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The Everlasting

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Extract

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Chapter One

the dread of a lost letter

The memories were most treasured when they came unannounced. Like rays of sunlight through stormy clouds, or sweet cherries in a bowl of sour grapes, they never failed to make Scott smile. He could be cooking dinner, dusting bookshelves, walking in the woods, staring from the window, or drifting into sleep, and Papa would appear.

'Nettles don't sting on Saturdays,' his grandfather says, and Scott, seven years old at the time, reaches out and is stung from palm to elbow. The old man laughs uproariously, leaning back to shout at the sky. Through the prickle of tears Scott laughs with him. Even at that tender age, before he knows anything of ghosts and damnation and the pains of death, he realises that the old man is special.

'Men were made to be inebriated,' Papa whispers, 'because that can be the best time to see the truth.'

Scott plays in the pub garden while his grandfather sits and drinks. Sometimes other men

gather around and are lost within a haze of pipe smoke and profanity, but every now and then he sees his grandfather's cautious eyes peering from the miasma, bright and watchful and alert, checking that Scott is safe. He offers a secret grin, as if to say, *I may be sitting here with these wizened old men, but I'm your age at heart, Scotty.*

The last time Scott saw his grandfather, the old man opened his eyes, just a crack, and whispered, 'I'm not afraid, because I know the truth. And one day I'm going to tell you.' He never heard his grandfather speak again. The old man had already been dead for three days, and these last words were whispered from his open coffin.

Scott had been sixteen years and sixteen days old when he stared down at the body of the man he loved so much. The corpse's wrinkled face – not so wrinkled in death, as his mother pointed out, not so pained – was blurred by Scott's tears, the grey eyelids made to flicker, and that brief semblance of life made the tears feel good. He reached out and touched his grandfather's cheek, and even the cool finality of that contact could not change the way he felt. It was a shock, seeing the old man like this, a man so vital and strong, motionless and quiet at last.

There were muted sounds of conversation, some shuddery tears, a sad little laugh from his mother as her sister sighed something into the air, but the dead man was the centre of the room. Scott knew that, because Papa had always possessed such power.

Sixteen-year-old Scott had never really heard those final words, of course. Not through his ears, at least. Perhaps his tears made the man's cool white lips twitch, and the clicking in his ears as he sobbed combined with the breath shuddering in his chest to form those sounds: 'I'm not afraid, because I know the truth. And one day I'm going to tell you.'

Scott had always called his grandfather Papa, and Papa had loved him dearly.

The first time he ever hurt Scott was three decades after his death.

The letter took so long to hit the floor that Scott thought he'd been mistaken. Perhaps he had only dreamt the familiar sound of the mail slot snapping shut. He lay still, breathing softly, listening for the postman's footfalls retreating along the street. But he heard only peaceful breathing from Helen beside him, and the cheerful sound of birdsong.

He yawned, rubbed his eyes, and scratched his head, and then the letter dropped to the floor downstairs, delivered in slow motion. He felt as though he'd slept and dreamt between the snap of the mail slot and the landing of the letter. Papa's voice haunted that dream, though the words were old and decayed, like thoughts long gone. His wife grumbled something in her sleep. She sounded agitated. Scott sat up and rested wearily on the edge of the bed.

The sun was blazing behind the curtains, and the bedroom was already warm. It was going to be a lovely day.

He walked quietly out onto the landing. Scott enjoyed receiving mail. For every dozen circulars, invitations to own a credit card, and appeals for charity, there was one postcard or a letter from an old friend. He didn't even mind the bills, because they were addressed to him. *We're all just fleeting dreams,* his grandfather had once said in one of his more subdued moments. Scott wanted his dreams to be alive, to persist. Seeing his name in print fixed him to the world.

This morning, looking down from the top of the staircase to the front door, he could see that there was only one envelope lying there.

He went slowly downstairs, yawning and rubbing his eyes again, taking care as his aching, ageing knees became accustomed to moving him about for one more day. The birds chattered in the front garden, singing in the morning. The house was silent and peaceful, a home, somewhere lived in and loved in. There was no reason why today should be any different – better or worse, safer or more dangerous – from any other.

As he stepped from the final stair, Scott saw the handwriting on the front of the envelope. *Scotty*, it said. The only person who had ever called him Scotty had been Papa.

At that moment the world changed around him.

It grew stale. And he knew that this dream of his life was close to edging into nightmare.

The ghost found him days after his grandfather's funeral.

Scott loved to walk in the country – a love that had been instilled in him by Papa – and following the funeral it was the safest way he knew to mourn. His parents' house was still a sad place, as if echoes of his grandfather lying in the coffin still resided there, sucked into the walls along with decades of cigarette smoke. His mother went to sleep crying and woke up the same way. His father was ineffectual in comforting her, and had taken to spending long hours in their large garden, finding a multitude of tasks that suddenly needed attending. Both of his parents seemed more concerned with the circumstances of Papa's death than the fact that he was gone. Scott had tried to encourage light back into the house, but he had come to realise that such dark times were sometimes necessary. At sixteen he understood that he still had much to learn about life. This week, he believed he was growing up some more.

His favourite walk was straight out across the field behind their house and into the woods, and that was where he went three days after the funeral. It took him past an ancient oak tree that had been blasted by lightning in the distant past. Most of it was dead, blackened, hollowed out and rotten. Yet

parts of it still gamely sprouted leaves each spring, and it dropped a handful of acorns come autumn. The tree provided a den for some of the younger kids in the village, and there was always evidence of their habitation. Scott had never made use of the space and fun the tree had to offer, because Papa had always taken him deeper into the woods to show him more wondrous and secret things. He passed it by with a casual glance. Its hollow trunk was empty but for scattered sweet wrappers and a crushed can.

A few steps beyond, with the edge of the woods still in sight, he heard the first footsteps behind him.

He spun around, expecting to see one of his friends creeping up on him. He didn't relish company right now; their sympathies would be awkward. But there was no one there. Only the tree, standing sentinel even so long dead.

The footfalls had stopped as soon as he turned his head, and he guessed it must have been the breeze in his ears, the sun on his neck, the throbbing wound he still nursed inside from Papa's violent death.

When he turned to start again towards the woods, the thing was standing before him. It raised a hand, and he fell back before he had a chance to see it properly: a vision of black, something old and scarred by time. It swept forward, and cool, dry fingers caressed Scott's throat.

'Where is the Chord of Souls?' the thing sighed.

Scott tried to cry out, but something like smoke

pressed across his open lips, and he tasted soil, tobacco, and spice.

'Where is the Chord of Souls?' the thing asked again, leaning over him now, blocking out the sun. It kneed him in the stomach and Scott gagged, winded, desperate to draw in a breath past the soft hand blocking his mouth and nose. He thumped his feet on the ground and tried to twist his head. The tightness in his chest brought panic closer, and for those few seconds the thing became quiet and still, staring down with fluid eyes, as though this act of suffocation were the answer it sought.

The shape's fingers splayed, and Scott drew in a stuttering, deep breath. 'What?' he asked. He tried to raise his arms, but they lay heavy and useless.

'Where is it? The old bastard couldn't have taken it with him. He *couldn't* have!'

Scott shook his head, and now he could see the thing above him at last. It was a man, that was all, a small, wizened old man with hair yellowed by decades of smoking, skin grizzled and creased by years in the sun or a lifetime of sorrow. His eyes held madness and sadness both: madness at what he had lost, and sadness that it would likely never be found again. Even then, Scott saw desperation in this old man's eyes.

And panic. He looked like someone for whom time had already run out.

'Don't know what you want,' Scott said.

'You tell me now, boy. You take me to it! Your

grandfather wouldn't have left it unresolved.' The man leant back, giving Scott room to breathe. He looked away across the field. His eyes seemed strange, as though they reflected nothing. 'Tell me he didn't leave things undone…'

Scott wanted to shout for help. Perhaps if he screamed at the top of his lungs his mother or father would hear him, or someone in the neighbouring houses. Or maybe the shout would simply frighten this old weirdo back into whatever hole he'd crawled from. But when Scott drew in a deep breath and readied himself – muscles tensed, hands clawing at the dried corn husks scattered across the ground beneath him – the old man changed. His age became power, not a hindrance. His eyes narrowed and filled with something so much more threatening than madness. And Scott felt heat exuding from him, like a breeze of hot air in the height of summer, an old, dry heat that had been stored and fed and nurtured for longer than Scott could hope to understand.

In that moment, Scott recognised him at last. 'No!' he said. It could not be.

'Tell me,' the man said. His breath made the air unreal. His presence here belied the safe truth of the field, the woods, the oak tree.

'You're dead,' Scott said.

The old man closed his eyes and slumped forward, drawing into himself as if searching for some deeper meaning. A bird chirped somewhere

in the distance. The man glanced that way and the bird fell silent.

'You have one more chance,' he said. 'The Chord of Souls.'

What can I do? He was trapped here, restrained by this dead man. Papa's friend. The man Papa had murdered before taking his own life, and now here he was, returned to ask Scott about something Scott knew nothing about.

'He would have *shown* you,' the old man said, looking away across the fields, his expression turning desperate. 'He would have *told* you.'

And then Scott remembered those final words his grandfather had somehow relayed to him, through Scott's tears and sighs of grief. *I'm not afraid, because I know the truth. And one day I'm going to tell you.*

'Ahhh,' the dead old man said, seeing realisation dawning in Scott's eyes.

'He told me he wasn't afraid,' Scott whispered, 'but he didn't tell me why.'

For a second or two Scott believed he was going to die. This illusion would release the violence simmering beneath its leathery skin, and its fists would rain down, elbows, knees, and gnashing teeth tearing and pummelling until Scott was dead. But as certain as he was of this fate, he could do nothing to prevent it. His arms were still heavy by his sides. And even though the man had stood and was no longer touching him, Scott still felt stuck to the ground. If he attempted to stand he would fall from the world.

The dead man's shoulders sagged and his face relaxed as though relieved of some great effort. 'Well, he's afraid now,' he said. 'I don't see what else I can do but wait.'

Scott's vision throbbed with each terrified heartbeat. Between one blink and the next, the man vanished.

There was no way this letter could be good.