



FIRST FEET
A JAIN LAZARUS ADVENTURE
BY DEVON ELLINGTON



“First Feet”

A Jain Lazarus Adventure

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First Edition

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The characters and situations in this story are entirely fictional. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely a coincidence.

Author's Note:

There are many legends associated with the custom of "First Footing" in the moments after the New Year arrives. I read several of them, and adapted the customs I liked best for the purposes of the story. In other words, I didn't stick strictly to the information that's out there. If you're interested in the traditions, I suggest doing further research.

"Qualtagh" came up as the Manx name for a first footer. I liked it, so I'm using it.

In the chronology of the Jain Lazarus Adventures, "First Feet" follows HEX BREAKER and "The Possession of Nattie Filmore" but happens before OLD-FASHIONED DETECTIVE WORK, which is set to release from FireDrakes Weyr Publishing in Spring of 2009.

"First Feet" gives a hint of Billy's new environment, which will be expanded on in the full-length adventure coming out after OLD-FASHIONED DETECTIVE WORK.

Enjoy!

First Feet
A Jain Lazarus Adventure
By Devon Ellington

Billy Root giggled as he stumbled against the door jamb of his dorm room. Hogmanay was ever so much better than plain ole New Year's, although if you asked him at this moment to articulate the difference, he couldn't. And Hogmanay in Scotland was better than New Year's in some trendy LA hotspot with photographers catching one's every moment of stupidity.

He pulled himself up on the door frame and stretched as long as his five foot eight inch frame could reach to turn on his desk lamp. Its round, yellow pool of light on the pale wooden desk top mesmerized him for a moment. He didn't want to turn on the overhead light and wake up his roommate, Hank, who'd returned to the room hours ago. *Maybe*, thought Billy, giggling again, *Hank was so eager to get back to the room because he wasn't coming alone.*

The possibility caused Billy to twist around, losing his balance again. He crashed to the floor, but no one was in the empty corridor to see or hear. He looked up. No red mitten tied to the doorknob. Hank was alone. Hank hated the signal, but after Billy's insistence, agreed to use it.

"I think it's really stupid," Hank admitted, when Billy brought up the idea, just a few days after he arrived at the school (already in session) and was assigned as Hank's roommate. Hank's previous roommate disregarded safety mechanisms for transport spells and was currently in a rehab facility after breaking several limbs.

"How else are we going to signal if one or the other brings someone back to the room?" Billy asked.

“How about not bringing anyone back to the room to have sex?” Hank countered.

“Then where are we supposed to have it?” Billy was genuinely concerned. “The student handbook doesn’t say we can’t have sex in the rooms.”

“I don’t know, but how about not having sex at school?”

Billy’s mouth opened. “You’ve never had sex at school?”

Hank blushed, which meant the color of his face clashed with the color of his reddish-brown hair, which, for a reason Billy could never understand, was called “ginger” by the other kids. “No.”

“But you’ve had sex, right?”

Hank’s face was now redder than his hair. “I *am* twenty-four. And I’m not a *complete* social outcast, in spite of being paranormal. Of course I’ve had *sex*. Just not *here*.”

“Sorry. Sorry. Didn’t mean to offend.” Billy raised his hands in surrender.

“I suppose you *always* had sex at school?”

“Not always,” Billy admitted. “It was more trying than doing in high school. Girls didn’t really like me, ‘cause I wasn’t on the football team or anything. But once I started in college, yeah, whenever possible. I like to think it helped my grades. But since I flunked out, maybe not.”

“And you and your roommate used a red mitten tied to the door handle as a signal?”

“Yep. Saved us from a lot of embarrassing situations.”

“I don’t want to know.” Hank shook his head. Then he asked, “But why a *red* mitten? Why not something else?”

“It’s a metaphor.”

“A red mitten is a metaphor for sex? Where? Is that some special code American film people use? Or just college students?”

Now it was Billy’s turn to blush. “Just me and my college roommate back in Michigan.”

In the end, Hank agreed. And since there was no red mitten hanging from the door, it meant Hank was alone.

Billy hauled himself back to his feet and lurched into his room. Knocking the door shut with his foot. Using the desk to guide him, he staggered to his bed and sat down on it. Two single beds, two desks with bookshelves over them, a small refrigerator, two tiny wardrobes, and a door leading to a bathroom which had a door leading to another room that mirrored this one. It was a plain, simple dorm room which made him feel more like thirteen than nearly thirty. That feeling was intensified because, although he was one of the older students at this “boarding school for psychics” as he called it, he was far behind in the training of people quite a bit younger.

He was here because Jain Lazarus recognized his talent and recommended him for a slot. After their experiences on the botched film, where his director tried to sacrifice him by sending a zombie after him and then forcing him to activate a demon who would have killed him, Billy couldn’t go back to the usual routine of auditions and acting roles. Jain understood that, and she sent him here.

Jain Lazarus. Now there was a woman for whom he’d like to hang a red mitten on the door. But she was involved with a local cop she’d met on the film shoot, and he was here, in Scotland, learning about paranormal abilities he never knew he had until

they almost got him killed. It beat auditioning for hemorrhoid commercials. He missed the beer commercials, and some of the film set antics, but that was about all he missed from his old life.

Old life. New life. It was tough adjusting to the new life, trying to understand what was second nature to most of his fellow students, trying to fit in, feeling like he was a freak because he was more normal in the usual terms than most of the people around him. He could think of today as the first day of his new life, the first day of the New Year. And he spent it in a dorm room in Scotland, with, in a few hours, a spectacular hangover.

He looked across the room, wanting to wake up Hank and have some company. They didn't spend much time together, even though they shared a room. Billy wasn't sure if it was because Hank was about six years younger than Billy and had different interests, or because Hank didn't like him. He realized Hank's bed was empty. The duvet was pulled up, the pillows meticulously plumped in the annoying way Hank had of making his bed every day. Billy preferred leaving his unmade. That way, he felt like he'd done something illicit, with the possibility of more illicitness to come.

Billy frowned. He distinctly remembered that Hank told him he was headed back to the room. That was – Billy wasn't sure how long ago it was, but Hank left well before midnight. He remembered watching Hank leave the party in the common room, wishing they'd at least be in the same room at the stroke of midnight, but not wanting to leave the party himself.

Hank never made it back to the room.

Hank never made it back to the room.

Billy felt panic rise up as a chill ran down his spine. The two sensations met at his mid-section, holding him in their collusive grip like a vise. Hank was reliable; that was one of the reasons Billy, who tended to be scattered when he wasn't focused on a role or some specific item to study, was paired with him. Hank was a grounding force.

Where should Billy start his search? Go building-by-building? The grounds? The bestiary? The attics? The basements, nicknamed "the dungeons"? The Forbidden Tower? It made sense to start in one place and work his way methodically. But how could he do it by himself? And who could he call at two in the morning? Should he go to the faculty apartments and wake up Thaddius Bowker, the combat instructor, who already thought he was a moron? Or Natalie French, the automatic writing teacher only a year or two older than Billy, who'd been kind to him, but distant? By the way, weren't they in a compound of psychics? Shouldn't someone *know* something was wrong?

Jain. He'd call Jain. She was back in the States. It was several hours earlier there, although he could never remember how many, with the US switching back and forth to daylight savings time on different dates than everyone else. But chances were that Jain was still awake, and Jain would know what to do.

The use of mobile phones was forbidden in most areas of the school. Administration fed them some story about the signals interfering with intuitive work, which Billy thought was a crock, but those were the rules. He'd have to go to the Communications Chamber, a room set up for the use of mobile phones, landlines, internet use, etc., in order to call. Hopefully, the room wouldn't be full of drunks making calls they'd regret when they sobered up.

A knock broke Billy's concentration. He lurched up, steadying himself on the edge of the desk, hoping Hank forgot his key. "Hank?" He yanked open the door. He stared at the tall, handsome, dark-haired, dark-eyed man standing in the doorway.

"You're not Hank."

"No." The man's eyes danced with amusement. "I am not Hank. You are Billy Root?"

"Uh, yeah." When the man didn't say anything else, Billy stepped aside. "Come in."

"Thank you." The man moved past Billy, the edge of his cape brushing Billy as he stepped into the room. Billy closed the door and stared at him: Black trousers tucked into knee-high black boots, a black quilted jacket with silver buttons; a black velvet cape lined in midnight blue silk and trimmed in silver that fell to mid-thigh, held in place with a silver clasp; black gloves; a soft, broad-brimmed black hat. And a sword.

"I didn't know Seun Comraich had a drama department," Billy remarked.

The man laughed. He removed his hat, revealing almost shoulder-length black, curly hair, and tossed the hat onto Hank's desk. "Miss your old life, do you?"

"Not really." Billy plunked down on his bed again. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"I'm here to bring you gifts and tidings for the coming year."

"Like something out of Dickens? I thought that was last week."

"Sorry?" The man gave him a polite, puzzled smile.

"Never mind. Did Hank set this up? Is that why he didn't come back to the room?"

“No. This goes far beyond Hank.”

“Hank’s okay, isn’t he?”

“One would think you gave a damn about the young man.”

“I do! Of course I do. I mean,” Billy played with the corner of his blanket, “he’s my roommate. And he’s a nice guy and all.”

“Maybe you should let him know.” The man removed his gloves, pulling at each finger in turn. “Few people ever let him know he matters.”

“Uh, yeah, sure.” Billy’s head felt fuzzy with alcohol. “Those your tidings?”

“There’s more.”

“Great,” Billy muttered.

“Beg pardon?”

“Please.” Billy gave his best actor’s smile. “Continue.”

“A coin for prosperity.” The man tossed Billy a large, gold, octagon-shaped coin. “Don’t despair you no longer receive residuals from bladder control commercials. New opportunities are on the horizon.”

“Um, thanks.” If this happened in LA, Billy would ask questions about a series. However, here . . . Billy stared at the coin. For a moment, he thought the buxom woman depicted on it winked at him. He must be drunker than he realized.

“Bread, so you will never know hunger.” He handed Billy a long, slender baguette. “Salt, so your life has flavor. Coal for warmth. And whisky for good cheer.”

Billy juggled the items. “Is it okay if I don’t drink the whisky tonight? I think I’d puke.”

“Drink it when you will.” The man put his gloves back on.

“Thanks for all the stuff, but how’d you carry it? You don’t have a bag.”

“I don’t need one.” The man replaced the hat on his head. “Remember what I said about Hank.”

“Yes, sir.” Billy watched the man yank open the door. “Hey! Can I offer you anything?”

“No. But thanks for the offer.”

“Happy New Year.”

The man nodded and stepped into the hall, shutting the door behind him.

Billy sat on his bed for a moment, clutching his gifts to his chest. Hank. Jain. Find Hank.

He heard a key in the lock, the door opened and Hank entered. Billy dropped the items in his arms, scattering the objects. “Hank! You’re alive!”

“Uh, yeah.” Hank looked at Billy, dismissed him as too far in his cups to make sense, and tossed his keys onto his desk. “Hey, you were first-footed! That’s fun. Who was it?” He knelt down to pick up dropped items, placing them on Billy’s desk.

“No one I recognized.”

“Even better. Lagervullen,” he noted, holding up the whisky. “Very nice.”

“I was worried.”

“About what?”

“You said you were coming back to the room. When I got back, you weren’t here.”

Hank shrugged. “I ran into Duncan. We went to Bridget’s room for awhile. Their parents sent them a bloody brilliant package from the farm. And Justine’s mum,

you know she's a professional groupie who follows around that band, The Sandlot Pervs? She sent over the new CD. It's not too bad."

"I was worried," Billy repeated.

"You were?" Hank stared at him, puzzled. After a moment, a smile spread across his face. "You were?"

"Yeah." Billy grabbed the coin and tossed it into the air. He missed the catch and it hit him in the shoulder. "It would really suck if you got eaten by a manticore or something."

You're pissed. Or, as you Americans say, drunk."

"Yeah. But I still don't want you to get hurt or killed or anything."

Hank rested back on his heels. "A group of us are going up on the cliffs to watch the sun rise. Want to join us?"

"Who's going?"

"The usual suspects. Justine. Isobel. Bridget. Duncan. Stewie. Justine's breaking into the kitchen to pack a hamper."

"Sounds like fun."

"Come along then. Maybe it will sober you up. Besides, *Isobel* is going to be there."

"Isobel has the hots for that Davy guy."

Hank laughed. "Now you sound like a love-struck teenager."

"Maybe lust-struck. And disappointed, that's all."

"She never knows when you're acting or when you're being real. That's why she's so cautious around you."

“If I was able to sustain my acting that well, I’d have sustained a better career.”

Billy stood up. “I can contribute bread and whisky.”

“Let’s save the whisky and drink it after exams in spring.”

“I doubt we can wait that long, but we can try. We don’t have to state any New Year’s resolutions out loud or anything, do we?”

“The girls probably will. I won’t.” Hank reached into the wardrobe and tossed Billy a thick, hooded sweatshirt. “Bundle up, it’s cold out there.”

“Yes, Dad.” Billy laughed and put it on.

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“I thought I’d call you at my midnight. I’m not sure where you are.” Wyatt East leaned back in his office chair. The detective’s squad room was quiet. His partner, Jesse Ryan, managed to get the night off to spend with his wife. Patty Brayne, the other detective on duty tonight, was out at the scene of a car accident. The room smelled like old radiators and burned coffee dregs.

“I’m snowed in at a hotel near O’Hare Airport.” Jain Lazarus’s voice floated down the line. “On the way to the airport, I figured it was a pretty good bet I wasn’t going anywhere fast. So I had the taxi driver drop me at one of the airport hotels. I booked a room while I still could. All they had left was a suite, of which I’m taking full advantage. Figured I’d sit out the storm in comfort rather than in a hard plastic airport chair with no amenities.”

“Smart on your part.” Wyatt shoved his cold, old coffee aside and reached for his water. “How’d the case go?”

“Pain in the ass,” Jain responded. “The numbnut who created the hex read a bit of this and that, building it like Frankenstein’s monster. Breaking it was like untangling a messy skein of yarn.”

“But you did it.”

“Yeah.” Jain laughed.

“Of course you did.”

“With a zero body count, for once. How’s the murder case going?”

Wyatt grimaced. “Hit a wall. Far as we can tell, no one had any reason to want Laura James dead. I think it was a murder of opportunity rather than passion. Something’s not sitting right. I’m casting a wider net, looking at other open cases from other areas to see if there’s a connection.”

“You’ve got good instincts,” Jain reassured him. “You’ll nail the murderer.”

“Doesn’t help Laura James.”

“Indirectly, it does. And it will probably save other lives, down the line.”

“Are you still up for a skiing weekend in Vermont in a couple of weeks? Or would you rather go someplace tropical?”

“I don’t want to waste any of our limited time together in an airport. Vermont’s perfect. Your boss letting you take off?”

“He insists on it. Says I’m getting too wrapped up in the case and I need to clear my head.” Wyatt glanced up as a tall, oddly dressed man entered the room. “Someone’s here. Back to work. Happy New Year.”

“Happy New Year. See you soon.” Jain clicked off.

Wyatt rose, taking in the man’s unusual appearance. He hoped the guy was on his way to or from a costume party; otherwise, there might be some trouble with locals. He was as tall as Wyatt, which put him just over six feet, but lean where Wyatt was broad and sturdy. He was dressed all in black, in what looked to Wyatt like a costume from a Renaissance faire, complete with mid-thigh cape, gloves, broad-brimmed hat and a sword. From a distance, and by the way he moved, he seemed like a young man; however, as he approached, Wyatt saw the lines etched into his face and figured the man to be around his own age, the early forties, or a little older.

“I hope that’s a prop sword,” Wyatt stated.

The man smiled at him. “For our purposes, it is.”

“How can I help you?”

“I’m here to help you.”

“If this is about the Laura James murder, I’ll take all the help I can get. Have a seat.” Wyatt watched the fluid movement as the man sat, not jamming the sword against the chair or the desk. Wyatt waited until the man was seated before settling into his own chair. “What have you got for me?”

“A coin for wealth. Bread so you’ll never go hungry. Salt so your life always contains flavor. Coal for warmth. Whisky for good cheer.” As he listed each item, the man placed it on the desk in front of Wyatt, although he carried no bag and Wyatt didn’t see him pull it out of anywhere.

“Neat trick.” Wyatt reached out and picked up the coal. “A lump of coal? For warmth? When I was a kid, that’s what my parents threatened would fill my stocking if I was naughty.”

“And were you naughty?”

“Constantly. But my stocking was never filled with coal.” Wyatt picked up the whisky bottle and read the label. “Talisker. Nice. I’ll save it for later.” He put the bottle in his desk drawer. He looked at the coin, large, gold, and shaped like an octagon. “Jain sent you, for some sort of New Year’s whatever. I’d offer you coffee, but wouldn’t want to insult a friend of Jain’s with what passes for coffee around here, especially after midnight.”

“I assume you refer to Jain Lazarus and not some other Jane?”

“Jain Lazarus. This kind of thing is right up her alley.”

“She didn’t send me, but it wouldn’t surprise her to learn of my visit.”

“Friend of hers?”

“Not exactly.”

“I hope you’re not an enemy, because if you are, it makes you my enemy.”

“Not at all.” The man smiled. “We merely work in loosely connected fields.”

“What do you want from me?”

“I’m bringing you tidings for the New Year.”

“I’d rather you gave me solid information on my case.”

The man spread his hands on the top of the desk. “If I had any, it would be yours.”

Wyatt gave a short laugh and shook his head. “Tide away, my friend.”

The man leaned forward. “Listen with your heart when challenged.”

“Challenged by whom?”

“More than one source, that’s for sure.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You will, *friend*. You will.” He stood up. “Happy New Year.” The man turned and walked out of the room.

One of the beat cops appeared in the doorway, not noticing the man in black who passed him. “Hey, East, we got a jumper on the bridge over Rigby Road.”

“Still on it or below it?”

“On it for the moment. We’re hoping you can convince him jumping would be a really bad way to start the New Year.”

Wyatt stood up. “I’m having that whisky as soon as I get off shift,” he muttered.

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Jain flipped her phone shut and tossed it onto the fussy chintz sofa. Wyatt wasn’t picking up; her call went into voice mail. She hoped nothing horrible happened. She was in her robe, fresh from a shower, with a nice, warm dinner waiting for her on a trolley table by the window. She stood there for a moment, staring out as she heard the revelry of midnight strike in other areas of the hotel, strains of “Auld Lang Syne” floating from television sets through the walls. She should formulate resolutions for the coming year, or at least wishes. But nothing immediately came to mind.

She was interrupted by a gentle knock on the door. Jain opened it, expecting room service. “Did I forget to sign the bill?”

The tall, dark-haired man standing in front of her smiled. “You even added a generous tip.”

“Come in.” Jain stepped aside.

“You don’t expect me to show I.D?” He grinned as he stepped past her.

“I know what you are, even if I don’t know your individual name.” Jain shut the door. “You’re Qualtagh. A First Footer.”

“Octavius Burns, at your service.” He bowed. The flourish he added with both cape and sword amused Jain.

“Thank you. How’d you get the sword past security?”

Octavius shrugged. “People tend to see what they believe is possible. The only one who really *noticed* me was a small girl in a frilly dress the color of lemon custard. *She* thought I was charming.” He tossed his hat onto a nearby chair.

“Good for her. And you. Champagne?”

“Lovely.” He removed his gloves, yanking at each finger.

Jain poured one serving into the flute which had arrived with the bottle, and went into the bathroom to fill one of the plastic cups. She handed Octavius the flute. “Happy New Year,” she said, as they clinked glasses.

“Happy New Year.”

They drank, and Octavius placed his glass on the suite’s faux French-style coffee-table. “A coin for wealth, bread for a full cupboard, salt to keep flavor in your life, coal for warmth, whisky for good cheer.”

“Thank you.” Jain bowed her head as she accepted the gifts. “You’re welcome to share my T-bone steak with all the trimmings and help me finish the champagne.”

Octavius laughed. “The offer is tempting. I do get peckish on my rounds. But I’ll pass.”

“More stops before dawn?”

“Me and St. Nick. Got to traverse the world in a single night, a week apart. Only my list is considerably shorter and chosen with a bit more discernment.”

“Who chooses the list?” Jain asked. “I always wondered.”

“Ah, that’s a tale for another night.”

“Why not now? It’s a dark and stormy night, and,” she waved the whisky bottle, “we have good cheer. Laphroaig’s cheer is especially good, in my opinion.”

Octavius laughed. “I must refuse, with regrets. But I do wish to share tidings for the coming year.”

“I’m listening.”

“This will be an extraordinary year for you.”

“Is that good or bad?”

“The results are up to you. You have the opportunity for great love and great loss.”

“That sounds ominous.”

“You must face the past. You must come to terms and decide of what to let go before building your future. You are at that crossroads now, the one you’ve avoided for years. Accept help when it’s offered. The challenges you face will be unique. And complicated.”

“Is Wyatt part of my future?”

“That depends on how you wrest away from the past’s hold on you.”

“What about his past?”

“He, too, must face it as he’s never faced it before.”

Jain swallowed. “Will he be all right?”

Octavius spread his hands. “That depends on his choices.”

Jain nodded. “Of course.” She looked at him. “Am I allowed to ask for help? Or only take what’s offered?”

Octavius stared at her, puzzled. “Of course you may ask.”

“And what will *you* say when I come to you with my request?”

“*Me?*” He stared at her, shocked. “What do I have to do with this?”

“I don’t know. Yet. But I don’t believe in coincidence. So there’s a reason why you, Octavius Burns, are *my* first footer tonight, rather than one of the other Qualtagh. What will you say when I find you and ask for your help? I *will* find you, you can count on it. What will you say?”

The muffled sounds of footfalls in the corridors, different television programs, and muffled laughter filtered into the room. They stared at each other.

“I will say yes,” Octavius finally replied.

Jain smiled. “Thank you.” She leaned forward and kissed his cheek.

“You’ve left me quite flummoxed, my dear.” He pulled on his gloves and hat.

“I’m sure you’ll recover.”

He grinned. “I shall. And I shall ever be at your service.” He walked to the door.

“Happy Hogmanay.”

“Happy Hogmanay.”

Octavius left, closing the door behind him. Before Jain could react, her phone rang. She retrieved it from the sofa, glanced at the ID and flipped it open. “Wyatt? You okay?”

“Yeah. Sorry I missed your call at midnight. I was talking a jumper off a bridge.”

“Did you get him down safely?”

“He’s in the psych ward. Which beats getting scraped off the pavement. For all of us.”

“What a way to start the year.”

“Yeah. Soon as I get home, I’m opening that whisky your friend dropped by. I’ll drink it as I watch the sun rise.”

“My friend?”

“Dark haired guy. Dressed in some sort of Renaissance faire costume. The lump of coal was a bit disconcerting, but the whisky’ll come in handy.”

Had Octavius visited Wyatt? Or was it some other Qualtagh?

“He said you didn’t send him,” Wyatt continued, “but however he turned up, he was a pleasant interlude in a long night. Thanks.”

“Glad you enjoyed it.”

“Call me when you get safely home? So I’m not monitoring the news about plane crashes?”

“I will. It could be a couple of days before I get back into Boston, considering how the snow’s falling.”

“What will you do while you’re stuck?”

“Use the gym, keep ordering room service, use the gym some more, read the books I bought at the airport.”

Wyatt laughed. “You’ve earned the break. Enjoy it. See you in a couple of weeks.”

“Yeah. Take care. Be safe.” Jain closed the phone. She placed it on the coffee table, crossed the room, and drank her champagne as she watched the falling snow.

THE END

BOOKS, BLOGS, AND OTHER FUN STUFF:

The Jain Lazarus Adventures

By Devon Ellington

You can keep up with the Jain Lazarus adventures on its website:

<http://hexbreaker.devonellingtonwork.com>

“The Possession of Nattie Filmore” is available as a free download:

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Jain Lazarus is back in Detective Wyatt East’s territory. This time, they’re exploring a reputed haunted house – only this time, the consequences were fatal!

HEX BREAKER

By Devon Ellington

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Read an excerpt of HEX BREAKER here:

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Devon Ellington's main website is:

www.devonellingtonwork.com

Cerridwen Iris Shea's main website is:

www.cerridwenscottage.com

Devon's freelance writing site, which also contains information on workshops, coaching, and manuscript critique services is Fearless Ink:

www.fearlessink.com

For Devon's blog on the daily ups and downs of the freelance writing life, visit Ink in My Coffee:

<http://devonellingtonwork.com>

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