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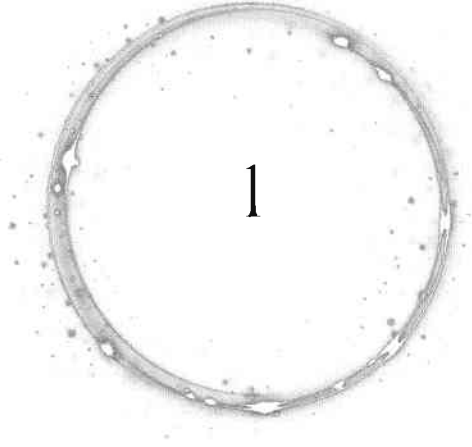
The  
Once  
and  
Future  
Queen

PAULA LAFFERTY



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To the best of her knowledge, Vera was twenty-two years old. And by the time she finished tying the laces of her running trainers on this early October morning, she had ten hours and fourteen minutes remaining of the life she knew in a little town called Glastonbury in the southwest of England.

Glastonbury's highest buildings topped out at three stories. And still, when the air was just right, wind whipped down the High Street as if in a tunnel. You could almost smell that something there was not simply ancient but sacred. Many tourists have driven near to Glastonbury with the aim of passing by, but were drawn in. All it took was coming close enough to town to see the Tor, the mystical hill that rises above the landscape with its singular stone tower (just ruins, really) perched at the peak.

A passerby aims to pass by, sees the Tor, is drawn in, goes home, and says to the people they love the most, "You have to come and see it, too." And so, pilgrimages to this place began some 10,000 years ago. To even the slightly attuned spirit, Glastonbury positively hums with sacred energy, a mystery never to be solved and always held like a breath of anticipation.

The only poor soul who would say in skeptical disbelief, "A hill? You want me to come see . . . a hill?" simply hasn't seen it yet or, bless them,

they have a disposition entirely the opposite of curious. Boring, even, one might say.

The Tor draws a soul in, the wind whips up some untapped and wildly alive place, and the whispers of pilgrims who've walked these grounds echo up through the feet with every step. You drink the waters of the well, and the work is done. Transformation—and something else, too, is ripe for the picking.

Pick a legend: pagan gods and goddesses, King Arthur, even Jesus himself. Their stories all have some home here, along with ordinary, everyday people. Some who live in Glastonbury sell supplies for the household witch, artifacts and gems said to contain deep magic. Others craft handmade goods or brew spectacular coffees. Some sell carpet or repair automobiles. Whether they deal in what might be called mundane goods or not, it can't be helped. Wherever you live, whatever air you breathe, whatever oddball people might pass through, it all becomes ordinary.

And the extraordinary existence of living in Glastonbury amongst the Tor and the legends and the mystical air is all but forgotten in the business of living a life.

Alas, the price we pay for proximity to wonder: it gets cheap.

It was for precisely this reason that as often as she could manage it, Vera would set her alarm before sunrise and jog up the steep path leading to the top of the Tor. She craved the wonder and was willing to pay for it with her footfalls and sweat. She wasn't particularly fast, and sometimes the steeper stretches were more of a trudge, but she loved the predictable race against the sun's morning appearance. Vera woke with just enough time to dress and scurry downstairs from the innkeeper's quarters at the George and Pilgrims Hotel before bolting out the front door.

She carried only a torch for guidance—no phone, no music, no distractions. Just the noise of her feet on the pavement until she turned off the road and onto the narrow gravel path that curved back and forth along the spine of the Tor.

Vera used to grin in the darkness when the wind pushed at her back, feeling like some greater force carried her onward. She didn't believe

that anymore. It was only wind, whining in her ears as it whipped by, no longer an omen of good to come. Indeed, its mere sound was a har-binger of remembering what she had lost.

She inhaled a ragged breath, powerless to stifle the rising memory. That sound. It was like the day two years ago when she'd rushed into the university library. Only then, the whistling wind came with flashing lightning in its wake.

It had stormed mightily. She'd scarcely heard thunder like it before or since. There hadn't been many other people there, so Vera weaved through the halls and bookshelves, quietly singing to herself while she waited for the rain to slow.

She hadn't even seen the young man sitting on the floor with his back against the wall (probably because she was so used to no one ever noticing her) until he called out as she passed by, "Do you take song requests?"

She'd stumbled to a stop and spun around to face him. It was the first time Vera met him, though she would come to know him so intimately: Vincent. He smiled without glancing up from the sketch pad on his knees. Over the next two years, Vera delighted in calling him Vincent-not-Van Gogh, the artist who had both ears. His hair even had a shine of red to it under the brightest sunlight.

As she urged her feet up the Tor's steepest section, Vera saw that whole day play out in her mind, like the memory was in fast-forward or like time didn't exist at all. How she'd stopped to talk to Vincent, then spent hours poring over his sketches. It was late evening before either realized that the storm had long since ceased. When they left, they went for a pint (which became three) before he walked her home. Vincent kissed her cheek as he bid her goodnight.

They didn't go many days without seeing one another after that. She'd loved Vincent fast, and he loved her well in return.

He had now been dead for four months.

The taste of love lost was cruel, and the permanence of Vincent's death left her shattered.

These days, her run was less pursuit of wonder and more fleeing from feeling; a desperate attempt to escape the pain of his loss and her own guilt at how she could have stopped it.

It was a fifteen-minute jog on her slowest days. St Michael's Tower, the marker of her destination and the lone structure on the Tor, loomed as a vague dark mass in the pre-dawn light. The tower was nothing more than four stone walls with no roof overhead. If she'd kept jogging when she reached the Tor's level top, she would have continued straight through an open arch doorway on one side of the tower and out another opposite, where it opened to a terrace the size of a back garden with a geographical compass right in the middle. It looked like a round stone bench, but on closer inspection, the silver disk at its center had fine arrows etched into it, pointing in all directions. They marked the bearings for what an observer would see if they could look far enough: twenty-five miles north to Bristol (where Vera had gone to university), eleven miles southeast to Camelot (yes, the one of legend), seven miles southwest to Somerton . . . and on.

More days than not, there were others in town who craved to shake the shackles of mundanity on the Tor at daybreak. Today, there was no one else.

Vera walked past the tower, thoughtlessly trailing her fingers along the stones as she always did out of a visceral pull to connect with the ancient things around her. She looked westward toward the ruins of the Glastonbury Abbey, remembering the time during a school trip there when her primary school teacher scolded her for touching every ruin within reach. It wasn't light enough to make out the town a mile or so down the lane. She couldn't see the abbey ruins from here anyway. The impressive stone columns of a once grand cathedral were tucked away right off the High Street, nestled so tightly that it was another spot of astonishment for visitors. One moment a traveler had their eyes glued to their phone for directions, and the next they rounded a corner, looked up, and had their breath taken away by the scope of the ruins.

When Vera's fingers found the corner of the tower, they lingered there for a breath longer. With minutes to spare before the sun's daily miracle, she took off her shoes and socks and tucked them next to the tower's base while she ventured out onto the grass and wiggled her bare toes on the cool, dew damp ground.

It was barely a stone's throw to her favorite seat in the house. Almost

exactly between St. Michael's Tower on one end of the Tor and the large stone compass on the other, there was a perfectly smooth patch of grass for sitting and watching the day begin. According to the compass, she faced legendary Camelot, included in the list for tourists, yes; but locals believed the legends more fervently than anybody else.

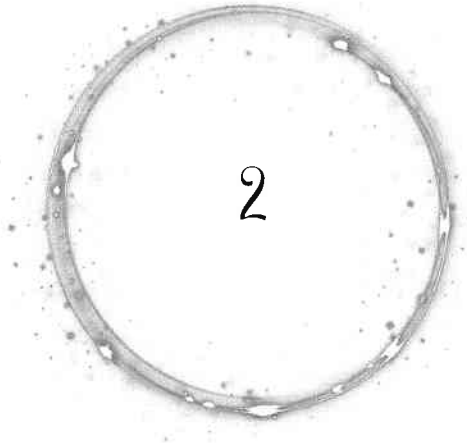
It was clear by now with only one, maybe two minutes left before daybreak, where the sun would first appear. Vera trained her eyes on the glowing spot, hardly daring to blink. It was a perfect sunrise day. No clouds to block the view, yet thick mists had gathered low, surrounding the Tor. They would burn away within hours, but when the mist packed in densely, it was like a blanket laid over the valley that held the moment suspended, containing it for an extra second. She held her breath, knowing the first eyelash of sun was on the edge of fluttering into view.

And there it was.

There were taller mountains and more stunning landscapes, but Vera would be hard pressed to believe there was another sunrise quite like this one anywhere in the world.

She stayed for the whole thing until the sun had cleared the horizon, and it worked to buoy her soul. At least for a moment. Then she gathered her shoes, touched the tower one last time, and jogged back the way she came.

If she'd turned to look as she passed the old White Spring temple at the foot of the hill, she might have seen the cloaked man standing in its doorway. He'd arrived inside the temple the moment the sun crested the horizon, and he would be gone, Vera with him, by the time night fell.



Vera never intended to work at the hotel. Her parents had been the George and Pilgrims' proprietors all her life, and she'd practically lived there even before she actually moved into the innkeeper's quarters after graduating from university last spring.

While her mother Allison tended to guests, six-year-old Vera had colored by the fireplace in the pub. When her father Martin swept through the guest rooms, perpetually racing to change linens in a record time, nine-year-old Vera searched for hideouts and hidden passageways. In lodgings built in the sixteenth century, a wandering child was bound to find all sorts of secret spots tucked away.

Vera returned to the hotel with just enough time to shower and get dressed for her many daily roles. She pulled her hair into a low ponytail and decided that was good enough. Tidy and nice. Her features were attractive and even, nothing markedly off-center or unconventional: average-sized nose, standard lips, normal-length eyelashes, unevenly wavy brown hair. Pretty, but not extraordinary.

She was embarrassed to admit it, but there'd been a time when being unnoticeable had bothered her. Now, after losing Vincent, moving through life without drawing attention was a relief. The sphere of her world had gotten very small, and it was the simplest way to press on in the space of loss. And her little innkeeper's quarters, so outside

what she'd planned for herself, brought comfort. If she could keep her mind from drifting to him, she'd be fine.

There'd only been six rooms occupied at the George the night prior. Vera got word that one family of lodgers was headed to Stonehenge today, so she carefully built a replica of the standing stones out of butter pats on their table. They were delighted to be greeted by a piping hot breakfast and a preview of their day that they could spread on their toast.

Guests filtered in while Vera served tea and coffee and took their orders. They spoke politely to her but looked right past her. When they left and she wished them a good day, all of them, including the family who'd enjoyed Vera's butter art, said goodbye as if they'd never spoken to her before.

As if she were a stranger.

It would have been jarring if she hadn't spent her whole life this way, with everyone around her treating her as a forgettable background player. There had been a few notable exceptions over the years. Vera's parents, of course. And once, when she was twelve, Vera became inexplicably interesting to her classmates. Girls wanted to be her friends; boys wanted to be her boyfriend. She was invited to special celebrations, even an overnight birthday trip to London. Then, they all simultaneously seemed to decide they didn't want to be around her anymore. She hadn't had some awful, embarrassing moment. No one was cruel. They just . . . lost interest.

Another time, during her third year at university, when she'd been at her absolute lowest and loneliest, something similar happened. Like a lightning strike, Vera had a group of friends overnight. She dated. She had fun. And like before, there was an abrupt and silent agreement that they would all move on without her. It didn't matter as much then because she found Vincent during that last spell. He didn't forget her.

And now he was gone, too.

It wasn't normal, but Vera didn't know anything different. To her, a life of insignificance was absolutely ordinary.

She brought fresh tea out for the late risers. They scrolled their phones or read the morning paper, except for one man who was

markedly out of place in his sharp, grey tweed waistcoat over a crisply pressed shirt. A silver chain looped from his lapel to his breast pocket. He had no phone or reading material.

He looked wise, yet not old. And stately, though not stuffy. His attire matched his perfectly manicured beard, dark and strikingly speckled with silver, and long hair kept in a tight knot at the nape of his neck. People roamed Glastonbury in all manner of clothing. That wasn't why the hairs raised on Vera's arms every time she turned in his direction. It was . . . well, it was hard to say. He sat with his hands folded in front of him, only moving to pull out a pocket watch attached to the end of the silver chain. He inspected it, put it back in his pocket, and resumed doing nothing.

It hit Vera as she delivered his steaming tea kettle and milk: he'd been watching her. No one watched her.

"Thank you, Vera," he said.

She'd been turning back to the kitchen but froze mid-turn and looked back at him.

She faltered before finding her voice. "You're quite welcome. I'm—I'm surprised you remembered my name," she said, though she didn't recall introducing herself.

He had bright green eyes that met Vera's with a startling intensity. The man cocked his head to the side, and his eyebrows knitted together.

"Of course I remember you." He smiled, and something about him looked sad.

Neither spoke for an uncomfortable stretch as Vera hoped she'd recognize him. No memory came to her.

"Well," she said, breaking the leaden silence. "Let me know if you need anything."

He nodded, mouth quirked up quizzically at the corners as he turned his attention to his tea.

By the time Vera returned with his check, the man was gone. His payment left on the table was the only evidence that he'd been there at all.

Vera moved on to housekeeping duties, the interaction forgotten as a momentary oddity. The daily linens race, as Martin called it, was his

favorite duty. Vera was only temporarily in charge of it until Martin was well enough for it again. But she'd inherited his love for the simplicity of a morning spent setting the rooms. She listened to her favorite music in her earbuds, and when the best bits of the song came up, she paused mid linen-tucking to dance with abandon. In such an old hotel, having music served another purpose, too.

The 500-year-old building stretched and groaned. Its porous wooden beams soaked in the memories of pilgrims past—and every so often, they leaked back out. Anybody who had ever worked at the George and Pilgrims and many guests would attest with their own experiences that the place was haunted, and thoroughly so. Being alone in the George amongst the ghosts and noises didn't feel so unnerving with music in her ears. But there was almost always something a touch abnormal.

Today, Vera was changing sheets in Room One, particularly known for being haunted, when the television turned on of its own accord. Then, the massive old wardrobe doors slammed open while Vera sanitized the washroom. Both things were easily explained away to aged wiring or wiggly latches on old furniture.

But she had seen her fair share of less explicable happenings, and once, she'd seen a ghost. It was another Tor sunrise nearly a year ago on the Winter Solstice. As she sat in her usual spot with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders to stave off the cold, movement drew her eyes away from the horizon to a spot not fifteen feet before her. A little cloud had been mysteriously left behind by the gathering mist in the field below, a puffy sheep of fog that wandered too far from the flock.

It took shape as Vera watched—a person. A man who paced half a dozen steps before turning and doing the same in the other direction.

“Holy shit,” she had whispered.

He had stopped when she spoke, as if he heard her. And he turned and looked directly at Vera. He had facial features, but they were weathered like a garden statue left outside through years of wind and rain, worn down and indiscernible. She was transfixed on the spot as the sun broke the plane of the horizon. When that first beam rose, and its light hit the specter, he dissolved into mist, and the mist was gone in a whisper.

Compared to that, odd occurrences like the ones this morning were more than manageable. Vera finished the rooms without further incident and moved on to her midday lunch shift in the pub.

By the time she even had a moment to think, the last guests had gone and she'd cleared all the tables. It was four p.m. She weaved through the empty tables, working from the back toward the front window, pushing in chairs and wiping down tabletops. She noticed a few spots of heavy crumbs on the floor and turned to get the broom from behind the bar but was startled to realize she wasn't alone. Where moments before had sat an empty chair, now it was occupied by someone wearing a hooded robe, their back to her.

After the initial jolt, she continued toward the bar.

"So sorry," she said, "dinner service doesn't begin until five. Tea's available in about a three-minute walk in any direction if you—" She stopped as the man tilted his head up, revealing his face.

Though he was in a cloak and not smartly dressed anymore, it was unmistakably the man from this morning. The corner of her mouth tugged upward. She hadn't pegged him as the druid, new-age type. Vera was pleasantly surprised to have gotten him wrong.

"Oh. Hello again," she said.

He smiled, and it was just like that morning. He looked sad. "May I have a word, Vera?"

She stiffened. He'd called her by name this morning, too.

"Erm, all right," she said. "Is . . . is there something I can help you with?"

"A great many, many things, I should think." He gestured at the chair across from him. "Please, sit."

Very hesitantly, almost in slow motion, she sat across from him and positioned her chair farther from the table, creating extra space between them.

"Vera," he said, "you aren't who you think you are."

Her eyebrows shot up as the hairs on the back of her arms sounded the beginnings of an alarm.

"Sir," she said, forcing the politeness, "you've never met me. You don't know me. As I said, the pub's closed."