

Echoes of the Past

Keith J. Bowers

This is a work of fiction. None of the characters are real people and any similarity is strictly coincidental.

It may not be reproduced, shared or transmitted for a fee by any party to whom the Author has not contractually granted permission.

The author retains all rights not explicitly granted within.

Published by Keith J. Bowers
kjbowers1@hotmail.com

Copyright 2005 by Keith J. Bowers

Echoes of the Past

Opening up his eyes, Ray rolled over, trying to put the sound of the alarm clock out his head. It continued on and on, and he realized that it had to stop before it woke up the kids. He reached out, flicking the off switch and returning the room to blessed silence. He ran through the day in his head, going over those things he needed to get done.

His usual routine of breakfast and then off for nine hours of work was broken by the seminar he had to attend. Held in Harrisburg, he would have to leave in an hour to fight through traffic to reach it in time. The sun beamed through the window and birds were chirping in the distance. The spring air billowed through the curtains, sending a delicious chill through the room. He loved the coolness of spring.

He looked to his wife Jennifer, seeing her sprawled on her back, her head tilted to the side away from the sunlight that was fast creeping up on her. She was still beautiful in his eyes, even though she had gained so much weight with the kids. After the second, she had never recovered to her previous form. It saddened him sometimes, but he still loved her because she gave up everything to bear him his children.

Startling awake, he realized he had fallen back asleep. Looking to the clock, he saw that forty-five minutes had passed. Fifteen minutes until he had to leave. Dashing out of bed, he ran to the bathroom, showering, shaving, dressing and out the door with two minutes to spare. The kids hadn't even stirred yet, school still two hours away.

By eight o'clock he had registered at the seminar, wandering his way over to the refreshments, watching as the hotel staff brought out tray after tray of Danishes and donuts. Bypassing the sugary stuff, he moved to the coffee, pouring him a tall cup of the crisp smelling liquid. He took it with cream and sugar, stirring the additives in with a spoon.

Looking up, he caught sight of someone he hadn't seen in nearly a decade. At least he thought it was her. She was a member of the hotel staff, wearing a black skirt and button down white shirt. A clip-on bowtie completed the outfit.

Marie? Was it her? She sat down the tray she was carrying and walked away. Yes, it was her. The right height. The same cute button nose. Ten years. His heart caught up in his throat. The last time they had spoken, she told him she was going to marry the man she had left him for. Scott. That bastard.

Of course, it could possibly not be her, ten years was a long time. The woman could be Marie's doppelganger. He walked up to another of the hotel staff. His name tag read Ryan. "Hey, who was that woman who just dropped off that tray? The black haired one."

The man looked up. "Marie?"

"Yeah. Last name Gallows?" It was her married name.

Ryan shook his head. "No, her last name is Sweigart."

"That was her maiden name." It stood to reason that she kept her own name, she had always been fiercely independent.

"Then you know Marie?" Ryan's eyes were on the table, centering the tablecloth before moving a bundle of napkins onto it.

"I went to school with her."

The guy thumbed towards the door. "Want me to get her for you?"

"No," Ray laughed. "We didn't exactly part on good terms."

"Oh, okay," the guy replied and went back to setting up the table. Ray walked away, deep in thought. Marie had black hair now. Jet black hair. Her nose was pierced too – a little diamond stuck out on the left nostril. Strange. She had always been prim and proper back when they had dated, having gone to vo-tech for cosmetology.

When they had dated... A little light on the relationship terms. Fiancée. Marie had been his fiancée for a year and a half. She was more than someone he had just dated. He had wanted to spend his life with her. Squashing the thought of how she had left him for that bastard Scott, he wondered what had happened to have changed her looks so.

The conference was starting behind him. Returning with his coffee, he sat down at the farthest table, his mind wandering. Obviously she wasn't with Scott anymore if she had taken back her maiden name. Did she have any kids through Scott? He found himself watching the door, hoping to see her again. She came and went twice, and curiosity got the better of him. Strange.

At lunch, he walked up to the guy he had originally question about Marie. "Is Marie still here?"

"Nope. Her double ended at eleven."

"She works nights?"

"It pays the most. She's got a lot of bills."

"Shit."

Ryan eyed him up. "Should have spoken to her when you had the chance."

"Shoulda, coulda, woulda. That's the way of my life."

Ryan smiled and walked away.

He walked out to his car, dragged out his laptop and carried it back inside. Sitting on a nearby couch, he logged into it, using the hotel's wireless connection to access the internet. Within moments, he had done a search on Marie Gallows. He found a phone number in the white pages and cross referenced it with another database to find the address. It was less than twenty minutes away.

He looked up, finding that the seminar participants were filing back into the conference room. Decisions. He knew that he wouldn't be paying attention to the speaker. For some reason, he wanted to speak with Marie.

Was it simply a desire to find out how she was? To compare his life to hers? To see if she was as successful as he? To gloat? No. Something nagged at him. She had changed far too much in the intervening years. Something had happened. And he needed to know what it was.

Memorizing the address, he closed the laptop and walked out of the hotel. Within minutes he was on the highway, driving towards Marie's address. He hadn't thought of her in years and now he was stalking her like an assassin. Cursing himself, he should have just spoken to her, found out how why she looked so different.

He slowed up, realizing that she might not approve of just showing up at their home. Fuck it. He'd already blown off the seminar. Might as well go through with it. He could always just keep on driving if he didn't feel right about going up to the door.

Pulling off the freeway, he found himself in the worst part of Harrisburg. The road became bumpy and rough, Penndot no longer caring about the failing infrastructure. Cursing the thuds and bangs, he pulled onto the street of the address. They were single family homes, most of which were boarded up.

"700, 720, 726..." he muttered to himself. Cripes, he would never come here in the dark. The area was blighted, downright scary. Slowing, he passed an overgrown and burned out home amid a bunch of bushes. A black Chevy Impala sat in front of it, and instantly he recognized the figure leaning against it and staring at the ruins. She didn't look at him as he drove by, her eyes fixated on the blackened skeleton. Wearing all black now, she had changed her clothing and she looked like Death from The Sandman.

Marie.

He continued on his way, rolling past. Quickly, he realized that the home in which she stood in front of was the address he had memorized. He pulled over a good distance away behind a wreck of a car, watching her through his rearview mirror. She stood there a good ten minutes before disappearing from sight into the wreckage.

Ray wrestled with what to do. Obviously this was a private time for her and he didn't want to interrupt. So he waited. Ten minutes later, she reappeared carrying what looked like a metal frame in her hand and a filthy bag. She tossed it into her car and drove away. As she passed him, he started his car, waited fifteen seconds and pulled out, keeping a discrete distance.

As she pulled onto the highway, he very nearly didn't follow her. What exactly was he doing? There were many options he could have done. Gone home and come back tomorrow to the hotel. Talk to her there. But no, he was following an ex-fiancée to her

home after watching her rummage through the ruins of a burned out home. What the fuck was he thinking?

But he kept going. She turned off the highway and onto a rural road. Within minutes she had pulled away, following a winding road through the hills around Middletown. After a few moments he lost her completely. Stopping, he realized that there had been only one driveway he had passed. Turning around, he retraced his steps, cresting the hill he had just passed over.

She had to be there. He sat at the mouth of the driveway. Contemplating. What to do?

He drove away after losing whatever courage he had had. Driving back to the freeway, he had every intention of just going home. What he had been doing felt wrong. But he had to know. He pulled off the road and sat in the gutter, the engine idling patiently.

What was he doing? What was driving him? It wasn't love for her, or even any type of desire to gloat. Then what was it? What was urging him back to her? Was it...

Closure?

They had never parted on good terms. He had always resented that she had left him for Scott and she had resented that he slept with Darlene after they had broken up. In her eyes, he hadn't waited for her to return and her indiscretion with Scott had been a test of independence for her. And Ray hadn't been patient enough to wait.

He kicked himself for six months afterwards for giving into his desires for Darlene. Even still, Marie's love for him hadn't been strong enough to overcome his weakness of the flesh. He felt that both of them had been weak.

After six months, he had met his future wife Jennifer, and everything in his world righted itself. She got pregnant and within nine months they had married and had their first child. A second and third soon followed. He loved his wife and children and they had the same problems that all married couples had.

And now he sat on the side of the road, wondering about the past.

It had to be closure. Or was it guilt? Guilt that he had turned his back on Marie, guilt because of the promise he had made her guardian that he would always look out for her. She had lost her mother to cancer at the age of fifteen and a friend of her mother had assumed guardianship of her. That woman, Pricilla, had made him promise to watch out

for her when Marie moved out at the age of nineteen. It had been an earnest vow, though less than two months later, Marie split from him. Pricilla had died shortly thereafter.

Was that promise the cause? Did he need closure to the promise?

Did he need to hear from her that she was happy, that she was satisfied with her life?

He didn't know.

Turning the car around, he accelerated back through the rural road, into the valley and rising up to the crest, where he saw the driveway. Before he could change his mind again, he pulled in, driving up the crushed stone road to the house. He parked some distance away, and stared at the structure. It was of wood construction, stained very nearly black. The windows were dark and Christmas lights trimmed the outside, even though it was mid-May. They blinked dimly in the afternoon sun.

The Impala he had followed sat outside a forlorn garage door whose windows were spray painted black. There were no flowers or any growing bushes around the home. It looked ramshackle and abandoned.

He felt out of place. Opening the car door, he mustered his courage and walked to the front of the structure. Knocking once, he took a deep breath and tried to calm himself. He always hated confrontation, avoiding it at all cost in nearly everything. But here he was, compelled by some force to see a woman who he knew didn't want to see him.

The door opened and a familiar face looked out at him. He knew the face, but couldn't remember her name. She had aged in the decade since he had last seen Marie's best friend, but time couldn't affect her height. What was her name? Harriet? Hannah? Helen. Yes.

"Hello, Helen."

"Yes?"

"I'm here to see Marie."

"And you are?"

"You don't remember me?"

"No? Should I?"

"You hate me," he said simply. "You've always hated me."

She shrugged. "I've hated a lot of people."

"I'm Ray Trendel."

Her eyes went wide. “You don’t look a bit like I remember. You’ve... lost hair on your head and regained it on your face.” She was being kind. He had lost most of his hair years before and now kept it shaved like a cue ball.

He shrugged. “Is she willing to talk?”

Opening the door, she ushered him in. “Yeah, she will. She was wondering if you’d show up.”

“She’s expecting me?” he asked, genuinely surprised.

“She saw your name on the seminar’s registry. Then saw you there today. We were watching as you sat on the road out there and then drove away.”

Of course, that would explain it.

The inside of the house was dark. The walls were painted black with strange circling patterns of white and red streaking through them.

He was in awe of the house. It was like gothic heaven. He would have loved this a decade ago. Sculptures of dragons and gargoyles sat in the corners and a 1950’s style couch graced the living room. There were piles of books in boxes scattered through the rooms.

“You live here too?”

“No, I just stopped by for a visit. Coincidental, in fact. Been back to the school?”

“Not since ’92. Your class graduation, in fact.” They passed through the kitchen and Helen stopped at the entrance to a back room. “She’s in there.” Quietly, she added: “I’m going to let myself out.”

“Why?”

“You don’t know, do you?”

“About what?”

Helen nodded towards the room. “You’ll see.”

Ray was genuinely frightened at Helen’s words. Frowning, he stepped down the step and into the back room. It was a patio that had been enclosed in plywood and again painted black. A solitary bulb dimly lit the room with its forty watts of weakness. Dirty carpeting covered the floor and worktables ran the length of two walls. Both were covered with all kinds of scrapbook making materials. Three well-used easels sat in the corner, covered in strange artwork that threatened to draw him in. There was a press to

make homemade paper, paints, wire, nails, hammers, knives of all form and fashion, piles of trash and a figure in black who nearly blended in with it all. She faced away from him, twisting wire around a stick.

“Hello.”

She didn't respond immediately. Slowly she put the wire down and turned to face him. Her eyes were cold and unemotional. Strangely enough, that was how he remembered her whenever she was thoughtful. Many times that was how she wanted to be.

Leaning back against the table, she stared at him while he did the same to her. He scanned her like a MRI, taking in whatever details he could in the dim light. She was still thin and small breasted but now held an edge she never had before. Tattoos covered the length of her outer arms from where her t-shirt ended to her wrists. The insides of her arms remained curiously blank, but looked rough. Other tattoos circled around her neck.

“You've changed,” he said finally.

“You have no idea,” she replied, looking away and off to a shelf on the wall. Some things didn't change. Whenever uncomfortable, she wouldn't meet anyone's eyes.

“How are you?”

She didn't reply, moving to the shelf and plucking one of the picture frames off. She presented it to him and he accepted it, trying to figure out what it was. He'd seen one of these before. It was a black and white image of a sonogram.

A baby! Holy shit, she was pregnant!

“Congratulations!” he exclaimed. “I always thought you'd make a great mother.”

She turned away and moved back to the table, picking up the wire and stick again. Twisting it with a pair of pliers, she broke it off the stick and held it up to the light.

“When are you due?” he asked, sitting the frame back on the shelf. She didn't respond and he knew from when they first got together, this was usually the extent of their conversations. Keep asking questions until she got sick of her walls and she'd be forced to open up. “You don't look very far along...”

Slamming the pliers down, she spun around and looked at him, annoyed at his questions. She opened her mouth to say something, but clamped back down and stormed to a nearby trunk. Ripping it open, she tore through it, digging deep.

She drew out a book. Not just any book, it was obviously handmade and very thick. It measured about a foot and a half square with a rusted metal binding and long hand braided ropes that looped around the entire book in an intricate knot.

She held it in her hands tightly, as if she didn't know what to do with it. Then she handed it to him with a huff and immediately went back to the workbench.

“What's this? Is this for me?”

“It's not yours,” she spat. “It wasn't meant for you.”

“I didn't...” he trailed off, knowing that whatever he said wouldn't make it better.

She ignored his fumbling, searching instead for various tools in the dim light.

Slowly, he pulled the tightly bound strings and the knot came undone. He gingerly unwrapped it and was greeted with the image of a demon's face on the cover. Not just any demon, but one so hideous that he opened the book immediately to escape its gaze. He felt trepidation crawling towards him.

Focusing on the construction of the book as a distraction, he realized he was right, it was handmade – the paper, likely the inks, all of it. There were magazine images and words glued onto the pages and then painted over, the paint scratched away before it had properly set. Newspaper clippings, poetry, photos, large amounts of text. Each page was a piece of art - each page more disturbing than the next.

He was awestruck. “I didn't think you were capable of this type of artwork.”

Stopping on a news-clipping about five pages deep, he saw a name he recognized. Scott Gallant – arrested for spousal assault. Skimming the article quickly he looked up for confirmation but she remained focused on her project. Suddenly concerned, he opened the book back up to the beginning and skimmed the first page. The first was a poem of loss, of pain. He moved on. The next was a story of abuse – how a young man came home from work and beat his wife. It was graphic, disturbing. He moved on to the next page. Poems and pictures. He realized the abuse pictures on the pages were of her. At the hospital. The date read seven years ago.

A sinking feeling rushed through him, making his feet and hands cold. He turned the page, seeing nothing but red. Fire. The edges of the pages were burned and newspaper clippings were stained red with blood. ‘Fire kills local man’ read the headline. Reading

closer, he saw that ‘Scott Gallant was the victim of a three alarm fire in lower Harrisburg...’ The date was three years before.

He found his mouth was dry as he turned the page. A poem on suicide. The ‘ink’ was black but with a tinge of scarlet. Written in her own blood. Christ. The needle and razor was embedded in the page itself. What the hell? The date was from two years before.

“What the fuck happened to you?” Spinning around, she took two steps over to him and grabbed for the book. He held onto it, trying to meet her eyes. “Marie, what happened?”

“Give it back!” she protested.

He didn’t release it and stared at her. Her eyes wouldn’t meet his, but he noticed the scars on her face. What did she go through this last decade? Hadn’t she gone through enough as a child? He wouldn’t give it up, needing to know. It was too late to go back, to escape this. He had to follow through to the end.

“No, Marie, I want to read it. I need to read it,” he pleaded. “If you’re not going to talk to me about it, I need to find out what happened to you somehow!”

“Talk to Helen! She knows!”

“I don’t want to talk to Helen! I want to hear it from you!”

She spun on her heel and stormed to the door on the back wall, flinging it open. The sunlight streamed in and she winced visibly as she held it open. Book in hand; he followed her, noticing that she walked with a limp.

Marie held the door open. “I want you to leave.” This time she met his eyes. They held so much pain and suffering that he forced his eyes to tear away from them.

In the sunlight of the open door, the extent of her facial scars became readily apparent. A long ragged scar ran the length of her chin and left cheek. Obviously her jaw had been broken at least once. Speechless, he couldn’t understand or fathom what all happened.

But it was in the Book. All the answers were in the Book.

“I’m not going to until I finish it,” he replied, genuinely confused at what the book told him about the last decade of her life. She rushed outside, leaving him standing in the doorway, watching her climb the hill in the bright sunshine. Her black shirt and jeans clashed against the green of the tall grass.

Closing the door behind him, he followed her up the hill, catching her and matching her stride for stride. At the top of the hill, she stared at the ground, seemingly unsure of what to do now that she was there. A cigarette appeared in her hands and she lit it up. After a deep breath, she calmed somewhat and turned to stare out over the house, focusing on some distant point. She never smoked before.

Slowly, he reopened the book and began reading anew.

*I feel the cold metal in my hands
I see the fear within his eyes
I do not care that I have hurt him
My goal is to see him die
He winces and begins to fall
I no longer see the fear
I see the light of life fade
He crumples into my arms
The metal is no longer cold
The redness had warmed it
The blood that is on my hands*

There was far too much to digest - pages and pages of pain and poetry - agony and text – suffering and horrific pictures drawn in pen and ink. Stunning, yet terrifyingly horrid at the same time.

Marie remained distant as the minutes passed and he read about the last decade of her life.

*Accept that you are evil
Why does that entice you so?
Because it's different from what you always were
Or because it is what you were always meant to be
Born to be bad
Such a fitting phrase
The action of the shadow
They play the cards
You have no control of your fate
Just let the shadows deal the cards
Are you afraid the evil dreams will come?
And show the ways to commit the sins
Hiding in the sleeplessness
But they will
They will come
Hours pass and minutes too
The planning begins within the mind
You are not needed
Except to let the body commit the actions
In control no longer...*

The wind picked up, freshening the air around him. Even so, he felt soiled, dirtied as he looked into her soul poured out onto these pages of handmade paper.

*As I look up into the sky
I feel the pain rise from deep inside
A pitiful depressing sigh
The sound of my soul as it slowly died
Life has just sped me by
And for that I have cried
Friends have flown yet I can't fly
This horrid existence I must ride
Cannot escape
Cannot hide
Touch the sky with my dirty fingers
I will not escape its hold
Life within me will end
Leaving only the dry husk
To be eaten by maggots and worms
There is no point in reaching for heaven
Unattainable and I know it
The ground is my home
I shall soon live within it
It is cold
Within and without
Finally
I can hate him
The coldness is creeping towards him
Right about the time it should
He can no longer hurt me
Because it is already done*

The cigarette shook in her fingers as she took a drag. “You can’t stay,” she told him. “I don’t want you here.”

*Scarlet rain falls
Staining the carpet
Painting the tile
Drips down my chin
Stone hands grab torn flesh
The dress I wore for him
Torn and splattered
Crimson showers
Wrenched face before me
Spittle screaming
The man I
Love
Married
Spouse*

*Mate
The fist collapses
Upon my lips
Upon my belly
Striking that
which brings forth life
Through his eyes
Anger is justified
I am here to
Take his sins into me
My blood
My pain
Catharsis
for him
Day's problems
That guy on the ride home
Cutting off in traffic
Boss who places blame
Upon he who struggles
And so
All his frustrations
I take into myself
I return forgiveness
For he who strikes me down
Love
It struggles
Fear lustfully grips
Rattles through my teeth
Each blow loosening my grip
On what I used to love
Within the fiend that roars
In a whirlwind around me
Tomorrow brings sorrow
When his unfettered eyes show him
My pain and suffering
He will be gentle again.*

Looking closer at her, he saw that her body has been broken worse than he thought. The telltale signs of a brace showed through the jeans she wore. The ragged scar marred her left cheek. Christ, did Scott actually do that to her? How could he do such a thing?

*As I am falling from the sky
Death has not a meaning
Loving nothing but existing
Standing as the sky does fall
Upon my crushed hopes and dreams
I cry alone amongst the clouds
As they laugh and taunt at me
I try to run I try to hide
Escaping the despair I feel
It is interminable this evading
Never does it end*

*As so I exist upon the Plane of Misery
Within its fiery claws
Torment without meaning
Because I have no purpose
But to exist without
Someone to love and care for
I believe it was meant to be so
A cruel joke played upon me
By the quirks and twists of Fate
Destiny without a goal
An incomplete circle
Written in the palm of my hand
Burned there by another's actions
The universe is nothing
Without the thoughts of life
Creation is the goal of all
Beginning to the end
It is not truly there
Unless someone says it is
That someone shall not be me
I will not take the responsibility
For the universe is a concept
One I do not like to comprehend
Much less accept as my own
Fate, the universe and destiny
Like and unlike the other
Dependent on the thoughts of others
As I am upon these words addicted
I regain my sanity through thoughts and syllables
Maybe I never lost it
It was here as always
Just transformed by the concepts of others
Others who control what we are and feel
We are not free
Oh no
Prisoners of others and their idols
I am depressed and alone
Loneliness
It is so unforgiving
I am falling through the sky
Catch me before I fall
Before I fall I can plainly see
That no one hears my plea*

I fell

I am beyond you now.

She took another drag on the cigarette. He looked closer at her body, examining the hand that held the cig. The wrist had cutter marks on them. Shit. A series of twenty short scars marred the skin across the wrist and forearm. A long one ran the opposite

way for length of her forearm. He knew what that one meant. The short ones were cries for help. The long one meant sincerity.

A sinking feeling ran through his belly. She had actually done it. Tried to kill herself. Earnestly.

She caught him staring at her arms and extended both of them towards him. Both held the same style markings. “Like these? These are because of you.” She winked at him and looked away, taking another long drag of the cigarette. It was nearly spent.

She couldn’t be serious. It was her that had broken up with him for Scott. Shaking his head, he returned to the book, reading over a poem.

*Her eyes betray the fear
Face is flawless
Tear tracks
Confined, she struggles
But cannot escape the bonds
Pleasure is what I seek
Pleasure from her that only she can give
Pleasure from knives and razors and flowing blood
From semen and screams and ecstatic orgasms
I cup her face with my palms and smile
The steel flashes
Agony erupts from her
I let it wash over me like my coming
Pain is to be endured
She endures it so well
I am drenched in her life
My joy is never ending
Razors cutting
Spikes penetrating
My pleasure is what I seek
She fulfills me so as I rise and fall
Begging me to stop makes me electric
Surging as I rip her in two
From below
I am in my own hellish heaven
I am content to destroy this young one
They taste so fine
They please me so*

“Oh, my god...” he muttered as he finished the story. He looked up at her – a woman he once loved. She had been tattered, broken, violated by a man she hardly knew. So much pain... Her word choice bit and scratched, causing his heart to bleed.

Innocuous steel

*Cleanly severs
Flesh and tendon
Pain is glorious
Pain is life when you're dying
Ending comes in slow spurts
Pulsing with each beat
Of my dead heart
Scarlet marinate
My dress
My flesh
The white porcelain unstained
Washes clean unlike my soul
I rise
My last struggle
Door knobs are difficult
When fingers no longer work
I leave the pallid sanctuary
Needing to see the darkness
Of the night
Of my death*

The sun was beginning to set on the horizon. His legs were tired and his feet were aching. "This is really good, Marie," he told her. "Can I take this..." He was going to continue, stating his intention to read and return it the next day, but she interrupted him, her eyes burning with rage.

"The book isn't for or about you! It's about me! About what I suffered these last ten years! Pain and suffering was all that I had! And now you want to take that too!" She flicked the spent cig at him.

"I don't want to take anything!" he replied, dodging the lit ember. "I only want to understand!"

"You can't understand!" she screamed at him. "These," she said, pointing to the scars on her wrist. "These were the excision of our past together!" She thrust her scarred wrists in his face. "I cut you out!" She turned away from him, continuing to rant against the wind. "You left! You moved on, finding happiness and children and joy!" Spinning around, her eyes were wild with hatred. "And I moved on as well. Only my story descended into hell."

"I'm sorry..."

Suddenly words began spilling out her. "I did what you did today - two years ago. I looked you up. Found out where you lived and watched your family one bright sunny day. I watched as Jennifer left for work and you had all three kids. You both kissed and

she drove off and you played with the kids before mowing the lawn...Your life turned out perfect... And I was trapped in hell... The abuse, the fire, all of it... I slit my wrists that night... It was the second time... The first was while I was still married... The police found me outside St. Matthew's Church, covered in blood..." She took a deep shuddering breath. "When I got out of the hospital, I wrote that Book as a testament to my pain. I won't let you or anyone take it from me. It's mine and no one else's." Her voice was little more than a whisper. "I don't know what I feel for you anymore. But I know it isn't love."

It was an admission he wasn't expecting. "It's the past we had together. It isn't love or any other emotion. It's just a link that we both share to the past." He chuckled. "You'll always cause me to lose my breath. I don't know why. Fear maybe. Fear that you're one of the few that saw what was inside."

He stood up, closing the book, suddenly appreciating what he had waiting for him at home. His wife. His children. Their love. She had none of it.

"Please. Go," she said quietly. "I don't want you here when Ryan comes home. I have enough to explain about my life."

Ryan. The young guy at the hotel... Things were starting to become clear.

"He seemed like a good guy," he replied.

"You met him?"

"At the hotel. He treats you well?"

"Better than Scott. Better than you." That stung a bit, but it was true. He had been young and immature when they had been engaged. Selfish.

One question remained. "Is he the father?"

"Father? What do you mean?"

"The sonogram. In the frame you showed me."

Realization crossed her face and she sobbed once while turning away. "No," she rasped out. "That image was taken ten years ago."

The words were a slap in his face. His stomach sank and his world swirled around him. His child. His child! The book dropped from his hands, flopping to the ground as he steadied himself by sitting down on his haunches. "What?" he finally managed to verbalize. "Was it Scott's?" he asked, trembling with the words, but knowing the truth.

She looked over her shoulder at him and he confirmed the answer he feared.

“How?” he shuddered out. “Mine?”

She snapped around, violent with anger. “Aborted. Four months.”

“Why didn’t you...” he began to ask, his hands clutching his head, unwilling to accept the reality of what she had done. The shock of it overwhelmed him. “You knew I wanted...”

“Why didn’t I what?” she snapped. “Tell you? So you’d come back to me? I was single and alone! By the time I found out I was pregnant you were with that whore Darlene!” She spat out the name with utter hatred. “And I was with Scott! Why should I tell you? So that another child would come into this hateful world to a broken family whose parent’s hate each other? Like mine did?” Her fists were tight little balls of anger. “No, it is better that it died when it did!”

With careful words, she began to recite:

*“She looks up at me, a child
Dead eyed with a purpose
Blackened hair infested with soil
Bloodless skin crawling with maggots
Rumpled dress with crusty red
I reach forth pointing my finger
She licks it with her cold dry tongue
Sucking the tip – chilling me
I retract my hand in fear
It stark white
Infected
She turns away
Mocking my pain
Dead eyed with a purpose
The undead child awaits others”*

He vomited on the ground next to him. Spitting, he felt the acid burn the back of his throat. His eyes welled up and he fought to understand the magnitude of what she was telling him. For the entire two years they had been together, they had struggled to conceive. She knew he wanted a child. Any child.

“We were never meant to be together,” she continued. “I know that now. I was meant to go through this. I was meant to have my father reject me as a child. I was meant to watch my mother die slowly of cancer. I was meant to watch my guardian die. I was

meant to be raped by a man I hardly knew. I was meant to kill the only source of unconditional love I could ever have!”

As she sobbed again, he realized she regretted the abortion. She regretted the death of their child. But he found he couldn't look at her and instead stared at the ground wishing this day had never happened.

“I was meant to endure the loss of everything I could ever love,” she said quietly. “Including you. I can only endure the pain that life brings to me.”

She gasped inwardly and went silent.

When he looked up, she was staring down the hill towards the house. Following her gaze, he saw a man standing in the shadow of the back porch, watching them.

Ryan.

Before he could say anything, she knelt over the book, quickly tying the long strings and recreating the elaborate knot that kept the book intact. Standing, she clutched the book to her breast.

“Don't come back,” she told him and walked slowly down the hill.

Rubbing his head in his hands, he watched her go.

Endure. That was all she could do.

He sat watching the house for nearly an hour, unsure of whether he felt rage or the pain of her suffering. She was right. To endure was all she could do, thus he had to do the same.

He had to endure the knowledge of her choice.

With that affirmation, he stood up and walked down the hill, around the house and to where his car sat on the edge of the road.

End