

“As merciless as a rising tide and as beguiling as a fairy’s bargain.”
—MELISSA ALBERT, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Hazel Wood*

A STUDY IN DROWNING



AVA REID

A
STUDY
IN
DROWNING

AVA REID

HARPER TEEN
An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Dedication

For James
This is a love story.

Epigraph

“I refuse mirrors,” the Fairy King said. “I refuse them for you, and I refuse them for me. If you want to see what you are, look into the tide pools at dusk. Look into the sea.”

From *Angharad* by Emrys Myrddin, 191 AD

Contents

Cover
Title Page
Dedication
Epigraph

One
Two
Three
Four
Five
Six
Seven
Eight
Nine
Ten
Eleven
Twelve
Thirteen
Fourteen
Fifteen
Sixteen
Seventeen

Acknowledgments
About the Author
Back Ad
Books by Ava Reid

Copyright
About the Publisher

One

It began as all things did: a girl on the shore, terrified and desirous.

From *Angharad* by Emrys Myrddin, 191 AD

The poster was as frayed and tattered as a page torn from someone's favorite book. Surely, Effy thought, that was intentional. It was printed on a thick yellow parchment, not unlike her drafting linens. The edges were curling in on themselves—either shyly or protectively, as if the parchment had a secret to hide.

Effy used both hands to smooth the paper flat, then squinted at the curling script. Handwritten, it was smeared in several places. It was further obscured by a water stain of no discernible shape, like a birthmark or a growth of mold.

*To the esteemed students of the Architectural College,
The estate of Llyr's national author EMRYS MYRDDIN is
soliciting designs for a manor home outside the late author's
hometown of Saltney, Bay of Nine Bells.*

*We ask that the proposed structure—HIRAETH MANOR—be
large enough to house the surviving Myrddin family, as well as the
extensive collection of books, manuscripts, and letters that Myrddin
leaves behind.*

*We ask that the designs reflect the character of Myrddin and the
spirit of his enormous and influential body of work.*

*We ask that the designs be mailed to the below address no later
than midautumn. The winner will be contacted by the first day of
winter.*

Three conditions, just like in one of Myrddin's fairy tales. Effy's heart began beating very fast. Almost unconsciously, she reached up to grasp at her knot of golden hair, tied back with its customary black ribbon. She smoothed down the loose strands that floated around her face in the drowsy, sunlit air of the college lobby.

"Excuse me," someone said.

Effy's gaze darted over her shoulder. Another architecture student in a brown tweed jacket stood behind her, rocking back and forth on his heels with an air of obvious irritation.

"Just a minute," she said. "I haven't finished looking."

She hated the way her voice shook. The other student huffed in reply. Effy turned back to the poster, pulse ticking even faster now. But there was no more left to read, only the address at the bottom, no signature, no cheery *best of luck!* sign-off.

The other student began tapping his foot. Effy reached into her bag and pawed through it until she found a pen, uncapped and clearly unceremoniously abandoned, the nib thick with dust. She pressed it against the tip of her finger, but no inkblot appeared.

Her stomach twisted. She pressed again. The boy behind her shifted his weight, the old wood under him groaning, and Effy put the pen in her mouth and sucked until she tasted the metallic bite of ink.

"For Saints' sakes," the boy snapped.

Hurriedly she scrawled the address on the back of her hand and dropped the pen into her bag. She tore away from the wall, and the poster, and the boy, before he could do or say anything more. As she walked briskly down the hallway, Effy caught the end of his muttered curse.

Heat rose to her cheeks. She reached her studio classroom and sat down in her customary seat, avoiding the gazes of the other students as they shuffled to their places. She stared down, instead, at the bleeding ink on the back of her hand. The words were starting to blur, as if the address were a spell, one with a tauntingly short life span.

Cruel magic was the currency of the Fair Folk as they appeared in Myrddin's books. She had read them all so many times that the logic of his world was layered over hers, like glossy tracing paper on top of the original.

Effy focused on the words, committing them to memory before the ink could run beyond legibility. If she squinted until her eyes watered, she could almost forget the boy's whispered slur. But her mind slipped away

from her, running through all the reasons he might have scoffed and sneered at her.

One: She was the only female student at the architecture college. Even if the boy had never so much as glimpsed her in the halls before, certainly he had seen her name on the exam results, and then, later, on the college roster in the lobby. Three days ago, some anonymous vigilante had taken a pen and turned her last name, *Sayre*, into something lewd, preserving the last two letters.

Two: She was the only female student at the architecture college, and she had placed higher than him in the entrance exam. She had scored high enough for the literature college, but they didn't accept women, so she had settled for architecture: less prestigious, less interesting, and, as far as she was concerned, monumentally more difficult. Her mind didn't work in straight lines and right angles.

Three: He knew about Master Corbenic. When Effy thought of him now, it was only in small pieces. The gold wristwatch nestled in the dark, thick hair of his arms. The adultness of it had shocked her, like a blow to the belly. Few of the boys at her college—and that's what they were, boys—had such thick arm hair, and even fewer had expensive wristwatches to nestle in it.

Effy squeezed her eyes shut, willing the image to vanish. When she opened them again, the chalkboard in front of her looked glassy, like a window at night. She could picture a thousand blurry, half-seen things behind it.

Her studio professor, Master Parri, was running through his usual introduction, only in Argantian. It was a new policy at the university, instituted only at the start of her first term, six weeks ago. Officially, it was out of respect for the university's few Argantian students, but unofficially, it was out of a sort of preemptive fear. If Argant won the war, would they impress their language upon all of Llyr? Would children grow up shaping its vowel sounds and verbs instead of memorizing Llyrian poetry?

It might be a good idea for everyone at the university to have a head start.

But even when Master Parri lapsed back into Llyrian, Effy's mind was still turning, like a dog unable to settle itself down to sleep. Master Parri wanted two cross sections finished by the end of class. She had chosen to do a redesign of the Sleeper Museum. It was the city of Caer-Isel's most

beloved tourist attraction, as well as the alleged seat of Llyrian magic. There, the seven Storytellers slept in their glass coffins, silently warding Llyr against threats and, according to some, waiting for the country's bleakest moment to rise again and protect their homeland. It was either provincial superstition or gospel truth, depending on who you asked.

Ever since Myrddin had been laid to rest, just before the start of her term, tickets had been sold out and lines for the museum wrapped around the block. Effy had tried three times to visit, waiting for hours only to be turned away at the ticket booth. So she had simply had to imagine how the Storytellers would look, penciling in the features of their slumbering faces. She had taken extra care with Myrddin's. Even in death, he appeared wise and gentle, the way she thought a father would.

But now, while Parri's voice rolled ceaselessly over her like low tide against the shoreline, Effy opened her sketchbook to a new page and penciled in the words *HIRAETH MANOR*.

After studio, Effy went to the library. She had turned in only one of her cross sections, and it wasn't very good. The elevation was all wrong—lopsided, as if the museum were built on a craggy cliffside instead of the meticulously landscaped center of Caer-Isel. The university buildings curled around it like a conch shell, all pale marble and sun-blached yellow stone.

She never would have dreamed of turning in such shoddy work at her secondary school back home. But in the six weeks since she had started university, so much had changed. If she had come to Caer-Isel with hope, or passion, or even just petty competitiveness, it had all eroded quickly. Time felt both compressed and infinite. It rolled over her, like she was a sunken statue on the seafloor, but it tossed and thrashed her, too, a limp body in the waves.

Yet now the words *Hiraeth Manor* snagged in her mind like a fishhook, propelling her toward some purpose, some goal, even if it was hazy. Maybe especially because it was hazy. Bereft of vexing practical details, it was much easier to imagine that the goal was within her reach.

The library was no more than five minutes from the architecture college, but the wind off Lake Bala lashing her cheeks and running its frigid fingers through her hair made it feel longer. She pushed through the double

doors in a hurry, exhaling a cold breath. Then she was inside, and the sudden, dense silence overwhelmed her.

On her first day at the university—the day before Master Corbenic—Effy had visited the library and loved it. She had smuggled in a cup of coffee and found her way to one of the disused rooms on the sixth floor. Even the elevator had seemed exhausted by the time it reached the landing, groaning and heaving and giving a rattle that sounded like small bones being shaken inside a collector's box.

The sixth floor housed the most ancient books on the most obscure subjects: tomes on the history of Llyr's selkie-hunting industry (a surprisingly lucrative field, Effy had discovered, before the selkies were hunted to extinction). A field guide to Argantian fungi, with a several-page-long footnote on how to distinguish Argantian truffles from the much-superior Llyrian varieties. An account of one of Llyr and Argant's many wars, told from the perspective of a sentient rifle.

Effy had folded herself into the most concealed alcove she could find, under a rain-marbled window, and read those arcane books. She had looked particularly for books on fairies, and spent hours thumbing through a tome about fairy rings outside Oxwich, and then another long-dead professor's ethnography on the Fair Folk he encountered there. Such accounts, centuries old, were written off by the university as Southern superstition. The books she had found had been spitefully shelved under *Fiction*.

But Effy believed them. She believed them all: the rote academic accounts, the superstitious Southern folklore, the epic poetry that warned against the wiles of the Fairy King. If only she could have studied literature, she would have written her own ferocious treatises in support of her belief. Being trapped in the architecture college felt like being muted, muzzled.

Yet now, standing in the lobby, the library was suddenly a terrifying place. The solitude that had once comforted her had become an enormous empty space where so many bad things could happen. She did not know *what*, exactly—it was only a roiling, imprecise dread. The silence was a span of time before inevitable disaster, like watching a glass teeter farther toward the edge of a table, anticipating the moment it would tip and shatter. She did not entirely understand why the things that had once been familiar now felt hostile and strange.

She didn't intend to linger there today. Effy made her way up the vast marble stairs, her footsteps echoing faintly. The arched ceilings and the

fretwork of wood across them made her feel as if she were inside a very elaborate antique jewelry box. Dust motes swam in columns of golden light.

She reached the horseshoe-shaped circulation desk and placed two hands flat on the varnished wood. The woman behind the desk looked at her disinterestedly.

“Good morning,” Effy said, with the brightest smile she could muster. *Morning* was generous. It was two fifteen. But she’d only been awake for three hours, just long enough to throw on clothes and make it to her studio class.

“What are you looking for today?” the woman asked, unmoved.

“Do you have any books on Emrys Myrddin?”

The woman’s expression shifted, her eyes pinching with disdain. “You’ll have to be more specific than that. Fiction, nonfiction, biography, theory—”

“Nonfiction,” Effy cut in quickly. “Anything about his life, his family.” Hoping to endear herself to the librarian, she added, “I have all his novels and poetry already. He’s my favorite author.”

“You and half the university,” the woman said dismissively. “Wait here.”

She vanished through a doorway behind the circulation desk. Effy’s nose itched at the smell of old paper and mildew. From the adjacent rooms she could hear the flutter of pages being turned and the slowly scything blades of the ceiling fans.

“Hey,” someone said.

It was the boy from the college lobby, the one who’d come up behind her to see the poster. His tweed jacket was under his arm now, suspenders pulled taut over a white shirt.

“Hi,” she said. It was more of a reflex than anything. The word sounded odd in all that quiet, empty space. She snatched her hands off the circulation desk.

“You’re in the architecture college, right,” he said, but it didn’t have the tenor of a question.

“Yes,” she said hesitantly.

“So am I. Are you going to send in a proposal? For the Hiraeth Manor project?”

“I think so.” She suddenly had the very strange sensation that she was underwater. It had been happening to her more and more often lately. “Are

you?”

“I think so. We could work on it together, you know.” The boy’s hand curled around the edge of the circulation desk, the intensity of his grip turning his knuckles white. “I mean, send in a joint proposal. There’s nothing in the rules that says otherwise. Together we’d have a better chance at winning the contract. It would make us famous. We’d get scooped up by the most prestigious architectural firms in Llyr the second we graduate.”

The memory of his whispered slur hummed in the back of her mind, quiet but insistent. “I’m not sure. I think I already know what I’m going to do. I spent all of studio class sketching it.” She gave a soft laugh, hoping to smother the sting of the rejection.

The boy didn’t laugh, or even smile back. For a long moment, silence stretched between them.

When he spoke again, his voice was low. “You’re so pretty. You really are. You’re the most gorgeous girl I’ve ever seen. Do you know that?”

If she said *yes, I do*, she was a conceited harpy. If she shook her head and rebuffed the compliment, she was falsely modest, playing coy. It was fae-like trickery. There was no answer that wouldn’t damn her.

So she said, fumbling, “Maybe you can help me with the cross sections for Parri’s studio. Mine are really bad.”

The boy brightened, drawing himself up to his full height. “Sure,” he said. “Let me give you my number.”

Effy pulled the pen out of her bag and offered it to him. He clasped his fingers around her wrist and wrote out seven digits on the back of her hand. That same rainwater rush of white noise drowned out everything again, even the scything of the fans.

The door behind the circulation desk opened and the woman came back through. The boy let go of her.

“All right,” he said. “Call me when you want to work on your cross sections.”

“I will.”

Effy waited until he had vanished down the stairs to turn back to the librarian. Her hand felt numb.

“I’m sorry,” the librarian said. “Someone has taken out everything on Myrddin.”

She couldn’t help the high pitch of her voice when she echoed, “*Everything?*”

“Looks like it. I’m not surprised. He’s a popular thesis subject. Since he only just died, there’s a lot of fertile ground. Untapped potential. All the literature students are clamoring to be the first to write the narrative of his life.”

Her stomach lurched. “So a literature student checked them out?”

The librarian nodded. She reached under the desk and pulled out the logbook, each row and column filled out with book titles and borrowers’ names. She flipped open a page that listed a series of biographical titles and works of reception. Under the *Borrower* column was the same name, inked over and over again in cramped but precise handwriting: *P. Hélowry*.

An *Argantian* name. Effy felt like she’d been struck.

“Well, thank you for your help,” she said, her voice suddenly thick with a knot of incoming tears. She pressed her fingernails into her palm. She couldn’t cry here. She wasn’t a child any longer.

“Of course,” said the librarian. “I’ll give you a call when we get the books back in.”

Outside, Effy rubbed at her eyes until they stopped welling. It was so unfair. Of course a literature student had gotten to the books first. They spent their days agonizing over every stanza of Myrddin’s famous poetry, over every line of his most famous novel, *Angharad*. They got to do every day what Effy had time for only at night, after she’d finished her slapdash architecture assignments. Under her covers, in a pale puddle of lamplight, she pored over her tattered copy of *Angharad*, which lay permanently on her nightstand. She knew every crack in its spine, every crease on the pages inside.

And an *Argantian*. She couldn’t fathom how there even *was* one at the literature college, which was the university’s most prestigious, and especially one who was studying Myrddin. He was *Llyr*’s national author. The whole thing seemed like a terrible knife-twist of fate, a personal and spiteful slap in the face. The name in its precise writing hovered in the forefront of her mind: *P. Hélowry*.

Why had she even thought this might work? Effy was no great architect; she was only six weeks into her first semester at the university and already in danger of failing two classes. Three, if she didn’t turn in those cross sections. Her mother would tell her not to waste her time. *Just focus on*

your studies, she would say. *Your friends. Don't run yourself ragged chasing something beyond your reach.* She wouldn't mean it to be cruel.

Your studies, her mother's imagined voice echoed, and Effy thought of Master Parri's disdainful glare. He had held up her one cross section and shaken it at her until the page rippled, like she was an insect he was trying to swat.

Your friends. Effy looked down at the number on the back of her hand. The boy's 0s and 8s were bulging and fat, as if he had been trying to cover as much of her skin as he could in the blue ink. All of a sudden, she felt very sick.

Someone shouldered roughly past her, and Effy realized she had been blocking the doorway to the library. Blinking, embarrassed, she hurried down the steps and crossed to the other side of the street, darting between two rumbling black cars. There was a small pier that overlooked Lake Bala. She leaned over the railing and rubbed at the third knuckle of her left hand like a worry stone. It ended there, abruptly, in a shiny mass of scar tissue. If the boy had noticed the absence of her ring finger, he hadn't said anything about it.

Pedestrians brushed past her. Other students with leather satchels on their way to class, unlit cigarettes hanging out of their mouths. Tourists with their wide-lensed cameras moving in an awkward, halting mass toward the Sleeper Museum. Their odd accent drifted toward her. They had to be from the southernmost region of Llyr, the Bottom Hundred.

Beneath her the waves of Lake Bala lapped timidly at the stone pier. White foam frothed like spittle in a dog's mouth. Effy sensed a dangerous frustration under the meekness of the tide, something fettered that wanted to be free. A storm could come on as quickly as an eyeblink. The rain would cause a sudden bloom of black umbrellas to rise up like mushrooms, and it would wash all the tourists out of the street.

Just faintly, through the ever-present rheum of fog, Effy could glimpse the other side of the lake, and the green land that lay there. Argant, Llyr's belligerent northern neighbor. She used to think the problem was that Argantians and Llyrians were too intractably different, and that was why they couldn't stop going to war and hating each other. Now, after living in the divided city for six weeks, she understood that it was the opposite problem. Argant was always claiming that Llyrian treasures and traditions were really their own. Llyr was forever accusing Argant of stealing their

heroes and histories. The appointment of national authors, who would eventually become Sleepers, was a Llyrian effort to create something Argant couldn't take.

It was an archaic tradition, but dutifully followed, even if most Northerners didn't believe what Southern superstition said: that when Llyr's tanks rolled across that green land, when their rifles peeked up from the trenches they had dug into Argantian soil, it was the magic of the Sleepers that protected them. That when Argantian guns jammed or an out-of-season fog crept across the battlefield, that was Sleeper magic, too.

For the past several years, the war had been at a standstill. Occasionally the sky rumbled with the sound of distant gunfire, but it could easily be mistaken for thunder. The inhabitants of Caer-Isel, Effy included, had learned to treat it like the white noise of traffic, vexing but unavoidable. With Myrddin's consecration as a Sleeper, she hoped the odds might turn in Llyr's favor.

She had no choice but to believe in the Sleeper magic, in Myrddin's magic. It was the foundation her life was built upon. Though she had read *Angharad* for the first time at thirteen, she had been dreaming of the Fairy King long before that.

A spray of salt water kissed her cheeks. To hell with that literature student, that Argantian, P. H eloury. To hell with Parri and those terrible cross sections. She was tired, tired of trying so hard for something she didn't even want. She was tired of being afraid she might see Master Corbenic in the hall or the college lobby. She was tired of the memories that swam behind her eyelids at night, those little pieces: the enormous span of his fingers, knuckles whitening as his fist clenched and unclenched.

Effy stood up and retied her hair. Overhead the sky had turned the color of iron, clouds swollen with ominous fury. The tram clanged down the street, louder than the nearing thunder—real thunder this time, not gunfire. She buttoned her jacket and hurried toward her dorm as the rain started to fall.

She staggered into her dormitory damp-haired, water dripping off her lashes and pooling in her boots. Effy yanked them off and hurled them down the hallway, where they landed with two empty thuds. Of course today would end with her getting caught in one of Caer-Isel's miserable autumn downpours, despite rushing to escape the rain.

Having exhausted a bit of her jilted fury, Effy hung up her jacket more calmly and squeezed out her hair.

The door to her roommate's bedroom creaked hesitantly open. "Effy?"

"Sorry," she said, a flush creeping up her neck. Her boots were still slumped at the end of the hallway. "I didn't know you were home."

"It's all right. Maisie is here, too."

Effy nodded, and went to retrieve her boots with a numb sort of embarrassment. Rhia watched from the doorway, dark curls askew, her white blouse buttoned haphazardly. Not for the first time, Effy had interrupted something private between Rhia and her paramour, which made the situation all the more humiliating.

"Are you okay?" Rhia asked. "It's wretched outside."

"I'm fine. I just didn't have an umbrella. And I also might be failing three classes."

"I see." Rhia pursed her lips. "It sounds like you could use a drink. What's that on your hand?"

Effy looked down. The rain had made the blue ink run all the way down her wrist. "Oh," she said. "I was mauled by a giant squid."

"Terrifying. If you towel yourself off, you can come in and have some tea."

Effy managed a grateful smile and went into the bathroom. Everyone had told her the university dorm rooms were disgusting, but when she arrived, she'd thought of it as sort of an adventure, like camping in the woods. Now it was just boringly, inanely gross. The grout between the tiles was filthy, and there was a sickly orange ring of soap scum around the edge of the tub. When she yanked her towel off the rack, she saw a preternaturally huge spider scuttle away and disappear into a crack in the wall. She didn't even have the energy to scream.

When she stepped back into the hallway, drier, Rhia's door was flung open, her room filled with soft yellow lamplight. Maisie was perched on the edge of the bed, steaming mug in hand, auburn hair swept up into a hasty bun.

"I saw Watson in there," Effy said, collapsing into Rhia's desk chair.

"No, I squished Watson, remember? That's Harold."

"Right," Effy said. "Watson went out in a blaze of glory." The black mess of him had taken ten minutes to scrub off the bathroom wall.

As Rhia filled Effy's mug, Maisie asked, "How come all the spiders are men?"

"Because then it feels more satisfying to squish them," Rhia said, flopping down beside her on the bed. Seeing her curled around Maisie like that, with such casual intimacy, Effy had the sudden sensation of being an intruder.

It was an eternal feeling, this sense of being unwelcome. No matter where she was, Effy was always afraid she was not wanted. She took a sip of tea. The warmth helped ease some of her discomfort.

"So I think I'm failing three classes," she said. "And it's only midautumn."

"It's a good thing that it's only midautumn," Maisie said. "You have lots of time to make it up."

Rhia played absently with a strand of Maisie's hair. "Or you could just quit. Come join us in the music college. The orchestra needs more flutists."

"If you can teach me to play the flute in the next week, consider it a deal."

She didn't say that frustrating as it was, architecture felt less like giving up than music would. The architecture college was the second-most prestigious at the university. If she couldn't study literature like she wanted, at least she could pretend architecture had been her first choice all along.

"Not sure that's entirely realistic, my love," Maisie said. She turned to Effy. "So what *are* you going to do?"

Effy almost told them about the poster. About Emrys Myrddin and Hiraeth Manor and the fresh drawing in her sketchpad. Rhia was impulsive and always full of wild ideas, including but not limited to *I'll teach you to play flute in a week and let's sneak up to the rooftop of the astronomy college*, but Maisie was almost annoyingly reasonable. She would have told Effy it was a mad thing to even consider.

Right now the possibility of Hiraeth Manor, the dream, belonged to her and her alone. Even if it was inevitable that it would come crashing down, she wanted to keep dreaming it a little while longer.

So in the end she just shrugged, and let Rhia try to talk her into taking up the organ instead. Effy finished her tea and said good night to the other girls. But when she got back to her room, she did not have the remotest desire to sleep. The itch of frustration and yearning under her skin wouldn't fade.

She sat on her unmade bed and picked up her battered copy of *Angharad* instead.

Angharad was Myrddin's most famous work. It was the story of a young girl who became the Fairy King's bride. The Fair Folk were vicious, shrewd, and always wanting. Humans were playthings to them, amusing in their petty, fragile mortality. The Fair Folk's glammers made them appear hypnotically beautiful, like a gaudily patterned snake with a deadly bite. They used their enchantments to make humans play the fiddle until their fingers fell off or dance until their feet bled. Yet Effy found herself half in love with the Fairy King sometimes, too. The tender belly of his cruelty made her heart flutter. There was an intimacy to all violence, she supposed. The better you knew someone, the more terribly you could hurt them.

In the book, the protagonist had her tricks to evade and ensorcell the Fairy King: bread and salt, silver bells, mountain ash, a girdle of iron. Effy had her sleeping pills. She could swallow one, sometimes two, and fade into a dreamless slumber.

She turned to the back flap of the book, where Myrddin's author photo and biography were printed. He had been a hermit and a recluse, especially in the last few years before his death. The newspaper articles written about him were stiff and formal, and he had famously refused all interviews. The black-and-white photo was grainy and taken at a great distance, showing only Myrddin's profile. He was standing at a window, his silhouette dark, face turned away from the camera. As far as Effy knew, it was the only photo of Myrddin in existence.

Any house that honored Myrddin would have to be similarly mystifying. Was there any other student at the architecture college who understood that? Who knew his works back to front? Effy doubted it. The rest of them just wanted the prestige, the prize money, like the boy in the library. None of them cared that it was *Myrddin*. None of them believed in the old magic.

Her sleeping pills lay untouched on the dresser that night. Instead, Effy pulled out her sketchpad and drew until dawn.