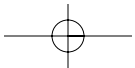
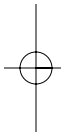
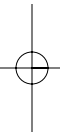


The Candlestone

Book 2

Dragons in Our Midst



The Candlestone

Bryan Davis

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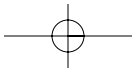
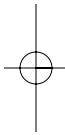
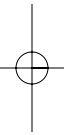
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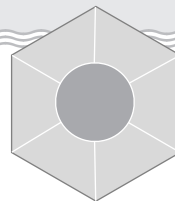
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To the keepers of the light.

When we set flame to a candle, we bring light to the world.
When we build stone upon stone, we erect the temple of God.
But when candle and stone are removed from the foundation,
The light is captured, imprisoned, destroyed.
How great is the darkness!

Let us never forget our first love,
And our light will spread across the world.





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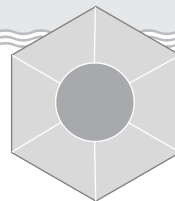
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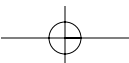
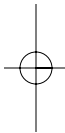
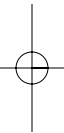
To my faithful wife, thank you for being an enduring light in my life.

To my seven torches in the wilderness, may this book inspire you to carry your lights in every sphere of influence you reach. You were called to be lights in dark places, and for as long as I live, I pledge to lead the way, following the Light of the World to the ends of the earth and beyond.

To my friends at AMG—Dan Penwell, Warren Baker, Rick Steele, Dale Anderson, Trevor Overcash, and all the staff—thank you for keeping the light burning.

To my editors—Jeannie Taylor, Barbara Martin, Sharon Neal, and especially Becky Miller—thank you for helping me polish all those smudges to make this book shine.





MERLIN'S PROPHECY

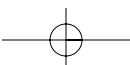
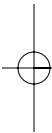
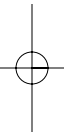


When hybrid meets the fallen seed
The virgin seedling flies
An orphaned waif shall call to me
When blossom meets the skies

The child of doubt will find his rest
And meet his virgin bride
A dragon shorn will live again
Rejecting Eden's pride

A slayer comes and with his host
He fights the last of thee
But faith alone shall win the war
The test of those set free

A king shall rise of Arthur's mold
The prophet's book in hand
He takes the sword from mountain stone
To rescue captive bands



CHAPTER

1

THE ART OF WAR

*With sword and stone, the holy knight,
Darkness as his bane,
Will gather warriors in the light
Cast in heaven's flame*

Out of the blackness a growling voice rumbled, “She will come.” The rough words reverberated, bouncing off shrouded walls that echoed dying replies.

A solitary man listened in the dark room, lit only by flickers of soft light coming from his hand, a dozen fireflies in a jar. They danced with hopeless wings in stale air, waiting for death to arrive, their distress signals only serving to guide the scientist as he paced the stone floor. “And what makes you so sure she’ll come?” his voice replied, tiny and squeaking by comparison. “She won’t trust me. Why should she?”



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The rumbling voice responded. "You don't understand her; you never did. She listens to a call that rises beyond your senses. . . . she has faith." The growl changed to a deep sigh. "But, alas! What would you know about faith?"

"More than you think." The scientist held up the jar and watched the dimming flashes. "I do know this; it was by her faith that you're in this predicament. I hear she was quite handy with that sword."

The growl deepened, its bass tones making the ground tremble. "If you really think she knew I would end up in this prison, then you're a bigger fool than I thought." After a few seconds, the echoes died away again, and the voice became soft and melancholy, like the lowest notes of a mournful cello. "You have no worries. She will come. She is driven by forces you cannot possibly understand."

The last flicker of light blinked out. The scientist picked up the jar and opened the lid. With a quick shake he dumped the dead fireflies onto the floor. "Very well." His voice stretched out into a foreboding snarl. "We shall see."

Swish! The gleaming sword swiped by Billy's face, its razor point slashing the air and its deadly edge humming a threatening tune in his ear. He jumped back, his cheeks turning red hot. *What an idiot I am! Another mistake like that and this fight will be over in a hurry!* He planted his feet on the tile floor and raised his sword, careful to keep it from stabbing the low ceiling. Eyeing his opponent warily, he slowly counted to ten. *Gotta keep my cool. I'm never going to win if my brain's fried. Besides, this sword weighs a ton. No use wasting energy.* Drops of sweat pooled on his brow and streamed down, stinging his eyes and blurring the light from the ceiling fan's globe. The fan's whirling

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blades blew a cooling breeze through his hair, a welcome relief in the spacious but stuffy rec room.

His opponent charged, his sword raised to strike. Billy dodged, swiping at the attacking weapon from the side as it passed, and the clank of metal on metal rattled his brain. His opponent twirled and set his feet, bending his knees to brace himself. With his sword held out in defense, he waited.

Billy puffed a loud, weary sigh as he readied his sword for an attack of his own. Heavy, sweat-drenched clothes clung to his body, and the weight of the hefty blade dragged his tired arms downward. He dared not let it fall.

His opponent, a tall, lanky man of considerable years, was quick and agile at the start of the battle but now slower and deliberate. He had spunk, though, a real kick start in his old engine, and that last charge proved his stellar swordsmanship.

Billy lifted his sword, pointing it at his mentor and remembering what he had taught. *“A knight opposes his enemy face-to-face. A stab in the back is the way of the coward; a pre-emptive strike of death is a strike of fear. If you must fight, attack your enemy head on. That is the way of valor.”* Billy took a deep breath and charged, pulling his sword back. His opponent met the blow, and the swords clashed once again. This time Billy pushed downward, then back up in full circle, wrenching his opponent’s sword from his grasp and flinging it away. He dashed to where the ringing blade fell and stamped both feet on its polished steel. He lifted his own sword, and with a pretend scowl, dared his opponent to approach.

“Way to go, Billy!” a young male voice shouted.

A female voice joined in. “Yay, Billy! You were awesome!”

A surge of heat prickled Billy’s face, and he drew in a deep, satisfying breath while nodding toward his friends, Walter Foley

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and Bonnie Silver. Walter slapped Billy on the back and helped him remove his helmet. "I told you you'd win if you used my helmet. Hambone licked it for good luck."

Billy accepted a towel from Bonnie and wiped his forehead, pushing his short wet hair to the side. Bonnie pressed her thumbs behind the front straps of her ever-present backpack, as locks of her straight blonde-streaked hair caressed her navy polo shirt. Her blue eyes sparkled, greeting Billy with silent messages of congratulations.

Billy smiled. His training was paying off. He felt stronger than ever, certainly not like he did on the mountain, the last time he wielded a sword in a real fight. He had nearly lost his life battling Sir Devin, the dragon slayer. Next time, if there were to be a next time, he would be ready.

A hearty voice boomed from nearby. "Well done, William!" The heavy British accent made its owner easy to identify, his teacher, his mentor, his friend, and now, his conquered opponent, Professor Hamilton. The professor approached with deliberate, stiff steps and his tall form cast a shadow across Billy's face. "William? You seem rather pensive. Are you all right?"

Billy wanted to say, "I'm fine," but his muscles ached, a good, satisfying ache.

He lifted his wet shirt, peeling it away from his shoulder. "I'm sore, but I'll be all right. I was just thinking about the fight on the mountain." He laid the sword on the floor and pulled off his protective gloves. "Do you think I'm ready? I mean, we've still never fought all out. And we're not really using the same equipment those guys had, you know, the authentic battle armor and stuff."

"No, we're not." The professor picked up his vanquished sword and slid it into a scabbard on his back. "We battled 'all out,' as you say, with foam swords early in your training. Just now we did restrain our thrusts with our metal replicas, but it was still a

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strenuous workout. Yet, until we can combine the weight of authentic swords and armor with the passion of unrestrained zeal, we'll not be sure you're ready." He unfastened the scabbard and tossed it onto a nearby sofa. "You see, I have no true armored helmets, and my fencing guards are inadequate for mortal combat, so I'm afraid it's not safe to attempt an unrestrained match."

Billy ran his thumb along the edge of his blade, leaving a shallow slice in his skin. "Is it 'safe' if we don't prepare for real?"

The professor slid off his headgear, a modified Washington Redskins helmet, his white matted hair pulling up with it, creating a frenzy of wet strings. "Your point is well taken, William, but we would have to find a better sparring partner for you. Your potential opponent will not likely be a creaking old man such as myself." He ran his hand through his tangled hair and examined the logo on his helmet. "And I'll have to find suitable armor. The authentic helmets I've seen don't have an American Indian on the side."

Walter took Billy's sword from his hand. "This sword is so cool!" He rubbed the etchings on the blade. "This looks like a picture of two dragons fighting, but what do the other marks mean?"

The professor stroked the blade with his index finger. "There's quite a story behind these runes." He gave a tired sigh and gestured with his head toward the hallway. "Walter, I trust that your father won't mind if we build a fire and sit in the den while I tell the story. Although our swordplay generated considerable body heat, we will cool off quickly. But first, I must visit the water clo—I mean, the restroom, and clean up a bit."

Billy tugged at his plastered shirt again. "And I have to change these sweaty clothes."

Walter ran ahead. "I'll start the fire!"

Bonnie joined Walter in the den. He was already holding a lit match next to a rolled up newspaper stuffed under a pile

THE CANDLESTONE

of logs in the fireplace. The end of the paper flared, but the flame soon died away.

Bonnie adjusted the left strap on her backpack and peeked over Walter's shoulder. She had been wondering what Walter had seen on the mountain after he kept the dragon slayer from following her that day back in November. Now was her chance to probe her friend for the truth. Had he discovered her dragon wings? She gently cleared her throat. "I was just thinking, Walter. When I was watching Billy fight just now, it reminded me of when you hit Devin with the tree limb."

Walter tore a second match from a matchbook. "Yeah? It wasn't much. It's not so brave to bash someone's head when he's not looking." He struck the match and set the end of the paper on fire again.

Bonnie watched the struggling flame and shifted her weight to her heels. "I . . . I was wondering, though, about how you showed up in the field to help us, right when we ran into the search party. Did you follow us down the slope?"

Walter struck a third match and held it against the newspaper, waiting for it to catch. He shrugged his shoulders. "I saw your tracks in the snow. It wasn't hard."

Bonnie crouched next to the hearth. "What I mean is, did you see us on the way down? Or did you just follow the tracks?"

"Ouch!" Walter shook his hand and sucked his scorched finger. "I was super pumped after whacking Devin, so everything's sort of jumbled in my memory. I don't remember all the details." He stood up, still sucking his finger. "What difference does it make?"

Bonnie straightened her body and folded her hands behind her. "When you met us at the bottom of the trail, did you see . . . anything peculiar? I mean, it seems like you're Johnny-on-the-spot all the time, so—"

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“So you’re wondering if I ‘spotted’ anything?” Walter dried his finger on his jeans and flashed a grin. “Maybe I’m like an angel. Maybe God puts me in the right place at the right time.”

Bonnie smiled back, reading Walter’s playful tone. “You think so?”

“Why not?” He pointed toward his back. “Except I don’t have any wings. That would be cool.” He stuffed the empty matchbook into his pocket and rushed toward the doorway. “I think Dad just bought some starter logs. I’ll go get them and another matchbook.” He almost slammed into Billy as he dashed from the room, deftly spinning around his friend. “Back in a minute. Gotta get something to start the fire.”

Billy, now wearing a fresh long-sleeved shirt and his favorite cargo pants, pushed his moistened hair back. He spied the blackened matches at the front of the fireplace and then winked at Bonnie while nodding toward the door. Crouching at the hearth, he leaned toward the stubborn logs and waited for Bonnie to block the room’s entrance. She stepped into the doorway, using her body as a shield to hide Billy’s deepest secret, the dragon trait handed down to him by his father. Walter was a great friend, but Billy didn’t want to let him know about his dragon heritage. Not yet.

Billy took in a deep breath and blew a stream of fire at the pile of oak, spreading it evenly across the wood. Within seconds, the logs ignited, shooting flames and smoke into the flue above.

“Knock, knock.”

Bonnie spun around. “Walter!”

“Mind if I come in?”

Billy jerked himself up to his feet, and Bonnie jumped away from the door. Walter sauntered in carrying a bag of paraffin

THE CANDLESTONE

kindling and set it next to the hearth. He nodded toward the blazing logs and smiled. "Nice job. You got better matches than I do?"

Bonnie put her hand over her mouth, apparently holding back a snicker, and Billy folded his arms across his chest. "I guess you could say that."

The professor entered, his face washed and his white hair plastered and parted down the middle. He carried the sword at his side and sat in an easy chair next to the fire. His face beamed. "William, I must reiterate my pride in your effort. You were outstanding with the sword."

"Yeah," Walter agreed. "You rocked!"

Billy bowed his head, his face burning. "Thanks."

The professor's eyes narrowed at Walter. "Rocked?"

"Yeah . . . rocked. You know; he was awesome. He really kicked . . . uh . . . gluteus maximus."

"Is that similar to being the cat's pajamas?" the professor asked.

"The cat's pajamas?" Walter repeated. "What's that?"

"It's an American idiom. It refers to someone who is well liked because of his accomplishments. I see, however, that it has passed out of common usage." The professor gestured for his three students to gather around. "Shall we discuss the sword?" He placed the blade on his lap and pointed at the etched writing.

"Some of these lines are inscriptions in an ancient dialect," he explained. He rubbed his finger along one face of the blade. "This one says, roughly speaking, 'May the Lady's purity never depart from the one found worthy to draw the sword.'"

"The lady?" Bonnie asked. "Who's the lady?"

"The Lady of the Lake. The legends say that she gave Excalibur to King Arthur."

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Bonnie rubbed her finger along the raised pattern on the wooden hilt. "A lady gave it to him? Can a lady be strong enough to battle with a sword like this?"

"I think a sturdy woman could wield it," the professor replied, handing it to her. "Give it a try."

Bonnie grasped the hilt with both hands and held the blade up, her feet spread apart as if bracing for an attack. She waved the sword through a series of pretend maneuvers, and the professor's eyes followed the blade's swings and parries. "You seem to have no trouble carrying it," he noted.

Bonnie returned the sword to the professor's lap. "I guess it's not as heavy as I thought it would be."

The professor slid the sword back into its scabbard. "It's probably not as heavy as the real Excalibur, but its mass is substantial."

"It seemed heavy to me," Billy said.

"As it should, William; you worked with it for nearly an hour today, nonstop. But I perceive that Miss Silver is considerably stronger than her frame would suggest."

Bonnie's face flushed. "I'm sorry, Billy. I didn't mean to say—"

Billy waved his hand. "It's all right. I know what you meant."

Walter picked up the scabbard and examined its ornate designs, an embossed angelic creature with knights on each side bending a knee in respect. "Do you think those Arthur stories are true, Professor?"

A dreamy expression floated across Professor Hamilton's face, the dancing fire reflecting in his eyes. "Arthur is the stuff of legends, the search for the Holy Grail, the splendor of Camelot. It's hard to decipher truth within the myriad tales." His scholarly air returned as he took the scabbard from Walter. "It seems that each new storyteller tried to outdo the previous one, not really caring whether or not his tale was true. Legends are, after all, not

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meant to be historical fact. For example, I certainly doubt the existence of a goddess in a lake, but I have no doubts that Arthur once wielded the great and mysterious Excalibur.”

He caressed the scabbard again, his finger pausing on one of the worshipful knights. “This is a replica handed down through many generations; its shape and details are based on legends and descriptions in journals. Many tried to copy Excalibur’s image, but no one could reproduce its power.”

Bonnie’s eyebrows arched up. “It had power?”

The professor placed his fingers around the hilt and drew the blade out a few inches. “Power incomprehensible. Whosoever held the sword in battle could not be defeated, as long as the wielder was pure of heart. And the offensive powers in the hands of the holy were a terrible sight to behold.”

Bonnie put her hands behind her back and shifted her weight toward her toes. “Does the real Excalibur still exist?”

The professor glanced from Billy to Walter to Bonnie, as if searching for something in each set of eyes. “I have no doubt about it, Miss Silver. I have hunted for it throughout the world, following many rumors and obscure tales. Finding it would make my life complete. You could say that it’s something of a Holy Grail for me.”

“What about the sword that guy took from Whittier’s office?” Walter asked. “Didn’t it have some kind of marks on it?”

Billy bit his lip to keep from laughing. He remembered Walter’s story of his adventure with Professor Hamilton when they searched for clues in the principal’s office. One of the slayer’s cronies had come in and picked up a sword from its hiding place while Walter and the professor watched in secret. When Walter told the story again just a few days ago, he acted out every event, using a baseball bat for the sword and coaxing Hambone to play the part of the professor.

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The professor slid the sword into the scabbard. "Your memory is accurate, Walter. That sword had many similar characteristics, but I couldn't be sure of its identity. I would like to pursue that lead at the appropriate time." His eyes fell on Billy and Bonnie, and his gaze lingered, making Billy feel uneasy. The professor went on. "And I suspect that there are some people I know who might be able to enlighten me concerning its whereabouts."

Billy twisted his shoe on the carpet like he was squishing a cockroach. How could the professor guess what was going on? He wasn't there when Bonnie battled the slayer in the mountain forest, and no one told him that Bonnie dropped the sword while flying away from the battle scene.

"In any case," the professor continued, "my sword is adequate for young William's training. While this replica is valuable, its symbolism is paramount for his development. His skill in swordplay will become necessary before long. And there is no concern for the replica's safety; it is practically indestructible."

Billy stepped away from the dying fire. Its flames had toasted his backside, and his hair had dried. "When are you going to explain all that to me—I mean, the stuff I'm training for?"

"In due time, William. I'm just putting the pieces together myself." The professor rose to his feet and strolled around the room, holding the sword casually across his shoulder. "Since you were expected to be out of commission for quite a while, I sent our mystery book to a friend of mine, an expert in antiquities. He has completed his analysis and will return the book in time for class Monday. I assume that when we decipher it we will learn a great deal."

Billy folded his arms across his chest and rubbed his aching biceps. Thinking about that book and how it had come into their hands made him feel sore all over. During his ordeal on the mountain with the powerful dragon slayer, Billy sat against

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the trunk of a tree, his hands and feet bound. The slayer opened a book and claimed that reading from it would summon a dragon, whom the slayer wished to kill. The poem sounded sort of like English, but Billy couldn't understand it. The words seemed archaic and symbolic; they just didn't make any sense. Clefspeare, Billy's father in dragon form, showed up before the poem ended, so it was unclear whether the words actually summoned him or he had sensed his son was in danger and flew to his rescue.

Since Billy was severely wounded in the fierce battle that followed, his memories of the details were fuzzy, but he recalled the professor's amazing crossbow expertise that saved his life that day. How could this wrinkled old guy be so daring, so agile? He could handle a crossbow and a battle sword with great strength and endurance, yet excel even more in his intellectual pursuits. This affable professor was becoming more and more of a puzzle.

The professor stopped his pacing and gazed at the fireplace, sighing before turning to face his students again. "William, I hope you and Miss Silver will carefully consider telling me what you know." He fingered the designs on the replica's scabbard. "I have discerned that you're confused and frightened, and I understand completely. I believe I would be, too. Both of you were severely wounded, yet you have mended at a miraculous rate. These are among the many perplexing mysteries to be solved." He straightened his whole body, his head held high. "I hope you will decide that you can trust me with your secrets. To be quite frank, I think I have earned your trust." A smile appeared on his wrinkled face, though a hint of sadness crept into his eyes. "Good night, students." He turned and stepped quickly out of the room. Seconds later, the front door clicked open, then closed with a muffled clap.

Billy flopped into the easy chair and slapped his hands on the chair's arms. Bonnie sank onto the sofa with a sigh, her brow

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knitting into three deep furrows. Walter sat on the far side of the sofa, his feet propped up on the coffee table, one shoe on top of the other. He picked at his fingernails, then retied his shoes, his eyes wandering toward Billy and Bonnie every few seconds. He finally jumped up. "I'd better make sure Hambone's warm." With a graceful bound, he dashed from the room.

Billy put his hand to his ear. "Bonnie, was Hambone whining?"

She smiled and shook her head. "Not a whine or a woof."

A sparkling gleam shone in Bonnie's eyes, though only the fading light from outside and a few dying embers in the fireplace illuminated the room. Billy sighed. "Either Walter has mind-to-mind connection with that dog or he knows more than we think."

"Uh-huh, I think he knows something."

"You do? Why?"

"Just some things he said to me today. And you know the professor's going to put all the pieces together before long."

"Yep. He'll figure it out sooner or later." Billy walked over to the small den window, and his thoughts traveled to the distant horizon, hills stretching into tree-covered mountains. He pictured the leaf-strewn battle scene and the dark, breezy cave. Bonnie joined him, and together they gazed at the deepening winter—thick gray clouds, cold, leafy breezes bending naked trees, tiny snowflakes threatening to bring millions of their friends later that night.

Bonnie's phantom reflection appeared in the window, smiling and peaceful. Billy kept his eye on the transparent image and pushed his hands into his pockets. "I think I'd better talk to Dad. I've only seen him once since I got hurt, and I was still pretty bad off then. I didn't ask him about a bunch of stuff that doesn't make any sense."

She leaned against the windowsill, bending forward to make room for her backpack. "A bunch of stuff? Like what?"

THE CANDLESTONE

“Like, what’s the deal with the sword you used on the mountain? And what happened to the slayer and that crazy candlestone? Stuff like that. And if I’m going to tell the professor everything, Dad should give his permission. Don’t you think? I mean, I know the professor’s going to ask lots of questions, so I’d better have a few more answers ready.” Billy placed his hand on his stomach, and, with his lips forming a circle, he created a perfect ring of smoke and pushed it into the air. “Besides,” he added as the ring expanded, “I’ve been practicing fire breathing, and I want to show Dad how I’m doing.”

Bonnie put her hand through the ring, scattering the remaining smoke. “You’re going to ask your mom to fly with you back to the mountain?”

“Uh-huh. Tomorrow if we can. We have a primitive airstrip up there now, so it’s easy to get in and out.”

She placed both palms on the windowsill and pushed herself up. “Then can I go with you?”

“That would be great, but isn’t tomorrow the big day, you know, the thirty-day deadline?”

Bonnie put her hands on her hips. “How could I forget? Mr. Foley wants to finish the adoption paperwork as soon as possible. The judge said he would sign it for us even though tomorrow’s Sunday.”

“Mr. Foley? Aren’t you going to start calling him ‘Dad’? That’s what Walter calls him, except when he’s acting crazy and calls him ‘Pop.’”

She ran her fingers through her hair and then hitched up her backpack, her eyes toward the floor. “Not yet. That’s going to be hard to get used to. I called my real father ‘Daddy’ for so long . . . until he betrayed me.”

Tears welled in Bonnie’s eyes, and her pain drilled a hole in Billy’s heart. How could anyone, especially a father, give an

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awesome girl like Bonnie over to a dragon slayer? And now she was on the verge of being adopted by Walter's parents, two really cool adults who still had no clue about her dragon heritage. Still, everything might work out great. If her real father didn't make contact in time, the judge would declare abandonment and let the adoption go through. The tension must have been terrible for Bonnie, like waiting for William Tell to shoot an arrow at the apple on her head.

Billy cocked his head and playfully tapped on the window. "I know what you mean. I'm going to a cave in the mountains tomorrow, and I'll be calling a huge dragon 'Dad!'" He placed his hand on Bonnie's shoulder and pointed, as though he were showing her something in the distance. "Can you see it? I'll be going, 'Dad! Dad!' and then I'll hear a roar, and a huge rush of flame will come flying out of the cave. And then I'll go, 'Dad! There you are!'"

Billy and Bonnie laughed together, and Billy noticed his hand resting on her shoulder, his fingers crossing the strap of her backpack. When their eyes met, her smiling countenance melted into a sincere, searching gaze. Billy pulled his hand away and cleared his throat. "Anyway, since it's your big day, I think you'd better stick around here. I should be back the same day or early the next."

They sat down on the sofa, and Bonnie placed her hands in her lap, nervously rubbing her thumbs together. "But what if we do hear from my real father? I don't know what I'd do without you here to talk to, I mean, if he wants me back and stops the adoption."

Billy glanced out the window toward the mailbox at the street. "There's no mail tomorrow, so the only way he could contact you would be by phone, right?"

"I guess so. Why?"

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Billy kept his eyes on the street while rubbing his chin. "I don't know. Maybe you should come with me then. Maybe it doesn't make much difference whether you're here or not. I mean, even if your father called, Mr. Foley would be the one to talk to him." He turned back to Bonnie and sighed. "But I'm not even sure if Mom'll have time to go or what the weather's supposed to be like tomorrow. Since they finally started rebuilding our house, she's always busy with that, too."

"When will she be back?"

He glanced at a clock on the wall, an old cuckoo with dangling, weighted cones. "It'll be a while. She spent all day training a new pilot to carry skydivers, so she has to catch up on paperwork. She was pretty worried about the training. Dad used to do that kind of stuff."

Bonnie stood and stepped toward the window again. Billy joined her and pushed the window up, letting in a cold, fresh breeze. Walter was playing "fetch" with Hambone in the leaf-covered grass. The old hound wore a thick doggy sweater, so he probably didn't mind a little romp on this blustery January day. The dog's owner, Arlo Hatfield, a hunter who lived in the mountains, never dressed his tracking hounds in anything so spiffy. Hambone yipped and raced through the leaves, grabbing a ragged ball and rushing it back to Walter.

Billy leaned out the window. "Hey, Walter! Give the old dog a break!"

Walter and Hambone stopped. The hound sat on his haunches with his long tongue hanging out. "He's posing for you," Walter shouted back. "He knows you're doing a portrait of him."

Bonnie shivered and rubbed her hands over her arms. "You're doing a portrait?"

Billy slid the window closed. "Yeah. You want to see it?"

"Sure!"

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Billy led Bonnie to a small utility room that Walter's father had converted into a serviceable art studio. He stepped over to the far corner where he kept his easel, dodging several rolled up posters and an empty frame. Gandalf, Billy's cat, lay curled up on the stool under the heating vent, so Billy remained standing. He lifted the cover of the sketchpad and flipped several pages over to find his drawing.

Bonnie let out a chuckle. "That's Hambone, all right. Those big sad eyes and long ears are perfect!"

"Thanks. You think Mr. Hatfield will like it?"

"He has to. It's beautiful! With all those shades of gray it looks almost like a black and white photo. It's so real!"

Billy reached into the deep, side pocket of his cargo pants where he always kept paper and something to draw with. He pulled out a pencil and signed the bottom of the portrait, including his trademark—two letter B's, the first one reversed, sitting back to back with the second. "Well, it's the least I could do. He didn't have to lend me his favorite dog."

"Are you going to give him the drawing when you visit your dad?"

"If I can. Mr. Hatfield doesn't have a phone, so I can't call him to see if he's home."

Walter ambled in, holding a pretend phone and talking in a high-pitched hillbilly twang. "Hallow? Do yew have a number fer Arlo Hatfield? The city? Nowheresville. You know, rait over dere next ta Boondocks? Yeah, I got a drawin' fer him. He caint read, so I drew a pitcher fer him."

Billy roared with laughter. Bonnie held her fingers over her lips and turned crimson. Following her lead, Billy tried to stifle his own laugh, letting out a snort through his puffed out cheeks.

Walter continued, exaggerating the accent even more. "Naw, he don't have no phone. Why in tarnation wood I want

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to go and tawk to that critter on the phone? Yew caint send no pickshures over the phone. What kine of fool do yew take me fer?”

Billy snatched the pretend phone from Walter’s hand and held it to his ear. “I’m sorry, ma’am. He’s a bit loony. We’re sending him back to the electric shock room now.”

Bonnie folded her hands in front of her and feigned a snobbish air, her eyes closed and her nose raised. Her lips trembled between a frown and a smile. “Well, while you two, ahem, gentlemen decide who’s the more loony, I shall be in my room writing my English essay. I suggest that you do the same. Evening is at hand, and it is due on Monday.” She started walking out, maintaining her stern librarian frown, but she burst out laughing and hurried down the hall.

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Bonnie flipped on her desk lamp. With Billy’s mother out late, the Foley household had opted for an a la carte dinner. Bonnie had brought in a sandwich and salad from the kitchen and placed them on her desk blotter along with a tall glass of water. Although it was time to relax, she kept her wings hidden in her backpack, choosing to endure the discomfort rather than risk someone popping in on her while she perched on her chair like a freakish bat.

After kicking off her shoes and socks and changing into a comfortable set of sweat clothes, she sat at the desk and chose a felt-tipped pen from her collection of markers in the middle drawer, pausing a moment to read the calendar hanging on the wall directly in front of her. She leaned forward and carefully drew a dark “X” on today’s date, the second Saturday in January. The box for Sunday was already filled, a happy face surrounded by pink and yellow flower stickers. At the bottom of the box a caption read, “Adoption Day!”

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Bonnie deposited the felt pen in the drawer and pulled out a three-ring binder, a fat notebook stuffed with paper. The first hundred or so pages were filled with flowing script—her journals, a number of writing assignments, and a sizable collection of stories and poetry. Although Billy and Walter shared a computer for their written work, Bonnie preferred the feel of setting pen to paper and letting her words pour out from mind to hand. Her script revealed her moods—the weightiness of the day exposed in dark, heavy strokes, or happiness riding the page on sweeping loops and roller-coaster m's. The blank pages summoned her eloquence more than any word processor ever could. And clacking on keys just wasn't the same. Computers produced too many distracting beeps and pop-up windows to get any thoughtful work done. No, this way was much better, the soothing slide of her lovely silver Papermate on the crisp, white sheet.

Tonight, as she wrote her essay entitled, "Counting the Cost," her uneven script meandered, frequently slipping below the rule line. Dark ink blotches told of her weariness, and her supper remained barely touched. Through bleary eyes she stared out the window at the thickening fog. The clear, breezy evening had given way, and a cooling blanket of rich mountain air had seeped into the valley in thick soupy layers. The short days of winter had brought once again an early sunset, and mist shrouded the last remnant of twilight. Darkness had fallen, and even the porch lights were swallowed by the engulfing gloom.

With her eyelids drooping like heavy curtains, she jerked her head up. Her eyes flashed open at the sound of a call, her name whispered in a long, dying echo. It was soft, yet urgent, as though a loving hand had rung the dinner bell to signal supper-time while she was playing in a field far away, or the wind had picked up the call and carried the syllables to her ears, lengthened and distorted, but still distinct and familiar—Mama's voice.

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Bonnie looked around. No one else was in the room.

She had heard that same voice several times over the last few weeks and had assumed her mind was playing tricks on her. She missed her mother so badly that part of her brain thought she was still around, in the next room making the bed, or in the kitchen cooking dinner, or in the rocking chair ready to read her a story. Although the voice sounded sort of like her mother's, it wasn't exactly the same—somehow it carried the chill of a haunted house.

With no hope of staying awake at her desk, Bonnie got up and slid her window open. The breezeless air outside allowed the mist to seep into her room in wet creeping fingers, caressing her face with damp coolness and sending shivers across her arms. A faint trace of wood smoke tinged the air, a sure sign that the mountains had lent their freshness to the valley.

What a great way to shake off her sleepiness! Although darkness had fallen, it was a little early to go for a fly. She usually waited until late at night when everyone was asleep, but the fog would surely keep her hidden. She climbed out the window and onto the roof, a trick she had perfected over the last few weeks. Since her second-floor bedroom was the only one that faced the rear of the house, it was perfectly placed for her covert escape.

Bonnie took a deep breath of the wet, cool air, and, glancing all around to verify her privacy, she unzipped her backpack, letting it dangle until her nimble wings pushed it off. Once freed, her dragon wings unfurled and spread out behind her body, the span extending more than twice her body's length.

Her roof escapes were times for solitude, unhurried respites for introspection and prayer. She sat just above the eaves, pulling her knees up and admiring her surroundings. She loved how the upper branches of the trees drank from the gray, hovering mist.

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She marveled at how birds flitted so differently in a night fog, with rapid wing beats and without chirp or song.

As darkness wrapped her body, she threaded memorized verses through her mind, allowing them to come out in whispered song. She especially enjoyed singing a passage from a psalm of David, having set it to a tune herself during one of her many rooftop visits.

Whither shall I go from thy spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?

If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: If I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there.

If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea;

Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.

If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me.

Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day:

The darkness and the light are both alike to thee.

With a long, satisfied sigh, Bonnie rose to her feet and climbed to the apex of the roof. Her flying experience told her that fog layers are often shallow. She hoped to be able to cruise above them, finding light in the moon and stars. With a mighty flap and jump, she was off! Propelling herself nearly straight upward, she catapulted into the mist, her hair and face dampening as she flew. She pushed onward, beating her wings against the cool air and watching, but the wet vapor persisted, thinner as she flew upward, but still too murky to be safe.

Not wanting to get too high and fearing she wouldn't be able to find her way home, she leveled off and began flying in

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a small circle, peering downward for any hint of light. She felt she was swimming rather than flying, streams of water soaking her hair and dripping into her eyes.

Bonnie had no doubt that she was higher than the trees; her only concern was how to land. After a few more seconds, she spotted a light down below. It was small, but bright enough to pierce the fog. She let her wings extend fully and glided toward the steady beam. As she approached, she thought she recognized the glow as a neighbor's halogen yard lamp. She would have to act quickly, land on the run, stuff her wings into her sweatshirt, and sprint about one block home. She folded in her wings and went into freefall, planning to unfurl them again just in time to parachute to a soft landing.

When she came within fifty feet of the light, it moved! It wasn't a yard lamp at all; it was the glow of a car's headlights! What should she do? It was too late to abort her landing. She was falling too rapidly.

Bonnie spread out her wings and pulled against the air, flexing her mighty canopy in the dark gray mist. She drew one wing in slightly and swerved, zipping just in front of the moving car's windshield and angling toward the curb. The car brakes squealed. With her legs already running, Bonnie's bare feet hit the ground, but she toppled forward, rolling into the roadside grass. Before she could get up, she heard the car door slam, and footsteps pounded on the pavement. She was stunned, feeling stark naked with her wings exposed and no hope of hiding them in time. Should she run? Should she wait, hoping the fog would mask her presence?

Then, from the dark shadows of a hundred nightmares, a tall specter strolled out of the soupy mist. Bonnie's eyes shot open, and she gulped.

"Daddy!"