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The Meaning of the Moment: A Collection of Short Stories

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A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of English  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts in English

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by  
Jonathan Benton  
December 2004

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Keywords: Creative Writing, James Joyce, Flannery O'Connor, Epiphany

## ABSTRACT

### The Meaning of the Moment: A Collection of Short Stories

by

Jonathan Benton

This thesis consists of three short stories in very different genres but tied together by a intensely personal look at the lives of its protagonists culminating in epiphanies. One of these epiphanies is intended solely for the reader, but in two cases, the reader and character gain the insight. “The Tears of Angels” looks at the effect one person in a moment, even a stranger, can have on the protagonist’s life. “Climbing Heaven and Gazing on Earth” focuses on the haunting power of history and the need we as humans can feel to share a story, to make sense of it, no matter how personal. In “To Set It Right,” I take history in a different direction, giving it a voice and a power to reach from the past. In all of the stories, the epiphanies serve to point towards meaning and enlightenment in different ways.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In an attempt to find my place in the annals of short fiction, I reflected upon my literary influences. Without a doubt, my favorite writers, since I began serious study of literature, have been James Joyce and Flannery O'Connor. Joyce's well-known contribution to the world, the literary epiphany, has found its way into my work. While my aim has never been as lofty as Stephen Dedalus', to "forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race" (the smithy of *my* soul seems dark and cold all too often, and I'm not sure where I'd begin looking for the conscience of my race), my intention has been to bring my characters to a defining instant that crystallizes the meaning of the moment.

When looking at the idea of an epiphany, it may be instructive to examine the word in some detail. The word epiphany originated as a "festival commemorating the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles in the persons of the Magi," used for the first time around 1310 (Simpson 333). It came to take on the religious meaning "a manifestation, striking appearance, esp. an appearance of a divinity" (Simpson 333). By the time Joyce got through with the word, though, the modern [Postmodern notwithstanding] short story would never be the same. Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* describes the epiphany as a part of his esthetic theory:

The instant wherein that supreme quality of beauty, the clear radiance of the esthetic image, is apprehended luminously by the mind which has been arrested by its wholeness and fascinated by its harmony . . . a spiritual state . . . which the Italian physiologist Luigi Galvani . . . called the enchantment of the heart. (Joyce 231)

Stephen goes on to say that he is using “beauty in the wider sense of the word, in the sense which the word has in the literary tradition” (231). Joyce includes examples of this type of epiphany in *Portrait*, but the word is broadened even further in Joyce’s other writing. For instance, the epiphany in Joyce’s story “The Dead” comes when Gabriel Conroy realizes he does not have the passion of Michael Furey, that he has never loved his wife or anyone as Gretta’s old flame loved her. Preeminent Joyce biographer Richard Ellman writes:

The epiphany was the sudden ‘revelation of the whatness of a thing,’ the moment in which the commonest object . . . seems to us radiant.’ The artist, [Joyce] felt, was charged with such revelations, and must look for them not among gods, but among men, in casual, unostentatious, even unpleasant moments. (83)

An important word here is unpleasant. Certainly Gabriel’s epiphany comes in a most unpleasant moment, attempting to be intimate with his wife who is thinking of an old lover. The epiphany is multi-faceted, able to show many faces of the human experience.

For my part, the epiphany has shown itself in calculated ways which I have plotted from the outset and also come as a relative surprise to me at times, which I suppose should not be surprising itself, as I’ve always been drawn to the stories with startling revelations of character saved for the end. When I look back at my favorite stories, whether they be Poe, Maupassant, Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily,” Kipling’s “The Man Who Would Be King,” Jackson’s “The Lottery,” the common thread tends to be a strong and jarring ending that has been painstakingly prepared by the author. In many of these cases, the ends include an epiphany; if not the traditional, Joycean epiphany, still an epiphany of sorts. And when to this list is added the bulk of Joyce’s writings, and numerous O’Connor stories such as “Revelation,” “A Good Man is Hard to

Find,” “The Enduring Chill,” and “Good Country People,” the common thread becomes even stronger and more pronounced.

Flannery O’Connor had her own special brand of epiphany. To Joyce’s standing definition O’Connor added the aspect of grace, offered to her characters in that all-important instant. She once remarked that she needed to return her “characters to reality and [prepare] them to accept their moment of grace,” (112) adding “I have found, in short, from reading my own writing, that my subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil” (118).

In “The Tears of Angels,” the first story in this thesis, my epiphany mirrored that thought of grace. I set out to write a story with a theme in mind but was not entirely sure how to go about it. I wanted to portray the effect one person can have on another, even without knowing, possibly, in the smallest and seemingly most inconsequential of moments. The players in such moments usually don’t know the import of their actions, and at times even the benefactors or recipients are unaware of the change they are making.

In addition to the theme, I started with a piece of music (the muse does have a good singing voice, after all). I had become intrigued by a symphony whose dramatic qualities I couldn’t help noting. Later I learned that the symphony was Mahler’s unfinished Tenth, but as time went by I thought more and more about writing a story to it.

Armed with a theme, and music to create an atmosphere to write by, I sat at my desk in search of a character with a story to tell. I knew I wanted the story to be dark, so I had a tone or effect to shoot for (Poe would have been proud. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren in their text *An Approach to Literature*, however, argue that “by very definition all fiction must have a unity,” or “totality of effect,” not just the short story, my chosen medium) (29). To that end, the

character that I create in “Tears” is a little more than obsessed with death, he is afflicted with it. The protagonist has had a traumatic childhood filled with the deaths of everyone he holds dear. From this childhood he becomes a bitter young man who shuts himself off from the world, literally unable to see the beauty in anything, rather seeing death and decay wherever he looks.

O’Connor mentions the fact that some characters have more “capacity” for grace than others, speaking of the Misfit versus the Grandmother in “A Good Man is Hard to Find” (111). In keeping with this idea, and knowing that traditionally speaking, there is a direct correlation between the effectiveness of a tragedy and the height from which the protagonist has fallen, my protagonist had to sink to the lowest depths possible to allow for the greatest capacity for grace.

So this malady, earlier referred to as his affliction, becomes in one respect symbolic of his attitude toward the world but also possibly a very real condition of at least the mind, and at least to him. Like Poe, whose characters seem to have an affinity to opium, the affliction could have its root in the supernatural or be a byproduct of some explainable outside source grounded in the physical world. (And like Poe, I leave to the reader to decide which he or she prefers.) Either way, I hope the story works. After all, without ambiguity, what would literature teachers have to talk about?

The story’s title is taken from the Tennyson poem “To -----, with the Following Poem”:

And he that shuts Love out, in turn shall be  
Shut out from Love, and on her threshold lie  
Howling in outer darkness. Not for this  
Was common clay ta’en from the common earth  
Moulded by God, and temper’d with the tears



Of angels to the perfect shape of man. (39)

Man was not meant to live alone, shutting out the world, and so the narrator must find a way out of the darkness he is living in. But he cannot do it on his own.

The protagonist's epiphany comes when he follows a girl he sees on the street. This is out of character for him, but divine Providence, Fate, or schizophrenia (take your pick), intervenes, and the two are brought together. On a bus in the middle of the night, they share a moment that is transcendent for the protagonist, a moment that gives him a reason to come out of his shell and return to the world of the living. O'Connor refers to that epiphanous moment in her stories coming with a gesture that gets to the heart of the story:

I often ask myself what makes a story work, and what makes it hold up as a story, and I have decided that it is probably some action, some gesture of a character that is unlike any other in the story, one which indicates where the real heart of the story lies. This would have to be an action or a gesture which was both totally right and totally unexpected; it would have to be one that was both in character and beyond character; it would have to suggest both the world and eternity. It would be a gesture which somehow made contact with mystery. (111)

Such a gesture passes between my two characters when the protagonist understands that someone else "sees" his affliction.

From the title, along with other clues, such as the light emanating from the girl, I suggest the possibility of the supernatural in her character. Similar to the question of the protagonist's affliction, this interpretation is far from certain, but I would like for the reader to entertain at least the possibility. The idea of an angel could be boiled down to a purely figurative sense. Perhaps

the possibility of another world might on some level help the story to achieve the gesture that suggests “both the world and eternity,” and make contact with mystery.

For the second story in this thesis, I changed genres entirely. One of my interests has always been history and the effect it has on present. There is an interesting connection between literature and history, as the two are so much an ingrained part of who we are as human beings that one feeds off the other. Whether it be writers creating a mythology for the unanswered questions of the past or exploring history through forms of historical fiction, a symbiotic relationship exists between the two.

“Climbing Heaven and Gazing on Earth” came about mainly from my interest in the Civil War and my desire to educate people about some of its more interesting stories and settings. I had heard a story about a man who ran during the heat of battle and been given a pardon by President Lincoln but doesn’t believe it because of the informal way in which it is written, and thus is shot for desertion. This story was told as a Christian allegory, and although I was never able to verify this story, I thought it would make a good piece of fiction if handled correctly. I set about making the story my own. Flannery O’Connor made the point that “a story really isn’t any good unless it successfully resists paraphrase, unless it hangs on and expands in the mind,” and that a gesture of grace should “transcend any neat allegory that might have been intended or any pat moral categories a reader could make” (108, 111). So my purpose was at least to expand on the allegory, deepening and investing it somehow with other literary values, in order to transcend.

First, I felt the need to give the reader someone to identify with. I didn’t think it would be easy to tell the story from the perspective of the coward who runs in battle, so I invented a friend who could tell his story. In doing so, I found myself sympathizing with this persona of the

“narrator,” thinking about what the knowledge of this story might have done to him over the years, keeping it inside, almost ashamed by his failure to help his friend survive. This kind of guilt can weigh on a man, and the desire for the cathartic experience of sharing the story can slowly build until the story must be told. This is where the story begins, with Joshua Dowell about to travel to Baltimore to meet a reporter to share the story he has never quite been able to come to terms with.

I’ve always liked the personal aspect of the relationship between the author and his or her audience. Brooks et al. define fiction as “the presentation of the author’s way of looking at life,” similar to an essay, drama, poem, or sermon (9), calling this the writer’s “vision,” and I attempted in “Climbing Heaven” to mirror that act of sharing a vision in Dowell as he tells his own story, a story within a story, if you will.

Also integral to this story is the idea of historical fiction. I was able to draw from several historical facts, using the battle at Antietam, the bloodiest single day of the Civil War, as the frame for Dowell’s story, wanting to present an accurate picture of history, but like a good fiction writer, not overly concerned with “the facts.” Thus, I peopled the story with two factual characters, Elmer Ellsworth, the first soldier to die in the war, and President Lincoln. My intentions with Ellsworth were slightly didactic, as anyone curious about the “facts” behind “Climbing Heaven” could find Ellsworth’s real story quite readily, although my version of him is not meant to be totally accurate in personality (however, Lincoln’s quote is accurate). I changed perspectives slightly when Joshua is telling his story to the reporter, choosing not to place his reminiscing in first person, which may seem more natural. My thinking at the time was to attempt to make this flashback more immediate and cinematic, rather than an obvious regression into

history, thus giving it more of a present tense intimacy to place the reader “at the scene,” so to speak.

Also emphasized in the story are ideas such as time, memory, and honor. I make a metaphor of the action of the story out of Shelley’s poem, “To the Moon”:

Art thou pale for weariness  
Of climbing heaven and gazing on the earth,  
Wandering companionless  
Among the stars that have a different birth, -  
And ever changing, like a joyless eye

That finds no object worth its constancy? (Hutchinson 621)

Joshua is facing death, or “climbing heaven,” gazing back on his life, or earth, wondering if any object is worth his constancy: “What must mankind look like from that perspective? His own life? How much meant anything at all?” He has never been able to come to terms with the needless death of his friend Carson, a good man, who died from a lack of faith.

The pardon is the gesture of grace in the story, but it is rejected. Symbolically, however, the pardon is still around at the end of “Climbing Heaven,” and accepted by the reporter, albeit given and accepted in a different way than that offered to Carson, but possibly empowering in its own kind of salvation. The Catholic imagery similar to O’Connor is present here, with themes of guilt, confession, and absolution. Carson is unable to overcome his guilt and place his faith in a pardon that does not come in a way that meets his conception of a pardon. Joshua is guilt-ridden because of his inability to help his friend, thus the need for confession, or telling his story. If Joshua is unable to understand the ramifications of all this, it is up to the reader to gain the

enlightenment of the epiphany, as the last lines are directed as much from the author to the reader as from Joshua to the reporter: “Why don’t you take it? It’s haunted me long enough. I suppose there are several different morals you could take for this story. I won’t choose one for you. It’s your story now anyway.”

There is an element of tragedy in this story, which also appears in “The Tears of Angels.” Both stories are concerned with the ways in which we overcome tragedy, how we put our lives back together in the face of Fate.

In the final story of the collection, “To Set It Right,” history also plays an important part. I have always been intrigued by the story of Boadicea, the Warrior Queen, who fought the Roman invaders in Britain in the first century. In keeping with my preference for a dark, atmospheric story, I decided to incorporate the story of Boadicea into a modern-day tale of a woman being haunted by the past, in a very different way from Joshua in “Climbing Heaven”. Under the surface of “To Set It Right” lies a story of conspiracy and reincarnation, but I did not intend for these elements to be obvious to the reader. The main character, Abigail, is haunted by dreams of a woman warrior, presented in flashback intermittently throughout “To Set It Right”. In addition to the dreams, Abigail is being shadowed by the embodiment of the mysterious stranger motif, a man in brown robes, whom she comes to think of as a druid because of his attire.

As Abigail attempts to make sense out of these bizarre developments in her life, the story of Boadicea unfolds in her dreams until she is able to recognize the woman as the Warrior Queen. Implied in the story is the fact that Abigail is either the reincarnation of, or possessed with the spirit of Boadicea, and her own life in the ending starts to bear that out.

One theme that emerges in “To Set it Right” is dreams versus reality, using the Pascal quotation: “We know that we are not dreaming, but, however unable we may be to prove it rationally, our inability proves nothing but the weakness of our reason, and not the uncertainty of all our knowledge” (217). As Abigail is working through the mystery of the dreams and the druid, she must use reason and knowledge to figure out what is happening to her. But underlying the story is the question, “what is reality?” and the idea that her reality could be a dream. In fact, the last line of the story has Abigail “praying in her mind that it was all just a bad dream.” In some ways this echoes the end of Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown,” which pointedly asks whether its title character has only fallen asleep and dreamed a dream of evil, which has a tangible effect on Brown, regardless of whether it is real or not.

The title of the story is from *Hamlet*, Act I, scene V, after Hamlet has just learned from his Father’s ghost the treachery of his uncle: “O cursed spite,/That ever I was born to set it right!” (1136). The inciting incident in the case of Boadicea was the murder of her two daughters. Abigail, in a case of authorial trickery and peripety, discovers that her own daughters have suffered a violent end that will bring her full circle, completing the link between the history and the present. I have purposefully kept from the reader the existence of these daughters in order to heighten this moment of revelation, and I hope I can be forgiven for this withholding. She is now in the place of Hamlet, after discovering the true nature of his father’s death; she must go about somehow “setting it right” in her own world. Tragedy is apparent in this story, like “Tears” and “Climbing Heaven,” as evidenced by taking my title from the most famous tragedy of all time. However, this story is more traditional in its use of tragedy, as it is concerned not with putting the pieces back together but how it all falls apart in the first place.

The identity of the murderers of Abigail's daughters is not resolved within the story, but there are many possibilities. To complete the analogy of a warrior queen and her army, Abigail's army is waiting for her, a secret society (which makes contact with her through the druid), but it is unclear their motives. They are an army without a war, and it may be that they have perpetrated the atrocity to give Abigail a reason to lead them. It may be that Fate has given Abigail a means of dealing with a random act of violence against her family, because of her connection with Boadicea. It was my desire that the reader mull these types of things over, letting his or her imagination put in a little extra work than is usually required.

In any case, Abigail, along with the reader, comes to a horribly unpleasant epiphany, the realization that her life is more like Boadicea's than she could ever have imagined. The point of the story is not what might happen next, or even why Fate has brought Abigail to this point, but rather that history has stepped out of the wings to take center stage, eclipsing the life Abigail was, if not overly fond of, at least comfortable with. But events overtake us, molding and shaping us sometimes, as Abigail discovers, rather than the other way around. As Pascal said (which I use as foreshadowing in the story), "The last act is bloody, however fine the rest of the play. They throw earth over your head and it is finished forever." We cannot avoid our destiny no matter how hard we may try to escape it.

There is no gesture of grace in this story, which separates it from "The Tears of Angels" and "Climbing Heaven and Gazing on Earth," but an epiphany of sorts is the common bond.

In each of the stories, I enjoyed experimenting with different genres, different perspectives, and different voices. But common threads link the stories, such as epiphanies, the concept of time, history, and gestures of grace. The motifs of guilt, confession, absolution, and

the tragic themes also link the stories. But the title of this collection is “The Meaning of the Moment,” for it is this connection which, in addition to holding the most resonance with the reader, is most strongly represented in each of the stories.



## CHAPTER 2

### THE TEARS OF ANGELS

The eyes that see the hourglass in humanity never see the beauty in people, incapable of that release. But such is the thorn I lived with . . . and died with, if I am to be honest.

I often wonder what sustained me through the twenty-odd years of my former life but am never able to satisfy my queries to my liking; in time, however, or beyond it, there may be no mysteries to nag the borders of the mind. I was not without love during the early years of my life, but fate had a way of denying me love that I had grown dependent upon. At the age of four, I watched my parents die. At least, this is what I was told later by my grandmother who took me in; I have no memory of it but no doubt of it either for it does much to explain why I would not open my eyes for several months after the accident. This I do remember: a suffocating fear that the world would not be there when I attempted to let it back in. They pulled me from the inferno that was our car with my eyes squeezed tight, and it would take some time before light would once again enter those windows.

It seemed the world had dimmed, even though the smiling face of Nana was the first thing I awoke to. Darkness covered everything. My waking hours had become a dream, a dream that I could not fully believe. Although Nana did everything she could for the next two years, nothing helped. I found her on the kitchen floor one winter morning. By this time, of course, Death was no stranger to me; I recognized His cold touch instantly. If the world had grown dim for the last two years, the light was now snuffed out entirely. I was truly alone.

The world lost all its beauty, and I was engulfed by the presence of death. Everywhere I looked, I was reminded of the decay and rot that overtakes us all. I watched as the flowers died

in the cold, as the leaves fell from the trees, and could never get those images out of my head, even while looking at Spring in bloom. I shrank from the people around me, for I *knew* now, knew the end of life in all its gruesome glory. I saw the frailty of their flesh and it consumed my being.

I was not left completely helpless, at the mercy of the wolves. My aunt and uncle made a decision they must have regretted many times, and took me in to raise. I have no illusions about their kindheartedness: there happened to be quite a large amount of money at their disposal because of their hospitality, as per instructions from my wealthy parents. More than once I overheard the sentence, usually muttered under the breath, "It's not worth it." But I'm afraid I am mostly to blame.

I had to be forced to attend a local private school, where I made a discovery that kept intact my sanity for years to come. I found the diversion of reading, and from that early age threw myself into my studies. I could not bear to look at my teachers, or even my classmates, for even the smallest of glances would remind me of things I was attempting to bury deep inside. I began to read everything I could find. I had availed myself of every volume in the school library by the age of eleven, with no particular regard for author or genre. Make no mistake: I did not read for pleasure. I read to occupy my mind. The page had no life, so Death had no hold over it, making it a small means of escape. But it was inspired by life, and I could recognize no beauty in it. I filled my mind with as many dry facts as it could hold, and when the school library ran dry, I turned to the one downtown. Some of the knowledge could not help but sink in, thus I made for the most part excellent grades.

Around my fourteenth birthday, I made a curious discovery, one that would send shock waves through my poor Aunt and Uncle and their three children: I discovered music. The curious aspect of this was the type of music, which admittedly was a little unusual for one of my age. I found it quite by accident, I assure you. While shopping one day with my Aunt and the other children after school, we ducked into a record store at a local mall, and for the first time in my life I was spoken to by music. At those haunting melodies, I wanted to lift my eyes from the ground on which I continually fixed my gaze. I learned later the piece was Mozart's "Requiem," and started an obsessive collection of classical music. I had finally found something that I could relate to, and the best part of it was, here was something that I could not only enjoy, but enjoy with my eyes *closed*.

However, there is only so much Mozart and Wagner that some families can take, and after much worry for my health that had been driven to desperation by my newfound friends, my Aunt and Uncle decided that some professional help was in order. I was sent to a psychologist in town. Psychologists, however, *are* only human, which did nothing to endear him to me. I had no interest in "working through my problems," as he so mildly referred to them. It would take something stronger than he to find a chink in my armor. It only took one look for me to realize he was the same as the rest of us, only waiting to die, so my eyes went back to the shelter of the ground. What could *he* do to help *me*? I unnerved even him after only two sessions, and was not made to go back.

I grew tall and lean, one might even say gaunt. Food did not interest me, especially since the family took their meals together with the exception of myself.

By the time I graduated from high school, I had settled into the comfortable routine of avoidance. In this way I saved myself a huge amount of pain, for I know I could not have survived intense human contact. I was able to exist with the smallest amount of interaction possible, and I *never* looked anyone directly in the eyes. I had made that mistake early on, and the storm of destruction that ripped my eyes was enough to teach me that cruel lesson. I moved out the week of my graduation in the effort to isolate myself further.

Even at that age, I was financially independent, which obviously only worked in my favor, allowing me to stay in my third-story apartment for days and even weeks at a time. The money that I had been left, combined with the large insurance policies collected after my parents' deaths, served me well enough that I was never in need of acquiring work. I would pay my bills by mail, waiting until late morning when I would be most likely not to run into a neighbor to drop them into the downstairs box. I bought everything I could by mail, from clothes to furniture to books and music. I found a young boy in the apartment and set up a system of grocery shopping, with him leaving the groceries outside my door and I his payment in his family's mailbox. All of the day-to-day things one must do to exist I handled from the shelter of my little apartment.

There were times, though, that my four rooms would start to drift down upon me, haven or not. In these times, I would venture out. Not in the day, of course, I minimized the risk. I would wait until the small hours of the night and navigate the streets much as I had the halls of my high school: head down, eyes constantly averted. These nights did not come along often however; once every three to four weeks was definitely enough to break the monotony.

I would sit, eyes closed, listening to my music for hours. It was the only transport away from the world in which I lived, a world governed by Death. I cannot say if it made me truly

happy; I think not, but it was enough. Without it I know there would have been only despair. It became my constant companion. Whether it was background noise or the sole focus of my attention, I always had something playing at least softly as I ate or slept, night and day.

I never gave a moment's thought to breaking the hold Death had on my life. I suppose I believed that would happen only when I died. And I was right.

I remember the night I died. As was my habit, I rose late, sometime around one in the afternoon. The details of that final day are somewhat hazy, for when your days are uniformly without distinction they do tend to run together. That night, however, burns in my mind. At about nine o'clock, I changed the CD in the player, slipping in Mahler's unfinished symphony and turning the volume up to eight to catch the extreme quiet of the music. I settled into my niche on the couch as the viola built into the lead-in of the first movement, with its wrenching violins. For a brief moment the thought entered my mind that I could write a terribly dramatic story to this music, and I smiled, knowing I would never possess that type of initiative.

Perhaps it was the whimsical nature of the second movement that caused my change in mood. I attempted to fight it off, going back to the first track with the press of two buttons on the remote once it started. But after the adagio had pulled me along its twists and turns for the second time, I was beaten. I lay there, resisting the impulse to rise to my feet throughout the entire scherzo. The Purgatorio section, along with the fourth movement, came and went as I sat limp, resigned to my decision but holding out for as long as possible, wanting to clear the streets of a few more people before I ventured out into the night. The funeral drums of the Finale had begun to sound as I squeezed out the door, allowing the music to finish unattended.

I did not even make it to the bus stop at the end of my block. From the corner of my downturned eye I caught a form, thirty feet from me, waiting for the bus that was even now pulling up to the curb. At that distance, I detected a light coming from the figure, a light that grew as my momentum carried me forward. I risked an upward glance that told me only that she was female; she moved onto the bus, and I started to make my way past the door. Something spoke to me in that instant, from behind me.

"Do not let her get away."

I whirled to find the source of the advice, but the street was empty.

It seems I abandoned my conditioned response of avoidance, for I suddenly found myself on the bus, dropping the fare into the driver's hand and berating myself at the same time for such a foolish lapse of self-control. I followed the light, although I did not need to. We were alone on the bus. Still never daring a look at her face, I took the seat across from her to study her with my peripheral vision. I felt her watching me even as I watched her in my own way. We hardly breathed as the world moved around us.

It was not her long brown hair that framed her face, her long pleated skirt that registered, though I did notice details such as these. She seemed to be lit from within, a soft candle glowing that she could not hide.

A spark caught my eye, and before I could stop myself I looked up, into the face where the spark had come from, and saw what had reflected the light inside her. A single tear had slipped from her wet eyes as she watched me. She made a move to reach out to me but restrained herself.

A storm let loose inside me as the realization dawned. She *knew!* *Knew* my thorn, somehow, never mind how, but she knew, and that was all that mattered.

How long we sat in silence I do not know. But my heart was breaking as I watched her cry for me. At length, the bus ground to a stop, but she did not move to leave.

I reached out, with trembling hands, toward the first human contact in almost twenty years, and wiped the tears away. I closed my eyes for a moment, and when I opened them I nodded slightly at her. It seemed she forced a smile then, and as she rose she reached for me, catching my cheek with her fingertips.

And then she was gone, out the door and out of my life.

Stunned, drained of all energy, I sat, unable to move, her tears growing cold upon my hands. As I struggled with my emotions, my spirit was dying within me, a searing pain in my soul that stabbed at me. I rode for what must have been hours with the old driver who never said a word, keeping silent watch . . . a death watch over my final hours.

I had gazed into the eyes of another person, and not felt pain and despair. Into the eyes of another person, no, not a person, an *angel*, and she had been beautiful.

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I stepped off the bus and met the dawn. The pain in my soul had lifted with the passing of the night.

My life, in essence, was over. I never returned to my third-story apartment. There was really no need. It held nothing of value to me now. I headed off, toward the light of the sun.

I have not met my angel since that night, but I know that she is out there, and I will find her.



## CHAPTER 3

### CLIMBING HEAVEN AND GAZING ON EARTH

*“Of all the days on all the fields where American soldiers have fought, the most terrible by almost any measure was September 17, 1862. The battle waged on that date, close by Antietam Creek at Sharpsburg in western Maryland, took a human toll never exceeded on any other single day in the nation’s history. So intense and sustained was the violence, a man recalled, that for a moment in his mind’s eye the very landscape around him turned red.”*

Stephen W. Sears,

*Landscape Turned Red: The Battle of Antietam*

The old man held the yellowed paper close, as if the signature on the bottom might save his soul when he reached the pearly gates. That day was soon arriving, when questions would be answered. His withered body was losing ground by the day, by the hour, by the minute. He ran a finger of his free hand, a hand that spoke much about the man with its work-worn hardness and crippled form, over the barrel of the Sharps 1859 rifle that lay across his knees, cradled against the supporting arms of the rocking chair that moved back and forth to almost perfect time. Time and trouble had kissed this instrument too, this instrument of death, but even with that similarity it made a nice contrast to the contents of his other hand, the old man thought sadly.

His thoughts were interrupted by the soft call.

“Joshua?”

A door swung shut that he had not heard open. Footsteps.

“The air is getting colder. You should come in.”

He removed his left hand from the rifle and reached backwards over his left shoulder, palm up. Almost at once he was reassured by the familiar touch, a hand filling his own. Together they looked out across the life that they had built, man and wife, from the porch of their Maryland farmhouse. The sun was lazy tonight, not seeming to be in any hurry to perform its duty of giving in to the night.

They did not need to speak, another result of Time.

The minutes faded slowly and melted away. Presently she noticed the ragged paper he held close to his chest.

“It’s a story that needs to be told,” she observed. “Besides, it will do you good to get away for a couple of days.”

He responded by gently squeezing her hand and smiling up at her.

She tugged at him with a sense of mock urgency.

“You are going to petrify if you sit in that rocker any longer. Let’s go start a fire and try to knock the chill off.”

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The story might need to be told, but that did not make it any easier. He murmured a prayer of thanks that his body was still capable of driving a team of horses. The road moved

sluggishly, it seemed to him, though he was making good time. He should make Baltimore by late afternoon.

He attempted to organize his thoughts, his life, to make some sense of, an order to the rush of memories and the vagueness that accompanied them. He was about to embark on a journey through areas of the mind that assailed him frequently, but ones that he had learned to parry effectively. He thought it best, considering the purpose of his trip, to prepare himself in this way, a passage through the winding dirt roads of memory, even as the team of horses stirred up the dust of the road around him. Though he tried, he could not start at the beginning. The important parts kept intruding. Highlights. The day he married Abby. The moment he became a father, and then a father twice over. Moments of intense joy that were associated invariably with home and family. And the low points. Deaths of friends and loved ones that he tried to hurry over in his mind now. There had been enough of mourning. But sometimes the bad memories linger on, pulling the mind back over ground thought be paid for with blood and tears. If only one could be more selective about the memories that are misplaced by age. But that sort of forgetfulness did not exist.

He saw his mother on her deathbed against the backdrop of the moving countryside. He knew it was a trick of the mind—she was better off now; the pain was gone. He was thankful for that comfort.

Life was devoid of order. This lack of order was becoming plain to him as he tried to force the scenes of his life into some proper context that would seem coherent. There were sensations, emotions, and the lack of them when the heart built its walls. There were days he remembered for no other reason than their triviality, which seemed odd to him.

The days and years eluded his grasp and taunted him. And so he concentrated even harder, which only made the task more difficult. He entered town without being conscious of it and had pulled up to Union Square House, a white monstrosity that claimed the better part of King Street. He had always liked the old building, even before the war, though it had changed much since then.

The lady at the desk was snoring lightly, and Joshua hated to disturb what might have been a much needed rest. But not wanting to take a chance on losing a room, he cleared his throat loudly, at which she raised her head sleepily.

“Oh. May I help you?”

“I’d like a room, please, for one night at least, possibly two.”

“Yes. Yes, of course.”

“I’ll know by tomorrow evening whether or not I’ll need the extra night. Will that be a problem?”

“No...you would need to let us know before six o’clock tomorrow afternoon, though.”

He nodded and accepted the key she offered him.

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When the knock came at the door, Joshua placed his book on the small table open and face down beside his chair and unhurriedly made his way across the room. The woman from the desk glanced past him and perused the room upon his opening the door.

“Mr. Dowell? There is a man downstairs asking to see you.”

“Thank you,” he said, “Please tell him I’ll be down shortly.”

Joshua paused long enough to pick up his book and insert a bit paper he obtained by ripping a piece off the daily newspaper. Shrugging off that pang of nervousness once more, he made his way down the broad curving staircase until the tall, broad-shouldered young man came into view.

“Mr. Dowell? My name is Andrew Ladd, from the *Tribune*.”

Ladd held out a hand as Joshua reached the bottom step.

“Very pleased to meet you, Mr. Ladd. You wouldn’t be objectionable to some late supper tonight, would you?”

“That sounds very good, sir,” he said, nodding. “I’ve not had the chance to eat, myself. Only just got into town. I’ve heard that the place across the street is quite good.”

“It is indeed. One of the reasons I chose this inn to begin with. I’m sure you’ll be quite pleased.”

The two made their way across the dusty thoroughfare, and the dusk that was falling relaxed the new acquaintances with its promise of the rest that night would bring.

Ladd waited until the preoccupied woman, who smelled like uncooked fish, had taken their orders before getting down to business.

“I must admit, Mr. Dowell, that my age and inexperience presented an obstacle to my receiving this assignment. My total lack of reaction to the mention of your friend’s name did not endear me to my editor’s fancy. He was quite close to the former editor, who of course would have rejoiced at having you turn up.”

“Mr. Greeley was spoken of very highly by Elmer.”

“Elmer Ellsworth. I did my homework, you know. A patriot, in every sense of the word.”

“I don’t wish to disappoint you, Mr. Ladd, but the story I came here to tell does not focus on my old friend.”

The young man was bewildered.

“Well, I . . . I hadn’t . . . I was under the . . .”

Joshua almost smiled. He decided he should rescue his drowning companion. “It’s quite all right, my boy. Ellsworth played his part, and an important role at that. Without him, I wouldn’t be having this meal with you tonight. But this is very much another man’s story . . .”

Joshua looked out the window. Night had fallen, much faster than the day before. Time was playing games with him again.

Joshua turned back to the reporter. “I’ll make you a deal. Let us have a wonderful meal. If you can stomach the company, the small talk, and the food, I shall pay the bill, and we’ll return to my room ready to work. Or, if you like, we can be up early and start in the morning. Fair enough?”

“More than generous, sir.”

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As they entered the Union House once more, Ladd spoke up.

“You were correct, Mr. Dowell. The food was excellent.” He paused. “If it’s all the same to you, would it be all right to get started tonight?”

“Quite. I have never needed much sleep, and my habit has been to go to bed late and get up early, so either way would have been perfectly fine with me.”

“If you’ll allow me to get my materials, I’ll be over to your room shortly.”

Joshua set about composing his thoughts even as he arranged the room. He carefully pulled the table out from the wall it hugged, and moved the high-backed red velvet chairs to opposite sides. That done, he walked over to the window, brushed the curtain aside, and looked up into the heavy night sky. A few dark clouds hung pregnant, but for the most part it was a clear sky. The moon was full tonight, filled with a weight. Joshua repeated the lines of Shelley’s poem to himself:

*Art thou pale for weariness*

*Of climbing heaven and gazing on the earth . . .*

What must mankind look like from that perspective? His own life? How much meant anything at all?

When the knock sounded, Joshua called out, “Come in.”

Ladd entered, arms full of notebooks, protruding papers sticking out at random as if trying to escape. “I suppose we should get the financial question out of the way,” he said, setting the books on the table. “They have authorized me to—”

Joshua interrupted him with a wave of his hand. “I’m not interested in your money. Have no need of it really.”

For the second time that night, Ladd did not know what to say. He finally shrugged and sat down in the chair facing the window.

Joshua took his place in the other chair. “I suppose it’s time we do this. How much do you want in the way of background?”

“Why don’t you start wherever you’re comfortable? If I have something I need cleared up, I can always ask.”

Joshua nodded. “Very well. When I contacted your editor at the *New York Tribune*, I mentioned that I had chosen your publication because of its past association with Ellsworth. Obviously, they thought this might be worthwhile to pursue, for they replied favorably, indicating they wanted to set up a meeting.

As I mentioned earlier, Elmer has a great deal to do with the reason I’m here. I met the charismatic young Colonel in the summer of ’60. He was to become quite the public figure, and his presence was immediately recognizable. Did you know Lincoln called him “the greatest little man” he ever met? No? He walked into town like he owned the world and started putting up advertisements all over, challenging anyone to compete against his Zouave Cadets. War was threatening, and Ellsworth wanted his men ready. I was working as a clerk at the local general store when he entered, wanting to know if he could post his challenge in our window.

I’m not sure if anyone could have found it easy to say “no” to Elmer. His bravado did not make him less likeable. We struck up a conversation and found that we had several common interests. I was 34, he was 23, but the age difference meant nothing. I was mildly interested in politics, but on hearing that he was going to be campaigning for Mr. Lincoln, my curiosity got the best of me. By the time he left Baltimore at the end of the week, I had made a friend. We exchanged letters every couple of weeks or so over the course of the next year, and the friendship grew.



It was a cold morning in May of the next year that I received the news. Colonel Ellsworth shot dead in Virginia. It isn't had, even now, thirty-six years later, to find evidence of the martyr he became. Being the first officer from the North to be killed was not the determining factor, you realize. It was that he was already adored by the masses."

Here Joshua paused. "I traveled to Washington, where his body was taken at the request of the President. A ceremony was held at the White House, and a few of Ellsworth's friends were permitted to attend with the President and Cabinet members and military officials. I can see Lincoln, sitting, head in his hands at the foot of the casket, as the minister prayed for the soul of a man who had been larger than life.

That picture was one reason I joined the War Between the States. There was another.

I struggled with leaving home and family for several months. Three days after Ellsworth's death, the Second Maryland Infantry was formed in Baltimore. When the unit finished organizing in October, I was not with them. It was Lee's invasion of Maryland in September of the following year that completely shattered my illusions of reality. I could no longer ignore what was going on around me. The war had come to me..."

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*September 16*

He fell into place with the steady stream of volunteers on the road from Baltimore to Sharpsburg, outfitted with only the barest of provisions, a uniform that did not fit properly, to say nothing of the boots, and an 1859 Sharps that he carried propped on one shoulder. He had

brought from home his Whitney Navy .36, which was stuffed into his belt at his hip. The revolver, he was comfortable with; the rifle, he was not.

Being the friendly type, he slowed his gait to match that of the man walking behind him, until the man was even with him. He had to stretch to keep up with the man's pace.

"How do you do?"

The big man grunted in a not-unfriendly way.

"You didn't by chance get boots that were too small for you, did you?" he asked, looking at the man's feet. At this his companion stopped in the road.

"Yeah... What size do you wear?"

Minutes later, the two were well on their way to becoming friends, and walking much more comfortably through the mud and the muck.

The big man looked over at him. "Name's Carson."

"Dowell."

The two talked of home, family, and weather, They steered the conversation around their destination.

Crackling campfires and muted singing awaited them outside the city. The line of volunteers slipped in, collapsing around the tents of McClellan's army.

An excited youth accosted the two new arrivals. "Have you heard? One of our scouts, the old boy—got a copy of the Rebs' battle plan! Can you imagine? 'Lee's Special Order 191', or somethin'." He skipped off to share the news with more of the incoming volunteers.

Food was available, but all Dowell could think about was sleep. He could not find a tent with a vacancy, so he settled for a couple of blankets for Carson and himself, and found a flat

place, from which he removed as many of the little rocks and clumps of dirt as possible, to lay them. Once he got somewhat comfortable, however, he could not bring himself to close his eyes. The moon was a sliver of light that was snuffed out from time to time with the passing cloud. At length, he rose up on one elbow and retrieved his powder and bullets from his pack, and began loading his revolver.

A corporal appeared above him.

“You boys with the ones from Baltimore?”

“Yes sir.”

“You need to join up with the Second Maryland, Infantry, at dawn, you understand.”

Joshua applied in the affirmative.

### *September 17*

Dawn came up with all of its fury but none of the glory. The campsite was chaos, and Dowell and Carson had to find a 900-man unit in 90,000. By the time they had joined the Second Maryland, the fight had been on for an hour.

The morning wore on. From his vantage point overlooking the battlefield, albeit from a great distance, Dowell was able to observe what war looked like before it became personal. The screams of the dying did not fail to make their impression from the surgeon’s tent that was nearby. Fascinated, he watched Lee’s center fall back into a sunken farm lane, taking up position behind a tired-looking bridge, and instinctively he knew they would not be removed easily. Wave after wave assaulted the road, only to be cut down.

And then came the call.

*“We’re going to take us a little bridge, boys.”*

Down to the road, down to the little bridge, the Second Maryland marched. Alongside was the Sixth New Hampshire. Dowell and Carson were not among the first units sent in. They watched, horrified, as their division was taken apart. After one final assault along Antietam Creek, the commander had had enough, and called for the remainder to fall back to the higher ground. They rained down deadly fire for almost two hours, Dowell unflinchingly loading and reloading his Sharps time and again.

“We’re breaking through!” A shout went up from Second Maryland. The steady volleys had sent the middle of their line into confusion, falling back slowly but surely. Dowell’s commanding officers, without hesitation, gave the order to follow the troops that were breaking through the Confederates’ center. The overwhelming numbers of the North had prevailed. He ran as fast as his legs would allow, across the field and over the fallen. When he reached the road, the Rebel army had gone. They were scurrying up a hill opposite the Yankees’ old position, with the Union IX Corps in hot pursuit, including the Second Maryland.

The first cannon blast sent three men flying over Dowell’s head. The second caught a piece of the road behind him, and the men on it before it even registered what was happening. The volleys came faster, and more accurately, from the top of the hill with every passing second. Still upwards the Second Maryland climbed. The cannons were aiming more at the front of the charging Yanks now, and fifty yards away chunks of dirt mixed with pieces of his fallen comrades. Out of the corner of his eye, Joshua saw Carson. He was running, heading back for the protection of distance. Dowell hesitated, then continued to climb.

It is hard to say, in the heat of the afternoon, exactly how long the Second Maryland climbed that hill in the face of obliterating cannon fire. At some point, they fell back. There was simply nothing left to do.

Joshua stumbled back, over the same bodies, but much more slowly this time.

Later that night, trying not to hear the cries of the wounded echoing around the camp, Dowell sat numbly, not moving, watching the flames dance. He wondered what had been accomplished by the day. The Confederates now occupied Sharpsburg. The Union forces had outnumbered Lee almost two to one.

“Hey soldier.”

He looked up.

“You have a friend, big man, you came in with?”

“Yeah.”

“They got him chained up near the commanders’ tents.”

He bolted up and headed at a run his body protested with every stride toward the center of the encampment.

Carson sat beside a large stake dug into the ground, the chains around his legs and hands. At the sight of Dowell, he lowered his head.

“Get out of here,” he growled in a low voice.

“What is this?”

Carson raised up. “I said get out of here!”

“Not until you tell me what’s going on.”

Carson shrugged. "They caught me. I panicked, I ran, and they caught me. Now they are going to make an example of me. It's as simple as that." His features relaxed, and he looked pleadingly at Dowell. "My wife and kids can't find out."

Dowell struggled to calm himself. "What do you mean, you ran? The whole bloody Union IX ran! There wasn't a lot of choice in the matter."

"Yeah, but I ran before the rest. They want an example. It's as simple as that," he repeated. "You can't let my wife and kids find out. It'd kill 'em. Promise me."

Dowell promised him, but he did not really believe that they would actually execute Carson.

### *September 18*

The next morning, and all through the next day, the work went around that the offensive was coming. Sharpsburg could be taken back. But as the day wore on, the rumors dwindled. There was to be no attack. It was not going to be necessary. Lee was pulling out of Sharpsburg. Dowell shook his head. All those lives. Was it all for nothing. No ground gained, none lost? One rumor, however, was not false. Carson was to be shot the next morning.

Joshua was in a state of disbelief. He had been there. He could not believe that this man deserved to die.

A cry went up from the camp, and he began to hear a name, from a distance that grew in volume.

"Lincoln."

"The President is here."

Joshua followed the crowd.

He stood so much taller than everyone around him. The last time Joshua had seen him, he had been sitting down. The soldiers jostled for position around him, but though they pressed in close, he did not turn them away.

Joshua stopped and watched for a time. The ease with which the man dealt with the soldiers. So kind.

Eventually, the President made his way up the road toward him, and the crowd thinned down.

“Mr. President?” Joshua was surprised that it was his voice that spoke the words as Lincoln neared.

“Yes?” Joshua marveled at the softness of the voice.

“My name is Dowell, sir. I . . . I wondered if I might speak with you, uh, if I may.”

“Yes, of course.”

They walked together, and Joshua tried to find the right words. The trial was over, but this man still needed an advocate. “I have a friend. A good man, sir. He loves his family, a decent man. They are going to shoot him because he ran during the battle. He just panicked, sir. Lost his head. But he doesn’t deserve to die. The whole division fell back minutes later. He’s a good man.”

The president stopped and looked at Dowell for a long moment.

“I see.” President Lincoln turned off the road and approached a nearby tent, at which he stopped, asking for a piece of paper and a pen. He returned, presenting Dowell with the paper. On it were these words, with the signature at the bottom:

*I, Abraham Lincoln, do hereby pardon this man.*

Tears filled Dowell's eyes. "Thank you, sir."

The president nodded and walked away.

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"How can you toy with me in this way?" Carson spat with disgust. "Don't you think I'd know a presidential pardon when I see one? Where's the Presidential Seal? It's not even on anything that resembles an official document."

Dowell stood speechless.

"Get out of my sight with this joke you're trying to pull." He crumpled up the paper and threw it at Dowell.

*September 19*

The morning broke cold and Dowell met it with unflinching reserve. He had not been asleep. He played over the events of the previous evening in his mind, as he had done all night, searching for a way he could have changed the outcome, but he could only come to the conclusion that he had done everything he could. The officers would not listen. If the accused wouldn't accept the pardon, why should they? All his attempts to reason with Carson had fallen on deaf ears. All that was necessary for Carson to live was a simple act of faith, which he was incapable of. When the shot rang out, Joshua did not react. A man was now dead, who did not have to die.



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“Look,” Joshua said. “It’s already morning.

Ladd looked up from his notebook at the sun streaming through the window. He had not noticed the increasing light in his furious attempt to transcribe the narrative. “That’s it? They shot him? How could they get by with that? Didn’t someone question the fact that there was a pardon?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, they did. Because of this very case, the Supreme Court had to make a ruling. It was their decision that a pardon is only a pardon if it is accepted. The officers were cleared. Carson’s family never found out how he died. I went to them later. They were under the impression he had died in battle, at Antietam. I never indicated otherwise.”

“So all that he had to do was accept the pardon, and he would have been saved?”

Joshua nodded. As Ladd watched, Joshua stood and crossed the room to his one bag he had brought with him on the trip. He removed the yellowed paper from its protective shell of a book.

“You kept it,” Ladd breathed in amazement. “After all these years.”

“How could I not? At any rate, I don’t need it any longer. Why don’t you take it? It’s haunted me long enough. I suppose there are several different morals you could take for this story. I won’t choose one for you. It’s your story now anyway.”

CHAPTER 4  
TO SET IT RIGHT

Fierce winds bent the tops of the tall, skinny trees, giving Abigail the feeling that they were reaching for her in the darkness. The fact that she was walking across a deserted parking lot only made it worse, not to mention a few well-meaning teenagers had knocked out the nearest streetlight. She shook the eerie feeling off, and with it an autumn leaf that had landed in her long, auburn hair only a second before. She had keys in hand fifteen yards away from her Silver Saab, and the jingling sounds of the keys were drowned out by the swirling wind around her.

Abigail was reaching for the door when she noticed it out of the corner of her eye: a single leaf about ten feet from her, being swept round and round by the wind in a little circle. Picking up speed, another leaf joined the small, forming whirlwind, then another, and another. In seconds, dozens of leaves were chasing each other in a curious kind of race. And then it started expanding.

Now it was six feet tall, and moving, this swirling mass of leaves. With a jolt that brought her out of her curious detachment, Abigail realized the whirlwind was moving towards her. She climbed in, slamming the door behind her. As she watched in amazement, the whirlwind enveloped the Saab. It moved faster and faster, until the leaves beat furiously at the car, as if wanting in. And then, just like flipping off a switch, the wind died. As the leaves settled on the hood and roof of the car, Abigail felt her heart pounding against her chest.

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She was three blocks from her apartment when she noticed the man standing on the corner. At least, she thought it was a man; his build and height seemed to suggest so. It was hard

to tell under the heavy brown cloak and hood he was wearing. The man seemed to hover above the sidewalk before he turned to walk away. Abigail smiled and shook her head at the thought of the whirlwind she had survived earlier.

“Relax, Abby,” she murmured under her breath to herself. “You haven’t had *that* much to drink tonight.”

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Abigail strode across the living room, throwing her newly shedded coat on the couch and keys on the coffee table in one deft motion. She reached the answering machine, starting to undress for a quick shower.

“You have zero messages,” the mechanical message counter announced, much to her relief.

She paused in the master bedroom to check the temperature, lowered it a couple of degrees, and slipped into the adjoining bathroom.

In five minutes she was buried under a mound of thick blankets. One arm sacrificed the warmth of shelter for a minute by reaching over to the bedside phone, taking it off the hook. Tomorrow was Saturday, and no one was going to rob her sleep tonight. In her eyes, at least, she had definitely earned it.

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The stone screeched its way across the knife blade, but none paused in their preparations to notice it or the woman who worked it. The men were busy with their own weapons. The woman sat on a rock in the firelight, the only woman among thousands of men. The hillside was covered with the tents and campfires of war. No one laughed. No one spoke. A dead silence gripped the air, save for the sound of stone against blade.

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Abigail woke slowly the next morning. She shook her head to clear it of the dull screech that lingered. *I must have dreamed about that stupid woman all night*, she thought. *What did the bartender put in that bloody drink last night?*

She lay in bed thinking happily about her responsibilities for the day, which amounted to doing absolutely nothing important. Knowing that a day like this was beyond rare, she had resolved to spend it on herself and visit one of her favorite places.

An hour later, she took A96 out of town and settled in for the long drive through the countryside. Five minutes on the road and it started to rain, but not even the cold dampness brought on by the rain could invade her good spirits. By noon she had reached her destination.

She parked the car overlooking Loch Assynt and pulled out a packed lunch while the rain continued to beat down. By the time she had finished her sandwich, the rain had slowed to a trickle, and she was able to venture out of her car.

The place was deserted, as usual. In recent years, tourists never braved the backcountry roads to seek out the ruins of Ardvreck. What once had been a formidable fortress was now

reduced to a tentative shell, but there was still power here. Abigail pulled off the side of the road that was several hundred yards from the castle, but she enjoyed the walk through the stony fields and down the hillside. The rain had deposited a fine mist over the lake, and with it, a chill in atmosphere.

Taking her time, she paused periodically to take in the area from different angles. Soon the rain had completely stopped, although the clouds still cast a darkness over the day. She zipped up her jacket as she neared the lake.

Abigail had made many trips here, starting at a very young age, with her father, now deceased. The historian in him had filled her head with the stories of these places. Ardvreck, in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, had been home to the MacLeods of Assynt, who warred with the supporters of Charles I, including one unfortunate martyr, the Marquis of Montrose. Montrose, upon his capture by MacLeod, was held at Ardvreck before he was beheaded and quartered in Edinburgh for his treasonous actions. No matter how many times she heard the violent stories of the past from her father, she never lost her fascination or wonder.

Today, the blue-gray waters were choppy from the rain and wind. Paradoxically, in these dark ripples Abigail found the most color. The peak of Cuinneag loomed over the castle, dotted with white rocks most of the way up the mountain, until the top was enveloped completely with the rock.

She picked her way through the loose limestone of the shoreline and made her way onto the strip of land that jutted into the lake on which the ruins stood. A sense of safety and warmth wrapped around her, although there were holes in the walls she could easily climb through. It wasn't the solidity of the walls that Abigail longed for, but the feeling that she had been

transported to another time, freed from the daily routines of this one. She closed her eyes and leaned against the wall, sliding down to wet earth, knees drawn to her chest, and rested her head in the crook of her arm. She loved to imagine the battles that had been fought here, the turnings of fate that had twisted the lives of its inhabitants.

She longed to return to a time when druids walked this land, when the aggressor was not the hated English but the foreign invaders from across the sea. Or even the time when this castle was built.

As her mind wandered, her body lost control until finally, her mind gave in as well, and she slept.

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*Guttural laughter of men mixed with the screams of a young girl in the distance. The woman wept and fought the ropes, but to no avail. She hung stripped to the waist between a makeshift altar to the god of pain. From every direction came the sound of laughter. And the screams.*

*“Tamen tui pecuniam cupis, femina?”*

*She made no reply to the derisive comments and questions coming from her captors. When the first lash came she welcomed it, giving her something to think about other than her daughters. With everything in her she tried not to think about them in order to maintain some sort of grip on sanity.*

*The whip came again and again, the blood, warm and thick, running down the backs of her legs. She tried focusing on different objects, the plume of the guard's helmet, the single ray of light coming through the clouds on this rain-drenched day, the huts in the distance. But the screams kept getting through. At one point she realized the screams were now her own, mixing with the laughter.*

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Abigail opened her eyes and saw that darkness had fallen. He was looking at her, crouched, unmoving, not ten feet away. But she did not scream. The screams were still echoing in her head from the nightmare. She could see his face now; the hood was not as far down as it had been before. Her heart raced, but his eyes were oddly reassuring. They told her that he knew the pain she was feeling, understood. The thick brown robes hid his hands, but she suddenly wished he would reach out to her.

He straightened and turned, walking out of the ruined castle walls. She tried to call out to him, but no words would come.

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Abigail cried all the way home. She couldn't shake the image of the woman being beaten, though she tried everything she could think of to get it out of her head. The backs of her legs felt hot and sticky, and she longed for a warm bath. Her mind was incapable of dwelling on the larger

questions at the moment, such as the identity of the stranger, and the reason for the dreams in the first place. Her rational mind could come up with no logical explanation for any of it, and after the three grueling hours in the car she resolved to put it behind her and forget it as best she could. Tomorrow she would spend a relaxing day at home, and keep the doors bolted. Plenty of Nytol, or vodka, or both, would fix the dreaming. Monday morning everything would be back to normal, the drudgery taking precedence once more.

She made a quick tour of the apartment to reassure herself she was truly alone. Abigail had thought when Eric died that she would always be nervous coming home when the house was empty. But she had gradually gotten used to it. This was the first time she had ever had cause to be frightened. The combination of the vivid dreaming, and the ethereal stalker had her nerves on edge. She started a bath running, then made her way to the console table in the hallway to deposit the keys which were still in her hand.

As she sank down into the steaming claw-foot tub, she noted that the decision to decorate the bathroom in red velvet and black wallpaper had seemed like a good idea at the time. The red now seemed to stand out even with her eyes closed. Abigail kept re-heating the water, not wanting to face the chill that would meet her when she stood up.

When she finally climbed into bed that night, the events of the past twenty-four hours kept repeating themselves, making it hard for her to go to sleep. As she tossed and turned, she stole glances at the bedside alarm clock which didn't help matters any. At 1:00 a.m. she finally got up and went to the kitchen. Afraid of the sleep but not wanting to prolong the slow passage of time, she decided to give the sleeping pills a try.



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Abigail woke up the next morning at 11:00. Immensely relieved that the night had been free of dreams, she thought she would stick to the plan of staying in today and watching old movies on the tube.

Changing burnt-out light bulbs and straightening the apartment occupied her for a couple of hours after breakfast. At three o'clock in the afternoon, she called her mother and made small talk for over an hour. She had fish and chips delivered at five and curled up on the couch in sweats and a t-shirt to pass the evening.

The entire day she refrained from looking out the window, and when the delivery boy knocked with the food she made sure it was actually he before she opened the door. But gradually the jumpiness left her, and she was able to relax more and more. By the time the Sunday night movie ended, she was ready for the oblivion of sleep.

Her beloved bed felt much more like a sanctuary tonight than the previous night, some semblance of normalcy having been returned to it by a night free of dreams. Her tactics of alcohol and sleeping pills forgotten, she climbed into bed slightly annoyed at the thought of the coming Monday.

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*The woman tied her flowing red hair behind her with a strip of scarred leather. She knelt in front of the candle placed on the ground in the tent, and began to pray to the goddess*

*Andrasta for favor in the upcoming battle. The old druid listened to her from outside the tent, making utterances in certain places. Their voices rose to the heavens until they joined in unison.*

*When they were finished, she rose, inserted the knife into the belt at her waist, and picked up the spear as she walked out of the tent. Not a word was spoken to those who awaited her; they fell in behind her, a mass of resolute faces. The campfires were no longer burning, the tents emptied of their occupants.*

*With the woman in the lead, a line formed, stretching for miles as they marched. The rocky fields were no deterrent to her determined, passionless stride. A blank gaze empty of thought was etched on her face. Her robes were the black of night, the color of mourning.*

*Through the night they marched. Hours stretched out, muscles grew weary, yet still not a word was spoken. Every third man carried an unlit torch in addition to his weaponry. Some had strapped the torches to their backs; others put the torches on their shoulders.*

*Two hours before dawn, the fires of the city came into view. The army gathered to regroup and rest, then made their way toward the gates. The first resistance met the woman, who was still in the lead. Her spear caught the first soldier in the throat, and as she jerked it free his blood covered her chest. His hands that had dropped his sword clutched at her as he fell, but she shrugged free and pushed him aside without a second thought.*

*As word of the attack got out, more and more soldiers came to meet them, but the enemy could not get organized. At the gates she met two soldiers coming out. A heave of her spear and the first was impaled upon the city wall. She stepped inside of a thrusting sword, and grabbing the man's sword arm, pulled the second guard into an embrace with her knife blade. Still holding the man's arm, she repeatedly plunged the knife into exposed abdomen beneath his*

*leather armor, the warmth of his blood spotting her face and covering her arms. She picked up his sword and moved on, the knife dripping at her side.*

*She walked through the streets of the city, the cries of the dying surrounding her. This time, there was no laughter to go along with the pain. She would make sure of that. For a brief instant, she froze as the thought of her husband entered her mind. What would he think of this? But it didn't matter. He was dead, powerless to help her now. She resumed her pace into the heart of the city.*

*Every man she met died at the point of her sword or knife, but she took no joy in the killing, only in the sight of the dead. She made her way into the heart of the city, leaving behind the men of her army. Crossing into the far reaches, she found what she was looking for: a garrison that had not heard the city was under attack. Silently she slipped into the door of the barracks, bloody knife in hand, the goddess of death come to minister justice. One by one, the beds became crimson pyres filled with men gasping for their last breath. When finished, she lit each of the beds and walked out of the barracks. By now, her army was sweeping through every part of the city.*

*She found the eastern gate and walked up a nearby hill, collapsing onto the hard earth, watching as fires started to spring up in different parts of the city. The fires grew until finally they merged and filled the sky, vying with the daybreak, giving off a glow that swallowed up the dawn of another day.*

*Though she could not bring herself to smile, her heart soared within her. London was burning.*

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Abigail stared at her computer screen, watching flames dance in her memory. Turning towards the manuscript on her desk, she attempted to divert her mind from the cinematic qualities of her most recent dream. On the best of days, focusing on the job at hand, the latest work in progress, could become tedious and mind-numbing; it now seemed a Herculean task. Her latest project, editing a collection of essays on the philosopher/mathematician Blaise Pascal, held not a passing interest for her.

She found herself coming to the end of a page and not remembering a single thing she had read, the page still blank with the absence of correction. Starting over at the top did not seem to help matters any, as the same result would repeat itself. By lunchtime, Abigail had made no progress. After downing a sandwich, Abigail locked the door to her small office on the fourth floor and tried a new tactic, opening up to page in the middle of the manuscript.

*The last act is bloody, however fine the rest of the play. They throw earth over your head and it is finished forever. We know that we are not dreaming, but, however unable we may be to prove it rationally, our inability proves nothing but the weakness of our reason, and not the uncertainty of all our knowledge.*

The last sentence jolted Abigail. The past week had been a lucid dream, in many ways. Abigail thought of the many confused Poe narrators attempting to make sense of the incongruous sights and sounds being fed to their senses. As Abigail saw it, she not only had difficulty with reasoning it out, but also a lack of knowledge. There was just not enough information about the dreams or the druidic figure. There was possibly something she could do about this however.

Energized by her discovery of a relevant quote, Abigail's interest in the observations on Pascal was piqued and she was able to finish out the day getting several pages proofed. She left the office with a plan forming in her mind as to ways in which she could deal with her two problems of reason and knowledge.

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*The field was littered with dead Romans. She lifted up the severed head from the pile by the hair, its helmet dislodged with the force of the killing blow. With pride in her eyes, she raised the head with both hands, and a roar went out from the gathered men before her.*

*She spoke to them now in the musical language of her homeland, having vowed never to speak the invader's language again. With the rise and fall of her voice, the men clung to her every word. She worked them into a bloodthirsty roar, at the height of which she slammed the head onto the top of a spear and stuck it into the ground. Several of the soldiers also grabbed heads, hacked from their corpses while the bodies were still warm, and together they decorated the field with tribute to their goddess of victory.*

*The old druid stood back and watched, pleased with himself and the druidess queen. The goddess had indeed looked with favor upon them. The enemy would do well to be very afraid.*

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Abigail came out of her sleep to the maddening alarm clock. When she realized the subject of her dreaming, she gave a shudder as she hit the off switch. The last thing she wanted to do was go in to work today. There was no way she'd be able to keep her mind on the boring details. The image of impaled heads assaulted her mind's eye though she tried to block it out. So she picked up the phone and called in sick. No use telling them a druid was haunting her by day and a dead woman by night. Not like they half listened anyway. Maybe she *should* have told them that.

With the day cleared now, she thought about her options. She needed to talk to somebody about all of this. The question was who? Certainly not her mother. Her mother had quite enough to worry about—made up things to worry about—so this would not be a good thing to tell her. She had systematically driven away every friend she had after Eric's accident—not that they were ever what you'd call good friends anyway. All except for one. And she had just stopped returning her phone calls along with all the rest of them. She would forgive her in an instant, Abigail was sure of that, and it was the one friend she had regretted losing. Three years is a long time to drift on your own, Abigail thought. Maybe she should call Rhiannon. It certainly couldn't hurt. She wasn't sure how much Rhiannon could help in this situation, but then she wasn't sure anyone could help her. She just needed to talk.

But first, she resolved to make a quick stop elsewhere on her way to the hospital in an attempt to deal with the knowledge aspect of her problem. Abigail dressed quickly and skipped breakfast. The library, conveniently located three blocks from her house, was within easy walking distance, which she usually opted to do. Today, she drove, knowing that she'd not want to take the time to walk back before heading to see Rhiannon.

Abigail pulled up the computer records and quickly found what she was looking for. The library had several listings for the search results, and she made a mental note of the area most were catalogued. The second floor held the historical documents and reference books. She carried several books to a desk and started scanning them. The first mention was in a general book of Celtic history.

### **Boudicca, Boadicea**

Queen of the Iceni, Celtic tribe located in Eastern Britain, at the time of Roman invasion of 1<sup>st</sup> Century. At the death of her chieftain husband, Rome attempted total domination of Iceni land, flogging Boudicca and raping her two young daughters. The Queen raised the surrounding Celtic tribes into a revolt, commanding an army of a hundred thousand men, winning several victories and burning London (then Londinium) and other towns before being defeated in battle by the more disciplined Roman Army. Also known as the Warrior Queen.

Abigail closed the book. A chill started at the base of her neck. She remembered the bedtime stories of the Warrior Queen her father had told her as a young girl, but the details, until now, had eluded her. She sat for a long time without moving. Her suspicions confirmed, Abigail was at a loss for what to do next. She quickly skimmed the passages in the other books dealing with Boadicea but found nothing further in the way of any great detail.

Her next stop was St. Mary's Hospital. Abigail had met Rhiannon in Nursing School 10 years ago, and when Abigail dropped out to marry Eric, the friendship only grew stronger. Rhiannon was the maid of honor at the wedding, and the only friend Abigail ever wondered about. A natural response after the accident might have been to cry on her best friend's shoulder, but Abigail had locked the doors and ran from any human contact. That was three years ago.

She braced herself for the possibility that Rhiannon would want to have nothing to do with her, or at least show no interest in resuming the friendship. If that were the case, Abigail couldn't blame her. But she didn't know who else to turn to.

After three elevator trips and five nurses who knew nothing, Abigail finally found an employee who knew for a fact that Rhiannon was not working today. This left Abigail with a dilemma. She had hoped to catch Rhiannon on some sort of neutral ground. She wasn't at all sure that she liked the idea of going to Rhiannon's house. Bad enough that she would be showing up after all this time; adding an invasion of privacy might not be the best thing. Abigail sat in the car wondering whether or not she should go to Rhiannon's house or just forget the whole thing. In the end, she decided on neither. She opened her cell phone and dialed the number from memory, hoping Rhiannon hadn't moved or changed her number in the last three years. But the phone rang and rang without anyone picking up, so either Rhiannon wasn't home, or she wasn't feeling like talking on the phone, if she still lived there at all.

Which left Abigail with only one option if she wanted to talk to someone. Her mother. With great reluctance she pointed the car north and headed out of town for the drive to her mother's house. After her father died, Abigail was forever asking her mother to sell the house in the country and move into town, but her mother kept waving her off. She was fine where she



was, she said, no one to bother her but the sheep. Her mother apologized for the inconvenience whenever Abigail came, but she wouldn't hear of moving from the farmhouse.

As she drove, she tried to piece together in her mind the events of the last three days. She kept coming back to one conclusion: the dreams, disturbing as they were, could be explained. Or didn't need to be explained. The man in the brown robes, however, was a little harder. *If he's a product of my imagination, I've got a serious problem on my hands*, she thought. The alternative wasn't much better. What if he was real? The explanations weren't coming any easier in that scenario. A crazed stalker following her? She didn't think so. Leaving the possibility that he was sane/normal and wearing that outfit around town? That didn't quite work either.

As Abigail neared her mother's house, she found herself dreading talking to her about this. What could she say, really? Did she really expect her mother to understand any of what was going on? Abigail told herself that her mother's understanding wasn't really the point, that it was the talking that she needed, the unloading, but was that really the case? Abigail had been a loner for the last three years; had gotten used to it and in fact thrived on it. She prided herself on not needing anyone to talk to. Now she needed solutions, and she was fairly sure her mother would have none.

Before the turn-off to her mother's house, Abigail heard a voice. She wasn't sure if the voice was audible or if it had just interrupted the thoughts in her head. She wasn't even sure if the voice was her own inner voice or coming from another source, but she didn't care. The voice told her to keep driving, and she obeyed.

Three miles from her mother's turn-off she passed a small one-lane dirt road that branched off of the main road for a few hundred feet and then stopped at the edge of a thick patch of trees.

Tired of driving, Abigail stopped the car and backed up, pulling into the dirt road and driving up to the trees.

She got out, locked the car, not entirely sure of where she was going or what she was looking for, but headed into the woods. She had only walked ten minutes along a narrow dirt path before she came upon a clearing filled with the ruins of scattered stones. Some of the gray stones were fallen over, lying in two or more pieces, but others were upright, standing about four feet tall, and eighteen inches wide. Immediately Abigail recognized this grove of trees for what it was: the site of ancient Druidic ceremonies and rituals. Places like this were hidden throughout the isles and were not at all uncommon. In what had once been the exact center of the ring of stones lay a larger, flatter stone, large enough for a average man to lie down on. With fascination Abigail drew nearer to examine this rock further. As she bent close she imagined that the darker spots in the stone were blood, the blood of the innocent demanded by an angry god. She ran her finger over the rock, wondering at what this grove must have seen. Her curiosity got the better of her, and she lay down on the rock. The length of the stone slab gave the impression that it had been made for her. There was a knot at the pit of her stomach as she thought about the fear one must have felt lying in this grove, chanting priests and priestesses in the torchlight and shadows. Abigail closed her eyes and could hear the voices.

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*The old druid watched in admiration as she worked the blade of the knife in the fire until its silver was replaced by a burning glow that seemed to come from within the metal.*

*The Ninth Legion had swept down from the Northern Foothills, having circled around in an attempt to catch them off guard. The only surviving legionnaire was now bound to the altar in the midst of them. The druid watched him now in respect. He made no move to struggle against his bonds. His face was devoid of emotion.*

*She removed the blade from the fire and crossed to the empty space in the circle of twelve. No one spoke. She waited while the others all drew their own knives and lifted the sleeves on their robes. Each druid made a cut on the inside of his lower arm and stepped up to the altar, covering the victim's naked body with the dripping blood. When they had finished, she stepped forward and began the incantation, raising the glowing knife with both hands above her head. She brought the knife down, burying it in the soldier's chest. She worked the knife back and forth, opening a hole in the chest as his cries and groans forced her to raise her voice in speaking the sacred words. At length he grew quieter, his body giving off a last few spasms of protest. She reached into the body and withdrew the heart, raising it with both hands above her head, her voice now raised in defiance and rage.*

*The old druid thought he saw tears streaking her face when she turned toward the light.*

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Abigail came awake with a start, sitting up on the stone altar. A cold sweat layered the surface of her exposed skin on her arms and neck. She swung her legs down to the ground and buried her face in her hands. A wetness in her hands made her realize she was crying.

At the sound of footsteps she looked up. No one was there. The sound had come from in front of her, but she turned around to make sure her ears weren't playing tricks on her, but the only things she could see were stark, skeletal trees.

She looked at her watch. She'd been in the grove for only thirty minutes. *That's too quick to start dreaming*, she thought to herself.

What were the dreams trying to tell her? There had to be a message that she was missing. The first dream had been the queen at the campsite. The flogging and rape had been next, so the dreams, for whatever reason, were not chronological. Following that came the burning of London, then the two rituals: impaling the enemies' heads and now the human sacrifice. Beyond the first two dreams, the rest could have been in chronological order, but there was really no way to know for sure. A historian specializing in the time period might be able to help her out with the ordering, but what good would that do? She was going in circles again.

This time when she heard the footsteps, she stood up and whirled around. She was still alone in the woods. A solitary oak leaf fell to the altar in front of her, landing intact on the flat stone surface. Almost immediately, it began to skim the stone as it made small circles, picking up speed. She backed up slowly, not taking her eyes off of the swirling leaf. No other leaves joined it in its lonely dance, but as it continued Abigail decided it was time get back on the road.

She turned around almost fell backwards to keep from walking into him. She regained her balance before her wits. He stood with his hands inside the sleeves of his brown robes, hood pulled down but not covering his eyes. He was young, she would have guessed about early- to mid-twenties. His face was completely devoid of emotion, but his eyes were not unkind.

She found her voice, but it came out in a whisper. "What do you want with me?"

He made no motion to speak, no sign that he had even heard her.

She repeated her question with some force behind it this time, but still he stood motionless, staring at her.

She was starting to get desperate. “I believe I deserve some answers, here! Why can’t you just leave me alone . . .” Her voice trailed off as he reached for a pouch hanging by his side. He extracted a rectangular shape and offered it to her in both hands outstretched.

It was a book, bound in old and scarred leather with a black metal strip covering the spine. After a long hesitation, Abigail reached out and took the book.

“And what am I supposed to do with this?”

He turned and started walking out of the grove.

Knowing she wouldn’t get anything else out of him, or just not wanting to try, she let him go, watching him as walked toward the road in the direction of her car.

One minute he was there, the next instant he was gone.

“Ahhh, no. That’s no good. There’s no easy way to explain that one, is there? And I’m standing here talking to myself, sure. But I do have the book. It couldn’t be all in my head.”

Suddenly remembering the reason for wanting to leave the grove in the first place, she turned around, but the leaf was still and unmoving as it lay resting on the altar.

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Abigail sat at the kitchen table of her apartment, looking at the leather-bound book. She had yet to open it. The same black metal that covered the spine of the book also ran in a small

strip horizontally around the middle, completely circling the volume. It met in the front with a clasp that was bound with a small metal lock. She had not been able to get past the lock.

She knew that if there were only some way to open it, much of this would be at least clearer. Perhaps all of her questions *would* be answered. But right now it was time to leave for work, even though she didn't know how she was going to keep her mind on the figures today.

An hour later she sat in her office, going over quarterly projections and double-checking reports from research, only half-skimming the pages. If there were any mistakes in the reports she was probably sailing right past them.

The morning went by in a haze. After lunch, she stopped trying to even read the reports, just letting them sit on her desk as she sat lost in thought. If she could just get the book open, she was sure that the answers would be found within. Somehow, she knew that the dreams, the druid, and everything else would all be tied together. She tried to think of the reason the book would be locked. Obviously the information found within was important. But the book was given to her. Why not the key as well? She could only guess that it wasn't time for her to open the book yet, and that she'd be able to open it later; possibly she'd receive a key. But if that was the case, why give her the book now at all? Why not wait until it was time for her to open it? Was this a test? Maybe she had to get the book to open on her own. She pulled the directory out of the bottom drawer and found the name of the town locksmith. Giving herself enough time to get home, pick up the book, and get to the locksmith's, she told the man she would be there at 6:15.

At 5:30 she was out the door and on her way home. Not stopping to even think about food, she rushed home to change, and ended up at the locksmith's fifteen minutes early.

“Sure lass, we’ll have you a key made for this in no time. Just have a seat and I’ll be right back.”

Abigail waited impatiently for the man to return. The minutes seemed to stretch out, but he was only gone for a few minutes. She paid the man and took the book and key to her car. She inserted the key in the lock, and tried to turn it, but even with all of the force she could muster, the key would not turn. Frustrated and annoyed, she walked back into the locksmith’s shop.

“Excuse me, sir, but I believe you’ve given me the wrong key.”

He stared up at her with a puzzled look on his face. “But that’s impossible. I took it out of the machine myself.”

Abigail handed him the book and key so he could see for himself.

His face screwed into a deep frown as he tried to open the lock. At length he shook his head. “Let me try one more time. Sometimes with these old locks, they can be stubborn.”

She waited once more for the locksmith, and this time when he came out they stood at the counter and tried the key. Again, it was a lost cause.

“I’m sorry, lass. It appears as though the lock’s just too old. Although I don’t see any rust or residue. It should be working fine. The machine is working, so I’m not sure what to tell you. Let me give you your money back.”

Abigail took the book and went home. If she couldn’t get the book open with a key, maybe there was some way she could force the lock open. She didn’t have the tools to attempt that sort of thing at her apartment, but a local machine shop should. She knew just the place, in fact. It was on her way to work, so she could drop it off there in the morning.

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The next day Abigail arrived at the machine shop for the second time that day, this time after work. She navigated the grease spots on the floor as she made her way up to the little desk where the owner sat reading a 6-month old copy of *Autosport*. He looked up at her approach and pulled the book out of a drawer, laying it on the table.

“Just what are you trying to pull here?”

Abigail didn't know what to say. “Excuse me?”

“I don't know what kind of metal you've got there, but my boys tried every tool we had trying to get that thing opened. Couldn't even make a scratch in it. What kind of metal is that, anyway? I've never seen anything like it.”

Somehow, Abigail was not surprised. “I'm not sure. It's just an old family heirloom,” she lied. “How much do I owe you?”

“Well, since we didn't do the job we were supposed to do, I'm not going to charge you anything.”

Abigail thanked the man and left.

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On the drive home, her thoughts were a jumbled mess. The book lay in the passenger seat of the Saab, mocking with its mastery of her. So she was back where she'd started from, no nearer to unlocking the book or her questions than she was two days ago.



The wind was picking up, beating the car with muffled thuds. She was almost home now, which was good. A storm was in the air. She reached her apartment building before the first drops had fallen. When she had made it to her door she turned around, realizing she had left the book in the car. Halfway to the Saab she froze.

In the road past the street lamp a small whirlwind was forming, more quickly than before. Her body lurched into gear as she darted for the car, yanking open the passenger door and snatching the book from the seat. She whirled around, closing the door with the motion of her body. With a glance over her right shoulder she headed for the door. She didn't make it far. As the twisting pillar of leaves slammed into her body Abigail stopped, and the outer edge of the whirlwind passed through her, leaving only a few straggling leaves clinging to her clothing as it settled around her, making her the eye of the storm. Darkness engulfed her; her only thought was to hug the book tightly to herself as the sound of the wind grew into a furious high-pitched symphony. She lost all consciousness of her surroundings in the blackness except for the screaming wind which beat at her body.

She didn't know how long she stood there, not daring to move, but gradually the noise subsided, the darkness lifted, and the leaves slowed to a lazy dance as they settled around her feet. The trembling came next. She knew what she had to do. The answer was in front of her now. Woodenly she forced one leg and then the other to carry her into the apartment, stopping to rest against the wall in the foyer beside the hall table. Her body slid down the wall into a heap on the floor. Her right hand let go of the book and reached up awkwardly to grab the console table's drawer handle. It opened too quickly, spilling its contents in a rain of unopened junk mail and restaurant receipts beside her.

There, scattered among the pile of paper, lay the extra sets of keys, some of which she had no idea what they went to, but could never bring herself to throw away. She was looking for one in particular. She wasn't even sure she had ever seen it before, but it would be here. It didn't take long to find.

Drawing her knees up to her chest, she sat looking at the nondescript key in her hand. There was not a doubt in her mind that this key would open the book. Fear gripped her now, but an overriding will to end it, once and for all, won out. She placed the book in her lap, inserted the key, and turned the lock effortlessly.

Her hands parted the leather covers and Abigail found in front cover a letter, addressed to her. Small determined manuscript covered the page.

*Abigail,*

*We know this will be hard for you. But there is nothing to be done. We cannot change who we are. If we could spare you the pain we would, but our destinies are unavoidable. The harder we rage against it the worse it becomes. Control the rage. Legends are made when people are given a reason to fight. You have heard that history repeats itself. And indeed it does, more than you know. Our Queen, you are on your own, out of necessity, for now, but strengthen yourself with the knowledge that afterwards, your army awaits . . .*

Abigail flipped the pages of the book. Scores, hundreds of names, addresses, phone numbers, lined the volume, all in the same handwriting. For what reason could she ever require an army?

A searing flash burned an image on her mind. Her mother's farmhouse. Her daughters there, spending the week with their grandmother. Blood on the walls.

With all her might she ran out the door of her apartment to the car, praying in her mind that it was all just a bad dream.

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Tennessee, 2000

Teacher, Tri-Cities Christian Schools, Blountville, TN, 2001 – 2004