

## Holding onto Home

Leanne Morgan pulled into the lot of the Trinitarian Church and parked her pickup back where the gravel met the graveyard fence. She turned off the engine and sat for a while, watching the headlights wink like fireflies on the distant interstate. It was absolutely silent up on Mill Dam Road this time of morning, not even the chirp of an early bird. The old church, the graveyard, the woods and the valley, all of it submerged in a mute black sea.

She got out of the truck, cursed the creak of the door—Ricky had forgotten to oil it—and made her way into the graveyard by a flashlight's beam. Her foot caught a clump of tall weeds and she pitched forward and almost fell. "Gaa-damn Levy's," she muttered, giving the weeds a spiteful kick.

The place had fallen to rack and ruin after the Levy Brothers bought it three years ago. The grass cut only when the council threatened to cite them, the clapboard husk of the church left to peel and pock through two Maine winters that would have chewed up a cinderblock wall, the cemetery fence abandoned to decrepitude. But what did the Levys care? None of it meant anything to them and soon it would all be gone.

She picked her way through the gravestones, through the damp and decay and the sudden sweet waft of the viburnum that choked in a tangle of vines near the fence. Beyond the graveyard, a wide swath of land stretched the length of a football field out to the rim of the valley. Playing her beam in front of her, Leanne crossed this grassy terrain, stopped just short of the rim and closed her eyes. Below her, obscured by the night, a green slope of land fletched with swamp birch, oak and pine emptied down to the valley floor and the slow-running ribbon of the Cassabet. Sometimes in the quiet of night, you could hear the river running from up on the

ridge, a faint watery whoosh as it flowed down country. Leanne heard it now as she opened her eyes to the blackness and all it concealed, this hollow bowl of country where she and her brothers and cousins once caroused upon and trampled so many years ago. “Don’t go near the water. Remember what happened to David Markey!” her mother would warn them through the smoke of her Winston as she ironed, and Leanne and her brothers would nod and go down to the river’s edge anyway and throw stones into the cool water and gather sticks for makeshift rafts that never got as far as sea worthy. All summer, every summer, that’s where you’d find them, the Morgan and Cunningham clans. Unruly tribe of banshees, people called them, because there were so darn many of them and they were noisy to boot.

The whispers of the dead rose up behind her, teasing the air like lute strings. Leanne considered her plan. She could go home now, crawl back into bed beside Ricky, say the hell with it and let things take their course. But she’d come this far and she owed it to this place, and to Abby. She owed so much to Abby.

A hint of grey was washing into the sky. Above her a lark sparrow began to sing. It was time. She waded back through the graveyard and the whispering chorus of voices. What an odd discovery for an eleven-year-old girl on an ordinary August day so long ago, this murmuring she thought might be rustling trees but wasn’t, when all she meant to do was break away from her siblings and follow her curiosity up the grassy slope from the river and into the graveyard where she’d never gone before. And when a shadow that was more than a trick of the light moved beside her, she somehow understood she was standing in a place of uncommon power. She ran home to tell her mother, who listened and stubbed out a butt in an ashtray with a serious look.

“You sure?” her mother said. When Leanne nodded, her mother did the same. “Then I guess you got it.”

“Got what?” Leanne replied with alarm, asking whether some terrible disease had befallen her. No, her mother assured her. “It’s the gift. You got the gift, of vision, same as me.”

Leanne stopped now at a weathered stone pitching out of the earth, shined her flashlight upon it and traced the worn inscription with her finger. *Abigail Moore. Daughter of James and Mary. Born 1788 Dep this Life 1808.*

“Abby,” she whispered. “I tried. Goddamn it, I tried.”

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Leanne leaned back against the big oak doors of the church and checked her watch. Almost six-thirty. The demolition crew would arrive in about half an hour. She moved to settle herself on the wide stone slab of the threshold. The chains around her waist rattled gently.

“I guess we’re in this together,” she said to the shimmering presence that had materialized beside her.

“Have faith, Leanne Morgan. Have faith,” came Abby’s firm reassurance, which though softly rendered seemed to echo in the quiet on deserted Mill Dam Road.

Leanne tilted her head to gaze up at the poster she’d taped to one of the doors. “Martin Luther had 95. But I have only one,” she said.

“Get thee behind me, Satan,” Abby murmured in a civilized tone but with a great deal of conviction.

Leanne couldn't help but laugh. "Get thee behind me, Robert and Carl Levy."

From up here on the topmost of the five steps that fanned down like a veil from the doors, Leanne felt ever so slightly closer to the branches of the huge old sycamore that arced over the church, almost as high as the steeple. "Old Zeus is looking down upon us mortals, Abby, thinking what fools we are...except I guess *you* aren't mortal anymore, are you? You're as immortal as any of the gods, at least to me."

By evening Old Zeus would be a memory. Leanne fought back a pang of regret that she hadn't gone over and pressed her palm against the tree and bid it goodbye. The Levys said they would try to save it. Cold comfort since the rest of the place was going to be torn asunder, the church ripped down, the graves dug up and moved to some godforsaken plot of scrub out by the old cement plant that no longer made cement, the land under her and on either side of the property and part way down the valley covered over by thirty houses, each with a two-car garage.

It was done with now—the fight against the Levys' plan, letters written, petitions signed, a foundation set up to raise money to buy the property and preserve it, the state historical commission called in. The town council had begged the former owners of the church, a non-denominational group that had bought the property cheap in an economic downturn and held services there for nine years, not to sell their fifty acres to the Levys. But in the end, it was all for naught. There was too much money to be made all the way around.

The song of the early birds was now swelling to a chorus. The sky had brightened to the color of cement. Leanne made herself comfortable, as comfortable as she could be shackled like

a galley slave. Ricky would be annoyed she'd used his chains. She pushed Ricky from her mind—something was terribly wrong with Ricky—and waited. Abby shimmered beside her.

“My mother told me I had some kind of purpose regarding this place, Abby,” she said. “I never would have thought that this was it.”

“Sometimes our purpose cannot be understood, Leanne Morgan. Sometimes it is buried in the heart.”

Abby had been the daughter of an apothecary and like Leanne, the only girl among her siblings. She'd died of fever when she was twenty. Those few facts Leanne had gleaned from some old records of the prominent Trinitarian families who'd been members here. Everything else about Abby she'd learned in those summer evenings when she sat with her, sister-like, in the grass at the edge of the valley and watched the sky steep to black.

“Look up there.” Abby might say, pointing to a cluster of stars, tracing them with her luminous finger. “You see. Cassiopeia.” Constellations were one of the wonders of Abby's short life. She'd drawn them on paper, embellished them with pigment and tucked them into her Bible. Leanne had two of those drawings back home, artfully rendered charts of the night sky edged with blues and pinks and greens. She'd talked a town historian out of them decades ago, asking only to borrow them, and when the old man died a month later, Leanne tucked them quietly into a drawer in the spare bedroom. She had only to look at them now and then to understand Abby's wonder at the world, her intelligence and grace. Abby had been one of the true gifts of Leanne's life. What would happen to her now?

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At seven, a convoy pulled into the lot on the other side of the church—a flatbed holding a bulldozer, four or five pickups, a second flatbed, long and empty—and discharged a horde of crewmen. When they finally noticed Leanne’s truck, a few of them held a brief confab, looked around and paused as they finally set eyes on Leanne, confused, she could tell, as if they weren’t sure she was real. Leanne’s hands went fidgety. “Here goes, Abby,” she whispered.

“Is that your car, ma’am?” one of the men bellowed across the lot.

“Yes it is,” Leanne hollered back, heart hammering, jaw tense. She could be stubborn when she knew her mind but she’d always preferred not to make a fuss. That’s what suited her about running the nursery. The shrubs and annuals and perennials never raised much fuss, and for the most part neither did her dozen or so employees.

“You’re going to have to move it,” the man called, walking, a little uncertainly, toward the church with a co-worker. “This is a demolition site. You can’t be here.”

The two men arrived at the church steps, 20s, early 30s, already tan even though it wasn’t quite summer. The younger one sported a dusty blond buzz cut, the older one a white hard hat. Their attention went to the poster on the door. They regarded each other in disbelief.

“Is this some kind of joke?” the buzz cut said.

“No, it certainly is not.” Leanne straightened up and tugged at the chains that bound her to the doors, the padlock dangling at her waist. A moment of terrible doubt welled in her but she pushed it down and tried for dignity, which didn’t come easy when you were trussed up in metal.

The buzz cut studied the chaotic network of links. “What exactly are you doing here, ma’am?”

“Please don’t call me ma’am. My name is Leanne. Leanne Morgan.”

“What the hell,” the hard hat said. He blew out a stream of air and whispered to no one in particular, “Is this for real?”

The crew was busy unloading equipment from their trucks in the lot. But for the occasional car passing by and continuing around the bend, all remained quiet on Mill Dam. Above distant Taggart’s Hill the sun peeked over the horizon.

The buzz cut took another stab at the puzzle before him. “Mrs. Morgan, I don’t—”

“I told you. Leanne. I’m not your Sunday School teacher.”

“All right, then. Leanne. Whatever your problem is, take it up with somebody else. We gotta get to work here.”

Leanne searched again for her courage. “Well, I’m not going to let you.” Pushing back against the doors, she tried to feel at one with the church. She had to speak for this place, for all of it, and for Abby, even if these men didn’t give a bunny’s ass about it.

“You’re going to have to unchain yourself or the police will do it for you.” The hard hat squinted hard at Leanne then turned to the buzz cut. “I’m gonna tell Butch we got a problem.”

“Yeah, Gerry,” the buzz cut said as his partner turned and stalked away.

“He’s Gerry and who are you?” Leanne said. A blurry grey mist was taking shape next to the young man. Not one of the Trinitarians she’d seen or heard over the years—she was sure of that—but a new, unfamiliar presence. A woman.

“Tommy,” he replied. He glanced up at the poster. “So what, you think you’re gonna save this place?”

With his hard jaw and hazel eyes, Tommy reminded Leanne of her nephew Chad, except Chad was an accountant and wore his hair considerably longer. Tommy sighed and turned toward the lot, maybe looking for a rescue.

“Hey, Butch!” he hollered, waving at a stocky man in baggy jeans who had broken out of the crew and was walking toward the church. Then he turned back to Leanne, perused again the bundle of metal that bound her. “You got a key for that?”

Leanne had flicked the key under the church door as hard as she could with her index finger and thumb, like she was playing marbles. “Not anymore,” she said. The woman beside Tommy was now fully formed. His mother, she decided.

Butch arrived at the church. With an air of authority, he glared down at Leanne.

Now that her nerves had settled, Leanne was beginning to feel a little powerful, like a tribal elder dispensing wisdom from a sacred altar, like the Delphi Oracle, even if her back side was beginning to smart against the cement step.

“Okay, ma’am,” Butch said. “We need you to move along. You’re puttin’ us behind schedule for the day.”

“She’s locked, says she don’t have the key,” Tommy offered.

Butch huffed. “One last time, ma’am.”

“Leanne. Please,” Leanne said.

“I don’t care who you are. You have one minute to get up and get out of here. Then I call the cops.”

A chorus of whispers, the weight of two hundred years, the secrets and the wisdom, her own life and that of all those who had passed over time in this place rose up around her. She offered Butch a silent stare.

“All right, if that’s how you want it,” Butch said. “Tommy, call 911.”

Tommy looked down at Leanne as if asking her to change her mind, and in that instance the maternal shadow turned toward him.

Leanne sensed sorrow. “I’m sorry about...your mother,” she ventured.

Tommy’s hand halted beside his pocket. “What do you mean?”

“I mean I’m sorry your mother has passed away. She must have loved you very much.”

Tommy cocked his head and didn’t seem able to speak. Butch stood silent beside him.

“How did you know my mother died?” Tommy finally said. “You knew her?”

“No, I just...felt her there beside you is all. She misses you, her favorite, are you? She wants you to know that.” Beside her, in a voice only Leanne could hear, Abby said, “A mother’s heart is strong.”

Tommy ran a nervous hand under his nose. “This ain’t funny,” he said.

“Just make the call,” Butch snarled, turning to go. “We ain’t got time for voodoo.”

Tommy pulled a cell phone from his pocket, eyes on Leanne. A few beeps later he cleared his throat. “Yeah, this is Tommy Hennessy with Pruhoff Construction out at the old church on Mill Dam. We’re supposed to start work here but there’s...” He hesitated, maybe thinking how foolish his next words would sound, or maybe still pondering Leanne’s revelation. “There’s a lady chained to the church. Could you...yeah, that’s right. Chained to the church.”

A moment passed as he listened to the person on the other end. “She says her name is Leanne Morgan....Yeah....I don’t know,” he continued. “But could you send somebody? We’re gonna need help.”

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A police cruiser rolled into the parking lot and unloosed a tall, burly cop Leanne recognized even from fifty yards away. Her cousin, Henry Cunningham, christened Halfy too many years ago to remember by his cousins because of his runty size. Having shot up like a beanstalk in his adolescence, he was anything but a runt now.

Halfy huddled with a few of the crew in the lot. The cruiser was now drawing the attention of the cars that passed at intervals on Mill Dam as they headed toward town. Butch pulled at Halfy’s arm and pointed in Leanne’s direction. Halfy nodded and trudged her way, his sidearm jumping with every step.

Tommy, arms crossed in front of him, said, “This isn’t gonna go good. Leanne.”

Leanne ignored the warning. “I didn’t mean to alarm you, about your mother. But she’s shown herself for a reason, maybe to let you know...” Leanne trailed off, her ears straining to hear the woman’s whispers. “...to let you know that if she’d had it in her power to give you—”

Halfy halted abruptly at the bottom of the steps. “Jee-zus H!” he declared, looming like Goliath in police blues. “I thought that was your truck! Leanne, what is this?” His polished black oxfords took aim at her like black missiles. Tommy watched quietly.

“What does it look like, Halfy?” She studied the full height of him, the captain’s patch on his sleeve, the clean-shaven face, the beefy arms dusted with dark hair. “Sorry it had to be you to get called,” she said.

Halfy walked up a step, studied the poster and the elaborate trussing that bound her to the doors. “Give us a minute,” he said to Tommy, who nodded and backed away. When Halfy grumbled “Alone, please,” Tommy trudged reluctantly back to the parking lot, his mother misting away. Halfy fixed Leanne in his sights. “Just what the hell is going on, Leanne?”

“The Battle of Wounded Knee.” Leanne smiled. “Who wounded a knee?” Abby asked beside her. Some of the finer points of more recent history were naturally lost on Abby.

Halfy snorted softly. “I don’t know but there’s gotta be a better way, like writing letters or calling your congressman? This here is going to get you in trouble.”

“So be it,” Leanne said. “I can handle a little trouble. Besides, none of that did any good. You know that. We couldn’t raise the money and the goddamn Levys did.”

Halfy gazed around as if plotting his next move. On Mill Dam, traffic was beginning to inch along like a trail of Congo ants. The workers in the lot sipped from their coffee cups and paced, except for Tommy, who stood solitary, staring over at the church.

“Does Ricky know what you’re doin’?” Halfy said.

“Leave Ricky out of it. He’s getting ready for work, I hope.”

Butch was on his way back, marching toward the church like a Prussian guard. He stepped up beside Halfy. “I hope this isn’t gonna take all day, Chief.”

Halfy held up his hand. “It’s under control. If you can step back to the parking lot, we’ll just be a few more minutes.”

Butch smirked. “It doesn’t look under control.”

“And you’re not wearin’ a badge, friend.”

Butch retreated with a shrug. Halfy turned to Leanne. “Look, Lee. You’re puttin’ me in a bad spot. How about you let me untie you and—

“I’m not tied. I’m locked.”

“Okay, locked. So give me the key and let me get these—”

“Chains, Halfy. They’re chains. I found them in the basement next to Ricky’s workbench. And I don’t have the key.” Halfy opened his mouth to speak, but Leanne cut him off. “I don’t have it.”

“Leanne, this morning was addin’ up to pretty good but I’m sorry to say you’re reversin’ that trend.”

“It’s under there.” Leanne pointed to the sliver of space between the step and the church doors. Abby did the same.

Halfy sighed, lifted a shiny shoe and mounted the next step, bent his head as if he might peer under the door.

Leanne felt a pang of pity for her cousin. The only wrong he'd ever done her was accidentally denting her bike fender when she was ten, and here she was putting him in an awkward spot. "You'll have to ask the Levys if they have a spare."

A drone of voices rose up by the road. Leanne looked over to see a half-dozen people gathered in the lot, mingling with the workers.

"You have an audience, if that's what you wanted," Halfy said.

Leanne pondered his words. What exactly did she want? What did she think would happen? "I don't know. I...just want someone to listen. This place ..." She tugged on the chains, which clattered softly, and looked again toward the spectators. "I guess they're wondering what this is all about."

"They're not the only ones." Halfy backed down the steps with a frown. "I'm goin' over there and stall for a little time, maybe make a call." He trudged away like a man on a hopeless mission.

Leanne turned to Abby. "Am I a fool, Abby? Is this all for nothing?"

"You are crossing a great chasm, Leanne Morgan." Abby's shimmering shape took on a more defined form, girlish face, hair swimming around her shoulders.

"But I don't know if I can do it alone."

"You are not alone and never will you be."

"But this place, it won't be ours anymore. Where will we go for peace?"

"Where will *you* go for peace?"

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Another police car drew up on Mill Dam Road. A young officer got out, chatted briefly with Halfy then walked out into the line of gawking cars and motioned to keep them moving. Halfy trudged back to the church as Butch watched. He lifted a shiny black shoe to the first step and leaned his elbow on his knee.

“Mr. Hard Hat over there says they’re gonna start charging you by the hour for lost time.”

“Levys can afford a little lost time,” Leanne sniffed.

“Don’t make things worse,” Halfy muttered. “Look, Lee, I want to help you outta this mess. Now, Sgt. Meany’s got a pair of bolt cutters in his patrol car. We’re gonna get those chains off you and—”

“Halfy.” A memory had intruded without permission upon Leanne’s otherwise focused thoughts. “Ricky put the sugar bowl in the refrigerator yesterday.”

Halfy cocked his head, squinted. “Yeah? I put my right leg in the left side of my trousers this morning. So what?”

“He did the same thing last week. And the week before that he put the trash can inside the trash bag instead of the other way around.” Recalling that scene, Ricky standing flummoxed in the kitchen with the can and bag in his hands, made Leanne shudder.

“A man can mess up once in a while. Happens to everyone.”

“I’m losing him, Halfy, just like...Bradley said he’s been making mistakes at the garage, paying the men the wrong wages, ordering the wrong parts or not ordering them at all. You know how meticulous he always was about his business. He’s too young to—”

A van veered into the parking lot emblazoned with the words SMJ-TV. Leanne couldn’t help but stare. A woman in a brown suit and hair to the chin exited the passenger side. She looked familiar even at a distance and suddenly Leanne remembered. Amy, Amy Herndon. She’d shown up at the nursery one day two years ago to ask for an interview, having heard about Leanne’s gift and the murder over in Monasset that Leanne was asked to help solve.

Amy and a man in a plaid flannel shirt hefting a black camera on his shoulder were now heading toward the church. Halfy shook his head. “Jesus H, Leanne. Looks like you’re gonna be famous. So what am I gonna tell these people?”

“I think it’s me who’ll have to do the telling.” She felt Abby drift from her side.

“While you’re at it, you better come up with something to tell your kids. Did you think about them when you planned this little caper?”

“Rob’s in Strickland on business. Katy’s on her way to Fenton with Dan and the kids. Today’s moving day. Didn’t I tell you?”

Leanne pictured her daughter’s packed car, everything organized the way Ricky would have done it. Two peas in a pod. But Ricky wasn’t organized anymore; he was forgetful and challenged by simple things.

“I can’t force them to leave,” Halfy whispered hoarsely as he spun around to meet Amy and the cameraman.

Leanne hadn't figured on the camera. Arrest and charges—she was prepared for that, for the watery stare of old Judge Hayward looking down on her from his bench, although what law said you couldn't chain yourself to a church? But she wasn't ready for television, for the blonde anchorwoman and her male counterpart to smirk toward the audience, the asinine jokes about Leanne. *Next up, a local psychic thrown in jail for trespassing. Who could have predicted that?* Fools. Leanne wasn't a fortuneteller, and she wasn't a psychic, either. She had a gift, that was all. And it didn't include predicting the damn future.

“Look to your heart,” she heard Abby say. “Look before you.”

Amy and the cameraman, whose paunch preceded him, stopped at the bottom of the steps, transfixed by the sight of Leanne in chains. Amy grew wide-eyed with recognition. “Leanne Morgan?” Her eyes went to the poster on the door then back to Leanne. “Is everything all...well, no, I guess not. What's going on?”

Leanne composed herself. “I am marking the end of this place, Amy.”

If the TV station had to send someone, she was glad it was Amy. Even though Leanne had declined the interview two years ago, the two of them had formed a kind of bond, owing no doubt to Leanne's revelation about the young man watching over her, who turned out to be the father Amy never knew, killed in Vietnam in 1969, Amy still in her mother's womb.

“Just be careful what you say,” Halfy muttered, arms crossed over his broad chest.

Leanne gazed to the parking lot, where Butch was talking intently on his cell phone, then back to Amy. The cameraman angled for a good shot. She was about to speak when she saw

Abby shimmering into view beside Amy. Abby gestured toward Amy with a small, graceful hand. “Where then is my hope?” she murmured and misted away.

“Where indeed?” Leanne heard herself say, “Amy, you’ll get your interview.” And for the next fifteen minutes she answered Amy’s questions while the cameraman darted like a dragonfly and Halfy stood sentry a few feet away.

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A few weeks later Leanne was back on Mill Dam Road, this time under a June sun that was coaxing the last of the magnolias and rhododendron into bloom. She pulled into the gravel lot, took a lawn sign and a hammer from the passenger seat and walked to the other side of the church where the big sycamore rustled softly in a light breeze. “Morning, Zeus,” she said.

She positioned the sign in the dirt by the road and pounded it in, the words *Thank You* blazed across the white poster board in green marker. “Thank you, everyone,” she whispered.

Amy and her cameraman had turned out to be a lucky stroke. Within hours of the local broadcast the big networks got in on it—grandmother takes on big land developers by chaining herself to church doors, *a David and Goliath story*, they called it. Corny, but at least they got her age right. Then the phone calls started and a vigil took place and checks began rolling in, and one of her customers who knew someone who knew someone with money to spare for worthy causes got on the case, and within a week the Levys were making a deal to pull out.

Halfy had done his part, too. He’d stalled the demolition crew that day by calling someone in the county DA’s office who declared the church a crime scene that couldn’t be

disturbed. There was still the matter of whether the Levys would press charges, but Leanne figured they wouldn't want the bad publicity.

She walked back through the graveyard and out to the rim of the valley, the hum of the nether world drifting over her shoulder. "Leanne Morgan," she heard Abby say. A familiar shimmer teased out of the air beside her.

"We did it, Abby," Leanne said. "We crossed the chasm, at least part of it."

There was still Ricky and that part of the chasm was going to be much harder to get across. She sat down in the grass, the sun warming her face.

Abby said, "When you were a girl, you used to inquire of me whether I'd always be here."

"And you said you would be. But you know, Abby, I won't always be. What will you do when I'm not? When I'm dead?"

"Why, we'll sit here on this ridge, two immortal spirits, and look out over the valley and watch the night sky."