

THE LOST LEGEND

by

GRACE CHETWIN

book 3 of the Meg & Sue Trilogy



For A, M, & C with love and thanks



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Chapter 1: June 17

Meg stared at the train window. Not through it. There wasn't anything to see. Just dull grey-blue rain and fog. Beyond that, endless rolling hill and blobs of grazing sheep. Greasy sheep. Cold. Wet.

Opposite, Sue snapped her book shut, took down her backpack, stuffed the yellowed paperback in with the rest. "Mysterious Wales," the faded title said. Meg had been staring resentfully at its cover for the past hour, willing the slow miles on. Why was Sue always so well organized? Why hadn't she, Meg, brought along something to read?

Mother looked up, stuffed a sheaf of papers into her briefcase, stood and stretched. Looked at her watch. "Any minute now."

Meg's middle churned. Gavin—here. On the platform with Gran.

All these months she'd thought about a meeting with their new cousin on the waking level. And here he was.

Before she and Gavin had parted in the Dark World, she had given him her phone number.

When you're back up in our own world, you call me, and I'll explain.

Though doubtful of that happening, Gavin had promised. The very next day his mother had called from the hospital inviting them to visit. Meg had been ecstatic. Not only had Gavin made it out of there, he had remembered.

But when Meg and Sue arrived at the hospital they'd been turned back. There was no record of any invitation and, in fact, Gavin was already back in LA. Father had spent the best part of a day trying to track down the Thorpes in the LA phone books without success.

Why? *Why?* She had felt such a bond between them. And he must have felt something, even not knowing who she was.

You must go while you can. Before he finds you.

She and Gavin *belonged*.

It could not have been Gavin's doing.

Was it the mother's? If so, Rose Thorpe, who had made the call on Gavin's behalf, had had a radical change of mind, for she had sounded so happy, even overjoyed on the phone. Had she had second thoughts about bringing unknown people into their lives—particularly at that time when Gavin could not have been totally recovered from his unexplained attack?

It could have been the stepfather: Thorpe. There was no one else to deliver the snub and whisk him away.

But why? Wouldn't he be glad that Gavin had found some part of his birth family after all this time? And in America, too?

Even if it were Thorpe, though, the question stuck in her mind like a log in a flood: Gavin was a rebel, a law unto himself, so why had he made no effort to track her down, as they had to find him?

Even after six months, the pain would not fade.

Her parents had not spoken of the matter since. And she could not press them. Only Sue, who had helped her through it all, knew how it had really been.

She couldn't even bring herself to write Gran about it.

Well, at least we should talk to Gran, Meg.

No way. Promise you'll never say a word.

And now a new puzzle: how Gran had tracked him down from far off Wales. Not only that, but had gotten him over for the entire summer.

Oh, she'd have answers now, alright. Not at the station, of course. But soon enough.

The train screeched into the station, jerked to a stop.

They opened the door and jumped down onto the platform, hauling their bags after them.

The platform was bare.

Nervousness gave place to dull flat chill. She turned to the exit, her hair blowing with the movement of the train as it pulled out. Grey sky. Grey stone. Rain. And fog.

She shivered.

"Here, Meg." Mother handed over her coat, scanned the empty platform. "We're twenty minutes late. Gran should have been here."

Right on cue, the old lady popped through the turnstile.

Alone.

She scurried over and hugged them hard in turn. Small, she was, barely up to Meg's shoulder, but strong as ever, Meg found, wincing in the wiry grip.

"I saw the train pulling out. I'm glad you hadn't had a wait." The voice was soft, with a light Welsh lilt. George was late picking her up, she said. Well, for the train, she added with a smile. Not for him.

"George?"

"My ride." Gran didn't drive.

They picked up their bags.

"You should not have come at all, Gran," Mother said. "We could have called a cab."

Gran laughed. "And I'd have wished you luck. Come on, before George takes off."

George was leaning up against an ancient cab idling just outside the station. If that was old and rickety, its driver looked even more so. But, Gran said, she wouldn't call anyone else. He'd been driving her around ever since she'd literally and deliberately ditched her last car. He was retired and out of the phone book, but he always took her calls, was almost her private chauffeur.

Morgan's Limo Service the door said, the paint almost gone.

By rights, it should have been off the road. A Morris something, bearing traces of past passengers: stains, cigarette burns, stale smoke, and caked fast food.

Gran had Mother sit up front with George while she parked her bird bones, as she put it, in the rear between Meg and Sue. Meg climbed in, bending low, wrinkling up her nose, and waited while George stowed their bags in the trunk.

Mother twisted around. "Where's Gavin?"

"Ah." Gran smiled brightly. "Good question."

"He knows we are arriving?"

Bumps and thumps behind them. The Morris shook as George slammed down the lid. Creaks and groans as George lifted it again, hauled out the bags and stuffed them back in.

"He does."

"How . . . *odd*," Mother said, in a way which Meg knew meant *rude*.

"I've hardly seen him since he arrived," Gran said. "He's out from dawn to dark."

Meg's disappointment turned to curiosity. "Doing, what?"

"Walking."

Meg sat up. Gavin—*walking*? "His computer?"

"Still in the box."

"Good grief," Sue said.

"He says you can't walk Over There. There are only *freeways*, as he calls them, which are dangerous for cars, let alone pedestrians."

True, thought Meg. But that computer freak—out with sheep in fog and rain? "He comes back for lunch?"

"I've been putting up a box by the back door before I go to bed," Gran went on. "He's gone before I'm awake."

Creak. Groan. Crash. The trunk lid ground down a second time, slammed shut.

Meg sat back, flat with disappointment.

After the first quarter of a mile, buildings petered out and they were twisting up and down over potholes and gravel through hills sheep-spotted.

"Look!" Sue pointed. "Bother, you missed it," she added, as glancing back, Meg glimpsed a rapidly receding needle just off the track.

“It’s a waystone,” Sue declared. “They pegged out routes from place to place before there were roads.”

“Oh, really.” Sue, the walking data bank. Meg was in a sour mood.

“There’ll likely be others. We can go look later.”

“Rah, rah.” Meg turned back to the windshield and the stony track ahead.

Twenty minutes of rattley ride and high stone wall loomed through the fog.

Gran’s cottage was a gatehouse on an old estate. Set just inside twin gates rusted open, the stone-brick-timber cottage was pure picture postcard—on the outside. Inside was cramped and dim and chill beyond the kitchen stove—the heart of the house.

The front door gave onto a whitewashed passage with just enough room for a coat rack and tray for muddy boots. To the left of it was a small parlour smelling of must and camphor with flowery wallpapered walls and tiny lace-hung windows, dark walnut and plum plush furniture and crocheted antimacassars.

Next to that, the bathroom: a narrow space running back to a tiny window, squeezed in between the parlour and the stairs, the nook beneath the stairs stocked with towels. The walls were whitewashed, the right-hand one stuck with flowery decals and towel rails, while lined up down the left was toilet, washbasin, and an ancient metal tub on legs with rigged-up shower and geyser for hot water.

To the right, the kitchen.

Directly ahead, steep brown-carpeted stairs climbed straight up.

Grandad Jenkins—Gramps—was waiting on the porch. Older than Gran, he didn’t move much but sat in his corner to the left of the stove in an old rocker, the daily papers and a stack of magazines at hand. Beside his chair a card table held an old Staunton chess set, usually in the middle of some game. Tall oak shelves lining the kitchen corner behind him were crammed with a complete set of an Encyclopedia Britannica circa 1920 and his prized collection of world championship chess games and grandmaster play: Tal, Botvinnik, Alekhine, Reti, Capablanca *et al* in ragged paperbacks and rugged tomes, their pages crammed with notations in his small neat hand. And, lastly, jammed between the shelves and the stove, an ancient cabinet radio—the only one in the house, and Gramps’s connection to daily news, history channels and documentaries.

Meg loved the old man, his quick humour, no boring reminiscences, no lectures either.

For most of her life, Gramps and Gran had lived in Barmouth itself in a row house a few streets back from the cliffs until he retired, so she hadn't known the cottage so well, but the moment she stepped into that kitchen it was back: beeswax on slate tile, pickles from twin pantries flanking a back door pegged with raincoats and oilskin sou'westers.

No time to take in the warmth of the stove. Gran hustled them up to their rooms as George brought in their bags.

From the top of the stair a low-ceilinged landing split, left and right. Left for Gran and Gramps. Right, the spare room for Mother. On Mother's side a narrow door closed off a creaky flight of attic steps.

The attic was over the landing and not much bigger. Meg dimly remembered that musty space as stacked with crates and boxes—great place for hide and seek. The storage gone, Gran had made it over for their stay. To either wall were plain cots plump with pillows and patchwork quilts all over lavendered mothballs. Facing the door, an ancient bureau. Squeezed between that and the low-beamed ceiling a dormer window stood wide to let in fresh air. Meg crossed over, shut out the misty cold and grabbing the two top bureau drawers opened her bags and rammed in her clothes. That done, she leaned over the bureau peering out.

"I wonder where Gavin is, Sue. It's rotten out there."

No reply.

Sue had dumped her bags and run back downstairs. Oh, well, it was almost lunchtime and she was getting hungry anyway.

Down in the kitchen, she wondered aloud where Gran had stowed Gavin.

In the left-hand pantry, Gran said.

Meg peeked in.

Cramped and dark with one overhead bare bulb, and reeking of pickled onions, herbs, spices, and carbolic soap, there was just space for a cot and drawers and a card table like Gramps's. Under the table was Gavin's computer, still boxed up as Gran had said.

Meg ducked out, closed the door. Humph. He had to show up sometime.

Lunch came and went, then afternoon tea with raspberry jam and fresh-baked scones. Still no Gavin.

Gran laid a place for him at supper on the big round table that vied with the stove for space, but he did not come.

That night, as they all climbed up to bed, Meg resolved to stay awake and listen for him. But it had been a long full day. In spite of her resolution, within the hour, she was gone. Yet some part of her stayed alert:

Some time during the early hours, something snagged her awake. She crept down to the kitchen. Gavin's supper was gone, his empty dishes by the sink.

Meg crossed to his door, rapped. "Gavin? Gavin, it's Meg."

Silence.

She lifted the latch and pushed, but the door didn't give.

"Gavin?"

Still nothing.

Meg raised her fist to let fly, halted. It would wake the whole house. And Gran would say he had a right. He wasn't hurting anyone.

Meg couldn't understand it.

Gran was wise and sensible. So why was she was letting him loose like that?

Coming in at all hours, up to goodness knows what?

And what if one day he didn't come in at all?

Sighing, she turned on her heels and climbed back to bed.