

FROM THE PECULIAR MIND OF
KENNETH JAMES ALLEN



THE
TORTOISESHELL
BOOKSTORE OF
ANTIQUITIES



THE TORTOISESHELL BOOKSTORE OF ANTIQUITIES

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This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

THE TORTOISESHELL BOOKSTORE OF ANTIQUITIES

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For those who seek adventure in the books



White.



I GRABBED A HOLD OF the gilded silver frame and leaned forward. The border of the mirror seemed to mold to my handprint, encasing it in dull gray. I peered through the grime, dust, and discoloration to take in my reflection. A stranger stared back at me with faint recognition. I remembered my hair used to be darker, my skin smoother, my eyes a darker shade of blue than the pale pools that gazed upon me.

But that's what time does, I suppose. It's a tricky thing. Hard to pin down, even harder to grasp, even when it floats around you and teases with its effervescent calling. "Catch us," it would cry, as it leaped from shelf to shelf, book to book. No use. No point in trying. It just wears you out with its games.

I pulled down on the bags under my eyes, revealing thin red lines on eggshells. A rich tapestry of adventure and intrigue gracefully swooned across my vision, as if my history was teasing me of memories soon to be forgotten. One last serenade.

"Where are you?" I murmured. "I know you're there... somewhere."

Suddenly, the door thrust open, sending the bell's ring dancing around the bookshelves like a fairy spreading pixie dust. I turned gradually, like a ship altering its course in the ocean. Shelves stacked with dusty tomes filled my vision. The fading light moved across the room, sending shadows climbing over book titles. Finally, my eyes befell a young lady, standing in the doorway, panting. A dark striped scarf hung around her

neck, over a long, navy coat. She was pretty by anyone's standard, even though my experience was unseasoned and capped.

It was hard to describe her reaction, yet I knew how it felt.

"Finally," I said, limping to the counter. "I was wondering."

"Wondering about what?" she said between puffs as she took in her surroundings.

"When you were going to arrive."

Her brow furrowed, and she tilted her head to the side. "Are you expecting me?"

"Of course," I replied, then let out a rapturous guffaw that ended in a spate of coughs. "Well, I was expecting someone! And here you are."

She cautiously stepped forward into the bookstore, as if tip-toeing into a lion's cage. She inspected the cracked leather spines with a clouding gaze, her eyes darting from shelf to shelf as if searching for answers to questions she didn't ask.

I sluggishly maneuvered behind the ancient cash register and laid my hands on a closed book in front of me. "My name is Percy. Percy White. And you are?"

She seemed immediately at ease, her tight shoulders dropping. She removed her scarf, releasing a mane of strawberry blond that shimmered in the light. It even attracted the dull yellow glow of the dying, naked bulbs overhead.

"Jennifer," she said. "Jennifer Gray."

"Well, of course, you are," I said. "Now, Jennifer, a very important question. What date is it?"

She did a double take. "Oh. It's June the eighteenth."

"The year?" I replied. "What year is it?"

Jennifer recoiled.

My eyes fell to the book in front of me. "It feels like a great many years."

"2023," she answered slowly.

I closed my eyes and let out a sigh. “Thank god.” I patted my chest, almost forgetting I had a customer. I opened an eye. “Oh, and how can I help you today?”

“Well,” she started, her words coming out at an excruciating pace. “To be honest, I didn’t even know this was a bookstore. I saw a lightning bolt symbol above the door. Didn’t this used to be—?”

“Jennifer, this has, and will always be, the Tortoiseshell Bookstore.”

We stared at each other, so I continued.

“What are you looking for?”

“I’m not too sure I need a book.”

“Well, we’re all looking for something, Jennifer.” I picked up the book in front of me and clasped it to my chest. “Some people don’t know what it is until they hold it in their hands.”

Jennifer spun on the spot and scratched her head as she took in the store’s expanse.

“Yes,” I crooned. “It’s not uncommon for people to become discom-bobulated. But the fact is, you are here... exactly where you need to be.”

She turned back to me. “Where I need to be?”

“Precisely.” I looked around at the books as if they summoned my attention. “This place attracts people like a siren’s call, so secret and subversive. People wander in here with no good reason other than they resigned themselves to the attraction.”

Our eyes met. I could feel the life in her like it wanted to seep out of her pores and investigate the dark corners and narrow walkways.

I coughed. “And so, given you are standing in a bookstore, it would be prudent to find a title.”

“But—?”

“Go,” I ordered. “Find one that speaks to you. But be careful. It can get a little... noisy in here.”

She cocked her head. “What do you mean?”

“Can’t you hear them?”

She turned, as if hearing the whispers for the first time.

“Bar careful,” I warned. “Some books can be... dangerous.”

I watched as she looked down at the closest set of shelves and tapped her foot. The rhythmic sound echoed in my ears, taking me back to when I was younger and first stepped foot into this very bookstore.



Black.



IT WAS A SUNDAY MORNING like any other. Nothing special about it. I was going about my usual Sunday business. I had on my favorite red lightning bolt t-shirt and heading to Hargrave's Comics. Sometimes it felt stupid and childish, but then again, so was life. Being twelve gives you that kind of wisdom. Besides, nothing could beat the feel of inked paper and glossy covers between your fingers, certainly nothing that a video game could give.

I wore my ridiculously large headphones covering my ears; a birthday gift from my parents. I still remember the lyrics from the song.

*Take my sins, my time begins,
Anew each day,
Time stands still,
For that is the deal we struck.*

I didn't quite know what the song was about, but it carried a heavy baseline with orchestral overtones.

The usual Sunday scenes filled my vision: two men awkwardly unloading crates from the back of a truck, two crows pecking a dead animal from the wet cement, a stray orange cat crouched under a dumpster watching them all.

I focused on the ground to avoid puddles from the overnight rain and strode down an alley between two nondescript buildings housing businesses I had no interest in. Wrapped up in the delights of my noise-canceling headphones, I didn't hear them when they called out my name

and didn't see them when they approached me from all sides. But I felt them when they pushed me behind a dumpster and against a shaggy brick wall.

"Well, if it isn't little Percy White."

I looked up to the three boys and pulled off the headphones. While I was small for my age, they were large for theirs. I recognized them from school, two grades above, and fiercely mean. Usually, if I had known they were there, I would have avoided them like the plague. I wouldn't have just taken a different alleyway, I would have ridden around on a bus for an hour and gotten off on the other side of the market.

Behind their backs, my school friends and I would joke they were related in some fashion, and their parents were brother and sister. I looked at each and addressed them by their last names in a sheepish voice that betrayed my immediate fear.

"Baldwin. Fresco. Holland. I'm meeting my mom around the corner."

"No, you're not," Baldwin said. He was the smartest of the three, which wasn't saying much. However, he saw through my lie, so I gave him credit for that.

"Say... Nice headphones." Fresco pulled them from around my shoulders and I let him do it. "You won't mind if I borrow them?"

"They were a present from my parents," I said as I reached for them.

"Boo-hoo," Holland interjected, slapping my hand away. "You're lucky you still have your shoes."

Suddenly a shout echoed down the alleyway. "Look out!" the voice cried, followed by what I would describe as a gunshot. The three bullies looked up in unison towards the source of the interruption. I didn't bother, instead I took my chance to escape. Grabbing the headphones from Fresco, I pushed between them and sprinted to the end of the alleyway.

Shouts and splashing footsteps followed closely behind me. I darted around the corner and broke out into the open market. People marched

with purpose in every direction towards their respective destinations. There were enough obstacles to make the bullies chasing me difficult, but not enough to escape indefinitely.

That's when I heard the call. A rush of voices washed over me, each talking over the other until it was a garbled mess. I looked over the other side of the markets to a red door inset into a solid brick wall, a purple flower emblazoned above it. A girl with curly brown hair had just departed the building through it.

I rushed past her as I ran towards the door and pushed my way inside, sending a ringing bell sparkling into the gloom.



Purple.



I SLAMMED THE DOOR shut and leaned against it. Closed my eyes as I tried to catch my breath. When I felt brave enough, I gently pulled back the white curtain and peered outside. Three figures ran across my vision and I fell to the floor, eager to stay out of sight. It was a close call.

A clearing of a throat broke my reverie. The sudden noise had me spinning and pushed back against the door. I spied a figure standing in the shadows.

“Can I help you, young man?”

“I was just... I mean... I needed...”

“To hide from some... friends of yours?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Something like that.”

She held up a hand. “That’s quite okay. I’ve been expecting you.”

“Really?”

“In fact, I was wondering when you were going to arrive. Being here all this time is tiring, and I do so covet a rest.”

“What do you mean you’re waiting for me?”

She stepped forward into the fading light, allowing him to see her for the first time. Mottled gray hair tied in a bun, wisps of hair framing her wrinkled face. Thin, colorless lips like dry riverbeds on mountain topography. A long scar down the side of her face. Despite wearing a cardigan, she wrapped her arms around herself and rubbed the pendant that hung around her neck.

“This place has a way of attracting people,” she said. “For those who need it.”

I cocked his head sideways, and we looked at each other. She pursed her lips. “Stand up, boy. Tell me your name.”

“Percy,” he said. “Percy White.”

“Welcome, Percy. My name is Emily Plum.” She looked over at me and cocked her head. “How old are you?”

“Twelve,” I replied.

“Twelve?” She shook her head and let out a sigh. “Oh well, if that is what they want.”

“Who?” I asked.

“Never mind, Percy.”

“Do you work here?”

“Something like that,” she replied. Then she laughed, a giggle that reminded me of a little girl.

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

She sighed and smiled. “I remember when I first set foot in this store. Seems like an age ago.” She shook her head as if to keep herself in the present. “Come now. There is much to discuss.”

Emily turned and disappeared between the shelves.

“Are you coming, Percy?” she asked, her voice wafting past the books.

Shelves towered over me as I walked, great skyscrapers of leather and fabric covers, titles stamped in gold and silver lettering. Whispers formed around me as I walked, and I put it down to the adrenalin subsiding in my system. Yet I couldn’t resist running a finger along the cracked leather spines. I breathed in and thought it smelt like my grandmother’s house. Old, musty. A sense of history and contemplation.

“Do try to keep up, Percy,” Emily called out.

I yanked my hand away and marched on towards Emily’s voice, meandering around the shelves that butted up against each other at seemingly random angles, but just as quickly got distracted again. I had found

a clear walkway, as if the shelves were directing me to an objective. At the end was a rolling ladder against the wall. The tracks ran off in both directions, swallowed by the darkness.

While engrossed with the sheer vastness of the store, I bumped into something hard. Turning, I saw a metal spiral staircase that I was certain wasn't there a moment ago. I gazed upon the treads and followed them upwards to the walkway that ran the perimeter of the room, where more shelves held more books. The sheer number of stories mesmerized me.

"Percy..." Emily sang out.

I eventually found my way to the counter where Emily was stacking books on a shelf behind her. The antique cash register displayed \$13.99, and I wondered when it was last used, what title was sold, and to whom purchased it.

"Now, Percy," Emily began. "We are in a what?"

Percy looked around. "A bookstore?"

"Exactly. A place where people buy..."

"Books?"

"Precisely. Do you like reading books, Percy?"

He shrugged. "I'm more into comic books."

"Well, story takes many forms. You may encounter things here that are a little bit different from what you're used to."

"What do you mean?"

She leaned forward on the counter. "Books have a way of calling to us. Go, Percy. Find the title that speaks loudest."

I turned, curious to hear the voices Emily was talking about, but unsure of where to start the journey.

"But be warned," Emily said from over my shoulder. "Not all books should be listened to. Not all books should be opened."



Green.



I WAS LOST IN THE LABYRINTH of shelves, consumed by faded titles and soft voices. It felt like I was walking for days. Down one particular aisle, far from the counter where I left Emily's stark warning hanging in the air, books rumbled on the shelves. Each was eager for me to pick them up and caress their covers, but one voice was louder than the others.

The title on the spine had worn off, yet I was sure it was the right book. I eased it off the shelf and it seemed to breathe in my grasp. Shadows crept into the gloom as I cracked open the cover, the contents eager to escape.

A stomp, so heavy, it made the ground shake. I turned slowly. Another bone-shattering stamp made books fall from shelves and topple to the floor. Enormous shadows moved over walls as the room darkened even more. The air grew chilly, and I could almost see my breath crystalize in front of my face.

I moved to the nearest shelf and peered around the corner, hoping to glimpse the origins of the destructive steps. But when I looked, the space between the shelves was empty. Not a single sign that anything was there.

But then I sensed it. A hot mass behind me. With heart in my throat, I slowly turned. The book dropped from my hands as I came face to face with a brown and green dragon. Its eyes glowed red. Fire consumed its mouth as it snarled at my presence. I was breathless as it reared up, ready to engulf me with flames. I closed my eyes in anticipation.

But then another noise, a wild scream echoing above me. As the dragon blew its lava breath, a girl swung down from a rope tied to the upper level and knocked me out of the way. Sprawled on the floor, I looked back to see the shelf engulfed in flames.

“Hurry,” she said, grabbing my hand. “This way.”

The dragon locked eyes on me as I hurriedly got to my feet and started running. She pulled me this way and that, maneuvering around shelves, crisscrossing paths, and doubling back to confuse our hunter. All the while, the beast crashing into shelves and set others on fire as it attempted to cook us.

Eventually, the dragon gave up, pointed its head to the ceiling, and gave a guttural roar of frustration, before sulking off into the depths of the bookstore, smashing shelves with its powerful tail.

Safe from the looming threat, we crouched in a dark segment of the bookstore. All around us, shelves were torn into pieces while others had large claw marks across their ends. Tattered and burned books lay strewn across the floor.

“You’re lucky I turned up when I did,” she said. “What’s your name?”

She was a little older than I was, if by only a few years. A scaled vest encased her, and I could see the handle of a sword poking out from over her shoulder. Her eyes sparkled in the murkiness of our surroundings.

“Percy,” I said absentmindedly, lost in her gaze. “Who are you? Why is there a dragon in a bookstore? Or anywhere, for that matter?”

“Slow down,” she said, patting my shoulder. “That’s a lot of questions and we have little time. My name is Wildflower. That dragon is a Scorch-tail. They say only one thing can destroy it, and it guards the weapon of its destruction day and night. I’ve failed many times to capture the weapon. But now you’re here—.”

“How is there a live dragon here?” I interrupted.

She leaned in closer, as if what she was about to tell me held great importance. “Let’s not quibble over the facts, Percy. The fact is the dragon is real, and if we don’t destroy it, all is lost.”

I resigned myself to that explanation, as fanciful as it was. “How are you planning to do that?”

“Like I was saying, now that there are two of us, I think we’ll be able to seize the weapon. I need you to play a vital role in the mission.”

I cocked my head. “What’s that?”

“You’re going to be the bait!”



Red.



WE PEERED AT THE SLEEPING dragon from the vantage point of an overturned shelf. Its body rose in rhythmic bursts; smoke billowed out of its nose.

“Don’t let it fool you,” Wildflower whispered. “It’s not really sleeping. It never really does. I fell for that one once, and only once.”

“Right,” I said, gazing at the dragon.

“And do you see that white thing behind it?”

I looked beyond the dragon, to a curved white object sitting on some books. It looked like a solid blade of some sort. “I see it.”

“That is the Tooth of Stagginrood. Once I have it in my possession, I will slay the dragon.”

We squatted out of sight behind the wrecked shelf.

“Are you sure this is going to work?” I whispered.

“It’s the only chance we’ve got,” she replied, “to save the lands and people of Stagginrood from the menacing Scorchtail.”

I swallowed hard. Wiped my sweaty palms on my pants. My hands shook terribly, and I pushed them together as if saying a prayer. Although I wasn’t sure a plea to a greater being would do any good for us at that moment. She placed her hand on mine.

“You’re going to be a hero,” she said. “People will talk about you for the ages.”

I scoffed. “You make it sound like I’m going to die.”

She looked at me and bit her lip. “Well... Very few have survived what you’re about to do, and those that live to tell the tale are missing some of their limbs.”

I narrowed my gaze. “For the record, your words of inspiration aren’t helping.”

She gave a tight smile, then returned to spy on the dragon.

“Uh-oh,” she whispered.

“What?”

“It’s gone.”

“What do you mean it’s gone?”

I joined her. But there was nothing to look at. “Maybe this is going to be easier than we thought,” I said.

“Or maybe...” she began. “Do you feel that?”

I nodded. Heat pressed against my back like the desert sun.

“Do you remember what I told you to do?”

I nodded again.

“Go!”

At once we ran in opposite directions. I screamed wildly and waved my arms as blistering flames licked at my heels. Shelves exploded and books flew in every direction as the Scorchtail chased me. I dodged left, then right, moved in any direction, as long as I kept moving, peering over my shoulder every so often to see how close to death I was.

I crashed into something hard and collapsed onto the floor. I looked up, first to the dead-end I had run down, and then to the snarling snout of the dragon as it looked down at me. Flame dripped out of its mouth and fell beside my head, singeing the floor before extinguishing, leaving smoking black char marks.

I squeezed my eyes shut. Wildflower was right. Survival was impossible.

But then it stopped, kicked its head up like a dog attracted to a whistle, and it bounded it away, ephemeral grunts dissolving into the distance.

“Wildflower,” I breathed.

I got to my feet and ran back to the dragon's den, swerving around corners with little disregard for where the beast was. I stopped short. Wildflower held the weapon and pointed it up towards the Scorchtail. Death to one of them was imminent, and I hoped it was the dragon.

"For the people of Stagginrod!" Wildflower screamed as she launched the dagger at the dragon's neck.

Angry smoke billowed out of the Scorchtail's enlarged nostrils as the white dagger harmlessly bounced off the tough scales, skittling across the floor until it ended up at my feet. Wildflower, her eyes wide with terror, backed into a shelf. The dragon reared up and swung a massive claw at her. She toppled end over end out of sight behind the beast. The dragon gurgled a triumphant cry, then prepared to deliver the fatal blow.

I picked up the weapon and noticed the oddity immediately. Something you didn't notice until you were looking right at it. I put my lips to the hole at the top and blew. A grumbling horn sounded out of the instrument, low and warbling.

The dragon lifted its head and shook it as if trying to get the sound out of its head. Roared, then returned its attention to its target.

I blew again, harder and longer this time. Once more, the dragon sat back, shaking its head. I continued blowing until my cheeks hurt and my lungs burned. The dragon yelped and bit at the air as if the sound was attacking it. Large hidden wings unfolded from the beast and with a powerful flap, it launched itself into the air, sending a gush of wind around the room. The resulting shock wave knocked me, along with several shelves, over.

Rolling onto my side, I blew again, sending the dragon into a spin. It flapped around in a circle, trying to catch the sound in its powerful jaws, before giving up and flying into the upper level. I watched as it disappeared into the dark, never to return.

I got up and ran to Wildflower. I helped her up and gently touched the gash on her cheek. A thin line of blood ran down her cheek. A lucky escape from the Scorchtail's massive claws.

“Are you going to be okay?”

She nodded. “You survived!”

I smiled and handed her the tooth. “I think this belongs to you.”

“It belongs to the people of Stagginrood,” she replied. “You, Percy, are a genuine hero. Lord Percy White!”

With that, she bent down and moved in close. I closed my eyes as our lips met, a soft kiss that dissolved into the musky odor of the store. When I opened my eyes, she had disappeared. I spun on the spot. Shelves were upright, books neatly ordered. Nothing was broken, not a single flame or spark had touched any of the books.



Blue.



WHEN I ARRIVED BACK at the counter, Emily was busily stacking heavy books onto a trolley.

“Emily!” I cried as I approached her. “Please tell me you saw that!”

“Saw what, dear Percy?”

“The dragon?”

Emily shook her head.

“Wildflower?”

She smiled. “Sounds like quite the adventure.”

“Where did they all come from? And where did they all go?”

She giggled once more, a private joke with herself. “This is no ordinary bookstore, Percy. An extraordinary place, for extraordinary people.” She removed her pendant and placed it on the counter. I noted the key sitting atop the chain. “The wonders of the store. What you experienced was but one of many. There are a lot of books to explore, Percy, and one needs a lifetime to do it.”

She turned and picked up a book from the pile beside. She clutched it to her chest lovingly.

“It took me a long time to find this book.”

“What’s so special about it?”

“It’s *my* book, Percy. Just like you’ll have a book, too.”

“Me?”

Emily nodded.

“But how will I know?”

She shrugged. "You just will. You'll just have to trust me on that one."

"How long did it take you to find it?"

"That depends on what year this is."

"What do you mean?"

She looked off into the depths of the store. "It's a strange feeling, Percy. On one hand, I feel like I've been here for many, many years. But on the other, I feel like I've just arrived."

"Well, it's 2023."

She held a hand over her heart, closed her eyes, and tilted her head back. "Thank goodness. And what about the date?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. It's Sunday."

"Are we in June?"

I nodded in reply.

She smiled back, and with a book in hand, shuffled towards the door.

"Wait! Where are you going?"

"Home," she called out over her shoulder.

She opened the door. A stream of light gushed in like the door had shut it out for centuries.

"But what about the store?"

She looked back, seemingly younger.

"It's yours now, Lord Percy." She gently caressed the scar on her cheek, then stepped into the light.

"What? What do you mean it's mine?"

But Emily had already left. I ran to the closing door and reached it just as it clicked into place. I tried the handle, but it wouldn't budge. I pulled back the curtain to see people walking back and forwards across my field of vision. But it was the young woman walking away that stole my attention. Long, curly brown locks fell over her maroon top. She stopped in the middle of the crowd, turned and waved, before being swallowed by the masses, disappearing from view. Forever.



Gray.



BUT THAT WAS MANY YEARS ago, or at least, seemed to be. Emily never returned, and I spent my time opening books with a cautious curiosity.

I had watched Jennifer wander off through the shelves to choose her first adventure. That had been some time ago, and I did not know where she was or what she had gotten herself into. However, I was sure it wouldn't be long before she returned to me, full of life and adventure, and I could leave the store, once and for all.

I removed the chain from around my neck and gently placed it down on the counter. It was Jennifer's now, and I knew she would look after the place as well as I did, just like those that came before, and those that will come after.

I picked up my book and held it to my chest.

"Now I can go home," I said. "Now I can be free."

The sound of a heavy tome crashing to the ground echoed through the store. I looked up in time to hear a gut-wrenching scream. Books smashing on the ground sounded like gunshots. Groans and cries of a struggle morphed with a shelf tipping over.

"This can't be right," I murmured.

Jennifer screamed out a garbled mess, but I couldn't make out her words. Eventually, she appeared from the depths of the store, running towards me. Blood splashed across her face; her eyes wide with terror.

"Help me!" she screamed.

“What are you doing here?” I questioned. “You shouldn’t be here!”

“Call the police,” she cried.

“What did you do?”

“I couldn’t help it,” she huffed. Tear-soaked eyes scanned every corner, every shelf, looking for something... or someone. “I didn’t mean to.”

“Jennifer! What happened?”

“There was this boy,” she panted. “I think... he hurt himself. I don’t know if...”

I reached down to my leg, caressed the throbbing pain.

Then I felt it. It was numb at first, kind of felt like pressure. But then pain rocketed up my spine. I tried to warn her, but the words wouldn’t come out, as if I had no air in my lungs.

“What is it, Percy?” she puffed. She looked a little older than when she arrived.

I dropped my book on the counter, but it fell on the edge and toppled to the ground. Tried to steady myself. Whispered again.

“What is it?” she pleaded.

My breaths came in short irregular spurts. Some books shouldn’t be opened.

“Run!” I breathed.

Then my legs faltered, and I could no longer support my weight. I crashed to the ground. Jennifer screamed as the masked figure stepped over me, holding a bloodied knife. Her screams reverberated around the bookstore.

I clutched onto my special book as blood washed out onto the floor. There was nothing I could do to help, just needed to wait until the end.

Just like reading a book.

