


Yesterday



By R. P. Houghton



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This novel is a work of fiction. The historical persons and events portrayed are accurate, though their interaction and conversations with the fictionalized persons are of the author's creation.

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To Alice and Ben.

Remember yesterday and you will succeed tomorrow.



≈ 2024: Pretend ≈

He understood grief and the goodbye of death. He also understood the weight of a promise. All three were wrapped and delivered to him when he was young, but not old enough to understand their full weight. The three reverberated throughout the remainder of his childhood. Now he was a man, but the child within wouldn't let him be free of the past.

Long ago he had been nudged out of a sound sleep to curl up in the back seat of the car. His father had driven him and his mother to McGuire, the base in New Jersey from where his father would be leaving for duty in Iraq.

Bending down to look into his face, his father had smiled before pulling him close one last time. The coarse texture of the man's uniform against his young cheek, the smell of his father's aftershave, the soft brush of the close-cropped hair against his own fingertips—all were etched into not only his mind but also his soul.

Remembered as well was the sadness in the man's deep blue eyes and how they had belied the smile he had given him. Even at ten, Max could see the false bravado.

"Take care of your mother," his father had told him. "You are the man of the house until I get home."

He had squeaked out the words, "I will," trying to be the man he wasn't, not yet.

The cliché of goodbye had been easily tossed his way in order to diminish the hurt of separation. The same words had been repeated time and again with each of his father's departures.

The moment was sad, yes, but in his young mind he knew his father would return within the year, so Max had held back the tears and remained quiet while watching his hero walk away.

But death changed everything. Reconciling the fact that the joy of hello would never again take place was devastating—a daily battle he fought over the years. The living, breathing, and animated man who was his father had been taken away. In his place had been the anonymity residing in a flag-draped box. There was nothing there for him, nothing to hold and hear of the hero Max had known. The promise made to that man, however, remained imprinted on his mind each day in the years that followed.

His mother had disappeared in her own way after his father's death. The mother he knew and had agreed to care for, had gradually become a stranger, losing herself in alcohol to forget her pain while losing sight of him in the process. Through the years, good days mingled with bad. He tried his best. His best, however, never quite equaled what was needed—a failure on his part, he believed.

Fourteen years later, Maxmillion Gerhard Engelhardt had still not lost the guilt of failed efforts to keep the promise of looking after his mother, despite his grandfather's cajoling him to let the matter go. Now a grown man, Max looked toward the river, watching it pass on and on into the sea well beyond him.

Standing on a ridge above the Delaware River, he felt the old hurt and shame seep into him at the sound and sight of her, Sarah Louise Engelhardt. Her alcoholic screams reverberated like emotional explosions from the edge of the river toward him. He wanted to scream back until the humiliation and hurt faded like smoke from a snuffed-out candle. His stomach churned, his insides ached as he continued to listen to her, wishing he were part of the river, flowing far away and free.

Like a banshee warning of death, Sarah squirmed and shouted at his grandfather with full-throated anger. His grandfather, General Rufus Engelhardt, had taken hold of his daughter-in-law and was struggling, with a reddened face, to lead her up the rise from the boathouse.

Her unbuttoned wool coat slid from her shoulders in the cold November wind. The coat beat against her slender frame while Rufus held tightly onto her forearm. Her dark hair flew round and about her oval face as she struggled against the old man and a world she couldn't deal with.

Max continued to watch, dreading the thought of yet again trying to sober his mother up. He had been doing the job for so very long. Would the promise ever be fulfilled? Instinctively, he clutched at his chest, trying to feel the dog tags that hung around his neck—his father's tags. He'd worn them since the day his mother put them into his hands. What would Dad do?

“Murder! They’re all murderers, Max,” she screamed, catching sight of him just as the sound of a shot took him by surprise. He ducked his head instinctively before straightening up again, feeling foolish.

The smoke and noise came from a blank. Of course it was a blank. That’s what reenactors used to play their war games. And that’s what this was—a war game with adults reenacting, pretending to fight. Nothing real. No death. No abandonment of those left behind.

The distraction of the shot gave him a moment away from his mother—a gift from Heaven. In that pinch of time, he had found a second of relief. But all the chaos returned as rapidly as the brief respite had arrived.

“Thanks for coming across town to take her off my hands,” his grandfather said, looking exhausted in his revolutionary war uniform. “It’s cold as Hell today. My arthritis is killing me and so is trying to keep your mother under control. How she managed to get herself here I haven’t a clue.”

The old man had called Max after failing to quiet Sarah’s hysterics while he was taking part in a rehearsal. The actual reenactment of the Battle of Trenton would take place in four weeks to commemorate Washington’s historic crossing of the Delaware on Christmas Day in 1776. And though his grandfather was participating in the show, Max had no heart for it. None of it.

“Maybe you’re too old for this reenactment stuff, Granddad.” Max watched the old man rub his elbows and left shoulder after handing Sarah over to him. Once again, she was a raging package of abuse, verbally and physically. Loving her after his father died was truly one of the hardest things he had ever had to take on, even now, after all the years.

Rufus lifted his head, trying to stand up to Max’s six-foot, six-inch frame. “It’s your mother that exhausts me, not my role in the production. I’ve known combat and many a battle, young man, but this commemorative replaying of the events is important, and I want to be a part of it for as long as I draw a breath. People forget. They need to remember.”

“War?”

“History! It is the forebearer of tomorrow. Don’t forget that!”

“I remember,” his mother slurred.

“Not enough,” the old man said, shaking his head.

“Let it go, Granddad.” He knew this was a sad repeat of an old back and forth volley of beliefs he didn’t want to get into. Not today. Not with his mother three sheets to the wind. He was already late for his part-time job at the Trent House and didn’t want to stand around in the cold, sparring with the old man. No matter how much he cared for him, no matter how grate-

ful he was for taking him and his mother in after they had lost the house and most everything else, he and his grandfather seldom agreed.

"I better get back to the others," Rufus said. "Settle your mother down with a few cups of coffee at the Trent House while you give your tour of the old place. She'll be fine. You can take her back home to the farm afterward. After that, help your Uncle August with the milking until I can get there."

"All right," he answered, thinking coffee was not going to be enough to sober Sarah up. His hopes had risen after the last round of hospitalization and psychiatric care, when his mother had been able to take a job and find her own apartment. Back then, Max had found a modicum of hope, fleeting as it turned out to be. A year and a half of sobriety was crumbling all too quickly.

He saw the remainder of the day dissipating into the tragic nothingness his mother would make it. Sarah would spiral into being sorry, being contrite and vowing to never touch another drop of spirits, as his own spirits spiraled down into anger and remorse at his inability to help her.

Rufus stepped away, but Sarah lunged at the old man, shouting, "Murderer!" and ripped off the medal he wore on his colonial uniform. The faded, blue ribbon with the tarnished bronze medallion lay in the gravel, looking abused and useless, not unlike how Max felt.

Rufus sighed, picked the piece up, rubbed it with arthritically gnarled fingers and handed the medal to Max. "I found this in the bottom of that box where I keep those old medals—mine, your father's, the whole family's. I was thinking you might like to have it. Meant to give it to you days ago. You know, you could wear the medal when you give those tours. It's plenty old. Older than me. A Hessian medal from the Revolution."

"I don't know ..." Max began in protest, but Rufus wasn't hearing any of it.

"Take the damn thing and wear it," he told him, raising his voice. "You're a student of history. Talk about who might have worn it, for heaven's sake! Make it part of your schtick to entertain and enlighten." With those words his grandfather lumbered away, rubbing his shoulder again.

Max watched him and pocketed the medal with a sigh. The family's military line went back a long way. He understood that, could follow it in numerous family photos and letters, as well as seeing the remnants of past accomplishments and glory lumped together in that box of medals Rufus had referred to.

He also knew his grandfather was still disappointed in him for turning down his appointment to the Naval Academy. The Academy had initiated

the careers of his father, grandfather, and great grandfather. Max's opting for the University of Pennsylvania and seeking a major in history did not sit well with Rufus.

"Why do that, when you can get all the history you need and more by attending the Naval Academy?" he had demanded.

Max had answered he would be a student of history, a teacher and helper on the farm rather than picking up a gun.

"When *do* you fight? What do you hold dear, son?" his grandfather had asked in response, and Max had held his tongue.

Thinking about war brought on the old anger and frustration, and always the grief. The contradictions of what he now wanted and what he once believed were palpable. The conflict churned and bubbled into a cauldron of inadequacies. Being confident about what he felt was right for him blurred with the memory of his father and the valor of the family. Thus far, he had managed to stand his ground and prevail, despite knowing his grandfather's hope for him as a warrior lingered on.

Looking at his mother, he felt the tugs of duty calling him in its own way. Taking her hand, he guided her to his rusted truck with the three bales of hay in the back and helped her into the cab. From where he was parked, the ride to the Trent House was barely ten minutes.

With his mother seat-belted and nearly quiet, he drove while she murmured obscenities to herself. He wondered where his real mother had gone—the beautiful woman who had once so very long ago cared for him and his father, kissed him goodnight, read Peter Pan like a poet enthralled in the tale of lost boys. She seemed to have made him one of them. A lost boy. Where oh where had she disappeared to?

At the Trent House compound, he walked Sarah to the carriage house, once the caretaker's house, and now the Visitor Services Center. He guided her through the mix of people humming around the main lobby like bees after historical honey.

Entering the office on the left, he greeted the middle-age woman sitting behind a scratched and brown-stained desk. She lifted her gray-haired head, looking up from her efforts of busily shuffling papers and smiled.

"Hi, Helen," he said, trying to make light of the situation. "Brought my mom for a little visit."

The receptionist's face lost all elements of joy. Obviously, she remembered Sarah's previous visit to the historic site—another drunken episode. Picking up some paperwork from his cubicle to the right of the room, he moaned, "More things to fill out?"

“Simply trying to keep tabs on the number of visitors and a little information on new projects.” She found her smile and asked, “Think you’d like to teach a summer class of five-to-eight-year-olds about farming during the Revolution?”

“I’ll get back to you on that,” he told her, thinking his plate was already full to overflowing. With a quick wave he turned away and returned to the reception area. Seeing the tangle of people by the front door, and his mother slumped against a wall ready to fall asleep, he opted to take the service tunnel, a straight underground route to the historic building next door.

He flipped on the light switch, walked Sarah into the brick-lined tunnel, and closed the door behind them. A few feet later, the lights began to dim and suddenly flickered off. He stopped, momentarily stunned at the total blackness surrounding him.

Just as suddenly, his mind latched onto a ghost story from the past that his Uncle August liked to tell. The story was simple and concerned August and Rufus. The brothers were boys of seven and nine years old. On a visit to the historic house, they had run through the tunnel, this tunnel. August came out the other side in the carriage house. Rufus didn’t. His grandfather went missing for three weeks and never explained why, remaining deaf and dumb to any questions.

Despite being nearly certain August had manufactured the entire incident, Max now felt a chill creep up his spine. Shaking off the thought by pinning the reaction to the morning’s anxieties, he pulled out his cell phone and turned on its small light. He walked on with his mother burping and wobbling beside him. She seemed oblivious to the momentary lack of brightness and began humming a sketchy version of “Here Comes the Sun.”

Suddenly, she stopped humming and began to shake. Throwing an arm around her, Max walked her forward. An aura of foreboding merged with each step he took as the tunnel seemed to engulf him with its own cacophony of sounds, noises which he’d never noticed before—the dripping of water, something scratching, the hum of air filtering through the space.

“Enough,” he whispered, trying to dispel the mood. He picked up his pace to make light work of the hundred-foot length of the tunnel still remaining.

Relief spun his way with the sight of a narrow strip of light under the door that opened into the Trent House. He was annoyed that he’d let himself be taken in by ghost stories and a loss of electricity. Silly, really.

Once in the historic building, he squinted against the light streaming in through four small windows in the large, whitewashed brick room that lay

beyond. On a small, fold-out table sat a setup of coffee and tea for the staff. After settling his mother at one of the round tables on the right, he poured her a cup of black coffee.

“I need to get upstairs, Mom. Lucy and my tour group are probably already standing around the hallway, wondering why no one has begun guiding them around the place.” Looking at her melancholy demeanor, he added, “You okay?”

She nodded before slumping over and resting her head on her arms. Maybe she would go to sleep. A good thing for both of them. After reminding her where the cup of coffee was, he headed toward the colonial kitchen.

On the far side of the large hearth, with its black kettle and other cooking implements, he continued on and up a narrow flight of stairs that led to the main floor. The wide hall ran from the front door to the back of the house and gave an airy feeling to the interior.

“Morning, Lucy,” Max called, relieved to see the slender young woman with a long blond braid weaving down her back.

“Hi, Max,” she answered with a sigh and a touch of annoyance. “I’d almost given up on you.”

He knew her well enough by now to gauge her reactions. Small and petite, with large blue eyes, Lucy had become a solace in the seemingly endless saga of his issues with his mother—his life. He had gravitated to Lucy’s arms slowly but surely and was not a stranger to her apartment.

They had known one another since he began his job at the Trent House, some three years now. Friendship had evolved into casual dating and then increasingly into a more serious situation. He could talk to Lucy, and she would listen—something his mother and at times even his grandfather seemed unable to do.

Her moods had been escalating from highs to lows since the topic of marriage had come up between them. She wanted to settle on a date and time, while Max continually avoided the issue.

She stood at the front door, looking at her watch. “I was waiting for you before opening the door. You could have called. I was worried.”

“Sorry. Got a little hung up.” He unzipped his down jacket but left it on. The heating system in the historic building hadn’t had time to warm things up.

Now relieved at seeing him, she let her annoyance dissipate. A ready smile erased the worry as she approached and slid her arms around him. She bent her head upward for a kiss of hello, which he delivered briefly. Maybe too briefly.

She pulled away to tell him, "That's a little cold. What's wrong?"

"My mother."

"Surprise me, why don't you." She reached for his hand and held it tightly. "One day soon, you are going to have to let her take hold of her own life, not yours. After we're married, are you going to still be at her beck and call?"

Married. She used the word as if the matter had been settled. He didn't think so. How had "might" become a sure thing? He cared about her, enjoyed her laughter—her kindness, her touch. Was that love? He needed time to think about that and much more.

Instinctively, he took a step back and turned away before recalling that his mother was still sitting below in the room off the kitchen. With as sheepish a look as he could conjure up, he looked at Lucy. "Mom is in the activity room. Could you go down and make sure she's all right after I start the tour?"

Lucy blinked away a note of annoyance. "You know your mother doesn't like me. You do know that."

"My mother doesn't like anyone, Lucy. Especially herself." And that was the truth of it.

With a frown of exasperation, she told him, "All right."

"Thank you." He smiled.

She answered with her own smile before walking toward the front door and opening it to those waiting out in the cold. People filed into the hall as she collected their tickets and Max called them to his side. "Morning, everyone. Welcome to the William Trent House, the oldest house in Trenton. My name is Max Engelhardt, and I'll be your guide this morning."

A stooped-over man with broad shoulders and a large stomach came forward and asked him, "You related to Major General Rufus Engelhardt?"

"My grandfather."

"Great guy, great guy. Served under him in Vietnam."

"Thank you for your service."

"I understand he has a farm round here somewhere."

"Yes, sir. On Federal City Road. Been in the family since the Revolution. He and my uncle run the place."

"You don't say. Well good, good." The man nodded. "Tell the general Buddy McFitz sends regards."

"I will."

The conversation reminded Max of the medal. He reached into his pocket and looked at it, catching sight of what it once had been—a powder-blue

ribbon with two horizontal red stripes now faded, and the circular medalion bearing the words, *Für Tapferkeit* (For Bravery). He whispered the words to himself. Pinning the medal on his vest, he wondered who had earned the right to wear the trophy and for what reason. He would research it later—another lesson in history.

Looking up, he saw the group of visitors were starting to wander around the hall and into the rooms without him. Losing control of the gaggle in the opening presentation was a bad sign of things to come. Raising his voice, he attempted to lure them his way by reinitiating his spiel.

“This two-story brick mansion, with its cupola centered on the roof and chimneys at both ends, was considered a prominent and innovative building at the time it was constructed.

“Trent was a wealthy merchant in Philadelphia and purchased eight hundred acres for this country estate situated just above the Delaware Falls on the Jersey side of the river. He and his young second wife, Mary Coddington Trent, moved into the house around 1719. An *allee*, or path, flanked by English cherry trees, once led from the front door down to a ferry landing where Trent kept boats at the ready to take him to Philadelphia and his business when needed.”

Max found his rhythm and continued his history of the house and its occupants with growing warmth. Talking of yesterday soothed all his mental aches and pains. He passed through the dining room, front parlor, morning room, and study, describing the furniture and the lifestyle of the eighteenth century during the Revolution.

“At the time of the Revolution, the Trent House was known as Bloomsbury Court and was owned by a doctor who—”

“Let me go!” The sound of Sarah’s voice reverberated like a cannon shot down the hall to the morning room where he and his group were gathered. There and then, he knew the day was done.