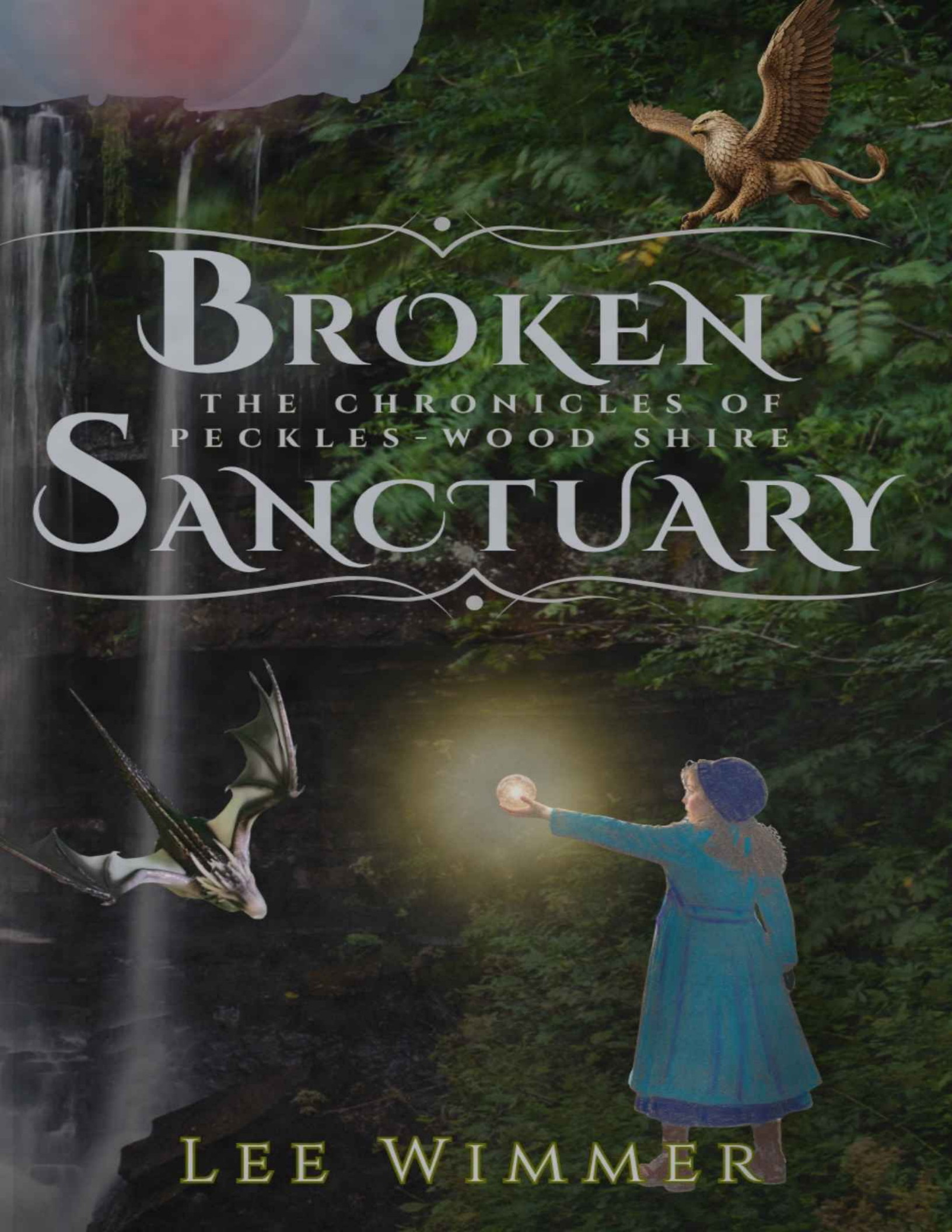




BROKEN

THE CHRONICLES OF
PECKLES-WOOD SHIRE

SANCTUARY

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BROKEN SANCTUARY

The Chronicles of Peckles-Wood Shire

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The Chronicles of Peckles-Wood Shire

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Historical and Folklore Note

Historical events, places, customs, and folklore referenced in this book are drawn from historical records and traditional sources. While care has been taken to represent them accurately, this is a work of fiction, and some details have been adapted, interpreted, or imagined for the purposes of the story.

Website and contact information were accurate at the time of publication.

Chapter 1

Sunday, November 1, 1885

Will walked in front of his brothers and sisters, the seven of them. At fifteen, he was the oldest male youth in Peckles-Wood Shire. He kicked a clump of weeds growing in the rutted pathway the wilds were fast reclaiming. When he stubbed his toe, a sharp breath whistled past his teeth, and his nostrils flared. He hopped around on the good foot, holding his other. His rounders stick dropped from under his arm. The rag ball fell to the ground too, rolling into one of the cart wheel ruts.

He motioned into the sky with the now-empty hand. “When is this brough going away? I’m tired of this. Everything is so drab.”

His older sister, Emma, shook her head as she adjusted the Bible and reader in the crook of her left arm. “You do know breaking your toe won’t get you to Hexham any quicker?” Then, with her free hand shielding her squinched eyes and her lips in a thin line, she appeared to take note of the ring around the sun. The bluish-white inner ring transitioned to a reddish gold.

“Well, Missy”—Will used that nickname for her when he got upset—“I seem to remember you telling Mother much the same thing I told

Father. What makes you so special?” He rested his foot back to the ground and tested it. Balancing to ensure he avoided the washed-out rut, he bent to reclaim his rounders ball and stick, then brushed off the bits of snow that lingered in the shaded ruts. When he straightened up, he called over his shoulder, “Come on, everyone. We’ve got chores to do.”

“Face it, Will, if I’m stuck here, so are you.” Emma pushed on his shoulder. “You’re not so special.” She tucked her hair bun up higher under the thick wool bonnet and fiddled with the chin ribbon securing the bonnet in place. Then she quickened her pace. “Will’s right. We’ve chores to be done.”

Aye, their animals had to be fed, the cows milked, and the eggs collected. This being a Sunday, they were getting a later start on the afternoon’s chores.

She held out nine-year-old Clarabelle’s small parish reader and slate. “Come here, Clarabelle. Take your things. You can carry it on your own. I’m not your mother.”

The Bishop’s ring around the sun seemed to grow brighter, a reminder things weren’t the same as the carefree days of the past. The small overgrown vegetable stand beside the half-reclaimed cart path also stood as evidence. Only two years prior, they’d meet others walking home from the chapel here. Not now.

“Are you two going to bicker all the time? Besides, if you leave, the rest of us will have twice as much work to do. We’re the ones who should be quarreling.” Ten-year-old Rance picked up a rock and tossed it hard back at the old stand. The rock rattled down the wooden roof as a blackbird flew up into the silvery-gray sky. “Tell me if I’m wrong, Emma, but you looked perfectly happy yesterday at the market. I saw you with Ted, you slyboots.”

“Ted! Are you crazy? You think I like *Ted*?” She gritted her teeth. “He was talking about his life since he left for Hexham. He went there two weeks ago—after their farm’s harvest had gone to the market.” She rebalanced her Bible and hymnal in one arm. Then, with her other hand, she straightened the back of Clarabelle’s bonnet. “With any luck, I’ll be leaving soon too.”

“I’ll bet he was just talking. Especially since he was practically the only boy around.” Rance’s eyes sparkled, and his gigglemug flashed a wide smile.

“*Was*. He was the only boy in the shire.” Emma took a deep breath, while her gaze also took in their siblings. “I’m going to miss this three-hour trip to chapel every week. Nothing like having your chops busted for six hours a day.”

Enough of this. Will increased his pace almost to a jog as the ruts disappeared the closer they came to home. “Come on. I don’t want to be

late for supper.” He motioned with his free hand. “Term day is here, and I won’t give Father any reason to delay my leaving for town.”

Term day didn’t really count for him, not being in an employment contract. But on term day, so many sought new employment and employees. He’d be there to snatch up one of those jobs.

Their iron-ringed clogs clanked against the packed-down ground in an unmistakable clatter. The air carried a chill, making everything seem more desperate.

“Why, Will?” Eleven-year-old Stacy tugged on his sleeve. “Why do you have to leave? I don’t want you to. Everything will change.” Her gaze darted from his face to his boots, then back again. Her water-welled eyes glazed in the grayish daylight.

“It’s just my time, Stace. I’m grown now, so it’s time I make my own way.”

She turned to the side, her head down. Her lips wobbled, and a tear tried to free itself. “But we need you here.”

Will crouched, placed his forefinger to the dimple in her chin, and tipped her face toward his. “I’m sorry. It’s just part of life. But it’s not the end. I’ll come back and visit. Besides, Father will bring someone in. I’m sure of it.”

She flung her arms around him and rested her dampening cheek on his shoulder. “It won’t be the same. Even rounders will be different.”

Shortly later, they reached home thirsty. So, as was their custom before beginning their chores, they went straight to the well behind the house.

“I really must find some proper food.” A strange voice with a high-toned accent came from Mother’s neeps patch before the well. “Where has every good thing gone?”

Something pounding the ground sharpened Will’s curiosity.

A shadow moved past him and disappeared. Nay, not just a shadow—a large figure. The voice stopped.

“Who goes there?” Clarabelle called out. Being brave, she stepped around Mother’s rhododendron bush by the patch.

The shadow moved again, then disappeared.

“Where did he go?” She bent and peeked under the bush. “I see you. Come out. Come out now. We won’t hurt you.”

“What is it, Clarabelle? What do you see?” Rance vaulted his gangly body to her side of the bush, and Will and the others followed.

“I see a set of long hairy feet. It looks like a large—ahem, a *very* large rabbit, judging by the feet.” She knelt on all fours and giggled. “Well, are you going to come out? Or do we have to come in to get you?”

The bush shook and jostled.

Then Clarabelle scrambled back on her bottom, gaping up at a very large rabbit, a hare. Rising off the ground, she straightened her pinny and rubbed the dirt off her stockings.

Rance jolted, and the other children leaned away too.

“Were you just talking?” Will asked.

“To myself. To myself.” A hind foot began pounding the ground. “I was just talking to myself.” The hare shook his head, causing his enormous ears to bounce and sway. Counting those ears, he stood just a foot shorter than Clarabelle.

“You can talk?” Emma edged toward the animal. “A talking rabbit?”

“I don’t know what a rabbit is, but most certainly, I can talk. Goodbye.” The animal then strode away. His white bob of a tail bounced up and down along the way.

“Don’t leave,” Clarabelle called out as the animal seemed to change color while it moved toward the forest line with a magical sort of grace.

Will shook his head and tapped the side of it with one hand. “What was that?”

All his siblings gaped as the animal... disappeared.

“Did my ears deceive me?” Emma hugged her Bible closer. “Or did I hear that rabbit actually... *speak*?”

“I think we all heard it,” Rance said.

“Hare,” Will corrected. “That was a hare. A talking hare, at that.”

“Do hares talk?” Clarabelle still fiddled with her stockings.

Will headed to the well for a drink, looking over his shoulder as he went. “That one did.”

The journey continues November 5, 2026.

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