

EMBERS
AUTHOR'S CUT
BY
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Selected Passages

From the Prologue . . .

He smelled smoke. The acrid odor drifted through the open windows of Connor's pickup as he drove between the entrance posts of the Marquel estate and started up the gravel road, toward the river.

A beach party, he guessed. Except, it was nine o'clock and still almost ninety degrees. Only a moron too drunk to strike a match would want a bonfire.

Figuring he must have been wrong, he sniffed the muggy night air, catching whiffs of salt water, mown grass, fresh paint from the carriage house . . . and smoke. His nostrils flared as the odor grew stronger.

Straightening in his seat, he turned off Zeppelin six minutes into "The Rain Song" and tuned his senses to the surrounding woods. The caretaker's house, where his mother lived, came up on the left, and he slowed to scan the exterior. Three stories of Victorian era clapboard: in a fire, it would go up like a matchbox. All appeared quiet, but he pulled to a stop, anyway, deciding he'd better look around. Then, in the distance, he heard the insistent, resonant bark of a large dog.

Cash. He should be home on the porch glider, asleep.

With a tremor of apprehension, Connor drove on, listening, searching for signs of a blaze and for Cash's black form.

The estate wasn't his—he was a McLeod, not a Marquel—but

he'd lived on the property for twenty-two years, and for the past sixteen, its well-being had been his responsibility. He knew every inch of the four hundred acres. He knew the river, too, the Tred Avon, that flowed past to converge with the Choptank River and the Chesapeake Bay a mile to the west. Most days, the place felt like a prison. Still, it was his job to take care of it, and a fire in these woods, when there'd been no rain to speak of for weeks, could mean disaster.

But the woods wasn't burning. The stronger the odor grew, the less like wood smoke it smelled, and the more worried Connor became. Then he took the bend in the road that gave him an unobstructed view of the manor, and he saw it: amber flames crackling with eerie radiance inside the windows of the kitchen wing. And Cash, racing back and forth in front of the windows, as if holding the flames at bay.

"Holy Mother of . . ." Connor jerked the steering wheel, hit the accelerator, and the F-350's big tires tore into the lawn, heading for the front entrance, at the same time he grabbed his cell phone. He gave rapid instructions to the 911 dispatcher with his gaze riveted on the catastrophe looming ahead.

Plumes of black smoke billowed into the starlit sky, bringing him close to panic. But as the truck skidded to a halt and he bolted for the front door, a glimmer of relief touched his awareness: No one was home. No one to rescue. A damned good thing, too, since he didn't know—and didn't want to know—if he'd be willing to risk his life to save the sonofabitch who lived here.

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At twelve-thirty Wednesday morning, ten minutes after the phone had awakened her, Anne Marquel sat on the edge of her bed, staring at the shadow pattern on her closet door: sycamore leaves backlit by street lamps. For a minute or two, she remained immobilized, unable to believe the news she'd just

received or what she had agreed to do.

The air-conditioning unit in the window sent a cool breeze across the flowered sheets of her bed, its quiet whirl insufficient cover for the noises of a sleepless city: the slam of a car door; the wail of a police car's siren; the laughing chatter of a group leaving the club bar on the next block. Above it all came the strident crescendos of cicadas carrying on their nighttime mating rituals in the sycamore outside the window.

Finally, with a ragged sigh, Anne raised her hands to her face, trying to rub away the effects of sleep, trying also to sort out her thoughts. Bad news in the middle of the night delivered by a voice from the past. Fire, the manor ablaze, police and firefighters everywhere, with Aaron in Europe for a month and no way to reach him: so Mrs. McLeod had told her in frantic tones.

She had no choice. She'd have to go. The McLeods couldn't be expected to cope with such a disaster on their own.

Shuddering, as if she could shake off the ominous feeling chilling her skin, Anne turned on the bedside lamp and, in the brighter atmosphere, faced facts. Her father's death last year had made her co-owner of the estate; regardless of how she felt about it or how little use it was to her, in her brother's absence, she was responsible for it. The thought of returning to the home she'd fled twelve years ago made her blood run cold. Still, she could think of no reason to refuse. No rational reason, anyway.

In the familiar comfort of her Baltimore apartment, surrounded by reminders of the gratifying life she led, Anne assured herself that she was capable of handling both herself and the situation. The fear curling through her was ancient history, an anachronism, and under present circumstances, it would stay that way.

She might feel strange, even uncomfortable, being at Yesterday's Dream after such a long time, but she wouldn't be in

any danger. Otherwise, if she'd been certain it was safe, or could have thought of a way to make it so, she'd have gone back years ago—to see Connor.

That thought brought her fully awake, and her gaze shot to one of the framed photographs sitting on her bureau: a slightly fuzzy image of a dark-haired youth, dressed in cutoff jeans and perched astride a limb of the old beech tree he'd taught her to climb. With his wavy hair cropped close, his ribs and shoulder bones sticking out, and the railroad-track braces displayed in his wide grin, he appeared every inch the gregarious, warmhearted fifteen-year-old she remembered as he posed indulgently for her camera.

He had been happy to indulge her in those days. Only later, at nineteen or so, had he become tired of her childish demands on his attention.

With the perspective of adulthood, Anne recognized that the six-year difference in their ages had made it inevitable that Connor and she would grow apart. Still, as upsetting as his benign neglect had been at the time, it had served a purpose—a despicable, albeit necessary, purpose; for had he been taking more notice of her, she would have found it even harder, perhaps impossible, to prevent him from uncovering her secrets. Secrets that, alone, regardless of any age difference, would have broken the unusual bond they once shared.

Anne stared at Connor's photograph, thinking that time had rendered the years between them irrelevant. And the secrets were part of the past, over and done and, most of the time, forgotten; the present filled her mind, and she felt no need to hide anything about it.

As she reflected further, a tentative excitement crept through her. She had never tried to salvage anything from the wreckage of her childhood, believing anything worth having irrevocably lost. But what if she were wrong? What if the fire coincidentally (or was it serendipity?) had created the very

conditions that she herself had been unable to contrive? Viewed that way, the prospect of returning to Yesterday's Dream began to seem a bit less like a loathsome obligation and more like an opportunity.

Of course, she couldn't expect to be bosom pals with Connor again; he'd always had more friends than she could count, and despite his still being single (she'd have heard if he'd married, being his employer), his life was sure to be busy and full. Surely, though, they could find time to catch up a little, share a good memory or two. And maybe, then, she'd have something besides a faded photograph to remind her that the first sixteen years of her life hadn't been a total loss.

Maybe, too, Connor's friendship—indeed, his very presence at Yesterday's Dream—would help to keep any imaginary ghosts or demons she might encounter at bay.

From Chapter Four . . .

Connor raised a hand to tug gently at a curl that had escaped her clip. "Welcome home, Butterfly," he said simply. "It's good to see you."

The tears welled in Anne's eyes. "Oh, Con, it's good to see you, too." And without a second's thought, she threw her arms around his shoulders and hugged him with all her might.

He caught her to him, saying, "I'd given up expecting *ever* to see you again."

"Me, too. I've wondered so many times how you were and what you were doing. I've got at least a million questions to ask you. I want to know everything."

His sigh fanned the hair at her temple. "Ah, Annie, there's not much to tell. Nothing important, anyway. I'm older, but otherwise I haven't changed."

It wasn't true. He had changed; that he wasn't eager to share his news down to the smallest detail proved it, and she

wanted to know why. But it could wait. They had time, now.

“I’ve missed you so much,” she said.

“I wish I’d *known* what I was missing. Then again”—he paused for an instant—“you know, meeting again like this, after so long, does have an upside. Feels like I just got handed a present I never thought I’d get but always wanted—even if I was too bullheaded to admit it.”

Pulling back a little, he let his gaze caress her features, his voice dropping to its lowest register as he whispered, “Oh, Butterfly, look at you. You’re all grown up—and so beautiful.”

His fingertips brushed a curl away from cheek. Her lips parted slightly in response. His smile slowly faded.

And, suddenly, something was different. All at once, as if a curtain hanging between them had vanished and they were seeing each other truly for the first time, their gazes were bound in a look neither of them seemed able to break. They crossed the line between innocence and awareness before Anne realized what was happening, and by then, it was too late to turn back.

With startled wonder, she became conscious that her arms were wound around a man’s bare shoulders, that his strong arms were folded across her back, and that her breasts were grazing his hair-dusted chest. She was close enough to see the dark beard just below the surface of his freshly shaven jaw and to smell the lingering scent of soap on his tanned skin. She could hardly believe she’d put herself in such a position, and she was certain, any second now, she’d pull away.

But the seconds ticked by, and she felt no urge to move. After all, her heart whispered, this was Connor, and he was no stranger; she’d known him nearly as long as she could remember. Yes, he’d changed, but in all ways that mattered, she knew intuitively that he was the same. The same man she’d looked up to as a child. The only man—the only human being, since her mother had died—who’d hugged or touched her with affection.

She trusted him completely, always had, and knowing that, she felt her body relax, felt the breath leave her lungs in a quiet sigh. Felt the knot in her stomach unravel. And as it did, something extraordinary began to happen.

A delicate quivering fluttered to life. Softly at first, then with increasing strength, the fragile stirring trickled through her, heating her blood, making her heart beat faster and her breath quicken. She felt warm from the inside out and kind of all-over trembly. A wonderful, luscious feeling that she recognized purely by instinct, for it was unique in her experience. The word *desire* flashed through her mind, and she thought, *So this is what it's like. This is what I'm supposed to feel.* And in that instant, her perception of herself and of reality was forever changed.

The summer-scented air seemed to grow heavy, the world blurring out of focus. Anne was aware only of the smooth texture of Connor's skin beneath her hands, the silkiness of the hair curling over her fingers laced around his neck, the rise and fall of his chest against hers.

An endless time ago, in a different life, she'd dreamed of his holding her this way. She'd imagined his blue eyes looking at her as they were now, so full of life, so aware, as if sharing some great secret meant only for her: *I see you. I know you. I want to know more of you.* She'd wanted him to want her without understanding what that really meant. She'd wanted him to hold her, sweep her into his arms and kiss her.

She wanted him to kiss her now.

That shocking thought made her gaze fall to his lips. In the next instant, his mouth slanted in a slow half smile, and she realized he knew what she'd been thinking. Her wide-eyed gaze flew back to his, her heart tripping into high gear, for she was sure it would ruin everything if he did kiss her.

He didn't; but it seemed he couldn't let the moment pass without acknowledging it.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” he said softly.

From Chapter Five . . .

At one o’clock, Anne awoke feeling sweaty and vaguely uneasy. She got up to remove her damp clothing and put on her nightgown, then trudged into the kitchen for a glass of water. Eyes half-open, she drained the glass, set it on the porcelain sink top, shuffled over to the back door to flip off the light switch—and saw that the door was ajar.

Frozen, she stared at the one-inch crack. She’d shut and locked the door when she came in from the porch. Hadn’t she?

She must have. She *always* locked doors; the habit was so old and ingrained that she did it without conscious thought. Even in her apartment, where she felt perfectly safe, she had to be careful not to lock herself out when she went downstairs to get the mail or take out the trash. Surely, she wouldn’t have gone to bed—to *sleep*, for heaven’s sake—and left the cottage door not only unlocked but open.

Thinking back, she tried hard to recall her actions when she’d come in from the porch. But it was all a blur, almost literally; she’d been too tired to see straight. So tired, she’d fallen asleep in her clothes. So tired, she was eventually forced to concede, that she might very well have forgotten to shut and lock the door.

“Idiot,” she muttered, “Of course, I forgot.” And so what? Nothing horrible had happened, had it? No, and nothing was going to happen.

With that firm reminder that danger was not lurking in every shadow, Anne locked the door and returned to the bedroom, determined to go back to sleep.

She was perched on the edge of the bed, reaching for the lamp switch, when she noticed her spiral steno pad, sitting on the nightstand next to the lamp. It was turned to the last page

of notes she'd scribbled during her phone marathon on Wednesday, the last note being the day and time of her appointment with Howard Stone. Beside the pad lay her favorite pen, a Cross ballpoint with her name engraved on it that Sister Bernadette had given her as a college graduation present.

For half a minute, Anne let herself get caught up in a debate over where she'd left the pen: On top of the notepad. No, beside it. No, she was sure it had been on top. No, it couldn't have been because—

Stop it. You're driving yourself crazy—and for no good reason.

How could she possibly remember something as inconsequential as the exact placement of a pen? Besides, even if she had left it on top of the notepad, the pad was sitting right on the edge of the nightstand, where she could have bumped it, rolling over in her sleep, and that might have caused the pen to roll off the pad. It could as easily have landed on the floor, and then what would she think? That somebody (silently) had broken in through the door that she (in her zombielike state) certainly must have locked, in order to . . . to what? Steal her pen—but, on second thought, drop it and run? Doubtless, said thief had noticed her waking up and been scared witless by such an intimidating, hundred-and-fifteen-pound woman.

Right.

With a sound of mingled frustration and despair, Anne made herself turn out the light and lie down. She even managed to shut her eyes.

Falling asleep again, well . . . she counted it a victory when, instead of ruminating about the open door and the pen, she managed to focus on reciting poetry in her head. If *Beowulf* didn't put her to sleep, she guessed nothing would.

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At one-thirty, Connor lay awake, staring at the half-moon hanging above the tree outside his bedroom window. The night was muggy and still and, as always on his isolated point of land, quiet. Quiet enough to hear the soft putter of a boat motor through the open windows and balcony doorway.

More restless than curious, he got up and padded onto the balcony in time to see a dimly lit boat pass the point on its way downriver. Morons, out joyriding in the middle of the night. Except the boat hadn't been moving recklessly in any way; he was just looking for excuses for his edgy mood.

Not that he needed an excuse. He knew damned well why he couldn't sleep.

Gripping the wrought-iron railing, he leaned on his hands and let out a tired sigh. The resolution he'd made to put Anne out of his mind had lasted maybe five minutes. Even a hundred feet up in the dead sycamore with a chain saw in his hand, when he should have been concentrating on staying alive, he hadn't been able to stop thinking about her.

He couldn't forget her eyes: the way she'd looked at him that morning in the tree house, as if he were the first man she'd ever seen and she found him completely fascinating. The look haunted him—strangely innocent, unconsciously seductive, amazingly beautiful. And as he stood there in the still, summer night with the image of Anne's sparkling green gaze swimming in his mind, the fantasies he'd tried all day to ward off became impossible to resist.

Fantasies of talking with her, laughing with her, of holding her again and feeling her soft, womanly curves against him. She made him want to forget his responsibilities and, for once, think only of himself, of the needs and desires he struggled constantly to deny.

In that solitary moment, he denied himself nothing. As he stared out over the dark expanse of the Tred Avon, his heartbeat quickened, blood pooled in his groin, and the partial erection

that had bothered him most of the day became full-blown. Instinct taking over, his hand moved to ease the ache as he thought of going to her, of walking down the beach to Sandcastle, of finding her asleep and waking her. In his mind, he saw her eyes open, startled at first, then melting with acceptance, as though she'd been waiting, expecting him to come to her. She smiled and reached out to welcome him, her body naked, flawless, on the cool, white sheets. He could almost feel his skin come together with hers as he lay beside her and took her in his arms.

His blood pounded harder, faster, as he imagined her rosy-tipped, rounded breasts flatten against his chest, her satin-smooth legs entwine with his, her belly rub against his erection. Their open mouths engaged in a long, deep, explicitly carnal kiss, his tongue consuming her mouth, so hot and sweet. He nuzzled and licked her breasts, creamy white, silky smooth, and felt the nipples pucker and harden as he sucked them, one after the other, into his mouth. He felt her thigh glide over his, heard her moan as his fingers delved between her wet, swollen lips and pushed inside her. Felt her hand slide downward to curl around him. Felt a shudder race through him as he moved on top of her, spread her legs, and began probing her hot, wet, tight . . . so tight, so . . . oh, Christ, *so tight* . . .

Drenched in sweat, his breathing ragged, Connor sagged against the railing and opened his eyes.

This was trouble.

From Chapter Nine . . .

Something terrible was going to happen. She felt it. She felt *him*. He was close—and getting closer.

Quickly, Anne scribbled a note to Ellen McLeod, then left the caretaker's house and started walking up the estate's main drive, toward Sentinel. Connor couldn't leave the property

without passing her; she had no reason to hurry. Yet she did—or tried to, her thong sandals making it difficult on the gravel road. It was even more difficult not to trip when her gaze kept darting around the sun-dappled woods on either side of her. She felt exposed, vulnerable, easy prey. Every ten steps or so, she glanced over her shoulder, and every time she did, her pace increased. Several times, she thought she saw movement or heard a twig snap; and each time, she picked up even more speed.

By the time she reached the short track leading to Sentinel, she was running, stumbling as her sandals caught on ruts and bumps in the road.

When she saw no white pickup parked at the cottage, her heart sank. Then she remembered that Connor didn't have his truck, that someone from the garage was bringing it to him. The possibility that he was still home carried her to Sentinel's back door.

She knocked twice, then banged, peering around the curtains that partially covered the cottage-style door's glass panes. Finally she had to accept that she'd missed him. She truly was alone now. Not another soul anywhere to talk to. Or run to.

Anne sagged against the door and shut her eyes. Her fears were foolish, entirely unfounded. She knew that. But, standing at the end of that lonely point of land, with the sun falling toward the western horizon, she felt eyes on her back.

The demon was here, somewhere. Waiting for dark. Waiting to catch her. And there would be no one to stop him. There never was.