”

“It’s great to hear you but work calls. Sorry. Glad you’re okay, Barbie doll.
I’ll try to call you later.” Before the line went dead she heard him call to the invisible
someone, “I’m coming.”

_You knew it was probably a bad time to call so you have no one but yourself to
blame. But... Jillian is there. Crap, crap, double crap. Yes, mother, I know. Only
feeble minds resort to expletives. But in this case, CRAP!_

Barbara typed up her day’s research, transcribing each note along with various
hypotheses into each appropriate file, making a back-up on her jump drive, and then
powered off her computer and plugged it into the adaptor to charge. She set the wake-
up alarm on her phone and placed it on the nightstand, slid the picture back under the
paper clip in her workbook and skimmed her notes from the library. A pattern was forming but it was elusive. Rollright stones, the Rowling journal, Mother Shipton, Knaresborough, two rings with the same stone, and, she reminded herself, a very dead body. Charlie, where do you fit into all of this or are you part of someone else’s mystery? Why is Lord Stanley so interested in finding out who you are?

Near midnight when she finished, Barbara slipped off her watch and placed it on the nightstand. She left her ring on. It helped ease her loneliness and gave her a connection to home. She couldn’t help pondering again on Jillian’s presence in DC, along with Ian’s invitation to lunch with her earlier. Her mother’s quote about ‘what’s good for the goose being good for the gander’ did nothing to calm her doubts or her mixed emotions. What’s up with Ken and Jillian? Don’t be silly, she chided herself, worrying about things you have no control over. We all went to school together, besides they’re just friends. The real question, is what’s happening between me and Ian? What do I want?

The Rowling journal sat by itself on the duvet when she climbed back into her bed after she washed her face and brushed her teeth and hair. Exhausted but not sleepy in spite of the long day and late hour, she settled to read or at least to look at the blank pages. Leaning back on the plump pillows, the Rowling journal propped against her raised knees, Barbara ran her hand over the soft leather, idly wishing she knew the formula for gaining access to the secrets between its covers. She opened the first page and without thought pushed herself upright. Her hands trembled for a moment as her eyes followed in the trail of a nineteenth century script.

The open page read…

‘The story of the stones begins
when rock overcomes water.'
This is the Book of Standing Stone.

To those who are of the blood
and who hold the key,

upon these pages are recorded

each guardian’s true history."
1871 ~ Rollright, England ~ Incident in 1865

Da had left to help with the community harvest and would be gone all day. Fiona sat at the cold room table, Gran’s journal before her. She tapped the pen handle against her pursed lips unsure of where to begin. She opened to a blank page.


September 8, 1871 ~ I have discovered Gran’s common book in a secret drawer of my treasure box. The way in was through the foresight of the ferret, just as Gran said. I will need his vision as well as badger’s courage to help defend both my heart and the stones. May the honour of the ermine help me to choose well.

Only when wearing mother’s ring can I read the old entries in Gran’s journal. Seeing her hand upon the page brings an ache to my heart as I am flooded with memories of a happier time. However, I cannot yet understand how to control the entries as they shift through time. I recognise some of the riddles and rhymes, but cannot always discern their intended meaning. At times, the writing appears in other hands. Once I spied something that looked runic but it faded almost as I laid eyes on it. It is all confusing and a jumble.

The blood ritual at the stone circle did not seem to awaken anything. The stones remain merely my childhood playmates, for they did not care that the fairies had danced across my forehead, marking me. Gran said to ignore the taunts and jeers of ignorant people; my mark was a gift. Johnny said it was a portent of second sight. To me, the fae mark meant I was different and alone.
However, with the guidance of both mother and grandmother lost to me, I see no course open but to turn to the stones because Gran wrote that the stones are a sacred trust, that they hold a great treasure and will surely reveal my true path. I must find my way through my fears; Da is firm that I must marry Iain instead of Michael. My heart and mind are divided. Loyalty and love war within me.

September 19, 1872 ~ Now that I know this journal will accept and hold my words, I must write of the day that lies heaviest on my heart, June 21, 1865, the day of the shearing when my world turned topsy-turvy.

As a child, I looked upon Iain and saw a brave, dashing gentleman, a come-to-life Fitzwilliam Darcy, stepped out of Miss Austen’s pages, although his home was not quite as grand as the Pemberley Miss Austen constructed.

Iain was home from school for summer break. In spite of his position, his father insisted he work. ‘To learn the business,’ Iain boasted when we joined him. Johnny, Michael and I walked beside the wagon, heavy with a load of newly shorn fleeces. I remember it creaked as we travelled the twisted road to the Great Barn, where the wool would be cleaned and sorted.

The day was beautiful, my world filled with joy at being with the three I loved best, yet I felt somehow a niggling anxiety. I didn’t understand the source of my discomfort, maybe it was my fairy mark, influencing me as Johnny used to tease. I could not guess at this day’s ending. In looking back, I should have paid more attention to the unease of my heart and less to the whisperings of spring.

We’d had such a lovely luncheon picnic while the wagon was loaded with fleeces. With the abandon of my youth, twelve as I recall, I named them all my daring knights and I their queen. Iain wove a daisy chain, placed it on my head, and swore
fealty. Johnny teased and told him to be careful as I was fae touched. Michael just watched, a smile on his lips.

The only darkness to mar our merry luncheon was in Johnny for his school marks were second to Michael and it was Michael who won the coveted place beside Iain at his academy in Oxford. I knew I’d miss them both terribly — Iain because he made my heart race and Michael because he was my true friend. But, at least, I wouldn’t lose my brother. I didn’t think I could bear an extended separation from Johnny.

I tried to cheer him but Johnny remained sullen at being left behind. Though he never told Da, I knew Johnny wanted to leave the farm, see London, and travel in the world like his best friend, Iain.

It all happened so quickly...

The scene came alive in Fiona’s memory.

The narrow river sparkled in the afternoon sun as Iain guided the team of mismatched draft horses toward the stone bridge. The farm wagon creaked under its heavy load of fleece. Johnny and Michael walked on the far side, Johnny darting through gaps in the hedgerow to throw rocks and pebbles at nearby rooks perched in the trees. Michael, who was in the rear across from me, looked my way now and then. We all laughed at the boys’ taunts and jibes at each other. Then chaos struck.

The left dray horse, a dappled grey, reared suddenly, heavily feathered hooves flailing. It whinnied as if stung by a bee or, perhaps, struck by something. Its roan coloured mate, startled, tried to bolt, but was held fast and tangled in its traces. It fell. Iain tried to control the terrified animals, struggling like a gnat against the might of giants.
“Fiona, run,” Michael screamed, as the wagon began to tip toward me. I froze in terror. The horses screamed, pulling at their harnesses.

Iain threw the reins forward, lunged for the lynch pin and failing to dislodge it, jumped clear. Grabbed from behind, I was thrown roughly into the tall grass away from the wagon’s arch. The wagon collided with the ground, burying my rescuer under its load of fleece. The grey bolted free, while the roan lay on its side thrashing, crying with an eerie keening sound.

Workers rushed from the nearby barn while I pulled at the heavy fleeces with Iain and Johnny.

“Michael, speak to me.” I cried, praying he was not dead as we continued to lift the wool from his silent form.

The runaway grey was captured, gentled, and led back to help shift the wagon upright. Another man released the struggling chestnut, while yet another stroked the animal, encouraging it to rise. The grey nickered and fought as it was led back to its downed mate.

Lord Stanley was driven across the bridge. Impeccably dressed in a charcoal town coat and silver cravat, he stepped down from his carriage, and advanced, assessing the situation. I held Michael’s head in my lap, his trousers bloody, and his leg bent at an impossible angle. Even to my untrained eye, I knew it was crushed and feared the doctor would take it. I looked up hopefully for surely Lord Stanley would set all to right again.

Using his silver-topped cane to indicate individuals, each rushing about as ants in a hill, Lord Stanley assumed control. He pointed to the foreman, who continued to offer encouragement to the fallen horse. The man looked up and shook his head. Lord
Stanley gave the order to reload the now upright wagon, get the fleece to the barn, and to put down the chestnut. All this he did as he approached Michael.

“What a doctor been summoned?” When no one answered, he turned to his driver and ordered Michael taken home in his personal buggy and sent another man to take a fast horse for the doctor.

Then he stopped and examined me. I must have looked wild, my face stained with tears and dust, my clothing covered in strands of wool, blood staining my apron and hands. The incident had clearly interrupted his lordship’s busy day, upsetting him, but I shall never forget the pique hidden in his modulated voice nor his words as he wiped my face with a clean, scented handkerchief.

“Don’t cry, child. What’s done is done. Opportunity comes to us in odd ways, girl. Looks like your brother, John, will accompany Iain to Oxford at beginning of term. You can be grateful for that.” He attempted a smile, straightened, and strode away.

The words on the page blurred. Somehow as Fiona had lived within her memory, the words had been recorded. She wiped her eyes, cleaned her pen, and closed the journal.
“Ursula. Do you understand me?” Agatha looked at her five-year-old daughter, assessing her misshaped form, one shoulder higher than the other, her nose still overlong and crooked. A shiver ran down her spine, like the scamper of a frightened mouse. “I will leave this life soon but you have Granny Wise to care for you.”

Agatha, never comfortable with her child, was grateful when the old woman had moved into the cottage following Ursula’s birth. “You must stay and learn all she can teach you.”

“Don’t want you to go,” Ursula replied. Her tone was flat, the corners of her mouth turned down. The only indication of her emotion was the subtle scritch of the broom shifting in its corner.

Agatha grasped the threadbare shawl tighter around her thin shoulders. Another wave of pain swirled through her insides. Agatha breathed evenly, waiting for her discomfort to subside, to become the dull ache that had been her daily portion since her daughter’s birth. She closed her eyes, wanting to leave the hell her life had become, welcoming the death that Granny Wise said awaited her, but not before she was sure the child would exact revenge for their betrayal.

“Ursula, I need you to listen to me.” Agatha looked at her daughter and again saw Kaleb’s eyes staring back at her. The taste of bitterness filled her mouth as she spat, “Your father, Kaleb Kahrl Artur despoiled me. He took my youth and stole my future and then abandoned us. Jarl Artur, his soldier brother, turned us out and denied support.” Her voice rose as she bit off each word. “Ansgar Artur, may the priest be
cursed forever in hellfire, branded me a whore. We are reduced to this wretched
cottage while they live in luxury.” Agatha’s litany seldom wavered. Even in her fear
of her daughter, she wanted to imprint Ursula with the justice of her own revenge.

The broom shivered in its corner. A mouse ran out from between its bundle of
fine twigs and with a flick of its tail, slipped into a tiny hole in the soot-stained stone
wall. Agatha studied her daughter, glancing at the continued agitation of the broom, a
sign the child was listening.

Ursula had shown unusual abilities shortly after her birth. Agatha remembered
the fright that gripped her when returning from the garden one morning, both infant
and crib were missing from beside the banked hearth. She had searched in blind panic
only to hear an unchildlike cackle from high within the chimney stack. This was
followed by an otherworldly sound of music. Moments later the cradle drifted down,
came into view, hovered over the glowing embers, and resumed its place near the
fireside. The babe, unharmed, lay down and slept.

“Ursula, you are almost old enough to learn the power of our cave. Outsiders
don’t know our secrets, can never learn of them until you are ready to mete out
vengeance.” She wanted to capture Ursula’s eyes with her own but yet again felt a
shiver of fear at the untapped power that lay within the child. She questioned her own
ability to teach what she had learned from Granny Wise. With no memory of her own
mother, Agatha had at first welcomed the companionship of the midwife. She soon
realized that the untapped stores of wisdom, plant lore, and homely incantations
Granny taught her were more than a wise woman should know. Granny Wise was a
white witch. Swallowing her fear, Agatha had gained confidence and eventually
became a willing student as she learned the potent secrets of the magic well that
bordered her home.
Again memory assaulted her. She’d been afraid to defy the parish council when they demanded the child be sent to learn reading and writing. Granny Wise had warned against this but Agatha complied and Ursula was sent. Her few weeks of formal education were a disaster. The school mistress had recited four letters in a crisscross row, pointing to each in turn. Ursula, assuming what was wanted, identified the other letters of the needle-worked sampler without further assistance. She was next given a book and read from it without being prompted. Several other books were offered for examination but the result was the same. Ursula, without training, could read.

Wonder and jealousy were born that day in the hearts of her classmates, which turned into hateful derision about her over-long nose, her crooked gait, and her dubious parentage. Ursula, silent and placid faced, left no torment unpunished. Some classmates were struck dumb when called upon to recite, others felt a pinch when no other was near them, each suffered for their torture and misdeeds. Eventually the jeers were silenced but no child called her friend nor would any venture near her home. Ursula’s presence was no longer welcome at the school.

The iron hanger in the hearth creaked bitterly when Agatha drew it toward herself. She inspected the hanging cauldron in which a watery stew bubbled listlessly. Stirring in some ground corn meal to thicken it, Agatha scraped the bottom, hopeful it would add some meagre flavour from past meals. The coins stolen from Agatha’s father had disappeared one by one as her babe changed from infant to child.

She felt more than heard the crockery being moved behind her. Turning, she saw the last of four small terra cotta pots leave the shelf and bob along, floating weightless through the air.
“Ursula. Put Granny’s pots back on the shelf. I’ve told you again and again not to play with her herbs.” Agatha turned a fierce face toward her daughter.

Three pots settled with a clunk and a rattle upon the small shelf above the table. The fourth container continued to float, circling the child’s unruly mass of dull black curls.

“Ursula.” Agatha snatched the pot from where it hung suspended above her daughter’s head and set it beside its companions. She handed her daughter a linen poppet, one grey button eye chipped, and turned back to the simmering kettle.

“We have time enough to practice your skill tomorrow,” she paused, “at the well. There is more wealth to be discovered there than the few sovereigns it once held.” She ladled the thickened vegetable stew into a carved wooden bowl and set it on the table.

“Come eat, child,” Agatha said. Over the contents of Ursula’s bowl, she sprinkled a fingernail of powdered herbs from the fourth jar.

Ursula lifted a spoon to her mouth, blew the heat from it, and ate. Agatha’s eyes narrowed as Ursula’s form straightened, her cheeks fleshed out, shifting from a swarthy, mottled look to a rosy glow, her nose became aquiline rather than twisted. The effect deepened with each spoonful, bringing a smile to the mother’s lips. “You still have much to learn, little one. You must continue to prepare so that you alone can punish the evil of these men and do so with skill.” She stroked her daughter’s hair, the healthy glow fading beneath her hand as the bowl was scraped clean and lay empty before them.

Agatha grasped Ursula’s chin between thumb and forefinger, tipping her face up and drew close. “These men are evil and must be punished. You, child, must remember everything I’ve told you. You must live to learn and to avenge us.”
Ursula looked up into her mother’s eyes. The wooden broom juddered violently in the corner and fell with a crash.
1502 ~ Knaresborough, England ~ Ursula

“Ursula, you must accept who you are.” Granny Wise stared up into her foster daughter’s eyes, noting the hungry longing, but none of the humanity she’d hoped to instil after Agatha died. The old woman had more than once caught Ursula with the small painted miniature of her mother. Ursula had hexed Agatha’s golden tresses into darker tones, until the portrait almost seemed to change by itself. Granny knew Ursula wished for the beauty her mother had displayed and, in her longing to gain what she did not have, Ursula remained wilful, often disregarding the consequences of the magic she could so naturally wield.

“But I want…”

“That’s the problem, Ursula,” said Granny. “You want. You expect. You take. But you don’t think about spillage and how it affects others.” The old woman sat hunched on the small hearth chair, adding herbs to a lamb stew, which bubbled over the hearth. Granny Wise saw the warning signs of Ursula’s wilfulness and disregard for the order of nature. Things could only be pushed so far before they broke and rebounded on this girl Granny had come to love. She also knew she only had a limited time to make Ursula understand.

Granny Wise, knowing Ursula was a marked child from her birth, had willingly stayed in the small fisher’s cottage on the River Nidd to nurse the babe’s mother, Agatha, until she died. Ursula, uncanny in school and in ferreting out ways to bend magic to her needs, had stood dry-eyed at her mother’s graveside. Agatha had done her work well and had thoroughly indoctrinated Ursula in her hate toward the
Artur family of York. The child’s dislike of men had grown, too, as the town-boys threw rocks, which bruised, or hurled names, wounds which never healed. As her charge grew from child to maid, fear stalked the old woman, walking beside her as a constant companion, for Ursula’s natural powers continued to increase. One day Granny Wise realized she had imparted all she knew of herbs and nature, setting bones, curing fevers, and birthing babes. Ursula, however, continued to experiment. Ignoring Granny Wise’s advice, Ursula had combined or rearranged the potions she’d learned, strengthening their potency or adding incantations foreign to Granny’s ears. Ursula’s magic had grown until it knew no natural bounds but one.

“I will discover it myself, if you do not tell me,” Ursula said, breaking into the wise woman’s thoughts.

“Yes. You most likely will uncover the incantation.” She sighed, considering the options before her. Perhaps something of her kindness would someday soften the young woman’s heart. “To be permanently beautiful carries a high price, child.”

Granny wise placed her hand over her heart, which fluttered against her ribs as if it were a wild bird trapped in a cage. She coughed gently to relieve the discomfort.

“Price?” Ursula’s eyes narrowed. “You always talk of consequence or of spillage, Granny. There’s only spillage if the spell is not woven tightly. Haven’t I shown that I can control my own magic?” Her voice was petulant, a challenge held within the words.

“Yes, Ursula. I’ve never met another wit…” she swallowed the word and continued, “wise woman with as much natural talent as you. You’ve a good grasp of charms and enchantments. And, your control is unequalled, but you are reckless.”

The old woman stopped, before she gave voice to her true concern and opened another discussion on responsibility. She plunged forward, taking a different tack.
“I’ve explained that when something is given, something is taken.” Granny’s eyes narrowed before she continued, waiting only a moment to see if Ursula was listening to her counsel. “The reverse is true as well. You know the potion to imbue worldly allure is a passing one. Comeliness doesn’t last. It defies the order of nature.”

“But you said there was a way?”

“Yes, I did, more’s the pity.” The old woman sighed, set her spoon aside, and lay her head in her hand. “If you wish beauty, one must love you and give you a fitting gift of gold or silver. He must do this of his own will. You cannot force or bind him.” She waited to see if her words had registered with her young charge. “Then you must stand before a Christian priest and be wed.” The young woman winced, her face paled in distaste. Granny smiled to herself. At least the girl was finally listening.

“Your thoughts cannot waver while you are being wed or the spell will not hold,” the old woman continued. “The priest cannot touch you. Under no circumstances can you allow his flesh to touch yours. You must not enter the church or hear the mass. Once your chosen has placed the wedding band on your hand, bands you must make yourself, you must consummate the marriage within seven hours. Only then will the spell of comely looks be complete and yours forever.”

The old woman’s sigh was soft but held a promise of further information.

“But…”

“Yes, Ursula, there is a condition placed on this enchantment. Much of your magic will be woven in and through this spell. You will have beauty and the protection of a husband when I am gone but the act of binding the spell within the two bands will diminish your abilities. You can live as a wise woman and practice healing but be warned. Should you ever call upon your magic to harm or punish, the spell will be irretrievably broken.”
“And…”

“The band will be destroyed, the spell of beauty forever lost; you will return to your natural form; however, your full powers will be restored.” The old woman waited for her words to sink in. She could see Ursula’s thoughts chasing one another like squirrels in the spring. Granny drew a deep breath and pressed forward. The pain in her chest now darted down her arm.

“And, Ursula, you can never restore the spell of beauty once it is lost. You will live out what remains of your life as you are now.”

Granny Wise knew from the look on Ursula’s face that her words were not believed, that Ursula felt only her own power. Ursula loved no other for her child’s heart had been turned to stone and, although the old woman had shown her kindness and even love, she knew that Ursula had never known the generosity of others while in her natural form.

Granny Wise shook her head slowly from side to side, her heart racing again, as the tiny bird within her chest battered itself against its captivity. Soon it would break free and Ursula would be left alone.

Again Ursula broke into her thoughts.

“What of your grimoire? It holds your wisdom and the secrets of the well.”

The old woman shook her head. “It is of no worth to you, my child, for your mother, may her soul find peace, foolishly gave the third key to the man she loved.”

“An Artur holds the key?” Ursula’s eyes deepened in colour, the line of her mouth drew downward, her skin blotched into deeper purples and red.

“Calm yourself, Ursula. One without the other is useless. I learned long ago that the journal works like a palimpsest; an incantation opened that much to me. Upon the death of the writer, the words fade and can only be unlocked by a combination of
three. One must be of the blood and must also rightfully possess the journal. Your mother left it in my care so I held only one key. But to unlock its secrets, you must use the Ring of the Well.”

“Ring of the Well?”

“Yes, a small gold ring set with a dragon bloodstone. A symbol of the well is inscribed on its surface.” Granny paused. “Your mother gave it to your father as a promise token.”

“But it’s mine by rights and I’ll have it back.” Her words were not a threat. They were a statement.
Today ~ Aberystwyth, Wales ~ The Ring

Stones overcoming water. Blood and keys. Barbara drifted into an uneasy sleep. Somehow she knew the dream would come but this time she hoped that maybe it would reveal answers…

Grey eyes, the colour of the Columbia, stare from the crone’s withered face, irises almost disappearing between the creased folds of her filmy lids. Wisps of curled hair snake out from the confines of her hooded cape, mimicking the fingers of mist that caress my skin and raise gooseflesh.

Pebbles crumble and slide beneath my feet, there is no escape as my world dissolves into this moment. I am trapped. Fear. My limbs turn to stone. I cannot run. I want to understand but fear builds inside, threatens to destroy me. Shadows materialise in the darkness that surrounds, touches me, calls to me.

A clawlike hand, knuckles knobbled and bent, reaches, turns, opens at the last minute to reveal a glint of silver. A key. No, not a key. A ring, a signet, and a chain.

The whisper is sibilant, almost inaudible, as I fearfully stretch my hand to receive the offering.

“Beware.” Wasted fingers strike at my wrist, encircling, forming a manacle of bony flesh. I am dragged closer.

My breath catches in my throat as the warning is whispered... the blood of birthright... terror takes me and I scream soundlessly in the darkness.

Barbara opened her eyes to near darkness, only street lights crept through her southwest facing windows. The duvet was tangle around her legs, the Rowling
journal and her workbook were pressed against her back. Her nightshirt, one of Ken’s, an oversized tee supporting the Oregon Beavers, was twisted tightly around her torso. Struggling to reach the bedside light, Barbara tried to control her breathing, purposefully slowing her racing heart. She kicked out of the confining bedclothes, then stood to survey the damage. It looked as if a war had been fought in her bed.

She stumbled to the bathroom, flipped on the light, turned on the shower, and shrugged off her sweat-soaked tee. Stepping into the shock of the hot shower, she dragged her hands through her tangled hair and lifted her face to feel the full impact of the pelting stream. She had to give it to the Brits. They knew how to heat water. The double shower head, each the size of a dinner plate, continued to pour down on her, washing away her night terrors. Finally with one hand placed on the still cool shower tiles and the other on the glass-fronted door, Barbara felt tears begin to mix with the pummelling heat.

She closed her eyes and dropped her head. God help me, she prayed. What have I gotten myself into? I’ve had enough. Maybe I should pack it in and go home.

Deeply inhaling the steaming air and standing erect, Barbara grabbed the shampoo, lathered her hair and scrubbed at her scalp and body as if to cleanse herself of her fright, her past, and to wash away the injunctions that had nipped at her heels and ruled her life since she was a child. Stand straight. Keep your head down. Eat your peas. Colour within the lines. Stranger danger. Mind your own business.

“Shut up, shut up, shut up.” Her voice rose, took on a ragged edge, strange to her ears. She leaned toward the wall and pounded on the white tiles in frustration. The ceiling light struck the surface of her locket, which reflected against the shower’s wet surface and stopped her tirade.
I’ve got to get a grip. Barbara held the comforting locket in her fist. I’m rich, educated, and have a passport. Go home. Go to Tahiti. But get a grip!

She turned the heat up to an almost unbearable temperature and stood beneath the shower’s cleansing rain, allowing the water to sluice across her breasts and shoulders, turning finally to let it wash away the tightness in her back.

Taking a deep centring breath, she turned the water off, reached for a thick terry towel and began to rub her arms and shoulders dry, eventually bending to twist the towel around her hair in a turban. As she bent, she saw swirls of soap bubbles circle the drain, white, fluffy, and streaked with pink froth. Staring, she looked at a thin trickle of blood lacing down her inner thigh.

“Shit.” Before her mother’s voice could chide her on her choice of language, Barbara laughed out loud.

“Yes, mother. I said, Shit. Crap and damn it all to hell. On top of everything, now I’ve got my period.”

Twenty minutes later, needs attended to, hair brushed, and the bed straightened, Barbara sat on the duvet holding a purposeful conversation with herself. The Rowling Journal, a little bent from being lain on, wasn’t seriously damaged. She did not feel up to opening its pages. She did, however, open her workbook to a fresh page and began to write what memories she could dredge up from her nightmare.

She could remember an old woman with grey eyes and wild, curly hair. Something about… she paused. Something about blood. “But that can be explained away by my period, I would think,” she said aloud. Filled with doubt and questions, her voice sounded strange in the silence of the hotel; but it was still somehow comforting, hearing the sound of a human voice, even her own.
How long have I been having this nightmare? The question, though simple, provoked intense thought. The terror of the nightmare in its various incarnations had been with her all her life, coming when she was under great stress. No, wait, she thought, that’s not right.

The memory she sought came dramatically, clear and whole as if she’d stepped back in time to retrieve it. The first time she’d had the vision of the crone, she’d been about twelve. The following morning she woke up to her first period. Barbara sat still, remembering her emotions of disgust, fear, and elation that she was now growing up. Blood. Her blood.

Not yet satisfied with the interpretation of her dream, she continued to probe her memory.

“What else?”

“There was a ring,” she said. Barbara flipped back and forth, seeking the paper-clipped page with the picture. Finding it, goose flesh rose on her skin. The ring. The signet ring with the carved stone was the ring of her night terror.

Not just the ring, she held her breath. She ran her finger down the page of until she found the memo she was looking for. It was a bloodstone, a heliotrope.

“No. It can’t be.” Her voice was flat but her stomach felt filled with eels writhing at the possibilities before her. “It can’t be that simple.” Barbara stared down at the ring Ken had given her, picked it up off the table, and then set it back down as if were a scorpion about to strike.

After an hour, Barbara had reread everything she had written in her workbook. “Even I don’t believe it,” she murmured.

With that thought, she knew she had to talk to someone. But who?
1502 ~ York, England ~ The Marriage of Tobias Shipton

_I’m finally rid of Knaresborough_, thought Ursula, as she stood outside the cathedral in York. She wore a simple homespun kirtle, its soft wool dyed dove grey. Her underdress of pale blue linen peeked demurely from behind the red braid which wove in and out of the lacing at the front. She knew the red would not go unnoticed, especially by the Yorkshire priest she despised, but Tobias was acquiescent in his love for her. Her normally unruly black curls had been brushed to a lustre and were more or less contained beneath a plain white coif, its ends looped about her head, holding the light covering securely in place.

She looked sideways at Tobias, caught him staring at the lacing on her bodice. He blushed under her gaze. She felt power surge within her for she knew the truth of his love for her. It was her beauty that had beguiled him when she sought shelter in his carpenter’s shop just weeks after Granny had died. He had not recognised her from their first meeting. She knew he could not.

Once she’d captured his attention with her beauty, she accepted his silver locket, engraved with a delicate floral S. Ursula had removed the herbal philtre from the leather pouch she wore around her neck and placed its contents securely within Tobias’s gift of love. Her beauty increased as the combined power of the two elements joined. His protestations of love became more intense and he’d sought her hand in marriage only days after making her acquaintance for what he believed was the first time. Ursula had followed Granny’s last instructions carefully.
Tobias knew Ursula only as Maiden Soothtell, recently orphaned, beautiful, mysterious, and alone in the world. She had appeared in his shop only last month, seeking refuge from a sudden downpour on an otherwise cloudless day. He’d been smitten with her apparent naïveté and had rushed to offer her comfort. He had no way of knowing she’d altered her last name.

_Fools, men were fools, _she pondered, then paused. _But Tobias was better than most. He was different. Strong as an ox, and kind as well. So unlike the others who’d shunned her or showed disgust and fear in their covert glances._

Ursula knew he could not connect her to the deformed witch, Ursula Southill, late of Knaresborough. Nor did he consider the making of an unadorned coffin for a withered old woman any form of great kindness. He had merely built an ordinary coffin when approached by the uncomely young woman, who claimed she needed it for her grandmother. He didn’t react to her ugliness as the townsfolk did, who crossed the road or crossed themselves to ward evil. He had not chased her away, taunted her for her disfigurements, or commented on her ungainly appearance. He had simply taken her coin and delivered a plain but beautifully crafted wooden box to the small fisher’s cottage and then had helped Ursula dig a grave and lower the old woman into the ground. Tobias had not commented as to why the old woman was not buried within a churchyard nor asked what the young woman’s plans were. He had quietly done his work and returned to York. He had no idea that his was the first act of kindness Ursula had ever experienced from a man.

The fleshy priest intoned a short greeting. Ursula’s skin crawled at his words as if with biting ants. She focused her mind, drawing on the contents of the locket hanging beneath her shift. The priest’s eyes lingered at the cleavage between her well-rounded breasts. _How easy it would be to blind him, _she thought. _But that will serve
no good. I must bide to catch him and his brothers and then I’ll have mother’s revenge. Ursula saw the priest blink in confusion, pinching the flesh between his eyebrows. She hurriedly refocused her thoughts on the contents of the locket as it warmed again to her spell. Concentrate, she warned herself. She could not afford to let anyone see through her veil of enchantment. I’ll not spoil my wedding day for this filthy priest nor his whoring family.

She looked around at the small gathering. A few were friends and well-wishers of Tobias. Some were townfolk or passersby who had stopped in curiosity to witness her wedding. Only Granny Wise was missing, leaving Ursula alone. A single woman with the knowledge of herbs was better protected within the bounds of marriage. Which, she reminded herself, is why I am marrying today. Besides, I’ve learned all of her secrets but one. The grimoire, once filled with Granny Wise’s remedies, potions, and knowledge had become blank upon her death as she had foretold. But Granny had said it held secrets that even Ursula would not be able to unlock until she could recover her mother’s ring, the ring that Kaleb Karl Artur had used to betray her. Ursula swallowed the bitterness that crept into the back of her throat. Then seeing a look of concern cross the face of her groom, Ursula composed her face, returning his questioning look with one of untroubled innocence, her eyes demure as they shyly gazed at him through her thick lashes.

The priest cleared his throat. Ursula looked up and saw his naked outstretched hand. In his left, he held Tobias’ right hand and now Ansgar Artur, priest of All Saints Church of York, stood waiting with outstretched hand, waiting for her to place her right hand in his so he could continue the marriage contract with the repetition of the vows. She had never seen a Christian marriage contract performed and knew nothing
of the handholding. She couldn’t allow him to touch her bare skin. Tobias must be first to help seal the spell.

“Your hand, please,” Ansgar whispered.

Delicately pulling a small silk scarf concealed within her sleeve, Ursula placed it over Ansgar’s open palm and, her cheeks tinged a becoming pink, gracefully placed her hand over his, careful to avoid touching his flesh. Ansgar frowned at the affront to his holy office, but Ursula saw Tobias swell at the delicacy she showed to all gathered. His future wife was so pure, she would not even touch the naked hand of another man, not even that of a priest.

When called upon, Tobias’ tenor voice echoed back from the church door, “Ursula Soothtell, I willingly take you as wife and spouse, being faithful in all my doings, sacrificing my body to protect and preserve you, and keeping you in illness, health, or whatever condition the Lord places upon us. I shall not leave or exchange you until death should part us.” At this point, Tobias ran out of breath and looked as if he would faint as he waited for Ursula to pledge herself to him.

“Tobias Shipton, I willingly take you as husband and spouse,” she continued in a soft whisper. No one noticed that she left out the word obey as she rushed to the end of her vow, smiling sweetly at Tobias.

Tobias handed the two wedding bands Ursula had created to the priest along with thirteen silver coins. Ansgar counted out five, looked up at Ursula, and slipped two back into his open hand.

“Three for the poor among us,” he intoned, “Ten for the bride’s purse.” Ursula’s mouth quirked in the corner. He is so easy to control. Then she realised that the priest was waiting for her hand so that he could give her the bride gift.
Damn this man, cursed Ursula under her breath. She handed Tobias her bag and motioned him to open it and receive the bride’s gift from the priest. She saw a look of adoration pass through her husband’s eyes and one of distaste show clearly in Ansgar’s.

Finally, a silver salver was produced; the rings were duly blessed, and then offered to the couple. Tobias lifted the smaller of the two, a wide flattened band, and placed it on Ursula’s finger, unwittingly completing the binding that she had cast that morning.

“With this ring…” he said, his words lost as she inhaled deeply. She would now show no visible sign of ageing or of returning to her natural form unless she removed the plain metal band from her finger. She reached for the second ring and looking into her husband’s face, repeated her vow. Her beauty lay like a mantle about her shoulders.

“No, married in the sight of God,” Ansgar said, attempting to draw all attention back to himself, “We will enter His holy house to celebrate the sacred mass.” He swept his left hand toward the great double doors as they were pulled open. On cue, Ursula fainted, crumpling into a delicate heap upon the church steps at the feet of her bewildered husband.

“Ursula, my darling,” whispered Tobias, kneeling beside his bride and patting her hand.

“Husband, please. It is too much. We must away.” In spite of the sealed spell, she could not risk entrance into a church until after the marriage was consummated.

“But the mass?” Tobias said. “We must have the blessing of Holy Church to begin our wedded life.”
“I cannot,” she pled in a whisper only he could hear. “Please, husband, trust me.” She leaned heavily against his side.

“My wife is ill, Father Artur,” said Tobias. “The day has quite overcome her, I’m afraid.”

“This is highly irregular.” Ansgar felt his disquiet building, first slighted by this beautiful woman in public and now denied the control of the mass to absolve them of mortal sin and re-assert his control of the community. Deep in his soul he felt there was something hidden about this woman. He’d never seen her until Tobias had come to him only weeks ago. As control slipped away, Ansgar felt he wanted to curse her. She was not as she seemed, he was sure of it. Yet, he held his tongue for he knew Tobias Shipton was a good, god-fearing man, simple in his devotions and faith and always biddable to the priest’s wishes.

“Can you bless us Father? We must journey with the day.” Tobias looked with clear eyes at the priest. Ansgar saw no guile, only a childlike request to have the blessing of the church.

Ansgar couldn’t see Ursula’s clenched fist, buried beneath her garments, her nails digging into the soft flesh of her palm, but he could almost see a ripple of unclean emotion rise from her. He paused studying the couple before him before he finally stepped forward and raised his hand.

“In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti. Amen.” As he spoke, he made the sign of the cross over Tobias Shipton’s head. Ursula, who truly looked in danger of swooning again, her face pale, her eyes closed, did not see the priest’s intended slight. But she smiled inwardly.
“See to your wife, man,” Ansgar said. Then sweeping his arm to include those gathered, he lifted his heavy vestments and entered the church to begin his service. The heavy oak doors closed behind the congregants.

“I’ll make it up to you Tobias,” Ursula said. With a sprinkling of tears gathered on her lashes and a new blush in her cheeks, she looked to him like a morning rose fresh with dew. Tobias’ heart nearly burst in his love for this miraculous creature, who had become his wife. He lifted Ursula to his side and, his arm supporting her, assisted her to their packed wagon.

Before lifting her to the wagon seat, Tobias stopped and swept Ursula into his arms, kissed her and at her response, kissed her again with increased ardour. Again her willing response stoked the heat that had begun to surge within his veins.

“Wife?” His hands on her shoulders, he held her away from him and studied her face. In astonishment he watched as Ursula tipped her head back, opened her lips, now reddened by his kiss, and laughed aloud.

“Husband,” she replied, “We must away.” Placing a hand upon his shoulder, she climbed nimbly into the wagon, much to his surprise. Glad to see her so suddenly recovered, he joined her in the wagon, knowing it was now too late to interrupt the service.

As Tobias drove out of York and into the countryside past a scattering of outlying farms, he hoped the weather would stay fair. The road ahead was dry and clear. If their luck held, he thought, perhaps they could even complete their journey and arrive ahead of schedule. The hills on either side of their winding path were green and dotted with ever-present sheep. He had planned three weeks’ travel to the south where he had cousins on his father’s side settled in and around Oxfordshire. Word of his skill as a builder had earned him several contracts in the region, and, as neither he
nor Ursula had family remaining in the north, he saw no obstacle in moving house to
the distant Wychwood forests where wood was abundant and his trade could flourish.
Along with contracts, he had received a welcome letter from a second cousin, stating
there was a small cottage near Shipton-under-Wychwood. The name seemed
fortuitous. He wished to settle his wife before he began the short journeys that would
fulfil his building obligations.

As the sun passed its apex, Tobias felt Ursula lay her head on his shoulder. It
was early yet but perhaps he should stop to allow his wife a rest and share a small
meal. He did not want to tax her strength nor did he wish a hasty journey to be the
cause of another collapse.

He remembered a small, secluded valley, heavily wooded with a clear stream.
It was just a bit off the course he’d planned. Although he was not one to stray from a
scheme once made, the idea of the lovely glade continued to play in his thoughts as he
approached the almost invisible turning.

Tobias suddenly started at the touch of Ursula’s hand on his knee. Looking
down at her, she tipped her head up and with what could only be a wickedly playful
smile, her hand slowly slid up his thigh. She fluttered her lashes, blushed, refusing to
hold his gaze.

An hour later Ursula smiled to herself as she listened to the rumbling snores of
Tobias merge with the tumbling rush of the nearby brook as he slept beside her on
their wedding bed of moss. He’d taken her urgently and then slowly a second time,
showing restraint and consideration. She’d chosen well, based on all she’d learned
from Granny Wise. Ursula closed her eyes, placed her hand over the locket that
throbbed to the beat of her heart, and sighed in contentment. Everything was going
according to her plan.
Warm August winds ushered in a damp September. Father Mark agreed that the first banns would be read just after Fiona celebrated her twentieth year. The days were now numbered to her wedding.

Fiona slid the signet ring from her finger for she wished only to view her own journal entries. When wearing the ring, the pages of Gran’s journal were hers to explore, filling with herbal lore, healing recipes, or the long ago paintings which reminded Fiona of happier times. In her studies, she had also stumbled across records of times long past, disturbing histories of women she believed could have been her ancestors, but today she wanted only to review her own scattered entries.

September 1, 1871 ~ Oh, how I wish Michael had approached Da after the festival and asked for my hand but he wanted to wait, to save the money needed to take his examinations and apprentice as a veterinary doctor. Now, everything is changed. Michael has said he must release me from my promise as it is the only honourable option open to him. I continue to search Gran’s journal for direction.

September 2, 1871 ~ Iain’s shadow fell upon me while I worked in my herb garden. I tried to hide my confusion at his appearance as well as slow my rapidly beating heart. He spoke and held out a small package. ‘I do so care, Fiona, and hope you can learn to love me again.’ He kissed my earth-stained fingers then turned and rode away. Within the package was a delicate silver daisy chain. I marvel that he remembered.
September 3, 1871 ~ The first of three banns were read today. Only silence returned the minister’s query asking for known objections as to why my marriage to Iain should not proceed. I am a coward as I accept congratulations. All the while my heart wars within me. Can I love two men?

September 5, 1871 ~ I visited the stones today to think what I must do. Michael is uncomplicated, never demanding, just there. Always there. He accepts what life offers. When Johnny followed Iain to school and Michael was denied his place, it was Michael who consoled me and helped the time pass. Was it then that I started to despise Iain’s father for his indifference and his great wealth? Michael seems to harbour no recrimination. He is like the water of a slow stream, flowing through my life, without upset or trouble. Iain is rapids. He brings into my life a tumult of emotion.

September 8, 1871 ~ I visited the stones again today. As I left the edge of the wood all was stillness. Within the stone circle, I begin to feel my burden lift, almost a heightened awareness of my surroundings. I feel as if I am on the verge of another great discovery. I am changing but I don’t know if it will be for good or ill.

September 11, 1871 ~ Life grows more complicated. Word has arrived from Barbados. Lord Stanley, Iain’s father, is dead. Iain is the sole male heir. Da worries the marriage might be put back and Johnny will be delayed in his return. But does my brother want to come home and work the farm?

September 12, 1871 ~ And what of the return of the Rollright Stones? The journal says they must stay in the family but how did the Stanleys gain control when Da promised Mama on her deathbed to protect the Stones and keep them safe? I must find a way to make Da tell me the whole truth.
September 14, 1871 ~ Da is relieved that the wedding will go forward and has at last confessed. Da has always turned a blind eye to Johnny but still I was shocked at what I learned. The Stones were forfeit to cover Johnny’s gambling debts to Iain. When I inquired why Johnny was in prison, Da informed me that although the Stanley debt was cleared, Iain’s father refused to settle Johnny’s London arrears so he languishes in prison.

Now Iain offers to clear these debts and ensure Johnny’s release upon our marriage. Is this an act of generosity or of a guilty conscience?

September 21, 1872 ~ I have studied Gran’s journal and the ‘Binding of the Stones’ ritual. I am afraid. I don’t understand it completely. Oh, Gran, why didn’t I pay more attention?

My hand is forced; the second reading of the banns is scheduled for this Sunday. I have come to a decision although it may make of me a social outcast and bring shame on Da. There is no other choice. I shall let my fate rest with the stones themselves and will attempt to follow the words of the Book of Standing Stone. The moon will be full on the 28th and I am determined to perform the ritual with Michael. He is willing.

The sun was setting in the sky, sending muted streaks of gold and mauve through a slowly creeping fog that had begun to infiltrate the low ground, softening edges and bringing a deeper chill. Fiona waited within the shadow of a tree as she stared up through the falling leaves and tried to sort her thoughts.

“I love you Johnny, but isn’t my word to Michael as important as Da’s to Iain? How can I trust a Stanley after Iain’s father turned his back on Michael? Iain made me think that he loved me and then married another. Although he has said he was
forced into that marriage, how can I love him again? I feel like Alice. I’ve gone through the looking glass into an inside-out world.”

Full twilight was descending as Fiona left the comfort of the tree line and stood silent, a dark silhouette in the clearing. Hitching her shawl closer about her small frame, she looked around, waiting. A dark form suddenly rose from behind a stone monolith, seeming to spring from beneath the fae mound. Michael’s unusual gait calmed Fiona as his form separated from the twisted stone. Stooping, he dropped a book into his leather rucksack, his arms held wide as Fiona rushed toward him. A kiss brushed her forehead before he sat and pulled her down next to the King Stone. The night deepened. Fiona stared up into his eyes. As always his kindness shone through the calm they held, giving her respite from her warring emotions.

“Are you sure you want to do this, my lovely? There’s no retracing our steps once we’ve completed the ritual. You know the land is full of myth and legend but for those who understand, the magic ‘tis real enough. Some can call it forth but not many can handle it, so I’m asking you again, Fiona love, are you sure you really want this? I’m not a lord nor ever hope to be.”

Not answering immediately, Fiona said, “Michael, I’ve been told all my life what I must do. Now I face losing you if I follow Da’s bargain. Other money can be earned to free Johnny.” She pulled away from his embrace to face him. “I’m not a pawn… and I’ll not be treated as one.”

“But the stones themselves. You said they must needs be kept in your family, didn’t ye?”

Fiona turned her head away, silent as the fog rising around them.
“As you will,” he replied. Finger crooked under her chin, Michael swivelled her head gently toward him and kissed her. She drew closer to his warmth, smelled the earth on his clothes, and returned his kiss.

“Aren’t you near ready? The sun’s gone, luv. The moon is rising and your stones are waiting.”

Hand in hand they walked away from the great monolith through a hedgerow and entered a small forest. Emerging, the King’s Men circle stood before them.

Fiona questioned herself, How can I be keeper of the stones? She felt alone, disconnected from her female ancestry, and doubted her untried abilities. Were the women in her family really the keepers of magic? Could the stones really bind true lovers eternally?

Tired of being acted upon and in spite of the doubts that assailed her, Fiona spoke with a firmness she did not feel.

“Tonight’s our only chance, Michael. It’s the last full moon before . . .” She couldn’t bring herself to say her marriage to Iain. And yet, even now. No, she thought, it’s too late. Michael loves me. He won’t ever leave me. I’ll never be alone.

“But are you ready? Are you sure you know everything about the ritual? You said . . .”

“Michael, I’m not sure about anything except us. You do want me, don’t you?”

She looked down and then up into his eyes, unable to read their usually transparent emotion. She wondered if he feared the stones, perhaps feared her.

“Do you love me, Michael?”

“Of course,” he replied.
“I don’t know if Gran was right, if what I’ve learned is true. I don’t even know if I can make this work. But I don’t see any other options.” She drew away from him and stepped around a low stone that stood prominently at the side of the circle.

Her hand searched under her cloak. She untied the ribbon around her neck and, pulling it from her bodice, slid a small ring onto the palm of her hand. It glowed softly in the moonlight.

“This was my mother’s ring,” she said holding it out. “Did you bring…?”

“Yes, Fiona love,” he interrupted. ‘I’ve my father’s ring like you asked me. When he died, mam kept it for me.” He held out the plain metal band. A cloud crossed the moon, darkening the ring’s dull gleam. She noticed that Michael’s palm was damp.

Barbara remembered what she at first thought had been a meaningless rhyme. She’d discovered it only days before. It had been titled simply, The Binding.

‘For two hearts to beat

Forever as one.

Seek two rings, filled with courage and love.

A third ring yet, blood-red shall bind,

Wi’ luck ye’l find by heaven divined.

For three there was and three be still

The glamour to complete, the union to fulfil.’

“Remember that we must kiss over the altar stone, when the rings lay nested one within the other. ‘Two rings filled with meaning and love.” Those were Gran’s words. What could mean more than our parents’ rings?”

Thin clouds, lace edged, obscured the moon. “Hopefully the moon will have a red ring tonight.” Fiona looked skyward and wondered. Could a moon’s red ring
really make a difference in the outcome? Or was this all just foolishness? Doubt and fear threatened to extinguish the small spark of hope she clung to. Please let this be the right path, she prayed.

Fiona looked at Michael, “If the full moon shines with a red ring through the trees and the circle of stones is lighted, we share one kiss only.”

She turned her face away to avoid another kiss.

“Are you paying attention?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He grinned sheepishly but did not try again.

“Michael, I never completed my training. Everything I know about The Binding I learned from Gran’s leather journal. I’ve read it again and again but the words and rhymes are cryptic at best, incomprehensible at worst. I only recognise some of them because Gran taught them to me as childhood songs. I never realised that they all tied back to the stones. I thought they were just nonsense, like Jabberwocky.” Fiona looked up into Michael’s face. “Gran wrote that the ritual seals heart to heart so that none can break the binding.” She paused.

“Don’t fret, Fiona love. All will be as it should.” Fiona trembled under the hand he placed on her shoulder.

“You must walk outside the circle counter-clockwise counting each stone. Put your ring on the altar stone when you complete your first circuit and I will place mine within it when I have completed the second. I will be walking clockwise on the inside of the stones. When we return to this stone after counting three times, we can say nothing to each other. No word. No gesture. We must not touch. If we have counted truly, no power can separate us in this life but if our count is false…” She broke off.

The clouds cleared allowing the moon’s light to touch the stones. Occasionally a prick of light would reflect off the scattered flakes of quartz embedded in the lichen-
crusted limestone. Fiona looked up toward the sky. Did she imagine it or was there now a red ring around the moon? *The third ring blood red shall bind.* Still unsure of what she knew and a bit afraid of what she was witnessing, Fiona somehow found comfort that this part of the rhyme was finally in place. She drew in a deep steadying breath. She reached to touch him but withdrew her hand.

“Well, we walk around the stones, opposite each other, counting them. When we meet back here the third time our count must match ….” She paused, realized that in her repetition her nerves were at the breaking point.

“But the legend . . . the counts never match, Fiona. Even when the baker put a loaf on each stone, the count did na match.”

She looked up into his eyes. He held her gaze for only a moment, looking away before asking, “What happens, Fiona, if our numbers do na match?”

Trying to ignore his question, Fiona continued, “As I said, you must not touch me. Just dip your finger in this elderflower wine.” She pulled a small vial from her pocket, pouring it in a small cavity on the altar stone. “Then write the number you have counted on the stone. If we have counted truly, no power can separate us but if our count is false . . .” She paused again, silent.

“Well, do ye not know what happens if the count does na match?”

“Gran said that the stones always know. If the count is not true, the stones will show you the truth. They cannot lie.”

“What else are you not telling me?”

“I’ve searched in her journal, Michael, but Gran died before I could ask what happens to the couple if their numbers do not match.”

Fiona began walking clockwise within the ruined circle of stones. She did not look up as she passed Michael going the other way at the far end of the stone ring.
Michael set his father’s wedding band on the surface of the altar stone at the end of his first circuit. Completing her second round, Fiona placed her ring within his on the altar’s cold surface, indicating with a wave of her hand that they should continue.

Fiona thought she heard the soft nicker of a horse but it seemed far away as if in a dream. The stones seemed to shift in the moonlight, to grow taller, she could almost hear their soft murmur. Did Michael hear them? Were they conferring about her fate? Fiona began to feel a peacefulness flood through her. She stood taller, adjusted her shoulders, felt strength begin to flow into her.

Michael completed his last circuit and stood before the altar stone. Fiona stood opposite him. Taking turns, each dipped a finger into the wine and began to write their individual count, the numbers murmured by the stones as they passed them one by one. Fiona suddenly knew that the stones could not be false to her, could not, in fact, be false to any woman who sought the truth. The stones could only reveal her true destiny, could only show her the path that she must walk and who she must walk it with.

She held her breath, watching as a cloud slid silently across the surface of the moon, blocking all light. When it passed, Fiona looked across the altar stone, expecting to see the blue eyes of her destiny. Instead she looked into the clear grey eyes of Iain Stanley, eyes as grey as the stones themselves.
Barbara opened her eyes to bright Welsh sunlight streaming through her window. She’d finally drifted into a dreamless sleep after her night-time revelations, but with morning came memory. Sitting up in bed, she considered her options. Who could she talk to, trust with her secrets, who wouldn’t think her a major head case?

It was nearly four AM in Washington, DC. It was too late to call Ken and she didn’t want to wake him, nor did she want to have Jillian answer the phone. You’ve got to stop stressing about Ken and Jillian, she reprimanded herself. He said he loved you, gave you a promise ring. He let you go to Wales. Barbara bridled at the word ‘let.’ He really didn’t have a choice, she replied to herself petulantly, still toying with the idea of waking him to discuss her recent discoveries. No, I can’t talk to Ken. He’ll just think I’m delusional.

Perhaps she should discuss these things with someone older, more knowledgeable, maybe Lord Stanley. One corner of her mouth turned down as she chewed on her lower lip. I know he wants something from me, but what?

She knew almost no one else in Wales, except Tao, but Barbara had not felt comfortable with Tao since her unexpected appearance at the Gwesty. The bed had not been turned down since. How does Tao fit in all this?

Her only other option was Ian Williams, but he was still an enigma, handsome, mysterious, and what? Barbara had the sense that he wanted something more than friendship and she could feel her body responding in a way that surprised her. She wondered if she just missed Ken or if Ian would come to play a larger role in
her life. She wanted to trust him but she didn’t trust his employer. Still Ian was the only one she could think of to help her sort through her discoveries. Perhaps the trip to Devil’s Bridge later today might prove the perfect place to sit and talk in a neutral place.

She suddenly realized that in the past, Ian had always contacted her. She’d never needed to call him to confirm their date and ask what time he’d pick her up. She scanned her list of recent calls and found one that had been repeated several times. Sure it was Ian’s cell phone, she tapped “Send.”

“Good morning. You have reached the residence of Lord Stanley, how may I be of assistance to you?” The voice carried a lyrical softness but was at the same time businesslike, British, and female.

Startled, Barbara hesitated, afraid of making a social gaff, but decided to continue forward. “I’m terribly sorry. This is Barbara Shaunaky. I thought I was dialling Mr Williams.” A pause at the end of the line triggered an automatic response in Barbara and she continued, “Lord Stanley’s chauffeur?”

“Mr Williams?”

“Um, yes. Mr Ian Williams,” Barbara’s face reddened although there was no one to see. Was it proper to call a Lord’s home and ask for a servant? It was almost nine AM. Surely the household was awake and breakfasted by now. Barbara heard a muffled voice and what sounded like someone’s laughter, as if a hand had been placed over the receiver. Had she interrupted something? Perhaps this isn’t such a good idea, she thought.

“He is unavailable at the moment, Miss Shaunaky. Is there a message you would like to leave for Mr Williams?”
“I just wanted to speak with…” Barbara hesitated. How much should she say to this complete stranger?

The silky voice filled the phone as Barbara paused.

“Would you like to have him return your call?”

“No. I mean, yes.” Barbara hesitated. She could feel the heat radiating off her face before adding, “But only if it’s no trouble. I don’t want to pull him from his work, but if he’s free, can he please call me. I believe he has my cell number.”

Barbara began to wish she had never made the call.

“Certainly, Miss Shaunaky. Mr Williams will return your call. Was there anything else?”

“No. Thank you.” As Barbara touched ‘END’ on her phone, she thought she heard distant laughter again. Barbara, you’re an idiot, she chastised herself. Probably going to get him in hot water with his boss for intruding on… on what? Barbara tried to think if she’d ever met or spoken with Lord Stanley’s personal assistant, something about the voice sounded vaguely familiar.

“Ian Williams. You’re kidding me. Little close to the truth don’t you think?”

“Truth? The fact is you’ve failed in everything you were sent to do. So why the sudden Brit accent?”

“I saw the caller ID, Ian, my lovely. Did you want me to say, ‘Hi, Barbara. This is Tao?’”

“What’s all this?” Lord Stanley strode into the room. Ian removed his leg from the arm of the chair, sitting up straight. When neither spoke, Lord Stanley continued, “I’m waiting, children.”
“Young Ian has just received a request from Miss Shaunaky to please contact her.” Laced with sarcasm, Tao’s voice now held only a hint of an English accent.

“Well done, my boy. Sounds like our little fish is finally rising to the bait as it were,” Lord Stanley said. His well-modulated voice hardened to an edge of steel before he continued. “You know what to do. Find out if she can truly access that journal. If the family letters I have are correct, the journal holds the key regarding our ancestral wealth.” He paused. “Gain her confidence. Learn what she knows but get that journal. The scrap Tao found at the Gwesty shows that Miss Shaunaky is close.” Lord Stanley’s eyebrow quirked up.

Ian remained silent, his eyes studying the intricate pattern of the Persian carpet on the floor.

“You’re certainly not having second thoughts, are you boy?”

Ian raised his eyes to meet his father’s, could not hold them, and looked away.

“Tao was destined to bond with the stones from her birth, until that witch, Rowling, set eyes on her and said she was unsuitable, no longer a virgin.” Tao winced at her father’s displeasure. “Everything became impossible until Brae let slip there was a distant relative in America. I spent months finding her.”

Lord Stanley let his words sink in before he continued.

“Getting our Miss Shaunaky here wasn’t difficult when I dangled the skeleton mystery before her. The young are such fools. I admit that introducing her to Rowling was a calculated risk, which I lost; but I didn’t expect the old crone to give her the journal when she disappeared; nor did I foresee that our young scholar would keep the book constantly on her person.”

“However, between the family letters I have, the scribblings Tao found in Miss Shaunaky’s suite, and the Rowling bequest, we know that our little American is
truly of the blood and is already questioning the purpose of the signet. If she finds a way to unlock the journal and if she’s still a virgin....” He swept his arm around the room as if to suggest she could claim everything. “She can bind herself to the stones, break the secrets of the journal, and control everything they represent. And I’ll never let that happen.” He broke off, his eyes boring into Ian’s. “Nothing will stand in my way. Nothing.”
“Are you both mad?” Euan, now twenty-six, stared across the long oak table in disbelief at his two remaining uncles. Grown men who should have been settled, Euan was disturbed at their blatant bid for power. Ansgar had grown somewhat corpulent in the clergy; his ambitions, however, remained unslakeable. Jarl, a soldier, was still rock hard and fit at fifty-three. Euan guessed the source of their latest treachery even though it was Jarl who spoke.

“What better time than when the king’s successor is yet a child?”

“Prince Henry is no child, though he is not yet eighteen.” Euan replied

“True, but a child to be reckoned with if his father dies. His father has removed our livery and limited our male servants not to mention his taxes and fees threaten to break us. Are you anything other than complacent in the wealth that has been accumulated for you, Euan? You do not realise that our lands are now in the king’s control and his health is threatened?”

“King’s tax. It’s how a country is run,” Euan replied. “England is out of debt. The family holding is secure for my son if we continue to show fealty. I’ll not back your bid for the crown, especially not by force. We can lose everything with your recklessness.”

“We can lose everything if we sit here and behave ourselves,” Ansgar interjected. “Father, may he rest in peace, backed York before you were born. Now the king plays both sides of the field and keeps all of York’s supporters in check by holding their lands. Your son won’t even be allowed a beneficial alliance without the
king’s permission to marry and you know King Henry keeps his peers in order so that none can gain an advantage. I can’t even intervene on your son’s behalf when he comes of age.”

Ansgar sat down heavily on a cushioned bench whilst Jarl paced before the fire. A log broke and rolled on the hearth. Jarl kicked it back, sending a storm of sparks flying up the chimney.

“We’ve made up our minds, Euan,” Jarl said, trying to keep his voice level. “At daybreak, I’m taking those that will follow. Some are from our holding, some are volunteer freemen, and we will gather more on the way. Ansgar will bless and attend us in our quest.”

Euan looked at Ansgar and read discomfort in his uncle’s averted eyes.

“Tell him that we are agreed!” commanded Jarl.

Ansgar stared into the flames, apparently weighing his pleasant quarters in York with that of the inherent hardships of a rigorous journey.

“Yes, Uncle Ansgar,” Euan asked, derision woven through his words. “Tell me that you’ve agreed to leave your comfort and power and chance everything you’ve built on this fool’s errand.”

Ansgar’s soft face hardened, suffused with rage at the ridicule in his nephew’s voice. “Yes, I am going, to give spiritual support and guidance.” He rose, his normal honeyed tone giving way to one of menace. “When Jarl is upon the throne, we will remember your faultless support, dear nephew.” Ansgar swept out of the room with Jarl at his heels.

Two weeks later, the brothers and their band of men entered Stratford after crossing the Avon River. Gossip was ripe in the town. King Henry VII was dying of consumption at Richmond Palace.
“The time to strike is now,” Ansgar’s voice was low but filled with excitement. “Surely the king will die and we can claim the throne in the confusion of succession.”

“We?”

“You, of course, Jarl, shall wear the crown, but I will be your chief advisor as we discussed. Remember, your duty is to God and to Mother Church,” Ansgar’s eyes narrowed. “When will we arrive in London?”

“Eight to ten days. With a push, we’ll pass through Long Compton late tomorrow, make camp, and then merge with our main force in Oxford.”

As they neared Long Compton, a wagon wheel unexpectedly broke. The small army formed camp under a threatening sky, while a horse and small cart were dispatched with the broken wheel to the nearby town.

When Tobias Shipton opened the door to his snug stone cottage, the smell of fresh baked bread and a savoury stew greeted him. His young daughter squealed with delight and ran from her mother’s side to embrace him. Ursula looked up, smiled as Tobias shrugged off his hat and coat, then leaned in for a welcoming kiss.

“Smells good,” he said. “Feels good, too,” Tobias added, his voice becoming husky. His hands wandered down her back and cupped her buttocks, pulling her tighter to him.

She returned his kiss, a promise for the night ahead, then wriggled free.

“Tobias, your dinner will burn. Wash up while you tell me the news from the town.” She poured water into a basin, then returned to the table to cut trenchers for their meal.
“Bit of excitement today.” Tobias rolled up his sleeves. “I heard from the smith that he’s repairing a wheel for a small army from York. Though it’s all supposed to be huish, word gets around over a pint.”

“Army. Whoever are they?” Ursula carried over the steaming stew and ladled spoonfuls onto the slabs of bread. Tobias ruffled his daughter’s dark hair and settled her beside him at the sturdy table.

“Appears to be brothers, name of Artur as near as I heard. They journey to see the king for reasons of their own.”

Tucking into his meal, Tobias failed to see the colour drain from Ursula’s face, as she fingered the ring on her left hand.

“Aren’t you eating?” Tobias looked up as Ursula scooped a bit more stew onto his already sodden trencher. “You’re not ill, are you?” A look of concern crossed his eyes as he studied her for a moment.

“No, Tobias, I’m well. Just a bit tired is all and I ate a bit as I cooked,” she lied. “Had to make sure it was good, didn’t I?”

“As long as you’re well, that’s all. You know yer mam’s a good cook, don’t you, eh, little one?” Tobias patted his daughter’s head.

“Da, can you tell a story tonight?”

“Well, I’ve already told my news.” He looked at his daughter and winked conspiratorially. “But yer mam has some great stories, don’t ye my love?”

“Tobias, whatever shall I do with the both of you, I’m sure I don’t know?” She turned to bank the fire and settle the kettle. She pulled a brightly coloured paisley shawl from its hook and placed it around her shoulders; the gentle fragrance of lavender wafted through the room.
“All right. I shall tell you the story of the badger, the ferret, and the weasel as Granny Wise told it to me.”

Sitting to one side of the fire, Ursula wove her story, weaving threads of magic for her daughter, who could almost see the creatures dance in the firelight. As the badger showed courage, and the others played their parts, the child’s eyes grew heavy, her breathing slow and steady as she nodded off in her father’s arms.

Ursula smiled at her husband’s good face and was content… until she remembered that the brothers Artur had come.
A veiled sun rose, weighted with an eerily thick fog. Expecting the return of his repaired wheel at any moment, Jarl stood with his gathered men around a weak fire. Some whispered of the coming night. It was All Soul’s eve. Jarl wanted to be gone as soon as possible for although he knew his man to be trustworthy, he also knew him to be superstitious, holding to the old ways of Samhain.

Three knights and a squire crossed the Rollright field, and now stood along the edge of a forest near a cluster of five ancient stones. The older men spoke in whispers, apparently reviewing stratagems, whilst Ansgar remained behind to finish blessing the main group of near eighty men.

“Ansgar, go check what our knights discuss.” Jarl tipped his head slowly to the group across the field.

“As you will,” Ansgar replied. He left his brother’s men as they lounged against a spiralling circle of ancient standing stones and walked toward the small party of gathered knights.

Jarl ordered his men to remain on watch, while he followed a sheep path that ran slightly uphill. Hoping to find a vantage point from which he could see the way ahead, Jarl passed through trees and a heavily, overgrown hedgerow until his men were lost to his sight. Although the trees thinned around him, the dew-laden brume prevented vision for more than a few feet in any direction.

“Damn,” he whispered. “No one can see anything in this god cursed fog.”

“What is sought?” The disembodied voice was directionless.
Fearing he’d offended or possibly attracted an evil spirit said to live within the dense forest mists, Jarl spun around seeking a source. Finding none, he quickly crossed himself. A heavily cloaked form separated itself from the gloom and stood, cowled head bent before him. Jarl relaxed his grip on his sword but did not release his hand from the embossed hilt.

“What is offered?” Jarl asked, trying to make sense out of the apparition before him.

“That depends on who asks for my help.”

“I am Jarl Artur, late of York.” The knight’s fear was not betrayed by his words, which were spoken in a voice long used to respect and obedience.

“Artur?” The question was a sibilant whisper. “Have you brothers?”

Ursula’s heart beat a fast tattoo within her chest, remembering the sound of her daughter’s laugh, the strength of Tobias’ arms when he held her, and the scent of the herbs drying in her home.

“Yes. I have brothers.”

“Are they with you?” Ursula’s mind reeled with the possibilities that these could be the very men her mother spoke of. Perhaps her father was among them. The warning of Granny Wise whispered, *There is no turning back.*

“All but the eldest,” Jarl said. “You weary me with your questions. Show yourself.”

“Bide, good sir knight,” the figure replied without moving as Ursula struggled between her heart, her mother’s long ago demand, and the last words of Granny Wise.

“Show yourself, or I’ll have your head.” Jarl took a step forward. The cloak-draped figure remained still while mist swirled across its surface, concealing and
revealing, making it appear to float. Gradually the mist lessened and a watery sun appeared in the sky directly overhead.

“You’ll not harm a helpless woman who has the power to show you the way to your heart’s desire?” The cowl dropped to reveal a handsome young woman, ebony curls surrounding a pale, delicate face; her lips blood red; her eyes shone with an unnatural light. Jarl was spellbound, unable to speak. Fear tickled the small of his back at the wraith’s unearthly beauty.

“Stick, stock, stone, I see thou wouldst be king.” The words were soft, sure, penetrating Jarl’s soul through his armour. He couldn’t comprehend how the phantom knew his secret desire.

“Yes,” he whispered.

“You must pay me for my trouble and I will show you the way to your destiny.”

“I will pay.”

“Seven steps, long and even,” she pointed. “If thou canst see Long Compton, your way is clear and England’s crown shall rest upon thy brow.” The young woman pointed the way with a delicate hand.

Jarl’s eyes rounded and then narrowed to slits before he said, “What do you ask in payment?”

“Only what is mine, Sir Knight.”

Jarl studied the woman before him. She was, indeed, beautiful but she was more than that. She hid a mystery with her cryptic words. But she had offered him assistance, which he sorely needed. Perhaps one of his men had taken something from her.

“What do you seek?”
“The signet ring my mother gave my father,” she paused, “and a coin to see me safely home.”

“I know nothing of signets and have no coin on my person. See my steward and be gone.” Jarl, uncomfortable with the young woman’s riddles and requests, found something eerily familiar about her. Pushing her from his path, he shouted over his shoulder,

“Stick, stock, stone. As King of England I shall be known.”

Ursula drew herself up, squaring her shoulders. Jarl took a step up the hill. His arrogant dismissal scraped away the thin veneer of peace Ursula had built over the last seven years. Anger shot cracks through her foundation reopening the betrayal of her birth, the taunting of her childhood, the hunger for revenge. A carefully built wall within her heart shattered as the venom of her mother’s words broke through, a bitter flood calling her to act.

Curls fell from her hair, the gloss fading to a dull grizzle. Her eyes blazed with hatred and turned red as her lips grew thin and pale. As fury built within and consumed her, the band sealing her marriage and protecting her beauty fractured. Crumbling, copper flakes fell from her finger. Her soft, delicate hands began to elongate, the knuckles becoming bony and large, the nails lengthened, yellowed and cracked. She pointed to the ground before the would-be king, an incantation on her lips.

As Jarl’s foot struck the ground on his seventh stride, the earth rose up before him, a long mound blocked his view. He tried to turn but found his foot firmly planted in the soil. The view before him was completely hidden by the Arch-Druid’s barrow.

“What sorcery is this?” Jarl drew his sword, tried to turn, but found his legs turned to stone. Beholding a hideous creature with a blotched complexion, a twisted,
broken nose, and straggling hair, his eyes grew round in fear, while he screamed in rage.

Ursula stood and silently raised her arm. With one accusing finger she pointed at Jarl and spoke quietly, “Jarl Artur, your journey is through and you are repaid. Your heart of stone will stone remain. As Long Compton thou canst not see, King of England thou shalt not be. Rise up stick and stand still stone, for King of England thou shalt be none.”

“No, you can’t be…,” his lips stiffened and became solid as he watched the young woman’s frame crook toward the earth, her transformation complete. Youth and beauty gone, the creature swept her cloak about her and marched through the thickening mist toward his men. He could not cry out. He could not stop her. He could not make right the wrong he’d witnessed so many years ago.

Ursula approached the Rollright stone circle, built centuries before by hands unknown. Nonetheless, she felt their magic pulse strengthen her racing blood. She searched the gloom, seeking for Jarl’s brothers: the priest Ansgar, who had sealed her a witch within her mother’s womb, and Kaleb, who had cast his seed carelessly and betrayed them all.

Hidden within the gloom, shielded in a stand of trees, she observed the king’s men, studied each soldier’s face, tried to identify which was her father. There was no priest among those assembled at the stones but as sure as a cat finds a mouse, she knew she would locate the priest, Ansgar. She could smell his false piety across the field. Ursula turned her attention back to the gathered men.

The stifling gloom and the echo of Jarl’s death scream permeated the circle of soldiers. They spoke in hushed whispers, fear cloaking each man but one. Ursula felt

---

3 Part of this sequence is taken directly from several ancient myths.
evil cling like a miasma to his person. She studied him and his leather clothing. Whip thin and dark haired, he leaned against the altar stone and pared his nails, smirking at the whispered fears of his fellows. As she watched, a dull glint drew her attention. He wore a ring.

As if the air suddenly cleared and magnified his hand, Ursula was drawn forward. Though never having seen it before, she knew at once it carried the symbol of Dropping Well. It was her mother’s signet given to her lover in token of faith, but was now an emblem of betrayal and a token of his fate, their intertwined fate.

Her fury hardened to hatred as she boiled out from behind the trees, her cloak flapping around her, drawing the attention of all. She wove her hands in a circle, then spread her fingers wide. With arms outstretched encompassing all, the incantation flowed from her mouth like spilled ink upon a page as she bound the body and soul of each man to the stone nearest him. Their screams rent the air, delicious to her ears alone for her enchantment sealed all sound within her circle of mist. Her eyes blazing, she watched with satisfaction at the contortions of each man desperately trying to flee his fate, while each stone shimmered, slipped from view, and silently stole across living flesh and encased their very essence. Finally all were still but one; and as his limbs grew rigid, he cursed himself for desiring one last quest, one last adventure before he gave up a mercenary’s life.

Ursula walked to the altar stone and stared into the now terrified eyes of this last man. Upon his hand was the signet ring she’d sought her entire life. Tearing the knife from his grasp she slashed his finger off and freed the signet, slipping the blood-slick ring upon her own gnarled hand.

“Why?” he croaked as his pain vied with horror. “Why?” he whispered again as blood pumped from his severed finger staining the stone.
Not satisfied that his agony was near enough punishment to compensate for all
the insults, taunts, and jeers she’d had to endure, Ursula waved her hand and the
progress of the stone was slowed.

“Name?” she said. “Give me your name.”

The voice was a croaking whisper. “Marc…,” he exhaled as his voice failed.

“I’ll mark you forever, trust breaker. Mark you for what you are, Kaleb Kahrl
Artur.” She spit the last words in a curse as the stone crept across his horrified mouth,
stopping his words forever. “And I will seal your soul in hell,” she screamed. With
that, she plunged her hand into the altar stone and pulled free the still beating heart of
Marcus Brown. Ursula watched, a rictus of pleasure spreading across her features, as
she held the dripping organ before his face. The light dampened within her would-be
father’s staring eyes as he watched his own heart pulse three times and go still.

Ursula looked to the darkened sky. She stared down at the silent lump within
her hand and at the hollow it had left within the altar stone. Bending she buried the
lifeless organ deep in the earth at her feet and wiped her torn hands on the rough
grass.

“And, now, the priest,” she said, turning.

She crept across the fallow field, hidden from sight within the unnatural
darkness, exulting as the power of her magic surged through her body.

Disembodied voices floated on the sodden air oblivious to the tortured
screams of their companions.

“And you are sure, Ansgar, of your information?”

“Have you ever known me to plan without surety?”

“But he’s your brother.”

“Jarl is an arrogant fool. I’ve led him by the nose his entire life.”
“But you’re a priest. What of your vows?”

“I serve Mother Church and by alerting young Henry to this attack on his ascension to the throne, you will be rewarded and …”

“What will you receive?” a deep masculine voice cut in.

“I will receive the ear of young Henry, the Eighth, and secure the place of the Church within all of Britannia.”

“Yes, and your place at the king’s side,” a low voice smirked.

Ursula stood silently at the edge of the group, remembering all her mother had told her of her one meeting with the priest, how he had cursed and cast her out. And now at last, her revenge almost slaked, Ursula had found the man, the spectre of all evil within her life, and he was plotting the betrayal of his own family.

She pulled her cowl over her head, concealing her face, and spoke a small incantation. Moments later the mist cleared around the gathered men, revealing an old woman on the periphery who continued her journey toward them. The surprised men put hands to sword hilts but seeing only a bent old woman relaxed their guard.

Pointing at Ansgar, she asked quietly, “You are the noted priest of York, Ansgar Artur?” Her hands folded back within the sleeves of her cloak, she peered into the face she’d sought to destroy her entire life, the face that had haunted her dreams since her marriage ceremony.

“Yes, my daughter, I am of the family Artur and serve as the priest of York.” He waved at the four men beside him, “Cannot you see that we are engaged. What is it you require?”

“I come bringing thee a gift.”

“What gift can you bring a priest? We seek no worldly wealth.” Ursula heard a quickly muffled laugh from the group of men.
“I bring you the gift of immortality.” Ursula held out a small bottle she’d pulled from within her robes. As Ansgar reached for it, she dropped it letting it swing from a chain she held firmly in her hand.

“What game is this? Are you a witch?”

“No game. Only a gift I was asked to bring to repay you for your deeds.”

The knight nearest Ursula reached for the vial. She snatched it away. “Not so, sir knight. The vial is valuable and is to be delivered to Ansgar of York of the house of Artur only.”

“Well, then woman,” Ansgar stepped forward. “Give it to me.”

Ursula let the bottle swing forward until Ansgar caught it. As soon as it touched his hand, she tugged gently on the chain, pulling the stopper free. Water dribbled across his hand. He screamed in pain. The knights and cleric surrounded him, unsure of what was happening.

Ursula, holding the chain, tossed it into the air where it expanded and fell around the clustered men. Hand outstretched, she swept it in an arch encompassing them all. Her curse fell from her lips like drops of blood, striking their ears, condemning their acts, sealing their fate.

“Black of heart,

Heart of stone,

Into the deepest pit,

Be thou now thrown.

Endless torment,

Bound with chain,

Links of black deeds,

Forged with pain.”
Again the men were rooted to the ground, their bodies slowly encased in the stone monoliths. Terror contorted their faces into studies of their own evil deeds until all were encased save Ansgar. He stood hunched in pain, staring at the vial in his outstretched hand, unable to stop the flow of fluid as it travelled up his arm, encasing his body in a spider’s web of limestone.

“Who?” Ansgar exhaled.

“I am the living curse of a long dead dam. ‘The child I carry shall revenge the father upon your black hearts, until stones weep blood.’”

Recognition replaced the horror in Ansgar’s eyes as the stone continued its relentless journey across his frame. Ursula watched in satisfaction until the water of Dropping Well completed its work of petrification. Ansgar stared through sightless eyes as the layers of limestone continued to encase his form. Stepping forward, Ursula placed a finger on the teetering monolith, and pushed. The earth shook when it struck the ground.

“Burn in hell,” Ursula said, her enemies defeated before her.

She turned and walked along the forest’s edge, past the Rollright stone circle, across the sheep path, but stopped suddenly partway through the hedgerow. A child stood before her, staring up at the King Stone. A beautiful child. Her child. Ursula took a deep shuddering breath as the words of Granny Wise sifted through the fever of her revenge. ‘You can never restore the spell of beauty once it is lost.’

Ursula looked down at her hands now withered, gnarled, twisted with her deeds of revenge. Upon the heels of her vengeance, terror of another kind began to tear at her mother-heart. What have I wrought?
The grief of loss cloaked her as she adjusted her cape securely about her form, concentrated the power of her magic to soften her voice, and stepped silently through the hedge.

“Child?”

The little girl, just five years but as precocious as her mother had been, turned and stared at the hedgerow. Her lovely face was without guile or fear; her hair a mass of dark curls.

“Child, can you carry an important message for an old woman?”

The child walked toward the hedge and stood in front of the unfamiliar crone. Ursula reached within her cowl and removed Tobias’ engagement locket, tipping out the withered dust within, then pulled the signet ring from her finger. She winced in pain as the ring caught on her swollen knuckle. She wiped it clean on her robe.

“Hold out your hand, child.” Ursula gently dropped the signet and locket into the tiny outstretched palm, patting the round pink fingers over the earthly treasure.

“These are for you from your own dear mother, who must be gone for many years and yet a day. Tell your father of this spot. Bid him take of the elder tree to form a box for his wife’s treasures.”

“But, old grandmother,” the child said, “there is no elder here.”

“There will be when you return. Now be obedient, child. Run home as I bid.”

The child cradled her laden hand with her other, protecting her gifts, and turned to go. Ursula, her heart slowing, watched her daughter walk away, across the barrow toward a life and home as realisation set in at the enormity of her loss. Her mother avenged, Ursula understood too late the warnings of Granny Wise. Once again Ursula would bear the price of the life she’d been ensnared in.
Resigned to the rubbled remains of her life, she went deep within her being to find her core. Ursula uttered the needed words. The warmth of the earth flowed into her body as her feet pushed into the earth beneath the hedgerow. Her arms and hands stretched skyward. The mist cleared and a kindly sun warmed her ravaged face. Her cloak hardened into the bark of an elder tree. Leaves sprang from her elongating fingers.

“Be it so until I am needed.”

Her words lingered on the air only a moment before a rook landed in her branches and devoured a fat worm.
Today ~ Wales ~ Devil’s Bridge

Devil’s Bridge loomed high above them, each of the three arches climbing higher as they crossed the gorge, reflective of the centuries and people who had built them. Ian walked ahead of Barbara down the last of the natural slate stepping-stones; the downward path was treacherous due to the mist from the falls and the fact that each slate stone was a different height from its neighbour. A thin cast-iron handrail bordered the steps and helped prevent a plunge into the rushing water far below. They stopped on an outcropping above the Devil’s Cauldron.

“You know Wordsworth wrote some of his work here?”

“Yes, I saw it mentioned on the sign across the road.” She paused, took another photo, made a notation in her notebook and slipped both items back into her bag.

“Ian, I…. She startled as he slid one arm around her waist. She liked how it felt, the warmth of him through her shirt. Her thoughts whirled away, becoming confused. Could she really confide in him? What would he think of her? And what about Ken? Her mind was a jumble of thoughts. Yeah, and what about Jillian? Stop over-thinking everything and enjoy the moment. Barbara leaned her head on Ian’s shoulder. He smelled of tweed and Paco Rabanne and maybe safety.

“What is it, cariad?” he whispered, barely touching the top of her head with his lips.

“Cariad?”
“Just a Welsh expression between friends. It means my lovely.” He backed away, hands resting gently on her shoulders, and studied her. “What’s bothering you, Barbara?”

“Ian.” She stopped. “I don’t know where to begin. My world is upside down. I have to trust someone, to talk through what I’ve discovered. I mean experienced. Actually I don’t know what I really mean.”

Barbara felt moisture begin to gather in her eyes. Stop it, stupid. The words formed inside her head. I can’t cry or he’ll think I’m a hysteric. Just start at the beginning and sort things out one at a time. Grow up and take the plunge. At least find out what he thinks.

“Ian,” she began again. “You remember when we saw Mrs Rowling and then there was the Samhain festival and I felt ill. The next day there was a picture in my notebook and I didn’t remember how it got there.”

“Yes but it seems a lifetime ago.”

“And then everything went terribly,” she paused, ‘horribly wrong, and I left and my life changed forever. Oh, Ian, it was awful.”

“I can’t imagine what you must have gone through,” he said, stroking her back.

“And then there were… things.”

“Things?”

She stopped and looked up into Ian’s face. It was a mask of concentration, his eyebrows met in the middle, the corners of his mouth turned down as his eyes searched hers, encouraging her to continue.

“You’re going to think I’m nuts but when I was home, I found a small wooden box with symbols on it, and an envelope that had my original birth certificate hidden
inside. I’d always been told it had been destroyed. Ian, it says I was born a Shipton.

Then I got a package a few months later. It was a bequest from Mrs Rowling.”

“From who?” Clearly puzzled, Ian’s voice rose as he asked again. “Our Mrs Rowling?”

“Yes. I mean I only just met her but there was this old leather journal with the same markings as the box and a cryptic letter about how I needed to understand the journal and it was in my safekeeping, except it was blank, Ian. It was completely empty.”

She paused again, looked quickly at his face, and then away at the smooth, striated rock of the gorge as the river rushed below them, ever cutting its own path, wearing away the solid stone. Barbara took a deep breath before continuing, “And then it wasn’t.”

“And then it wasn’t what?”

“That’s the hard part, Ian. Sometimes there’s writing. I think I’m losing my grip on reality. I see things in the journal. I mean, I don’t just see them. I don’t just read the cryptic words and riddles, it’s like they’re alive, as if I’m actually watching the writer record.”

“Watching?”

Barbara looked into Ian’s face. There was no judgment, only questions.

“I don’t know. It’s hard to explain. But it’s a long time ago, perhaps late nineteenth century, earlier at times, clothing from different periods, handwriting that changes,” she paused. “Ian, I don’t know what I’m supposed to do and then there’s the signet ring. When Lord Stanley showed me the picture, he said something odd about it returning to the family.”
She turned away toward the Cauldron, felt the spray of the rushing water lift and settle on her face, cooling it from the heat of the noon sun.

“Don’t you see that in order to return to his family, the ring once had to belong to them? Is that why he has me investigating Charlie? Ian, I saw. I mean I saw…. Again she stopped. “Do you have any idea why he wants me to do this research for him? Ian, do you trust your boss?” She turned back toward him, leaning against the railing, which blocked unwary tourists from the torrent and whirlpool below the cliff face.

He paused a moment, shrugged his shoulders and palms up, replied, “Chauffeur.”

“Ian, I know you’re the chauffeur but don’t the staff talk to each other?”

“Barbara, we’re not like *Downton Abbey* or the other BBC programmes you get in America. Lord Stanley is an employer like any other man. He has his own motivations and secrets,” Ian paused as if in thought, “and his own way of carrying out his plans.”

One part of her didn’t want to know but she couldn’t stop herself from asking the question, which lay uppermost on her mind. “Ian, do think I’m losing it?”

He placed his hands on her shoulders again, lightly, and then with a gentle pull, drew her into his embrace.

“Barbara, I don’t know what to think. You’ve been under a huge amount of stress.”

Unconsciously her back stiffened as she waited for the expected blow to fall from his lips. Barbara felt her stomach began to churn as she struggled with her vision of the signet being pulled from Charlie’s dead hand.
Ian did not release his hold but continued in a steady voice, “But in what little time I’ve come to know you, I don’t really see you as overemotional or out of control, imagining things where there can be nothing. There has to be a logical explanation to all this.”

Barbara felt the tension leave as she relaxed into his words of reassurance. Laying her ear against his chest, she listened to his steady heartbeat. In its regular cadence, her own quieted. She felt safe, glad she’d chosen Ian to confide in, happy he hadn’t judged her harshly.

Turning, she tipped her face to look up into his and found it very close. The pressure of his lips on hers was soft, almost tentative. Barbara felt a thrill of surprise, and then realising she wanted this, she lifted her arms and circled his neck, responding in kind. As his kisses lingered and deepened, she felt herself slide into the comfort of the moment, of feeling protected, of banishing her nightmares and questions into the realm of darkness from which they had sprung.

“Get a room,” a young male voice chided. Piercings grew from the nose and ears of an acne-faced teenager, who stood nearby, arm draped around the thin shoulders of a young girl similarly pierced but dressed completely in Gothic black.

Barbara pulled back, her face going instantly warm at the sudden interruption of the teenagers. She stooped to retrieve her bag, lifting the strap over her head. Ian bit off a reply, took Barbara’s hand, and started up the uneven slate stairs leading to the top of the ravine.
Two hours later as they neared the Aberystwyth train station, Ian’s phone sounded.
“It’s a text from Lord Stanley. I’m sorry, Barbara, but I’ll have to drop you at
Wetherspoons.” Puzzled by his speedy departure, Barbara watched him drive down
the street and turn left toward Penparcau.

“Yes, she’s got the journal,” Ian reported. Catching Lord Stanley’s glance at his
fingers drumming a tattoo on the chair arm, Ian stopped and stared out of his living
room window overlooking Ceredigion Bay. He never felt comfortable when his father
visited his home in Wales.

“And?” Lord Stanley prompted.

“And, she’s not sure how to use it although she is having some insights.”

“Insights?” Lord Stanley rose from his seat on the sofa, and stood in front of
Ian’s chair. “I’m not here to play Twenty Questions with you, Ian. What exactly
happened at Devil’s Bridge?”

“Yes, brother dearest, what did happen?” Tao prodded from the doorway.

“Anything delicious?” She entered the well-appointed living room, dressed smartly in
trousers and a silk shirt. She slipped off the velvet jacket she wore and draped it over
the sofa.

Ian stood, strode to the windows and stared into the distant hills edging the
bay, now silhouetted by the descending sun. He turned to face his father and sister
before beginning.
“I’m doing what you asked and getting you information but I do not feel obligated to give you, either of you, the lurid details of my private life. All you need to know is that things are progressing. Bar… I mean,” he corrected himself, “Miss Shaunaky is obviously beginning to trust me. She admits to having the journal, but she hasn’t shown it to me yet.” He examined his fingernails, dropped his hand, and looked into their expectant faces. “Based on what little you’ve shared with me, I don’t know how or why she’s having these little episodes as she doesn’t have possession of your precious signet ring. Based on your information, that witched book isn’t supposed to work without it or did I somehow get that wrong?”

Ian noticed shock in his father’s eyes and a widening of his sister’s. Secretly pleased when neither came back with a retort, he walked across the room. He didn’t slam the door as he pulled it behind him but he’d definitely made his meaning clear. He was done being questioned.

Disappointed their day had been cut short, Barbara entered Wetherspoons, untied her knit scarf, then ordered and paid for her new favourite, Dragon Curry. Returning to her table, she thought she might take a walk along the Prom and perhaps through the castle ruins before returning to her rooms at the Gwesty. She wanted to savour the memory of Ian’s kiss and plan her next move.

Later as she climbed the twisting stairs to her suite, she was encouraged that somehow things would sort themselves. She now had someone she could trust and Ian didn’t think her crazy for chasing what Ken had called old fairy tales.

As she entered her room, she noted again that although tidied, the duvet had not been turned down. The thought disturbed her as she tossed her bag on the bed and
stepped into the bathroom. Her curiosity, however, was quickly forgotten when her eyes fell on Ken’s promise ring sitting on the shelf over the sink.

The hot water ran heedlessly down the washbasin drain as steam bloomed and covered Barbara’s reflection in the mirror. Her euphoria of moments before was wiped away with feelings of guilt. *Well, it’s not like I promised to marry him. I only agreed to wait till we both returned to Oregon. Besides,* her inner voice continued, *what about Jillian? Why is Jillian still in DC with Ken?*

“Just shut up,” Barbara whispered aloud, turning off the tap. She wiped steam from the mirror and stared at herself. “Who are you anyway? How can you possibly love two men at the same time?” She stopped and considered the word *love.* What did it mean? Ken was great. Gorgeous. The life of the party, mostly he was the party. But there was Jillian, always lingering in the background. If Ken’s words were sincere, why were he and Jillian always together? And Ian. She’d felt so safe today circled in his arms, the Devil’s Cauldron swirling and washing away all doubt and fear. But did Ian love her? He’d never used the word but then he was quiet. *The strong, silent type,* her inner voice whispered. *Dependable. A rock. Maybe even a little like dad.*

She picked up Ken’s promise ring and strode back into her bedroom determined to find answers. She settled herself on the bed, slid her phone to silent, and pulled the journal from her shoulder bag.

“Here goes nothing,” she said, slipping the heliotrope ring on her thumb and placing her hand on the journal cover. “And, perhaps, everything,” she concluded

Barbara opened the journal.
Barbara wondered how generations could possibly be recorded within the journal’s limited confines. It was less than an inch thick, each sheet of vellum stretched thin and beautifully soft. Setting aside curious but perhaps unimportant questions regarding the journal’s construction, Barbara hoped that answers to her questions were now within reach.

She was becoming used to the nausea that preceded the subtle shift as ink formed on the blank page.

The surety of the strokes on the page now open before her revealed this was more a recording of details as opposed to the stylistic calligraphy and poetry she had viewed before. These words were simply formed, the writing filled with energy and emotion, the strokes on the page were slightly indented and heavily slanted. As the words gained clarity, Barbara wondered at the different styles of script within the journal. How many women had recorded their lives and lore within the mysterious pages of this slim volume?

Before her now was a new diary entry.

*September 29, 1871 ~ Dr. Pugh has taken his leave but I heard him tell Da that my collapse at the stones was a combination of shock and nerves and that another day of bed rest should have me right again. I remember little except Iain’s grey eyes meeting mine over the altar stone. My future is cast. The stones cannot lie and I now feel I must protect them. Will they protect me?*
October 15, 1871 ~ Although Da will not discuss the events at the stones or Michael’s sudden disappearance, I received a letter today from Edinburgh. It was brief and left me filled with questions, perhaps never to be answered. Michael simply wished me well and said his leaving was for the best. He will start anew in Scotland with a chance to finish his veterinary training. There was nothing else. Why did he never come to say goodbye to me? It is resolved. I am to marry Iain within the fortnight.

A signature, affixed to the bottom of the journal’s page, read Fiona Middleton. Turning the leaf, Barbara was surprised to see that months had passed.

March 21, 1872 ~ I have wonderfully found happiness. I have not written for months as events have not only changed my life irrevocably but I dared not take Gran’s journal from its hiding place for fear of discovery. It is powerful and must be guarded. I have returned to Long Compton as a bride but let me begin at the beginning.

I was wed on the second day of the New Year. It snowed. Iain looked dashing in his grey tailcoat and burgundy cravat. His eyes consumed me as I walked toward him and Father Mark to pledge my troth. He is become my Mr Darcy after all, not pressing me after our encounter at the stones, but rather is gentle in his affection. Although I am deeply saddened at the loss I feel of Michael’s friendship, I now know I have always loved Iain.

Following our wedding celebrations, we travelled to the continent where my husband, I blush as I write the word, plied me with Parisian dressmakers, escorted me to the Louvre, and shared the wonders of Versailles. It was like viewing Ali Baba’s treasures.
March 29, 1872 ~ Da has collapsed. The doctor says it is his heart and he must not be stressed. I fear for him as Johnny is greatly changed since his return. He is thin and furtive; his easy laughter of early years is now brittle, and his anger lies just below the surface. Discord lies heavily between them. I know not the argument that separates Johnny from those that love him.

April 1, 1872 ~ But for Iain’s kindness, it has been difficult settling into my new life, living with servants, and now there is the worry over my father. Iain has given me a horse and trap and I have overseen the transfer of my medical stores to a new cold room at the Stanley manor. Da’s health is precarious yet he works about the farm as he is able. Johnny is seldom to be found when I visit.

Barbara stopped. Stanley. Could the Middleton/Stanley line be ancestors of Lord Stanley? Was this the connecting link she sought? Odd. But was it possible? Barbara, really, how farfetched would that be? Maybe no more ridiculous than being related to Mother Shipton, she answered herself. Questions, like a swarm of unseen midges, began to crowd her as she returned to the open page.

May 3, 1872 ~ I am positive I am with child. Iain is pleased but cautious with me. I suppose he frets at the memory of his first wife but I feel quite well thanks to ginger root in my peppermint tea. I sip it each morning before rising for the day.

Da is pleased with the expected grandchild but his health waxes and wanes. The burdens of the farm should fall to Johnny but he remains taciturn. Anger continues to shadow him. What has happened to the brother I love? I overhear the servants couple his name with gaming in the town. I pray it isn’t so.

August 30, 1872 ~ The heat of summer is passing and we’ve had a cooling rain. Da and Johnny have quarrelled yet again. Da’s dreams of reforming Johnny into a country squire have not come to fruition. My dear brother has been to see Ian
and ashamed as I am to write this, I listened at the library door. Johnny needs money once more. Oh, Johnny, perhaps I’ve blamed the wrong man for ruining you.

Barbara read the next few entries, noted the skips of time, and fell deeper to Fiona’s life. Yet, she wondered again why the journal was showing her this particular history.

Distracted by a growling stomach, Barbara reached in her bag and fished out an energy bar. Partially unwrapped, it had a two-pence coin stuck to its nutty surface. She pulled it free and took a bite, occasionally sipping a glass of water from the bedside table.

She returned to the next journal entry.

October 21, 1872 ~ Our baby is due soon. My ankles swell when I sit and my back aches awfully. I need fresh air and a long walk, but Iain is adamant I rest. He is greatly distracted by constant visits from Johnny, and I know he is hiding something of import from me.

I now find that I, too, must hide something from him. I feel drawn to return to the stones and have used mother’s signet to study Gran’s journal, which I continue to keep hidden in its elderwood box. Although I am more comfortable with whom I have become, I have no idea how to accomplish the task before me. A further binding at the Rollright Stones is required using the birth ritual.

Barbara nearly dropped the journal she held. Her thoughts whirled, a sudden spiralling of her customary nausea made her dizzy. Mrs Rowling, the binding ritual, the box, the signet, the stone circle in Rollright, and the Stanleys. The ring. It was Lord Stanley’s ring. It could be no other.

Fearing to break her deepening connection as the pieces began to merge, Barbara read on.
November 4, 1872 ~ Such joy and sadness in my life. Lily was born on October 31st, and with her arrival came the news of my father. He is dying. Though Iain protested it was too soon for me to be about, I begged to be taken to my father’s bedside. I must admit my emotions and purposes were mixed. I wanted to comfort Da and to introduce him to his only grandchild. I also needed to find a way to the stones, alone but for Lily. The fates were with me.

Upon my arrival Da reached to touch Lily’s small head, smiled, and then slipped into an in-between world, which is neither life nor death. As I nursed my child, for I had insisted I should not have a wet nurse, Lily drifted to sleep when great shouts rent the peace of the lower rooms. Johnny’s voice ranted about imminent ruin. I could not make out Iain’s retort but could feel the controlled sharpness of his tone. Moments later my husband appeared at the door to my father’s room.

Barbara’s eyes studied the page. Bile rose in the back of her throat. She gagged. The entry blurred. Intense vertigo struck. Her hands shot out to steady herself from falling, from tearing apart.

As quickly as the sensations engulfed her, they stopped.

The air became chill, unfamiliar walls surrounded her, a tableau appeared before her. A well-groomed man, familiar yet never before seen, spoke to a young woman holding a sleeping infant in her lap.

“Fiona, I was a fool to allow this visit so soon after the baby. A storm gathers. We must away.”

“But what of Da?”

“I understand your desire to remain but I cannot stay a moment longer under your brother’s roof.”
“Iain, please. My father… it shan’t be long now.” When he didn’t answer immediately, she pressed her suit. “You go. Lily and I shall be fine and can sleep the night in my old room. Please. Send the carriage for me tomorrow. Da cannot last the night and he must not die alone.”

Iain paused, emotions played across his face before it settled into acquiescence. Moving to her side, his hand brushed the baby’s cheek, coming to rest on his wife’s shoulder. He bent to kiss her. “As you wish,” he murmured into her hair, “but you must return at first light if you cannot return tonight. Your brother is not to be trusted.”

“He will not harm me, Iain. For all his faults, I know he loves me still.”

“I hope your faith in him is never shaken.”

Barbara observed the passing of time with her father’s slowing breath. The room darkened. Allan Middleton sighed. A sudden downpour beat a steady tattoo upon the windowpanes. As the squall moved on, shafts of late afternoon light pierced the darkness, revealing tears upon Fiona’s pale cheeks. Her Da lay dead.

The door opened again. A man, hollow-cheeked with several days growth of beard, stood in the doorway. His unwashed clothes hung slack from his frame. Bleary eyes searched the room and settled on the figure in the bed.

“He’s gone then?”

“Yes, Johnny. Poor Da.” Fiona stood. “Come and sit,” she said. “Can you hold Lily for a moment whilst I settle Da?” Passing the infant to her brother, she folded her father’s gnarled hands, one on top of the other, and pulled the quilt over his permanently sleeping form.

“Johnny, can you keep watch with Da. Please. The rain has stopped.” She lifted Lily from her brother’s arms. “I need to walk, to be alone for a time.”
Her brother nodded, his eyes dry, while his hands plucked idly at a rent in his trousers.

Barbara reached to touch her face. It was damp with tears. *What is happening to me?* Old emotions of loss and grief consumed her. They were coupled with fear and an unexplained anticipation. “This cannot be,” she whispered.

Again the scene changed. The pungent scent of autumn’s last leaves returning to damp rich earth weighted the cooling air. Barbara’s vision settled as she found herself standing at the edge of the Rollright Stones.

Fiona laid her sleeping baby on an altar-like stone. Stooping to open her reticule, Fiona pulled out a blue enamelled jar and placed it beside the newborn.

“I paid old Sally a shilling to save this for me and to keep her silence,” she murmured to the sleeping babe. Carefully she opened the jar and upended its contents onto the grey stone. A membranous crimson mass fell with a plop on the hard stone; streaks of scarlet oozed across the stone and trickled down its outer face.

Horrified, Barbara watched Fiona’s bizarre behaviour. What could this mean? Suddenly the words of the Rowling journal flashed across her mind.

“A maiden’s journey through blood is borne,
A child’s home given, rosey and warm,
An’ last the crone, life’s wisdom born,
Will seal the life of hearth and home.”

It was a placenta. Fiona had placed the child’s afterbirth upon the stones. Barbara watched the macabre ceremony as Fiona next lifted the infant, who had begun to stir, pulled back her cape and shifted her clothing to suckle the child.
Nursing only moments, the babe settled into sleep once more. Barbara watched as Fiona cupped her still heavy breast, catching a stream of milk as it slowed and stopped, then let the liquid drip from her fingers staining the altar.

Fiona spoke.

“Maiden of the stone, now a mother grown
Child of my blood, borne upon the flood
With this birth, I seal the treasures of the earth
Mother of the stones, seal me thine own.”

At the completion of her words, Fiona again laid her child down and carried the placenta to the centre of the stone circle and burned it.

Barbara watched, her stomach churning as fascination, horror, and curiosity warred within her. What did these things mean to the woman named Fiona? Why was Barbara witness to these things? What did the journal want her to understand?

As Barbara watched the scene unfold, Fiona made her way across the field, unaware of a slight movement within the tree line which caught Barbara’s eye. A man stood watching. Had he seen the ceremony? What did his presence mean? She couldn’t make out his identity and then realized it had to be Fiona’s brother, Johnny.
“But I saw her.”

Lord Iain Stanley checked his pocket watch. He was a man of importance now, a father, a land-holder. His feckless brother-in-law was trouble, had always been so and apparently was set on stirring up trouble again. Iain considered how he’d honourably upheld his end of the bargain, paid his brother-in-law’s debts, gifted Fiona with her precious standing stones and the few acres they sat on but he was growing weary of Johnny’s constant finagling for more money. Now the man stood prattling on about Fiona’s unseemly and highly unlikely escapade at the stones.

“Iain, you’re not listening to me,” Johnny’s voice rose as he wrung his wool cap between his oversized hands. “She was witching in the moonlight, I tell you, like some wild woman.”

“You stand there and say you saw your own sister.” He paused for emphasis, “my wife, behaving in an unseemly manner at the stone circle the night of your father’s death?” Lord Stanley considered Johnny’s demeanour. He certainly didn’t smell of drink but he always had a scheme, found a way to wheedle just a bit more out of a business deal, and usually drank away any advantage he’d gained.

“I not only saw her but I heard her. She knows where treasure is buried. You’ll be rich and I want my share.”

Iain studied Johnny’s flushed face. His wife’s brother was the same age as he but looked years older, haggard, his life dissolute and wasted in drink and gaming. Johnny had become a bully to his lessers but still and all, Iain thought, he was a
coward at heart. He’d been a changed man since the accident that had damaged Michael and allowed Johnny to attend school in his place.

Iain snapped his pocket watch closed and slid it into his vest pocket, gold fob hanging neatly against the heavy green brocade vest. He turned and strode to the office windows, lifted a drape and scanned the rolling hills dotted with sheep, all the while assessing Johnny’s agitated shuffling from foot to foot.

Exasperated, Iain turned and poured himself a glass of claret. He watched the hungry look in his brother-in-laws eyes as he sipped the smooth liquid. Iain poured a second glass, strode around the table and handed the drink to Johnny, hoping it would calm his rants.

“Sit, John,” Iain ordered, “and tell me all you know.”
Today ~ Long Compton, England ~ 1885 Confession

Ian walked into his father’s study, poured himself a drink, and sat waiting, the Scotch aromatic but untouched. After their unpleasant parting yesterday, he wasn’t surprised to be summoned to the Long Compton manor but he had no further information to divulge. The fact that the roads had been particularly bad had placed him in a decidedly sour mood.

“Ian.” Lord Stanley entered the room. “I see you have made yourself comfortable. Bit early for a drink. Wouldn’t you prefer tea. Coffee?”

Ian raised the glass to his lips and swallowed the contents in one go, grimaced, set the glass on the table and replied. “You demanded my presence?”

Ignoring his son’s tone, Lord Stanley said, “I think it’s time you read the papers I possess. They are from your namesake. It’s time you more fully understand our position.”

Unlocking his desk drawer, he pulled out a worn manila folder, and held it out. When Ian didn’t rise, Lord Stanley walked around the desk and dropped it in his son’s lap.

“Read.” Not breaking stride, he walked from the room.

Ian opened the file. The first page was a marriage certificate joining Fiona Middleton to his ancestor, Sir Iain Stanley. A handwritten but notarised codicil was scrawled across the back deeding the Rollright Stones in their entirety to Fiona Middleton Stanley in perpetuity. Odd, Ian thought, but he had long ago accepted that his family was different to most.
Next was a court document embellished with official seals and ribbons, dated January 10, 1873. It affirmed that the Artur holdings in York and Oxfordshire had been transferred and the inheritance and title placed within the Stanley line, specifically one Lord Iain Stanley. A letter bearing the heavily embossed masthead of Brown, Beard, and Dub, LLC, also dated 1873, restated the general terms, contents and transfer of title.

Ian studied the document with its seals and ribbons. Curious, he thought. He’d never questioned the family holdings throughout Britain, never considered the legalities of inheritance. He knew the family genealogy showed an interweaving of the Artur and Stanley lines beginning with the marriage of his long dead ancestors, Ulf and Ellyn in the fifteenth century.

Ian wondered at the relevance of these documents until he came to the next. Written on simple foolscap, dated 1851 and carefully protected in an acetate sheath, was a handwritten family history ending in the birth of Fiona Middleton, showing her descended from Tobias Shipton by his wife Ursula Soothtell. The record had been injured in a fire; the ink was barely legible and smeared near the fire damage. On the line reserved for Ursula’s parentage, it read Agatha Southill betrothed Kal… . Ursula’s birth was apparently questionable. The fire damage would hide the father’s name for all eternity. Ian wondered why his father wanted him to see these records.

Unsettled by the possibility of yet more family secrets and drama, Ian looked again at the solicitor’s letter trying to find a connecting link and noticed a bright green paperclip, securing a scrap of paper to the back of the missive. Ian removed the modern clip and read the handwritten note.
L.S. It is my duty to inform you that a second line exists but due to its bastard nature and that it was lost somewhere in the Americas, I have not informed the court as was your wish. J.B.


He replaced the title, letter, and genealogy in the file. A single item remained, a small manilla envelope marked, “Confidential.” Ian found the end unsealed as he slid the contents onto his lap. The writing was old-fashioned, masculine, and bore a seriousness that wasn’t lessened by the title written boldly across the top of the first page.

_The Confession of Lord Iain Stanley, Long Compton, England_

_~ The Year of Our Lord 1885._

“I was named after someone in a family scandal?” Embarrassed he’d spoken aloud, Ian looked around the room, found he was still alone, and returned to the papers in his hand.

_The time has come to confess my sins for as I am not a Papist, I can only write them and hope absolution will someday come to me._

_Forced by financial need into marriage with an heiress, I nonetheless grieved when Margaret died in childbed. As the babe died with his dam, half the promised dowry was withheld for the nuptial agreement required a living heir, as Margaret was her family’s only child._

_I travelled the continent only to return at last to Long Compton and saw again Fiona Middleton, now grown from a gangly child into a lovely young woman._

_Wishing another profitable marriage for me, my father objected to my renewed interest in Fiona Middleton. I found, too late, why he finally approved of our nuptials._
Fiona, holding me at first as a stranger, relaxed into a camaraderie, which feeling had already grown within me. I felt or I should say hoped that she would come to love me as a man as she had when I was but a heedless youth.

I approached Allan Middleton, not for the first time, for his daughter’s hand, and learned that Johnny languished in Debtor’s Prison in London. I had been unaware that when his local debts were wiped clean with my father’s acquisition of Middleton land, that father had not also settled Johnny’s London debts. I promised to pay his significant arrears and free him from prison. Middleton brazenly went on to demand that I deed to Fiona the land which contained the Rollright Standing Stones, stating that she set great store by them for unknown reasons. If it would bring her happiness, I told him I would willingly agree.

Upon our marriage, I enjoyed a year of joy and solace. Fiona proved to be exceptional in running a home efficiently and wonderfully produced our darling child, Lily. Those days were glorious, but, alas, not destined to continue. The investments of my father turned and I faced a future much humbler than that to which I had become accustomed. Added to this burden were the constant requests for money from Johnny Middleton.

This all came to a head when Allan Middleton died. Johnny demanded money and when I refused, was not long in accosting me and filling my head with tales that my wife, his very sister, was a witch and possessed the key to great wealth found in her use of the stone circle. I believed him to be a raving lunatic or so far gone with the pox or drink as to not know what he was saying.

On that final and fateful day, I sat at my desk reading and answering letters of business. One, from an unknown solicitor, explained that while a small bequest was to be settled on Fiona, the bulk of a large estate was to pass to her brother, John. Now I
understood my father’s final approval of Fiona as my wife. He must have known of her ancestry but for reasons not in my possession, kept this knowledge to himself.

Before I could rise to tell her of her good fortune, Johnny burst into my study shouting that he wanted a share in the secret treasure of the stones. He raved that he knew we would soon be as rich as Midas and he wanted his portion. He vowed he would no longer be silent, once again swearing that his sister was a witch, and demanded his mother’s signet ring for it controlled the treasure.

I tried reason and drink to calm him but I finally had heard enough of his threats. All thoughts left my head except to preserve the reputation of my loving wife. I took hold of his arm to escort him from the house. He reared back and lunged at me. I pushed him away... and he fell, hitting his head on the table... and died instantly at my feet.

Only then did I remember the letter and that an inheritance was at that moment making its way to his door. He had been the surviving male heir to Lord Artur of York’s fortune, which now would pass to Fiona and by so doing to me. How could I reveal to Fiona that my hand had struck down her brother? Could I ever be seen as innocent by the constabulary when Johnny’s death so greatly profited me? What was I to do to protect my young family?

I am craven, unworthy of my wife and child. In the dark of the night, I transported John’s body to his home and left him lying at the foot of his own stairs. I have lived now with the torment of this secret much as Prometheus in his afflictions.

Ian studied the hand-written page. It had been signed and dated March 21\textsuperscript{st}, 1885. The family certainly had its dirty little secrets but what had his father wanted him to understand. That he was named after a man who was responsible for his own brother-in-law’s death.
He scanned the pages again. He was missing something important. What did his father suspect? How was Barbara tied to this? As if the words were highlighted, Ian reread the words: *secret treasure*, *witch*, and *signet ring*. Could his father actually believe that Barbara and the Rowling journal could somehow wrest riches from dead stones?

Ian turned the second page and found what appeared to be a postscript, dated April, 1885.

*I shudder to write the following for it fills me with dread, especially as it echoes the words of my long dead brother-in-law. I heard singing outside my study and rising, drew the drape to see my own dear Lily, who just turned twelve, playing with her new kitten. The words of her rhyme caused my blood to run chill. Her song will remain with me until I die.*

‘*Within the box a secret hides,*

*binding mother, maid, and crone,*

*through women do the stones abide,*

*blood seals the treasure home.*’

*Lily will soon be a maid. Could my wife, indeed, be a witch?*

The rest of the page was water damaged, the words ruined, unreadable. Ian held it up to a light to see if any meaning could be discerned. Only four words proved decipherable.

*I have the ring.*
Barbara opened bleary eyes. A dull ache behind her right ear throbbed to the slow steady beat of her heart. Mrs Rowling’s journal lay open beneath her hand. Simultaneously, she saw Ken’s promise ring on her thumb and just below it a recipe for preparing white willow bark. The crease between her eyebrows deepened, then she remembered a tidbit from her plant research. Willow bark contained salicin, similar to common aspirin. She smiled and wondered if the book could supply answers to unasked questions, as well as revealing the history of its previous owners?

Barbara slipped off Ken’s ring and the journal went blank as she rose, walked to the bathroom, and tipped two aspirin into the palm of her hand, drinking a glass of water to wash them down. She had a full day ahead of her and hardly knew where to begin.

“Breakfast,” she said to no one in particular. “I need a good Welsh breakfast.” Her stomach rumbled in agreement as she quickly brushed her teeth, combed her hair, and dressed for the day.

An unidentifiable yet somehow familiar intrusion of background buzzing caught her attention. Barbara scanned her room, and tucked under the edge of her duvet, saw the glow of her cell phone. She switched the ringer back on and answered it.

“Miss Shaunaky?”

Taking a moment to hold the phone away from her face, she glanced at the caller ID. It was blocked.
“Yes,” she answered warily.

“Is this Miss Barbara Shaunaky, daughter of Lena Shaunaky?”

“Yes. Lena is my mom. Who is this?” Barbara did a quick calculation of the time difference. It was half past eleven at home in the US. Who would call at that hour?

“Miss Shaunaky, this is Nanc…,” the phone crackled. “PA with Dr Price. We’ve been trying to reach … news about … your mother’s tests …”

“I’m sorry. Can you repeat that? The connection’s terrible.” Hearing no reply, Barbara looked down at her phone. The call had been dropped. She automatically hit redial but the call didn’t go through.

“I hate blocked calls,” she whispered, dialling her mother’s care facility.

“You have reached Riverside Care,” said a toneless voice. “If this is an emergency, please hang up and dial 911. Our office hours are eight to five…. Barbara pulled the phone from her ear and saw that the call had dropped again. With a sinking heart, she saw that there was only 2% battery life. She’d forgotten to recharge the phone before reading from the journal yesterday. Sitting on the edge of the bed, worried about her mother and angry at herself, she plugged in the phone and waited for a return call. Thirty minutes passed. No messages were left. The phone didn’t ring. Barbara finally left her room and descended the winding purple-carpeted stairs to reception.

“No, miss, there have been no messages for you.”

“Can someone notify me if there is a call? I’ll be in the cafe.”

“Certainly, Miss.”

Breakfast a memory, her phone recharged but still with no new messages, Barbara tucked it in her bag. She’d have to wait for the Pacific Coast to wake up
before she could receive any answers to calm the fear that niggled at the edge of her mind. Had her mother’s condition changed? Did her mother possess information on her birth mother? And then there was the question of why the journal allowed her inside its secrets. Barbara didn’t think it was just the bloodstone. Who was she really?

Smiling as she remembered Ian’s kiss at Devil’s Bridge yesterday, Barbara walked up the hill to the National Library. Earlier that week, she’d handed in a printed request, listing several books and papers that were promising; she now looked forward to a whole day of research.

Inquiring about her order at check-in, the clerk behind the counter scrutinised Barbara as she signed in and showed her visitor pass.

“You must be the American. Mr Jones left this message.” The clerk handed a small folded note with the NLW logo embossed on the front. “Your books are already in your private room,” she said, her voice now deferential.

Barbara read the briefly penned request from the library’s curator.

“I’d be more than happy to meet with Mr Jones,” Barbara said.

“I’ll notify Mr Jones and I’m sure he will come to your study room as soon as he’s free.”

Setting up her table for research, Barbara opened her computer and connected to the library’s wifi, then pulled out her workbook, two pencils, and her fully charged iPhone, setting it to vibrate only. She began to read though the list of questions and topics she’d written earlier that morning, while willing her phone to ring with further news about her mother.

1- Literary reference to palimpsest journals if any

2- Tolkien papers: Reference to rings, sources cited

3- Genealogy: Poss unknown progeny of Tobias and Ursula Shipton
4- Who is Fiona Middleton Stanley?

5- Symptoms of schizophrenia or bi-polar disorder? Genetic?

Barbara almost crossed the last one off the list but then decided that even with Ian’s acceptance of her wild tales, her life was certainly not normal. She had to find her way to bedrock.

Three hours into cross-referencing commentaries on Tolkien and the creation of palimpsests by early scribes, Barbara stopped to rub the kinks out her neck, then applied pressure to the bridge of her nose. Her headache was back and threatening to escalate. Reaching into her bag, she pulled out two more aspirin and swallowed them dry. She jumped when her phone vibrated simultaneously with a gentle tap on the door.

“Just a moment, please.” She glanced at her phone. It was an incoming text from Ken dated yesterday evening, Eastern Standard Time. Before she could read it, she heard the door open and quickly slid the phone, which library rules stipulated should have been off, into her pocket.

“Mr Jones, I presume?” She extended her hand.

“Why, yes, Miss Shaunaky,” he said, shaking her hand and nodding. “I hope you find our accommodations fit your study needs?”

Barbara nodded, “The office is great. It’s awfully kind of you to allow me to use it.”

“Would you care to accompany me for tea? I would like to discuss your research with you, if that is possible?”

“I’d be more than happy to visit with you.” Barbara began to close her computer and notebook.
“If you don’t wish to carry them, I assure you that the security at the National Library is quite high, especially in our private office area.”

Not wishing to appear ungrateful or call into question her host’s veracity, Barbara slipped her satchel over her shoulder, patting the side. The Rowling journal was safe inside. She closed her workbook and followed Mr Jones to the Pen Dinas Café.

Finding she was hungry for more than tea, Barbara ordered hot chocolate and Welsh rarebit, an over-the-top British equivalent of an American grilled cheese sandwich.

“I shall miss many things when I leave Wales, Mr. Jones,” she smiled. “And this is certainly one of them.” She lifted her mug of hot chocolate, savouring the creamy consistency and deep chocolate flavour. “Diolch,” she said, looking into his eyes for a reaction.

“Well done, Miss. Perhaps a bit more guttural from the back of your throat but your ‘thank you’ was wonderful. I’ve always said that a little bit of Welsh goes a long way.”

Barbara smiled, settling her cup in its saucer. “Mr. Jones, I do really appreciate the lovely tea but wasn’t there something you wanted to talk about?”

Barbara noticed a slight redness rise from his shirt collar. “You and the library staff have been great. How can I help you?”

In spite of the fact that the cafeteria was nearly empty, the curator looked around before answering. “Might you be able to tell me what… or more importantly, why you are researching for Lord Stanley?” He ran his finger around his collar, the red rising.
Barbara studied the man across the table from her. He looked very Welsh, medium height, inky-black hair, and a soft burr to his voice. Trustworthy, she surmised, from his well-groomed haircut to his white shirt fitted with proper Welsh dragon cuff links. Still, he appeared decidedly uncomfortable.

“That Mr Jones is an excellent question and the first part is fairly easy to answer. I began researching the skeleton in the castle ruin. For reasons known only to himself, Lord Stanley is quite interested in who he is or I should say was,” she replied. “But to your second question, I really don’t know why he requested me.” She paused. “I haven’t even finished my master’s degree in anthropology and my credentials are only a handful of publications, though they were well received.”

Barbara felt the heat rise in her face. “I still ask myself the same question. Why me?” She looked up into her companion’s clear blue eyes, “May I ask, why you ask? Is there something I should know?”

“It’s just that the Shipton genealogy you’ve requested hasn’t been required in my twenty-seven-year tenure until last week when you placed your order. In fact, they haven’t been requested since the late 1800’s when they were housed in the University College before the main library opened. But since your interest, we immediately received two additional requests for them. And then there was a flurry of research, which appears to mirror yours, but which is being done by his lordship’s daughter.”

“Daughter?” Barbara’s eyebrows almost reached her hairline. “He has a daughter?”

“Why, yes. A daughter and a son. I presumed you’d met them whilst doing your genealogical research as it was his Lordship’s son who requested your private room, which is highly unusual. That and I’d seen you together.”
“With Lord Stanley?” Barbara tried to remember a time she’d been in the National Library with his lordship. “I must admit, I’m a bit confused. Who are his children? Can you tell me about them?”

“I suppose so as his marriages were quite public at the time. Lord Stanley’s daughter by his first wife is Tao Woolfe…”

“His daughter is Tao Woolfe?” Barbara blurted.

“Yes. Frightful business. The first Lady Stanley took the infant shortly after she was born, returned to her family in the Caribbean, and divorced Lord Stanley. She gave her daughter her maiden name of Woolfe and raised the child herself in St. Lucia. It was quite a scandal with fights over custody. She accused his Lordship of evil intent toward the child, something about witchcraft. She was portrayed a complete nutter by the press. However, Miss Woolfe returned several years ago and appears to be reconciled to her father.”

Barbara remembered the threatening letter, the comment on the Prom, Tao in her room. Her outward composure warred with the fear that crept up her spine.

“Lord Stanley married again, a Welsh woman, the only child of a prominent Aberystwyth family, but the second Lady Stanley died when their son was only twelve, about thirteen years ago. Her family dates back many generations here in Aber. But surely you must know this. You had luncheon with Lord Stanley’s son here in the Pen Dinas recently.”

“His son?”

“Why, yes, Miss Shaunaky. Lord Stanley’s son, Ian William Edwards Stanley. He won’t assume the title until his father’s demise but he is the only male heir.”

Barbara felt the air leave her lungs as her world imploded. Her stomach pleasantly warm and full moments ago, began to roil against its contents. Tao now
seemed a threatening omnipresence. And Ian Williams was Ian Stanley, the son of a Lord. She’d kissed him, trusted him, confided in him. *Why the deception? What did they want?* Barbara’s world turned upside down as she suddenly realized her research, her workbook, her computer were all in a *safe* room arranged for her use by the Stanleys.

“Miss Shaunaky, have I spoken out of turn? Are you quite alright?”

Barbara looked into the guileless face of Mr Jones, fumbling for words that would reassure him, while she fought the rising panic and pain inside her heart.

“Why, no,” she lied, swallowing. “I mean, yes. I’m fine and you’ve been helpful. Really.” Trying to keep her face as expressionless as possible, Barbara slipped her bag over her shoulder, wishing she could be alone to sort through these new revelations.

Mr Jones coughed discreetly. “Well, I’m not sure I should say more but there has been speculation, perhaps only on my part.” He studied his manicured fingernails before meeting her eyes. “I consider myself something of an amateur sleuth.” His blush returned and deepened. “I confess a great interest in mystery, and my inquiries revealed that one record had gone missing.”

“Missing. How?” Barbara found her attention refocusing on Mr Jones.

“Evidently when the files were transferred here to the National, mention is made of a handwritten genealogy gone missing. I searched through old microfiche records of the late 1800’s, hoping to recover it. All I could find, however, was that Lord Stanley’s ancestry not only secured a great land holding through marriage to the lost line of a noble Yorkshire family, but they also won full rights to their title. Although the claim seemed tenuous to me, the high court upheld it. I’ve often wondered if the lost record would have shed some light on the claim.” He paused
again. “I kept file copies of my findings. Not really quite sure why, but I’d be glad to share them with you, if you think it would help in your research.”

“Oh, yes, please. That would be great.” Torn between possible answers and his overwhelming revelations, Barbara’s head reeled with his latest information.

“I really enjoyed lunch.” Barbara stood and began gathering her things. “But I’ve got to get back to work.” Her life, which mere moments before had seemed to be filling with hope, now toppled like a rock fall. Like stones sliding beneath my feet. It is my nightmare, she thought as she felt her heart constrict. Why did Ian lie? Why the charade?

“I’ll bring the file to your room straightaway, shall I? I hope it can help you.” Mr Jones extended his hand. Barbara looked at it dumbly for a moment, gathered herself, smiled and shook it.

“Diolch yn fawr,” she said before she hurried away.

Back in her carrel, everything looked untouched. Her computer screen was dark. Barbara tapped the control pad and jumped when a message appeared on the screen. It was in Welsh – Cyfaill cywir mewn ing y ’i gwelir. She sat heavily in the chair and ran her fingers through her hair. Who was sending these messages? A light tap on the door preceded Mr. Jones’ entry carrying a thick file.

“I had a copy prepared for you as I thought you might want…. He broke off in mid-sentence. “My, dear, whatever is the matter?”

“I’m not sure as I can only say thank you very much in Welsh but I keep running into strange messages. Can you tell me what this means?”

“It doesn’t translate directly but means that in adversity, you will find a true friend. Does that help?”

Barbara smiled at the librarian. “Yes,” she said, “I think I just have.”
Today ~ England ~ Revelations

The idyllic Welsh countryside, punctuated by occasional small villages, rolled softly away on either side of the train track. Sheep, which Barbara had come to accept as part of the landscape, cropped everything to velvet smoothness. *My life used to be like this, uncomplicated, no sharp edges, no cryptic Welsh messages.* Too tired to argue with herself or examine her thoughts too deeply, Barbara couldn’t hold back the last stray thought. *And, she continued, no Ian either.* Exhausted from the overwhelming revelations of the last twenty-four hours, Barbara fought the frustration of tears as she pulled out her phone and reread the text from Ken.

‘Arriving Birmingham, 17th, at 10:25 AM, on KLM. Please meet me at the Ibis. Lunch at one, Barbie doll. Important must talk.”

Nothing else indicated what he wanted to talk about. *Why not call rather than fly to England?* she asked herself again. *What’s going on?* She’d read the text just after yesterday’s meeting with Jones and decided immediately she’d meet Ken. She needed to get away. *To run away, you mean.* The argument had played itself over and over in her head. *I don’t need any more drama. I don’t want any more drama and maybe Ken will understand.*

A distant church spire pierced the heavens and called to the faithful from a small vale. *Barbara, you’re a bloody fool.* She allowed herself a weak smile at the British colloquialism before her inner voice began again. *Am I just oblivious to the obvious?* She tried to reconstruct the chain of events that had led her to rush to Birmingham alone.
Her luncheon yesterday with Mr Jones had shattered the fragile new world in which she’d been so willing to trust. Ian was not a chauffeur, he was in line to be the next Earl of Comptonshire. Tao was his half-sister. Ken, unreachable by phone, had not answered any of her questioning texts, and was now en route for tomorrow’s meeting. The call from Riverside Care had finally come through last evening while at dinner in the Gwesty. Her mother was no longer in a full-coma, spikes of brain activity had been detected over the last few days. The prognosis was still guarded. There had been only one episode in which her mother became semi-conscious, seemed agitated, and repeatedly muttered an unintelligible name, which the staff hadn’t been able to decipher. Did her mother know anyone named Rollay or Rowytch or was she perhaps a fan of the popular author? More tests were being run but the incident hadn’t repeated itself. Barbara could think of no one her mother might know by either name. She did not mention that her mother hadn’t been happy that Barbara had read and enjoyed the entire boy wizard series, especially when Barbara had identified so strongly with Hermione, Harry Potter’s brilliant female sidekick. *Wait. What of Mrs Rowling and her journal?* But, despite everything in her life being farfetched at the moment, Barbara felt this was too great a stretch, even for her. The realisation hit her that in spite everything, she missed her Mom.

Barbara again fingered the chain she wore about her neck, which resulted in a reassuring tug between her breasts as her locket slid free. Ken’s ring was safe within a little velvet pouch, tucked in a button-down pocket of her jacket. Wearing the ring on her thumb felt too dangerous as she wasn’t sure how to control the… *the what… flashbacks, visions, journeys in time. Mom, get well. I need you now, more than ever.*
She didn’t know how to label her deepening episodes but she was certain she didn’t want to have one on the train.

The last year of her life seemed like an endless merry-go-round, speeding with each revolution until she could no longer see her way clearly. Blank pages of an old journal suddenly replete with information, rings that held magical properties, and bloodlines that criss-crossed history and continents like ley lines. Ken at least was a part of her normal life. Barbara realized she looked forward to seeing him although she knew now she no longer loved him romantically.

A question shivered down Barbara’s spine, forcing her to gather her thoughts. Could she ask the journal a direct question? Was there a way to control the grimoire? It had on one occasion pointed the way to an unspoken need on her part for aspirin. Coincidence or could it help her find the real reason for her journey to Wales?

Confused by yesterday’s revelations… how could it have only been yesterday?

Her mind and heart had been assailed with questions as she had handled and read the deeds of property, rights of ascendency, assorted clippings, and parish records spreading across the UK. Mr Jones’ records were a gold mine as she tried to piece together the disparate pieces of history. The librarian had been right about the marriage of one Lord Iain Charles Stanley to a Fiona Middleton in 1872 and the transfer upon their marriage of a piece of property in Little Rollright near Long Compton, citing Fiona as the sole owner. Mr Jones had commented that it was odd for a woman to own property in her own right as the Married Women’s Property Act wasn’t passed until 1882. The genealogical records dated back to the early 1400’s and a family named Artur of York. Wasn’t York near Knaresborough?
You’ve really stepped through the looking glass this time, she chastised herself. Think, Barbara. Think. If Mrs Rowling possessed the book and was telling the true story of the stones…?

But that’s impossible. There’re no such things as witches and the stone circle is thousands of years old, she argued with herself.

Possibly, but then, how did she come by the book? Was she a direct descendant of Fiona Middleton? Why not ask the journal?

I’m not going to explore the journal while on a train heading off to meet the man I promised...

Promised what? What about Devil’s Bridge and Ian? The kiss had changed everything. Once again Barbara felt the pressure of his hand on her back, the thrill of his lips on hers, and the release of fear and surge of comfort that he didn’t think her insane. But immediately following the warmth of the memory, her inner voice sliced through her reverie and into her heart.

You trusted him and he lied. Am I just an agenda? What do the Stanleys want?

Barbara sighed, exhausted from her internal debate. He can’t possibly want me. I’m such a trusting, naive idiot. Barbara put her hands over her ears, trying to block the internal conversation. “Oh, shut up. Just shut up and let me think.”

“I beg your pardon?” The man across from her looked vexed.

Barbara blushed red, realising she had spoken the last aloud. “I’m terribly sorry,” she stammered, “I…”

“Birmingham International,” boomed the recorded message, interrupting both her embarrassment and her circling thoughts. Barbara stood, gathered her possessions and walked from the train to the Ibis, where she had booked a room. She needed to be alone to sort her feelings and discoveries. She stopped a moment to stare at a multi-
armed signpost, which pointed the way to Brussels, Zurich, Rome, London, and Paris. Such tantalising names and yet… she sighed and closed her eyes. *I still hate travelling alone.*

The Ibis Motel, a tall white building, loomed across the car park. Its restaurant was on the main floor. Glancing at her watch, she saw it was too early for dinner and she wasn’t really hungry as she’d snacked on the train. On the elevator to her room she winced, remembering that she was supposed to have dinner with Ian tonight and she’d left no message for him. *Serves him right,* she thought without much conviction. *One problem at a time, Barbara, dear. Take a nap, have a quiet dinner, read a book, but turn in early before you face Ken tomorrow.*

The room around her was a no-frills cubicle, the bath, a circular unit of continuous plastic. *Definitely European,* Barbara mused, *perhaps Scandinavian.* It was nothing like her cosy room at the Gwesty Cymru nor spacious like her home in Astoria, but its clean lines were devoid of conflict and allowed her space to plan her next move.

She knew she wanted to visit the stones again and hoped this journey would help piece together the discordant puzzle that was her life. Revelations at the library and the text from Ken had merely given her the impetus she’d needed to get on the train. She hadn’t planned past Birmingham. *Maybe I can talk Ken into driving if he’s not too upset when I tell him I no longer love him.* The thought was followed with an immediate retort. *You should have gotten your driver’s license at sixteen like everyone else.* Barbara sighed as she sat on her bed, adrenalin thoughts made sleep impossible and conversations with herself only deepened her anxiety.

She rose, thinking a run would do her some good, give her a chance to clear her head, and think about how to suss out the truth among all the histories that
besieged her. A glance out of the window convinced her once again how changeable
the weather was. The standard British drizzle was beginning to slant sideways, when a
distant flash of lightning cut across the sky.

“One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi, four…” she counted
before she heard the low rumble of thunder. “Okay, I guess my decision has been
made for me. No run today. Time to face things.”

She kicked off her shoes, sat on the bed and pulled the Rowling journal from
her bag. Unbuttoning her jacket pocket, she pulled out the small velvet pouch and slid
Ken’s ring onto her palm. It looked innocent enough and decidedly unmagical.

“Oh, well, what was it mom used to say? ‘In for a penny, in for a pound.’” She
pulled the journal toward her, slipped the ring on her thumb, and placed her hand on
the embossed leather cover, then stopped not knowing what question she should ask
first. The answer came to her almost as if the book was leading her.

“What’s it say? ‘Whose history is contained in The Book of Standing Stone?’”

Barbara held her breath and lifted the cover as swirls of ink appeared on the
blank page. Again she read the opening words she had seen for the first time only last
week.

‘The story of the stones begins

when rock overcomes water.

This is the Book of Standing Stone.

To those who are of the blood

and who hold the key,

upon these pages are recorded

each generation’s true history.’
Barbara slid her finger under the parchment page to turn it and was confronted with an ancient writing style she could not decipher. She turned page after page until she found Celtic runes, heavy and black, and then Uncial and Carolingian script several pages further in, followed by the loops and swirls of Italic and the easily read Roundhand. As Barbara moved backward and forward among the pages, she began to decipher names, dates and places, mostly in the United Kingdom, listed much like a family bible. Some of the lines had a small ‘x’ next to the name. At the bottom of the page, the interpretation was given: written history and common book.

Her chest felt constricted as she felt an invisible yet tangible force pull her further into the book. Near the end of the fifteenth century, Barbara read the name, Granny Wise from Knaresborough, England. Following her name another had been struck through but Barbara could clearly see an ‘Agatha Sh…’ at the forefront, although the remainder was no longer legible.

There was no turning back, no way to ‘un-see’ what was before her. As if heavy interlocking stones were falling into place creating a mosaic of understanding, Barbara read the next name listed - Ursula Shipton, nee Southill or Soothtell, the whole of which filled the line with a flourish. A small infinity sign had been drawn upon the symbol of a tree, which trailed after the name. As if seeking an exit from a labyrinth, she felt her hand turn pages faster now, the names unknown to her until the name Fiona Stanley, nee Middleton stared up at her.

*How can this be? This is impossible.* She paused, staring at the name.

Inhaling sharply, Barbara’s eyes locked on the last name on the page that lay open in her lap. It read… Sula Rowling followed by the same symbol of a tree with the sign for infinity encircling its trunk.
Barbara turned the page. It was blank. She looked away and then back to where her hand rested. There was a faint stain on the upper left page. She watched in horrified fascination as the name Barbara Shaunaky, born Shipton, grew from the smudge until it lay crystal clear upon the page.
“What do you mean, she’s gone?” Lord Stanley paced back and forth beside his desk, hands clasped behind his back.

“Exactly what I said,” Ian replied. “She left the Gwesty yesterday morning but I didn’t find out until last evening. She didn’t cancel our dinner plans, which isn’t like her at all. The clerk said she requested the room be held and asked for a train schedule and some bus routes.”

“Did you… ?”

“Yes, of course, I stayed overnight at my bungalow so I could follow up this morning in Aber before I drove here to meet you, Father,” Ian interrupted. “A woman matching Barbara’s description took the noon train to Birmingham. Although why she’d go to England alone surprises me.”

“Surprises how?”

“She’s a nervous traveller,” interjected Tao, studying her painted nails.

“Seems as if our little bird is growing wings.”

“That will be quite enough, Tao.” Lord Stanley scowled, his eyebrows forming a ‘v’ above his nose. He circled around his desk, extracted a small case, and standing before Ian, handed it to him.

“What’s this?” Ian turned the dark wood box over in his hands. “Where did this come from?”
“It came from Miss Shaunaky’s home in America. Tao went to pay her a visit and, since Barbara was quite conveniently absent, invited herself in. Delightful twist of fate to find it.”

Ian looked up at his father. “You didn’t.”

Lord Stanley tipped his head toward his daughter, “Your sister can actually do some things right.” Tao drew breath as if to speak but instead closed her mouth, biting off her retort.

The ghost of a smile touched Lord Stanley’s face, which passed as he continued. “You will notice the bas relief decoration.” He watched as Ian studied the box.

“This one’s a bit different.”

“I’m surprised you noticed so quickly. Push it gently and …” A tiny click sounded. “Yes. Now pull out the drawer and look at the incision on its underside. I believe that to be the confirming formula for which we’ve been searching.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The book, bound by a ring, stained by the blood or, I presume, the genetic line that ties back to the beginning. Our Miss Shaunaky must be very powerful indeed to be able to read the journal without the signet I possess.”

Ian studied his father’s face. Had he gone mad in his obsessive search? What beginning did he refer to… was it the scorched genealogy? Surely his father didn’t actually believe in the myths and fairy tales tied up in the Rollright Stones or in some mysterious and unnamed treasure?

Lord Stanley crossed to the window and stared out at the countryside then turned abruptly into the room. He fixed his eyes on his son. “And, you know
absolutely nothing else? Done nothing to frighten her? You’ve tried to call her, I presume?”

Ian considered his answer and how much he should reveal of what he knew. When he’d found Barbara gone last evening without a word for him, he was shocked that his father’s carefully laid plans had gone awry. With the disappearance of both Barbara and the journal, they’d lost the key to discovering what secrets it contained. His second thought, however, was much more difficult to understand. Why did he feel personally hurt?

“Of course I’ve tried to call her but she doesn’t pick up.”

*Why*, he wondered, *doesn’t she want to talk to me?*

Barbara had gotten up early and gone for a run. Returning she’d taken a quick shower, then slipped into the cafe for a hearty breakfast. She regretted eating nearly the entire serving as it now lay like a stone in her stomach. Sipping some chamomile tea to calm her nerves, she had forgone her usual hot chocolate. It reminded her too much of Ian.

The cafe was almost empty as Barbara lowered her head into her hand. *I am a freak of nature. Even my own mother gave me away. How can I be a witch? Witches don’t exist except in books and fairy tales.*

“Was there anything else I can get for you, Miss?” The waitress raised an eyebrow and smiled.

“Do I look normal to you?”

“I beg pardon, Miss. What was that you asked?”

Barbara shook her head. “Never mind. Just wool-gathering.” She winced as the term evoked memories of a happier time when hope and new beginnings had filled her.
She gave the waitress a generous tip and wondered if she, herself, would ever again feel the simple joy that covered the young woman’s face at her unexpected windfall.

As she finished her tea, Ken stepped off the elevator.

*Odd*, she thought. *I assumed I’d be nervous but I feel…* She considered…

*almost calm.*

“Barbie-doll,” Ken called. He walked toward her, bent to give her a quick hug, and pulled out a chair across from her. “You look great. Wales must agree with you.”

He waved for the waitress. “Care for a drink. Perhaps some tea?” Ken amended.

“Just finished breakfast. Bit early for drinks.”

“Still on US time, Barbie.”

“Thanks but no thanks, Ken.” She saw him glance down at her hand.

“I see you’re not wearing your promise ring.”

“It’s a long story. Ken, you came an awfully long way to ask how I’m doing. Why are you here and why so early?”

“Well, Barbie, I wanted to talk to you face to face. In fact Jillian insisted.”

“Jillian?”

“Things have changed for me, for us. You see, I’ve been given a promotion and am staying on in D.C. Jillian’s been an invaluable assistant and… and… well, you know. Things sometimes just happen and, I’ve,” he paused, ‘I’ve asked… Jillian and I are together now.”

“You’re what?” Barbara’s eyebrows drew together. Ken was not prepared as Barbara’s surprise gave way to a chuckle, which slowly began to escalate.

“I’m sorry, Ken,” she hiccupped after several attempts to stifle her mirth.

“And here I was worried about how you’d take my news.”
An implosion of the tightly held rules that defined her life released a flood of uncontrollable laughter; Barbara stuffed a napkin against her mouth while tears spilled from her eyes.

“I’m really sorry,” Barbara chortled, as she dabbed at her eyes and nose. “I’m…. Her words were lost as she placed both hands over her face in an attempt to control herself. “Sorry. I mean congratulations.” She lifted her head as Ken, his face a mask of concern, beckoned with an outstretched hand and Jillian appeared beside the table, sliding into a seat next to Ken.

“Please don’t look so worried or I’ll have to start laughing again and I don’t think my ribs can take it,” Barbara said. In their stunned silence, she interjected, “Not quite the response you expected, I imagine?”

“Well, no,” he paused. “Barbie doll, are you quite all right?”

“I’m fine. Really.” She dabbed at her eyes. “First off, congratulations Ken,” she reached across the table and surprised herself by patting their joined hands, “and, of course, you too, Jillian. Congratulations. I hope you’ll both be very happy.”

“Second - ” her voice calmed considerably - “please never call me Barbie-doll, again. I always hated Ken and Barbie jokes.”

“I told you so,” whispered Jillian.

“And third, I’m obviously not mad.” Barbara took a deep breath. “Well, at least not at either of you. It’s just a nervous reaction. I’ve so much to tell you.”

The uncontrollable laughter had broken something loose within her. Barbara felt free and perhaps a bit brave for the first time in her life. She had a new identity and though she might struggle, she was determined to adapt. She was through with hiding and doubting herself. Barbara took a deep breath, considered her options, and took the plunge. “How would you like to hear an interesting story?”
“You’ve completed your research then?”

Jillian broke into Ken’s question, her hand squeezing his arm. “Oh, Kenny told me you were doing research on a witch and a stone circle and magic.”

Barbara looked at Ken, shook her head, and replied, “Well, it is a rather long story. What say I rent a car and you drive? As long as you’re here to break up with me, you owe me a favour and I can tell you the whole story on the way.”

“To where?”

“To the Rollright Stones of course.”

No one was more surprised than Barbara when Jillian not only listened patiently to her discoveries as they drove along the motorway, but somehow suggested she and Ken play guinea pig in the stone ceremony. Barbara mutely agreed, just accepting that the night would bring a full moon. Her life, so recently filled with coincidence and discovery, it now seemed entirely plausible that a red ring around the moon would be forthcoming. She had long since forgotten what normal felt like.

Her phone’s vibrating buzz filled the car again as Ken left the motorway and navigated narrow twisted roads.

“Aren’t you going to answer that, Barbie, I mean Barbara?”

“No, I’m not,” she said. She knew it was Ian and he had plummeted from possible… possible what? she asked herself… to the lowest of the low.

He’d lied to her and her father had taught her lying was wrong early on, had fed it to her with her breakfast, had taught it to her while helping with homework, and had been disappointed in her only once. Once was all it took. She had never lied again and looked on anyone who did so as completely untrustworthy. But has he lied or just done the bidding of his father? Maybe there was a reason. Just add prevarication to your new persona as witch. Barbara groaned inwardly. Do white lies really count?
The entire world as she had known it for almost twenty years had split along an unknown fault, shattering all she trusted. Her parents weren’t her parents and Tao and Ian were not the people she’d thought they were. The Stanleys wanted something from her and were willing to play this charade to get it. The Rollright Stones were magic, or cursed, or perhaps filled with the souls of wicked men according to the journal. And to top things off, she was the latest in a long line of witches according to the same journal/palimpsest/grimoire/common book that magically shared writing from hundreds of years ago through the use of a promise ring that no longer held any promise. Barbara glanced at Jillian in the front seat and wondered again why she felt relief instead of anger.
The threesome looked skyward. In the twilight, a flock of swallows dipped and soared above their heads, like notes of music fixed in a score, adrift on the wind.

A full moon rose, as if on cue a red ring circled its expectant face.

“Perhaps we should break out the Elderflower wine for a little nip before we do this?” Ken asked hopefully. “What do you think, Bar… bara?” Ken corrected mid-word.

“No. It’s for the ceremony.” Barbara looked at Ken, who had put his arm protectively around Jillian. Barbara could tell he was a bit nervous. It’s one thing to be keen on a story about magic and witches in the afternoon. It’s entirely something else when dusk redefines the known world.

“Sorry, guys. Didn’t mean to snap. I guess I’m a bit nervous too. You know you don’t have to do this.”

Jillian shivered and pulled her cashmere wrap closer about her shoulders. “Oh, Barbara, we must do it, mustn’t we Kenny? It’s so romantic.”

“Your boot heels may be a problem on the uneven field, Jillian, but I really like your cape.”

“Thanks. I just had to bring it when Ken said we were going to the land of fairies and witches.” She stopped, putting her hand to her mouth. “Oh, Barb, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean.”
“Relax Jillian. It’s a lot to take in and I’m still dealing with everything myself.” She looked at her companions, stepped toward the altar stone, slipped on the uneven ground, and caught herself on the rough surface.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, just a scratch,” Barbara said, rubbing her wrist. She uncorked the wine and poured a bit into a natural depression. She waited a minute to see if it would be absorbed but the wine didn’t sink into the stone, although as the liquid settled, the moon’s red ring reflected from its surface.

“Well, then,” continued Barbara, “we just need two rings of meaning. It appears,” she looked up, “that nature is working with us. Although it looks like we might get a bit of rain if we don’t hurry.”

Ken pulled his heavy class ring off his hand. Jillian took off a small plain band from her pinkie finger. “It’s from my mom,” she said.

“Are you sure you both really want to do this?” Barbara asked, looking into their faces. “I don’t know if it will work for you or even if it makes any sense.”

Ken looked at Jillian. “Oh, please, Kenny. It’s so romantic.”

Barbara saw that Jillian was the perfect foil for Ken’s ego and wondered why she hadn’t seen it before.

“Well, as long as you’re sure, I guess we can begin.” Still unsettled by the turn of events and Jillian’s proposal earlier that they be allowed to perform the ceremony, Barbara worried about the possible consequences, which were unknown. “You know what to do. Kiss once, set the rings on the altar, count the stones…”

“We remember, Barbara,” Ken said.

“I’m just going to stand back by the trees to give you some space. According to what I read, this is just for the two hopefuls.
Ken looked sharply at Barbara. “Just kidding, Kenny. I’m sure you two were meant for each other.” Barbara was gratified to see Ken wince a little when she used Jillian’s term of endearment. *Serves you right. You better get used to it, you’ll be Kenny for the rest of your life.*

Barbara backed away to the tree line, wondering why he had agreed to this. Jillian had always been fanciful but Ken was rather anti-mystical when they’d been a couple. Maybe Jillian had this effect on him.

Barbara hoped the ceremony would be successful for them, again surprised at herself that she sincerely wished them well. She gave no further voice to her doubts but wondered if the stones would work for them, curious, indeed, if the stones would work at all. What if they only worked for the bloodline? Or perhaps, the women of the line had used it for couples in the community?

“Okay, go ahead. Take your places and start the count.”

After a last look at each other and a low murmur that Barbara couldn’t quite hear, the couple began their opposing journeys around the stones. Barbara watched, remembering Fiona’s words in the journal, wondering how she must have felt when she didn’t gaze up into Michael’s blue eyes and was surprised instead when she stared into the grey of Lord Iain Stanley’s. Fiona’s diary entries said she’d found happiness but Barbara wondered if she had ever discovered the truth about her brother and how a single careless stone, thrown thoughtlessly, had changed so many lives. There was so much Barbara felt she needed to learn and to understand. Why did her name appear after Mrs Rowling’s? Why wasn’t her birth mother listed in the journal? Had she died giving birth?

Her thoughts drifted to the current Lord Stanley and his son, Ian, the so-called chauffeur. She wondered if she could have found happiness in the UK, then realised
that she was already happy in an odd sort of way. Questions still plagued her. The puzzle wasn’t solved. She still didn’t know what part she would be called upon to play but at her centre was a small grain of quiet resolve. Maybe she was making peace with who she might be; perhaps she was just growing up.

Pulled from her reverie, Barbara saw car lights pass on the road outside the protective fence. The lights were cut and the motor silenced. The sound of tires on gravel was all that disturbed the still night. Fear shivered down her back. Hoping whoever it was wouldn’t disturb the ceremony, she saw in the light of the disappearing moon that Ken and Jillian were passing opposite each other yet again. If their numbers matched, the journal said they were destined to be together.

Footsteps sounded in the underbrush. Barbara turned toward the forest path as a tall figure rushed past.

“Stop,” a male voice commanded.

Jillian, leaning in for a kiss, cried out in surprise. Ken stepped around the altar stone, putting an arm protectively about her shoulders. “What the hell is this? Who are you to barge in?”

Barbara stood hidden, studying the dark silhouette. It sounded like Ian but it couldn’t be, she reasoned. Why would he want to stop strangers having a kiss at the stones? What was he doing here anyway? He couldn’t possibly have followed her, could he?

Another car parked outside the gate. Torchlight cut through the gloom, followed by heavy footsteps rushing down the forest path.

A mourning veil of clouds obscured the moon as Barbara watched the first dark figure halt his advance and melt into the tree line across the path from where she stood.
“Ian, it was very foolish of you to steal from me and bring Miss Shaunaky here. It’s the journal we want. Your sister is destined to control the stones regardless of what Rowling said.” Lord Stanley left the forest path and broke into the clearing, a slender woman at his side. “Miss Shaunaky, you have no idea what forces you are toying with.”

As Jillian’s hood slipped back and fell about her shoulders, a stream of moonlight slipped through the cloud cover and illuminated her blond head, creating a halo.

“What?” His surprise was only matched by his anger, “Tao, you are as worthless as your brother.” He focused the beam of his torch at Ken and Jillian. “Who are you and what are you doing here?”

“Look, old man, I don’t know who you think you are but take that light out of my eyes.” Ken drew Jillian closer and led her from the circle. “We’re leaving and you can keep your damned fairy circle for all I care.”

As they stepped away from the edge of the Rollright stones, the air went still and black. Lord Stanley’s torch failed. Barbara could hear him clicking the switch frantically. She could hear no movement from Ken or Jillian.

In the centre of the monoliths was a smaller circle composed of flat stones. Barbara had once seen an offering of flowers placed there, which had been replaced with the changing colours of the Samhain fire, but there were no druids present tonight.

A pale violet light began to glow and spiral up from within the tiny fire pit. Standing in the stillness, Barbara felt nausea rise, but this was different. She clutched her arms about her waist. She felt her wrist begin to pulse where she had scraped it
earlier. She touched the bruised flesh. Her fingers came away sticky, a rim of crust had begun to form.

The glowing light deepened in intensity, colours merged, blended. A ghostly form detached itself and stepped out of the flame. Translucent, dressed in a flowing cape, the figure stood, silent, then lifted a delicate hand and pulled the cowl away from its face. The woman’s countenance shifted between ages - maid, mother, crone. Only the eyes remained constant, black holes that reflected an abyss of suffering.

The light behind the spectre grew brighter and dimmed, again and again, as women stepped from the flame’s centre and filled the space within the Rollright Stone circle. They were each clothed in the costumes of their period, some gentle and young, some ancient, withered, one, whose head hung lopsided, had a broken rope laced about her left hand, yet another bore the blackened skin of burns.

Barbara heard Jillian whimper but the sound came to her muffled as if from a distant place. She somehow felt Ken comfort Jillian, a low shushing as his hand stroked the wool of her cape. All of Barbara’s senses were heightened. Almost overpowering, she felt the life force expand within the ring of stones before her.

Finally the circle was full, the myriad-faced wraith stepped to the altar stone, raised a crooked finger, and pointed. Unwilling but compelled, Barbara stepped forward from her place of concealment, her feet leaden, her gorge rising, her eyes fixed. This is my nightmare. Soon I’ll wake. No, she argued with herself, I have never been more fully alive.

“No.” A scream ripped through the air. “This is mine. I am to inherit.”

The wraith, eyes never losing contact with Barbara, circled a bony finger and Tao dropped to her knees in silence.
Mesmerised, unable to look away from the crone, Barbara sensed a presence approach from behind. In an outstretched arm, an offering. It was Ian. Somehow her elder wood box was balanced on his hand. Again the crone pointed. Barbara saw the signet glow in the moonlight, and not knowing why, lifted it from the box and placed the ring within the small pool of wine. The liquid boiled and steamed, while the scent of elderflower filled the air. Tao sobbed at the feet of Lord Stanley.

The gauzy shadow of a young woman detached herself from the glowing phantoms, slipped forward, took the box and reverently set it upon the altar. Ethereal fingers reached inside, lifted and placed a cameo-sized portrait upon the stone. Barbara felt a tender attachment grow as the faintly smiling shade studied her. Somehow Barbara knew that she looked into the face of Fiona Middleton Stanley.

“Come, child,” commanded the oddly familiar wraith, her many faces now become only two.

“Stick, stock, stone,
By these three shall thou be known.
Stick of elder, a portal true,
Stock of woman, thy blood hew,
Stone, their prison, now renew.”

Barbara stared within the depths of the soul-consuming black holes and saw the grey eyes of another, gentler soul. The river-grey eyes of Mrs Rowling battled within a visage of ugliness, which passed only to be replaced by a face of unearthly beauty, but the eyes were the eyes of Barbara’s nightmare.

When the howling began, Barbara could not say, but from each standing stone, upright or lying on its side, rose the spirit of a man. Some were bent and misshapen,
ugly shapes, no longer men but only an amalgam of black, twisted deeds. Others stood peaceably, betrayed and resigned to their suffering.

Barbara felt faint, her insides scooped out. Was she being asked to judge? Who? The women within the circle or the men trapped within the stone? How could she know their truth?

Like a kaleidoscope shifting, everything happened at once but yet in slow motion as Barbara stepped inside her nightmare.

The crone’s hand reached for her, turning at the last moment to reveal an open palm. Without knowing why, Barbara pulled her necklace from under her jacket and held the locket for the wraith to see. The crone smiled, gave a barely perceptible nod and again held out her closed hand. At the last moment she turned it, palm upwards. In it rested the ring. The ring Barbara had first seen torn from Charlie’s finger as he lay dead within the castle walls, Lord Stanley’s signet ring, the Ring of the Well. As it slipped onto Barbara’s finger without assistance, memories crashed down upon her, an avalanche of memories, threatening to tear her sanity and destroy it upon the stones before her. Names and places, unknown yet familiar, appeared and vanished, forming loops and whorls of genealogy, betrayal, lust, and terror. Power, murder, a curse and its revenge descended as she was swept from dirt-floored rooms and blood spattered sheets to the cloying smell of incense and the sound of black-robed chants. A great hall she somehow knew was in York, to an unmarked grave overlooking the Irish Sea, a cottage spare but filled with an angel child’s prattle. A mother’s heart broken by the wrong choice and an elder tree renewed again and again with each generation. Ceremonies, rituals, and choices. And always women seeking answers from the stones. Who were these Women of the Stone? Guardians or enslaved?
“Enough.” Her scream broke the maelstrom of thoughts and images and suddenly the spectres were gone from before her face. Only the Janus-faced crone remained, silent, before her. Barbara searched for the seed of peace within her and, surprised, found it intact and glowing.

“Will you witness?” The crone’s words were not harsh nor challenging but Barbara knew two paths stood before her and her answer would decide the balance of her life.

“Who am I?” she asked.

“You are a Woman of the Stone. if you so choose,” the crone replied.

“Who is my mother?”

“She is the mother you have always known though she thought to deny it.”

“What is wanted?” Barbara knew her answer even as her words faded in the evening quiet.

“You must bear witness.”
Today ~ Wisdom

The rising sun sent tentative fingers, probing the night and outlining the stones as Barbara nodded into the kindly grey eyes of the crone. Three tears slipped from her eyes, which she gathered and placed upon the stone altar. They sat like diamonds and then merged with the rough surface. Barbara remembered the last lines of the rhyme. “An’ last the crone, life’s wisdom born, Will seal the life of hearth and home.”

“The treasure is the protection of hearth and home,” whispered Barbara.

Perhaps it was a trick of the morning light, but the spectre seemed to stand a little straighter as she turned and walked toward the dwindling flame in the centre. In her left hand, she clasped the hand of a small curly-haired child. Her right was laced through the arm of a young woman. The trio stepped within the flame and disappeared, leaving behind only a wisp of white smoke.

Barbara placed the portrait within her wooden box. It still smelled of charred wood, elder wood, and was embossed with three dancing animals, a badger, a ferret, and an ermine. She heard a lingering voice whisper within her head,

“The badger, child, stands for courage and bravery in defending one’s home. The ferret knows the hidden meaning of things. The little white weasel, an ermine some call it, is a symbol of purity, preferring death to dishonour.”

“Courage, insight, and honour,” Barbara whispered, not understanding how she knew the words were true.

The advancing light slid across the dewy field. Ken and Jillian held each other. Jillian buried her face in Ken’s chest, while Ken’s face was a mask of disbelief.

Lord Stanley and Tao were nowhere to be found.
Afraid to startle her, Ian whispered her name and placed a gentle hand on her shoulder.

“Ian.” Barbara turned, clutching her treasure box to her chest.

“Can you ever find it in yourself to forgive me? I’ve been such a fool. I tried to find you, warn you. But….”

Barbara stood motionless, emotions at war within her. Unable to withstand her gaze, Ian looked away.

“Er, ah, Barbie. I mean Barbara?” Ken, holding Jillian’s hand, walked toward the stones cautiously. “I don’t know what just happened. I’m not sure I want to know but Jillian wants to leave. Now. Will you be alright with…?” he tipped his head toward Ian.

Barbara shook herself as if coming fully awake. She held out her hand. “Ian, wait.” Turning toward her American friends, she said, “I guess there was something I left out… Ken… Jillian. This is Ian Williams.” She felt him stiffen.

“Barbara, I’ve got to talk to you, to explain,” he whispered.

“Yes, you do.” Barbara turned back toward her friends. “I mean, this is Ian William Edwards Stanley,” she reintroduced him.

The following morning, they sat together in the pub at the Crown and Cushion. Ken and Jillian had left immediately after breakfast, Jillian effusively thanking Barbara for offering her Ken’s dragon stone ring but politely refusing.

“They never completed the ceremony. I wonder if it would have worked for them?” Barbara commented to Ian, as she rubbed the scrape on her left wrist. “Neither of them said anything definitive after. Well, after everything.”
“But didn’t you say there needed to be a blood ceremony to bind you to the stones first?”

“Yes, Ian, that’s what I believed from what I’ve read, but I’m well past puberty and can hardly turn back the clock to my first blood.”

“That’s it.”

“What’s it?”

“Your wrist.” He pulled it toward him. “You said you scratched it on the altar stone just before Ken and Jillian began.”

“It did bleed.”

“I don’t know much about the rituals but my father wanted that book for Tao so he could control the stones and what he thought was the treasure through her. He also wanted to hide some uncomfortable family secrets from coming to light. I still don’t know how he expected her to bond with the stones as I know she’s not a virgin.”

“A virgin! How medieval. Wait a minute. Are you kidding me?” Barbara’s eyebrows shot skyward as she pulled her hand back across the table and folded her arms across her chest. “Part of the plan was to seduce me?”

“Well, it was either ruin your chances to control the stones or marry you.” Barbara had the satisfaction of seeing Ian’s pale complexion deepen to scarlet. “It wasn’t my plan and I didn’t understand all he was trying to do, Barbara, honestly I didn’t. I still don’t have all the pieces. Two years ago, Tao just appeared at our doorstep. Father seemed ecstatic at first. She was constantly with him, but recently, he seemed to be as disappointed in her as he has always been in me.”
“I didn’t know at the beginning but he’d received a possible lead from Brae that the family line was somehow connected to America, then he read an article you’d written for History Speaks. Your picture was attached.”

“Your father reads History Speaks?”

“Yes. It was quite good actually.” Ian hurried on, “At any rate, he got excited again but wouldn’t explain anything. Finally a week or more ago he showed me a small antique portrait. He had kept it locked in a safe in a small velvet box.”

“Portrait. The one in my box. What are you trying to say, Ian?”

“Barbara, it could have been a portrait of you only the woman in the brooch looked otherworldly somehow.” He shook his head. “I really can’t explain it very well but when I saw her, I thought of you. He has papers too, diaries, and a half-burnt genealogy that I couldn’t understand. I decided then that I couldn’t go through with my father’s plan and decided to talk to you, to tell you everything, to return the box Tao stole.” He swallowed, “But by then you’d disappeared.”

“Which brings up another question. How did you track me to Long Compton?”

“Partly hunch and… you must be aware that if a phone is reported lost or stolen, it can be tracked.”

“Lost or stolen? My phone isn’t… Wait a minute. You had me traced?”

Barbara stood and began pacing, trying to decipher which was the strongest of several emotions - invasion of her privacy, being treated as a pawn, or being aware that she, indeed, had a decided effect on Ian.

Ian watched her pace letting her questions fade in the emotion-charged air. Finally he stood, reached for her hand, and raised her bruised skin to his lips, his eyes as steely grey as the Columbia back home in Astoria.
“Ian, why did you follow me? Why are you still here? For good or ill, I’m apparently tied to the stones now,” she pointed at her marred wrist, “but I don’t know what it means yet. I’ve the stories of any number of different women running through my head, generations in between, a new riddle about my mother, betrayal, murder, and a vague line in the Rowling journal connecting me to this, but I’m still not sure what I’m supposed to do with all this information. Except, I know who Charlie is.”

“Charlie? You mean the skeleton at the Ceredigion Museum?”

“Yes. Perhaps that’s why I felt compelled to return in the first place. I’m positive the remains found at Aberystwyth Castle are of a distant relative, the missing Artur brother, Kaleb Karl. Kind of copasetic that Karl translates to Charles, don’t you think? I’m sure he was Mother Shipton’s natural father.”

“Barbara. I won’t even hazard a guess as to how you can possibly know that but then I don’t think I’ll ever be able to explain last night in any reasonable way.”

“I gave up reasonable the first time I fell into the book,” she said and laughed.
Deer strolled across the lawn outside the office that had once been her father’s, while lamblike clouds meandered across the blue sky. Barbara sipped the last of the hot chocolate her mom had brought to her earlier. Initially anxious when her mother had been released from the hospital, Barbara was relieved when an easy peace had settled between them. She was grateful for her remaining parent and smiled as she watched Lena’s broad-brimmed garden hat bob up and down among the rows of peas in the side yard. Nieko, curled in sleep on the desk opened one starburst sapphire eye, while Barbara, pen in hand, pondered the events of the past year. She was at last ready to write in the Rowling Journal and make it truly her own.

Before she could touch pen to paper, the page in front of her shimmered. Barbara watched first in fascination and then in satisfaction as the writing became legible.

*I am Sula Shipton Rowling, your great aunt, and if these words are being read, my charm succeeded. Well done, Barbara.*

*When your mother’s family sent my niece to me from America, it was to hide Lena’s pregnancy. At the end of her ‘semester abroad’, the child was to be adopted. We often walked through nearby Knaresborough, enjoying the River Nidd, the weir, and the tall arched stone trestle. Lena was naturally drawn to Old Mother Shipton’s Cave and the famous Petrifying Well, previously Dropping Well, although our family heritage frightened her. As her pregnancy progressed, I thought Lena’s heart would break for she knew she would soon be forced to leave you behind with strangers.* Lena
and I devised a plan. Our cousin, Richard, the village doctor, consented to our request. The home birth went easily and with a stroke of his pen my name was placed on the birth certificate. We named you Selah Babette Shipton.

For five years I relived the joy I had once foolishly thrown away. Then I learned you were in danger from one who sought to steal your birthright. To conceal you, I contacted Lena, who had married her childhood sweetheart, your natural father. After Cousin Richard arranged a quiet adoption, I married Arthur Rowling in Wales, moving to Long Compton when he passed. With no trace of the Shipton line remaining, I hoped you would at last be safe.

For your protection, my dearest child, I chipped free a corner of my signet ring and sealed it within the antique locket using the Power of the Well. As long as you wore the charmed heirloom you were safe, for you would remain a maid until you could choose to become a guardian. Each time I felt your need, I whispered the sealing incantation, hoping you would somehow feel my love.

Barbara capped her pen and looked out the window into the distant purple mountains of Washington. Understanding, forgiveness, and peace washed over her as she watched the ships safely anchored in the Columbia River.

Again a glint of fresh ink on the journal’s vellum page drew her eye. A Welsh sentence formed — Nid oes terfyn i gylych o gerrig. Clear and dark, it appeared; bold, it challenged. Slowly, the words faded. When they reappeared, Barbara understood.

A stone circle has no end.