

M.L. Bushman



The  
*Implausible*  
Hero

Do what your heart wills.



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**Jigsaw Press**

Sun River, Montana

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You may be wondering why I've dedicated this book to Stephen King. Through his memoir of the craft, *On Writing*, Stephen King opened my eyes to my own creative process and managed to label to that strange phenomenon from which we both suffer—*the buzz*—a malady the burden of which anyone not cursed as a writer will never fully comprehend. As a writer, I owe Stephen King far more than he will ever know. But, until I can think of a more appropriate way to repay him for all that he's done for me, as well as writers everywhere, poor Stephen is stuck with my dedication, such as it is.

—M.L. Bushman



*This book is humbly dedicated to  
Stephen King,  
who unknowingly gave me the permission  
to do what my heart wills  
and write.*



# Chapter I

## I

Justine Hawkins slapped the legal documents with the back of her hand as if brushing a fly from the backside of a horse.

“What about Thomas? You’ll need his signature, even if I were to agree,” she said to Elmore Tunsten, counselor-at-law.

The bespectacled man dressed in a wrinkled white shirt (no tie), gray slacks and scuffed black shoes was huge, a pale-skinned balloon, an impression his bald head did little to allay. Upon meeting him for this first time, Justine had wondered if the gold letters trimmed in black on the glass door to his office shouldn’t have read *counselor-at-large*.

“You leave the legalities to me, Mrs. Hawkins. It’s a good offer.” The worn red leather office chair squawked in protest when he leaned back to hook his hands behind his neck. “Can’t imagine you’d ever do any better.”

She looked down to the top page of the contract, the tiny legal wording not her strong suit.

“I don’t get it,” she said more to herself than the counselor scrutinizing her from behind the messy steel desk.

“Justine,” he said finally in a patronizing tone, “why not go home and sleep on it?”

“But, who are they, really?”

“I told you—a small group of investors who want someplace private to relax, maybe do a little hunting or fishing. Your place has it all.”

“So do a lot of other ranches around here.”

“You’re not saying no, are you?”

She frowned. “I’m not saying one way or the other.”

“You have to admit, it’s very tempting,” he said, and the semblance of a smile touched his pasty lips. “Actually, I think it’s more than generous.”

“It’s obscene,” she said, thinking the dollar amount ridiculous—two million for a scant thousand acres along the eastern bank of the Imnaha River, just west of Hell’s Canyon?

The white, two-story farmhouse was over a hundred years old, the ranch itself a legacy handed down generations, the deed to which her husband had added her name within months of their marriage. But only because his late father had insisted in his last will and testament that they protect the future of possible heirs, a provision his grieving son had found impossible to refuse.

“Thomas is dead,” Elmore said to her. “You’re going to have a baby in a couple of months.”

“You don’t know he’s dead any more than I do,” she said briskly, annoyed with the man for stating the obvious. The child inside her kicked then, as if to shore her flagging hope. Was Thomas dead or had he just bailed out on her and the baby? Desertion seemed highly unlikely, yet each day that passed...

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought that up,” Tunsten said, but his apology she distrusted, certain he was insincere. “I just want you to think about your child’s future.”

She slowly rose from the padded chair. “Money runs through the fingers like water, but land is forever.”

“You sound like your husband.”

“Better than emulating a lawyer.”

“Say no now,” he said, leaning forward to rest his elbows on the desk, “and you could have a rough time of it later.”

Apprehension shivered her head to toe, and steeled her resolve. “That wouldn’t be a threat, would it?”

“I just want you to consider the best interests of your child.”

“His grandfather did that, before he died.” Justine dropped the documents on the desk. “Answer’s no. I suggest you take the matter up with Thomas, *when he gets back.*”

“You’re making a huge mistake,” Tunsten said, his beady eyes mere slits behind his lenses.

“Why? You know something about his disappearance that you haven’t told anyone?” When he rolled his eyes, Justine said, “Your clients can wait for my husband if they want the land so bad. But I can tell you this—Thomas won’t sell. He loves that ranch more than he loves anything, even me.”

She waddled from the room, her black leather purse tucked neatly under her right arm, her child restless within her womb. Uneasiness followed her through the icy chill of early Spring to the old, primer-gray Chevy pickup.

Who were these anonymous investors? Why her place out of all who lived on either side of Oregon’s Imnaha River, a stone’s throw from Hell’s Canyon?

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Evan Brooks barely glanced at the pretty red-head, wearing the finest of silk nightwear, slumbering on the satin sheets of his bed. His wife for the time being, a rich heiress whose affections he’d tried his damndest to dissuade, convinced as he was, after centuries of excess and debauch, he would never again know love or feel such for any other being. Resigned to his fate, he answered the summons and stepped over the threshold of the garish arched portal into total darkness.

The Door closed behind him of its own accord. As he prepared to turn, to face his next life, a distant pinprick of light held him fast.

Was this new, or something he’d simply failed to notice, perhaps there all the time if only he’d thought to look?

A low squeak the tiresome announcement of yet another new age and world, for a split second Evan hesitated, unsure of his options.

Could he simply not step through? What would happen? What did he have to lose? What more could he risk? Certainly, what he was experiencing now was no life at all. And if he stayed within its confines, wouldn't the Door then be forced to cease its endless pursuit? Why hadn't he thought of doing this before?

His eyes and mind fixed on the pinpoint of light, Evan reached behind him for the ornate brass knob, pulled the Door closed, and the most wondrous thing happened.

Luminosity traveled at warp speed to curl about his feet like a thick fog, swallowing his knees, thighs, torso, binding his arms to his sides. He squinched at the ethereal glow, unable to open his eyes a moment later, his eyelids stuck together as if glued. Surprisingly unafraid of these developments, he sensed movement, as if his spirit were flowing with the easy essence of a cloud, then peace and harmony of a magnitude never imagined rode in on the back of an omnipotent baritone voice.

"He has earned the right."

The sniveling reply set Evan's teeth on edge, familiar as the whisper in his ear when he was seventeen. How he'd come to hate that voice, then as now.

"He chose, fair and square. He is mine to do with as I please."

"Not yet," the Baritone countered. "He has failed to take the final step as so many weaker before and after him have done, despite your best efforts at persuasion. Do you fear his decision now that he has tired of his servitude?"

Evan wished to speak on his own behalf, but his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. And still he moved like a blind wraith, his speed increasing.

"I fear nothing," the Sniveler said. "Least of all you."

"Then he will be given the opportunity, a *fair* chance to rectify his errors."

"But that, in and of itself, is not fair."

"And who are *you* to tell *me* what is just or unjust?"

"I have free will—."

“A gift of your creation...how well I know.”

Silence accompanied what seemed a struggle of wills, the buffeting of strife, energy tugging on every particle of Evan’s being from every conceivable direction, as if his consciousness might disintegrate within the heat of intense friction.

Abruptly, terror embraced him like a malodorous entity.

“Speak, Evan Brooks,” the Sniveler demanded. “Tell us of your wanton desires, your lust for lucre and fine living.”

The Baritone shattered the shackling fear as though it were glass. “Evan Brooks, what is your desire?”

“Life, one normal life,” he replied hastily, his mouth suddenly free to move, “real people, a family, and love—.”

“You’ve had centuries of life,” the Sniveler cried, so close that Evan gagged at the putrid stench flooding his nose. “Worlds at your feet, your every desire—.”

“That’s not life,” he shouted, desperate to make himself heard. “I’ve learned that now.”

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“Kill me then, you sorry bastard,” Evan muttered. “I’ve been dead for centuries.”

A loud whack, like that of an open palm to a cheek, eased the constriction as suddenly as it had taken hold.

“Why have you not taken your own life?” the Baritone asked.

Evan had no answer. Why hadn’t he tried suicide? How simple an escape from this purgatory, this prison of time and displacement the act would be; or would he wake in the same darkness only to have that blasted Door open once again? Was he yet alive or dead already?

“The easy way out had no appeal?” the Baritone asked.

“He is a coward. He fears death,” the Sniveler said before Evan chanced to reply. “His sins are many, his debauchery unparalleled—.”

“Your sin far outweighs his or any other,” the Baritone said. “He did not run from his decision or choose to die his way out. He took responsibility for his actions, shouldered the weight of his errors.”

Despite the praise inherent in the comment, Evan trembled like a leaf in a gale for the stillness. Gradually, he slowed to a stop, body and spirit fixed yet within the immobilizing glow.

“He would go to any extreme to save himself,” the Sniveler said. “He is utterly weak, without morals of any kind.”

“I’m not like that now,” Evan cried. Hadn’t God himself seen how he’d tried to escape, attempted to rectify past mistakes in behavior and judgment with better choices in later lives? “I was young then,” he said, referring to his first step through the Door. “I admit I knew nothing.” Remorse beyond measure rippled through his being. “I have learned the hard way.”

“He is mine,” the Sniveler reiterated, “to use as I please for any purpose I wish.”

“Not yet,” the Baritone said.

“Shortly then, a matter of time.”

“Care to wager on that?”

A roar that began at a distance steadily drew nearer. Evan’s eyes suddenly opened, his breath leaving his lungs at the frothy rapids churning less than ten feet below his prone body.

“No, not this,” he shouted.

Water spray defined his face, chilled his naked skin, yet even wiggling a little finger was out of the question.

The Sniveler’s derisive laughter blunted the sound of the angry river. “You see? He fears death. He is mine; he renews his choice this very moment.”

Adrenaline swamped Evan’s heart at an inkling of what suffering might lie ahead. Worse than any Door, perhaps a final punishment for daring to complain, to fight the unknown power behind the portal.

“I can’t swim,” Evan hollered to no acknowledgement.

“You fear to wager?” the Baritone asked, the soothing voice a brief respite to Evan’s mounting terror.

"I fear nothing," the Sniveler screeched.

"Stop it, please," Evan begged repeatedly between gasps for air. Icy moisture dripped from his nose, his chin, plastered his hair to his scalp, his body goose-pimpled and shivering against a rising wind.

"Then commit," the Baritone said. "Commit and we shall see who and what he chooses."

"This is war," the Sniveler cried. "I cast my lot."

"It is always war with you. What do you bring to the table?"

"The gleanings of a thousand years."

"Even the Crown?"

"What do you offer in return?"

"Double."

"And this piece of filth, he is your champion now?"

"The fate of all rests with him. However, it is only fitting he begin with a clean slate."

"As if you would derive no advantage in that."

The Baritone voice boomed over the tumult raging below Evan. "Do you commit?"

"Of course, of course," the Sniveler said. "But, he will be tested, correct?"

"Your plans are well underway, are they not? That should be test enough."

"Ah, I see what you're up to now. You cannot stop me."

"*He* will stop you."

Foul laughter preceded the reply. "Your wager is lost, even now."

"Then why do you fear to commit?" the Baritone asked.

"You must have the Crown?"

"All or nothing, unless you fear losing—."

"Go on then, do your worst. I am more than ready for the likes of you."

"Insane," Evan screamed on the drop into the water.

Tumbled end over end by the raging current, he tasted the river's surface but once for a ragged, water-soaked breath, then a sharp pain preceded total darkness.

“Two million dollars,” Justine said to her brother, Hank Avery, on their way back to the house after haying the cattle. “But Tunsten wouldn’t tell me why.”

“Maybe he don’t know why,” Hank said.

In his mid-twenties and six-inches taller than Justine, he was good-looking for a younger brother, his brown hair curly-short under that old white cowboy hat he practically wore to bed. Unattached and planning to stay that way for a while, or so Justine had surmised, despite the ongoing efforts of the perseverant young ladies from the surrounding area doing their level best to change his mind. He’d left a rodeo dream in Montana to help her, showing up in Oregon just a day after her husband had disappeared. But she hadn’t expected any less of him, hating herself for making that call, yet knowing that in her condition, physical and financial, she’d had no other choice.

Two million dollars would sure buy a lot of land elsewhere, not to mention returning that dream to her brother.

“They’d still need Thomas’s signature,” she said, “but Tunsten told me not to worry about it when I brought it up, like that didn’t matter at all. Maybe they think I’ll have him declared dead right away or something, but doesn’t that take years? How’s this consortium going to get around that?”

Was Thomas truly dead? Or behind the whole scheme somehow? If so, why? How would he stand to benefit? And why were such despicable doubts coming so easily to mind?

“Lawyers got more dirty tricks up their sleeves,” Hank said. “I’m with you on this, Justy. Ain’t right, whatever they’re up to, you can count on that. Better we stay way the hell out of it, you want my opinion.”

The flatbed truck jiggled over frozen ruts cut into the grassy bench of land overlooking the eastern bank of the Imnaha. The swift water-course swollen higher than normal for the snowmelt running off the

Cascade mountains, the feisty tributary limned the western boundary of the Hawkins's ranch. Beyond the steep hills hemming the valley to the east lay Hell's Canyon, North America's deepest river gorge, carved out of solid rock over centuries by the Snake River hugging a portion of the state line shared by Oregon and Idaho.

The child in Justine's womb braced his tiny feet against her rib cage, pressuring her bladder uncomfortably.

"Stop," she told Hank.

"Here?" he said, his face scrunched in obvious distaste. "Can't wait until we get home?"

"You want to clean the seat?"

He snickered and pressed the brake. "Not the seat I'm worried about, but the smell that lingers after."

Hank slapped the transmission into park, then left the idling truck to skirt the front bumper and open the passenger door.

"I'll just wait in the cab," he said loftily upon helping Justine to the ground, "where it's warm."

"You do that, and no peeking either."

He sniggered and said, "Like I'd even be interested in my sister's bare ass. Probably whiter than—."

"Shut up."

In minutes, she'd faced the river and finished her business behind a leafless bush, the cold gritting her teeth. Steam misted about the puddle draining down the gentle slope. She smoothed the elastic panel of her maternity jeans over her round belly, and a casual glance along the uneven riverbank brought a gasp of icy air at a spike of trepidation.

"Hank," she shouted, turning to the truck.

He reached across the seat and rolled down the passenger window. "What? You got to shit now? Don't have no toilet paper—."

"There's a...I think it's a body." She jabbed in the direction of the pale, lifeless form at river's edge. "Over there."

He left the cab to dash down the hill, Justine hurrying after. Couldn't be, not Thomas, could it?

She forgot the cold in the upswell of relief. A stranger, naked and bruised, a bluish caste to his white skin, the lower half of his torso and legs submerged beneath the roiling brown water, a huge purple lump over his left eye. Definitely not her wayward husband.

Hank whipped the leather work glove from his right hand and pressed two fingers against the man's neck. His eyes widened. "Got a pulse."

"We have to get him out of here," Justine said, mildly annoyed with herself the very next instant for stating the obvious.

Her brother crouched to slip his arms under the man's shoulders, wrestling the unconscious soul up the bank enough that his feet cleared the frigid water, then shed his coat to cover him. "Wait here, Justy. I'll back the truck close as I dare." He looked at her. "You might have to help me carry him."

Justine nodded soberly, and Hank raced up the hill, leaving her to study the poor man. Not a bad looking sort from what she could tell: light brown hair matted over his ears, firm square jaw despite a general puffiness about his face, nose neither too big or small. He seemed familiar almost, in a distant sort of way, though she couldn't readily place him, or anyone like him, in her recent memory.

Hank parked the flatbed with twenty yards to go, and together they toted the man between them, lightly scraping his bare back on the metal frame in a successful bid to lift him onto the wood deck.

"We should put him in the cab," she told her brother. "He's going to die otherwise."

"But you're pregnant."

"I'm not wet and I have a good coat. This man here needs heat."

"A hospital." Hank paused briefly to scrutinize the unconscious stranger, then said, "Think I can get him over my shoulder now."

"Drop me off at the house."

"I'll use my cell, have an ambulance meet us there."

"Good idea," Justine said, surprised she hadn't thought of that. Not that she cared for cell phones, wouldn't have one herself, never seeing any real need—until now.

While Hank settled the stricken man into the passenger side of the warm cab, Justine climbed the back bumper, crawling on all fours along the wood decking to seat herself below the rear window. She pulled the navy blue hood over her head, thinking of the stranger's family, nearly fretting for them in her empathy.

God, they must be worried, like she'd been every day since her husband failed to return from a search for a stray cow along the river.

She splayed the cold-reddened fingers of her left hand for a look at her wedding set, dismayed to discover a small diamond chip in her engagement ring missing. Four months she'd waited now, unable to dispel the gut-knotting sentiment that Thomas had simply dropped off the face of the earth and out of her life for good.

4

"She said no?" Lazarus Waters regarded the corpulent bald lawyer seated behind the messy desk with contempt. "Just like that."

Tunsten nodded, his wire-rimmed glasses poised at the end of his nose. "Gets her attitude from her husband, I'm sure, but what would I know? I only just met her—."

"Was she looking for more?"

"Never got that far with her."

"Not very persuasive, are you?" The small room gave Lazarus a fleeting sense of claustrophobia. Nothing near as spacious as his office back in Miami. His five-story coral and sandstone building was diminutive by big city standards, but just right for a business centered mainly about real estate acquisitions.

Tunsten registered his offense in a slight wrinkle of the nose, a flare of nostrils, the momentary slit of the eyes. Lazarus knew dollar signs had quelled any further show of insult. Money talked, especially to a small town attorney. Six percent commission on the two million offer was a pittance to Lazarus, considering the return. His life had been all about the approaching moment for centuries by Earth standards.

“Why’s it have to be her land?” Tunsten asked. “There’s plenty of others along that river who’d jump at the chance for a quarter of the price.”

Lazarus smirked. “My brain’s not open to the picking.”

Leather squeaked as the obese attorney leaned back in his office chair to hook his fingers behind his shiny dome. “Nothing gets past you, eh, Mr. Waters?”

“Not since my grandfather disappeared.”

“Disappeared, you say?” The lawyer leaned forward, placing his hands on the paper-strewn desktop. “You mean, like Thomas Hawkins perhaps?”

“What’re you implying, Mr. Tunsten? Surely, you don’t mean to infer that I had anything to do with his disappearance, do you?”

“Heavens no.” Tunsten smiled, a Cheshire-cattish conciliation of sorts. “Just an unfortunate coincidence, don’t you think?”

“Depends on your point of view.” Lazarus detested him far more now than he had on first meeting, several days earlier. “Smart men make their own luck.”

“Why not tell her you’ve got her husband’s signature, if indeed you do?”

Lazarus snorted and rose to his feet. “I don’t think we require your services any longer.”

“Too much trouble and publicity? Is that what’s stopping you? How would you explain her husband’s signature? Especially since he’s been missing now for, what? Four months, is it?” Tunsten paused for a breath, then added, “Maybe you ought to move on, try another little town out in the sticks, Idaho or Canada even. Of course, wherever you go, you’re going to raise questions, lots of them. People don’t care much for outsiders, especially people in small towns like Redemption.”

“Duly noted, counselor.” Lazarus swallowed, and with a disingenuous smile, sent the first mental feelers into the lawyer’s mind. “Have lunch with me and I’ll cut you a check.”

“Lunch?” Tunsten appeared disoriented, squinting and shaking his head, as if Lazarus’s noetic probe could ever be so easily deterred.

“I’ve leased a very nice place, just over the state line in Idaho,” Lazarus said, wishing all minds were as weak. “My assistant is just outside. He’ll be glad to wait and give you a ride at whatever time is best suited to you.”

“A ride,” Tunsten repeated, a blank look in his eyes, nodding slowly like a sleepwalker before abruptly furrowing his sweaty brow. “I...not today...can’t...clients, you know...uh...” He shuffled papers on the desk for an appointment register, a black book the size of a diary. He stared at the cover initially as if trying to comprehend the meaning, then opened it. “A week from today?”

“Fine. I’ll send Richard in to finalize the arrangements.”

Lazarus left the man’s memories untouched, too foul a waste of his time, and upon closing the door to the office, gestured to the burly driver behind the wheel of a white Chevy van parked across a main street barely two city blocks long.

## 5

The face of an angel on his mind, an acrid clinical smell greeted him upon opening his eyes to a semi-darkened ceiling, a soft light and a slow steady beep coming from somewhere behind him. Where the hell was he? How did he get here?

A glance to an IV needle stuck in the crook of his left elbow, and he tensed at the pain that swept him after the inadvertent turn of his head. The beeping sped up slightly.

A rather chunky nurse materialized out of nowhere and blocked the charcoal-dead screen of a black rectangular box his balky mind labeled a television mounted high on an opposite wall, ten feet beyond the foot of his bed. An older woman, the wisps of gray hair escaping her bun caressed her matronly face.

“You awake, honey?” she asked softly.

“Yes,” he tried to say, his throat scratchy and sore, and managed only an unintelligible croak. Afraid to nod, to move any part of him

at all, he repeated the word “water” several times to the nurse leaning closer until she finally grasped the gist of his request.

At a soft humming, the upper half of the bed rose, bringing him to a semi-seated position. She held a glass near his mouth and parted his swollen lips with a plastic straw.

“Slowly now,” she said.

A sip and a swallow induced a gag, a wince at the throbbing of his head, and she quickly withdrew the water. “Maybe we better wait on this until the doctor sees you again.”

Heavy curtains shielded the windows to his right. “Where am I?” he whispered.

“Wallowa County Memorial hospital.” She set the glass on a rolling tray table buttressing the stainless steel bedrail. “You almost died.”

A subtle sense of disappointment plagued him. Did he want to die? He remembered nothing save that face of an angel, a mere cameo in the dark. Where the hell was Wallowa County anyway?

“What’s your name?” the nurse asked.

“Grayson,” he said without a thought, surprising himself in the bargain. Grayson? That didn’t sound right, did it?

She smiled then. “Is that your first or last name?”

He opened his mouth to reply, speechless when the answer eluded his recall. Nothing relevant came to him, not even the semblance of an indication, as if all but the tiniest portion of his memory had been wiped clean, like a blackboard erased.

“You don’t know?” she asked.

Tears stung his eyes, and he grimaced at the fear, the beep fluctuating yet again, its rate ever increasing.

“Don’t worry about that right now,” the nurse said. “Probably temporary amnesia. A head injury can do that.”

He lifted his hand, intent on feeling over his skull, the effort too much in his weakened condition, his arm let to rest on the beige blanket covering his lower torso.

His body stiff and pulsating, his hands and arms were scraped and bruised, as if he’d been through one hellacious battle. But when

and where? And for what? Life itself? What *was* his full name? The beep in the background all but doubled then, and alarm crept into the nurse's kindly expression.

She stepped from his line of sight and a moment later, his peripheral vision caught her uncapping an outlet in the IV's clear plastic tubing prior to the appearance of a syringe.

"You must be in pain," she said, slotting the needle.

"No, wait, please," he whispered. "Wait a minute. Didn't I have any clothes? A wallet?" He choked on a sob. "I need to know who I—."

"You were naked as a jaybird when you were brought in," she said, her thumb smooth and steady on the needle's plunger, his aches and pains dulling in the onset of a warm rush. "A woman and her brother pulled you from a river. If it hadn't been for them, you wouldn't be with us now."

"But, who am—?"

"Don't worry, a little rest and you'll be good as new."

"What?" he asked, his eyes closing, his fight to remain conscious lost already.

"Turner," she said, her voice surfacing briefly in the thickening fugue. Had he asked her another question? What was she talking about now?

"What do you think?" she asked.

He sighed, his eyes firmly closed. "Gray."

How apt a moniker, he decided, for a man lost in a limbo, a gray zone between life and death, no past or future.

"Turner?" he whispered, or thought he did, clinging to the last vestige of wakefulness.

"My last name," she said, her voice fading. "You can use it."

He tried to thank Nurse Turner, her amused huff of breath ferrying him off to an assortment of odd names tumbled end over end with a myriad of questions. The conundrum requiring far too much energy to contemplate, the face of an angel overlooked Grayson Turner's bumpy ride into the no man's land of drug-induced slumber.

Lazarus smiled at the counselor throughout the sumptuous lunch at his leased mountain chalet, the picture windows overlooking the deck providing a postcard view of Idaho's Seven Devils Range. Smiled so long and hard his cheeks had begun to burn. His assistant, Richard, sent to the nearby town of Council on the pretense of an errand left Lazarus and Tunsten *mano y mano*, no one apparently the wiser.

Fat bastard had no secretary, no answering service, not a wife or any kids and few, if any, close friends. The attorney had been chosen for these very reasons should plans go awry, as they had with Justine Hawkin's refusal to sell, or too many questions surface, like the day in Tunsten's office a week ago.

"Before I cut you that check, I have something I'd like to show you," Lazarus said, rising to his feet.

"Really," Tunsten said with the snort of a skeptic.

Lazarus escorted the lawyer to the Door occupying a corner of the spacious living room. "The riches of the Universe."

"Behind door number one, huh?" Tunsten grinned at his own sad joke and said, "What's the nature of these so-called riches?"

"See for yourself," Lazarus replied. On his mental cue, the Door swung open with a low protracted squeak, sending that special shiver up his spine, a delicious chill at a phenomenon above his reckoning to fully comprehend.

Closed, the Door was a rich mahogany in a gilded frame, the gold inlay of vine and leaf intertwined about the arch a tad opulent for this century, an entry one might possibly install in a Victorian mansion undergoing restorations. Open, the world beyond the threshold was nothing short of wondrous, miraculous even, and different each time, dependent on the base desires of the individual soul being courted.

From just inside the portal a beautiful woman smiled at Tunsten, a model-perfect specimen no older than twenty-five and naked from natural blonde head to polished red toe, scores of rubies and diamonds,

sapphires and pearls of inconceivable proportions scattered about her bare feet, a Cartier-cut emerald in her belly button.

“Oh, my God,” the lawyer whispered, eyes as round as the lenses of his glasses. “Is that for real?”

“Ah, I see you like the ladies,” Lazarus murmured. “Your heart’s desire, Tunsten. All you have to do is stake your claim.”

“That’s all?” But the man wasn’t listening any more.

Good lackey that he was, Lazarus sidestepped the invisible pull, listening for that certain whisper, anticipating the victim’s mindless nod of agreement. How well he knew what awaited Tunsten, the being Lazarus was now resembling nothing of the innocent child he’d once been—the day his grandfather disappeared.

Then, from his hiding place under the king-sized bed, nine-year-old Lazarus watched the old man open what appeared to be a plain closet door, only to cringe at the agonizing scream cut off mid-breath. His grandfather’s struggle thwarted, his fingers clawing the carpeted floor for purchase denied, he was dragged by ankles caught up in unseen hands over the threshold. The Door had closed with a whomp on a soft scrabbling noise, and his grandfather was never seen again.

What child could resist, despite the initial shock and terror, deny his curiosity that single peek at the unknown beyond the threshold. The portal itself had beckoned young Lazarus then in the very same manner it tempted a naïve Tunsten now. The Door, then as now, opened to the youngster, calling in naked perfection, as if it sensed the subconscious moral weaknesses of any who stood before it.

And the child forgot his grandfather’s lost battle, even his own fear, for the wonder of the lure, the whisper in his ear compelling him to claim that shiny red bicycle he’d been told that very morning he would have to earn to appreciate. Certainly, he must step over the threshold to snatch the prize, just a single, small step after his nod of agreement, the implications of which he understood not at the time.

Lazarus swallowed his breathlessness at the rise of an unearthly lust within him, hot blood engorging his loins, when the lawyer hurried to cross the threshold, making no effort to hide his swelling crotch.

*The Implausible Hero*

The Door closed behind Tunsten to a sound similar to that of a kitten clawing smooth wood and the silence left Lazarus a thumping heart at the orgiastic pleasure induced by yet another victim dispatched.

The whisper of reward buckled his knees, dropped him to the carpet where the ghostly hands and milky lips of his phantom Lover caressed him to cold senselessness, the physical orgasm naught but a messy little side effect of his soul's climax. For an instant, the twain were one, the end result of a youngster's step through the Door and seconds later, or so it appeared to family members who would search in vain for his grandfather, a minion centuries-old bided his moment cloaked in the guise of a growing child.

"Time is short," his Lover whispered. "Time is very short now."

A prickle of apprehension ignored, Lazarus caught his breath and got to his feet for a shower and a fresh change of clothes.





## About the Author

M.L. Bushman holds a BS degree from the School of Hard Knocks and lives in Big Sky Country, aka rural Montana, with her beautiful daughter, three insistent cats and two fat, demanding horses. She is the author of *Miracle, the novel*, published by Jigsaw Press in May of 2007, in both paperback and eBook.

Upcoming titles by Ms. Bushman for Jigsaw Press include: *Third Warp*, *The Elevator*, *Crimson Ice*, and the series, *Elijah*, among others. She is currently working on her sixteenth novel.

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