

The book cover features a dark, atmospheric background. In the upper left, a close-up of a werewolf's face with intense blue eyes is visible. On the right side, a woman with long, flowing blonde hair and a serious expression is shown. In the lower left, a young child with curly hair is smiling. At the bottom, two portraits of a woman with long brown hair are shown, one looking slightly to the side and the other looking directly forward. The title is written in large, red, serif font across the center, and the author's name is at the bottom in green, block letters.

THE GIFTER'S RING SAGA
BOOK TWO

Return of the Brethren

P. G. BARNETT

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"Finally," Angie said, "What took you so long?"

Coop realized the little girl wasn't even breathing hard and shook his head in amazement. He was about to answer when Angie turned to Irene. "It begins," she said. Coop had heard that tone before, just after she did her performance with the television. It was the same synthetic, unnatural sound which somehow managed to produce words he understood, but still seemed sterile, almost inhuman. Coop watched Angie step between the widened spaces of two stone columns and then place her back against the nearest column. For several seconds she stood there with her eyes open, and then Coop saw her close her eyes and extend both of arms to her sides. "What's she doing?" he said aloud. Coop decided he needed to get a better view of what the little girl was doing and moved to step into the circle. He felt Irene grasp his arm and pull him back. He stared at the woman and was about to say something when Irene took his right hand in her left and looked up at him.

"Do not venture into the circle alone, watch." Coop heard her voice, and then realized her lips hadn't moved. He realized that he hadn't heard what she'd said as much as he had sensed it. ***"Ah shit this is getting ridiculous,"*** he told himself. ***"I gotta be losing it."*** He felt the woman's voice brushing against his inner consciousness again. ***"You're not losing it, but I would prefer that you keep a civil tongue while you are around my niece."***

Coop's eyes widened in disbelief. She had done it again. He just saw her say something to him, but she never opened her mouth. He felt Irene quickly adjust her grip on his hand and at the same time felt a warming sensation begin to travel up his arm and into his body. He tried to withdraw his hand, but just as it happened with the little girl on the doorstep that morning, he found that he couldn't break the connection.

"Look into the circle," Irene said, her words dancing across the darkness of his thoughts like a neon ticker tape. Coop turned his head and gazed between the spaces of stones. He blinked and then swallowed and then blinked again forcing himself to concentrate. In front of a stone on the far side of the circle opposite him he saw a flame of light, a scintillating vortex of brilliant white, flickering and

pulsating as if fighting for purchase in the circle. Then Coop saw another light spring up in front of another stone, and then another and then one more until all the stones were occupied except for where Angie was standing and the two columns to her left. Coop found himself having to squint as the culmination of light was almost more than he could stand. One of the flickering lights brightened more than the others. Coop focused on the wavering intensity noticing that inside the cocoon of light an image begin to take shape. In seconds the image of an old lady, an old lady with a cane, sprang into view.

"I know her," Coop said, "That's the grandmother. I met her when-

"Yes," Irene's words whispered in his head, ***"Grandma Danielle."***

Seconds later other images began to spring into view. Coop saw the image of the elderly man he'd seen in the portrait at the house. Next to him, in front of another stone column, an image of a woman appeared.

"My mother and father," Irene's words tickled the back of his brain. As he continued to watch a vibrant band of pulsating energy streamed away from the image of the old woman with the cane and connected with the image of the elderly man, seeming to worm its way through the wavering transparency. Coop saw it connect with the other images until it was almost around the circle.

"Now we go," Coop heard Irene's voice in his head. ***"Take your place in front of the vacant stone nearest the last image to your left. Do you see him?"***

Coop craned his neck to peer between the spaces of the stone columns. Perched in front of the stone column was a man wearing clothes that Coop knew were not of this century.

"You mean the Scottish looking guy, with the kilt?" Coop said.

"Lord Cunningham, one of my ancestors," Irene's reply whispered in his head. ***"He will offer you his hand; take it to connect the circle. Do not break contact with me. Do not struggle against what you feel or what you witness. We must go."***

"Wait!" Coop said. "Couldn't Angie have just shown me this with her television act?" Irene pulled him into the circle and guided

him toward the visage of Lord Cunningham. ***"Remember, take the hand when offered, and do not break contact."***

Coop moved in front of the empty stone column and turned his head to watch Irene. She had replicated his actions except for now she was holding the hand of her niece and staring into the center of the circle. Coop watched as a brilliant band of light jumped from Angie and pierced Irene's body. In less time than it took to blink, her body began to glow from the inside out, and then she was consumed with the same flickering light as all the others. Coop knew he only had seconds to either break the connection and step out of the circle or make the connection with the image to his left. He turned his head to look at the image of the man. He was staring back at Coop, his arm outstretched, and his hand palm up. The expression on his face was one of mild curiosity, as if he was being introduced to something, or someone, he'd never seen before. ***"The guys at the station house are never going to believe this,"*** he told himself and then reached out to grasp the flickering image of the man's hand.

The change was immediate and almost overwhelming. Coop knew he had his eyes open and yet he saw nothing, but then realized that wasn't true. What he wasn't seeing was the present, the circle of stones, the grass beneath his feet, the sunlight pouring through the hole in the clouds. He wasn't seeing Irene, the little girl, the images of somebody's ancestors ringing the circle. He wasn't seeing any of that. What he was seeing was a multitude of voices, disjointed sentences flashing across his thoughts, spoken in languages he'd never heard. He was seeing places he'd never imagined, people he'd never met and he was experiencing sensations of both past and future, anger and pain, joy and hope. He tried to channel this overload of information into something more manageable, a train of logical thoughts he could handle. He knew if he didn't he'd go stark raving mad. It was as if all the information somehow sensed he was fighting against it and so the volume and the intensity responded with a harder and much more consistent push against his thoughts. The harder he fought against the images and voices, the more difficult it became and soon Coop realized he was done, it was over. He couldn't handle the constant barrage against his senses. ***"So this is what it***

feels like just before you go into a coma, he told himself, complete overload and then bam, short circuit." Seconds later, Coop saw nothing but darkness.

He soon discovered that he liked the darkness. No noise, no constant assault on his thoughts, no one bothering him. It was just him and the void. The thoughts he experienced were his own thoughts, the feelings he had belonged only to him. He thought it great. Somehow he'd managed to find his way into a peaceful corner of his thoughts, but he didn't know how he got there and he was pretty sure he didn't know how to get back. *"Why do I want to get back?"* he asked himself not really expecting an answer. *"I haven't felt this good in years."*

"Young man," a voice flickered across the calm sea of his thoughts, interrupting his solace. *"Young man, we are all waiting for you."*

Coop recognized that voice from somewhere in his past. *"Mrs. Cunningham, why are you in my head talking to me?"* Coop said.

"Love, we are all in your head talking to you, that's the fundamental problem. Trying to absorb the thoughts and experiences from generations past is not an easy task even for the most studied Gifter. You should have taken my granddaughter's advice."

"Right, so where is everybody now, and why can I only hear you?"

"You went to your own special place love, the one place you can control in your thoughts that no one, or thing can ever reach."

"And yet you found mine," Coop said, *"so it couldn't have been too special."*

"Poppycock love, I just knew where to look. My entire family unfortunately has had more practice in that area than we care to admit."

"You're talking about Irene, right?" Coop said.

"Exactly love," her reply blinked on and off in affirmation against the dark background of his thoughts.

"Okay so what now?" Coop replied.

"Well first I think we should continue this discussion in another manner." Allow me to introduce you to the first lesson a new member of the Coven must learn. I want you to look about."

"Look about?" Coop repeated, ***"What am I supposed to see? The only thing I see is darkness."***

He could have sworn he heard the old woman issue a long winded sigh.

"That is because you are using your eyes in an attempt to see what can only be seen by inner sight," she replied, ***"Clear your thoughts and use your mind to see, not your eyes. Concentrate on the darkness about you."***

Coop tried to do what the old woman asked, soon discovering that for him, what she wanted him to do was impossible. Each time he managed to void all conscious thoughts from his head, another thought of how he'd just managed to do it materialized. It became a cyclical pattern of thinking about not thinking and Coop soon realized that this was how insanity started. He was about to abandon his last attempt when a small blaze of light flared up and then vanished just as quickly as it appeared. Coop focused his concentration on the fading outline the blaze had left behind in the darkness, thinking about nothing but that flicker of light. The tiny flame of light appeared again, except this time it didn't retreat back into the darkness. He saw it begin to pulsate and grow, a blue-white swirl of iridescence that increased in intensity with each throbbing pulse. Inside the cocoon of light Coop could see a shadowy form begin to take shape and then as he continued to focus in stunned amazement he saw a young woman step out of the flame. Coop told himself the woman had to be somewhere in her late thirties or early forties, and gazed in amazement at the smooth ivory complexion of her skin, the gentle curves of her hips barely disguised by a white gown parted on the side to reveal long tapered legs. He saw her smile and then sensed the voice of the old woman in his thoughts.

"Thank you young man," she said, ***"it's not every day an eighty year old lady such as me gets mistaken for a forty year old."***

Coop realized that her lips were still frozen into a gentle smile. She was speaking to him, just not using her physical voice to do it.

"Mrs. Cunningham?" Coop said, *"You're the old woman that came to the police station that day? Can't be. You look, you look -" "Younger?"*

Coop imagined himself nodding his head.

"What you see love is my perception of myself at that moment in time when I was truly happy with who I was on the outside and on the inside. You are now effectively seeing my thoughts as I see yours. It is, as I said earlier, the first lesson a new member of the Coven must learn."

"Wait a minute," Coop said, *"I don't remember joining anything much less this Coven you just mentioned."*

He saw the young woman tilt her head down and close her eyes.

"Ah, yes, about that," Grandma Danielle's voice blazed across his thoughts, *"You have been chosen."*

"Chosen for what?"

"You along with Irene will protect Angie," the woman said. *"She carries the soul of both the Coven and the Brethren and in time will learn the powers and unfortunately the drawbacks of both. She is extremely powerful and yet even now hardly aware of the many uses of the gift. It will be up to Irene to guide her along the path of knowledge and up to you to protect her from harm."*

"Why me?" Coop said, *"How all of a sudden did I get sucked into this craziness?"*

"Because you sacrificed everything in search of the truth, and in time you will learn to believe."

"I sacrificed everything to bring her to justice!" Coop shot back.

"How else do you explain asking to be assigned to the marshal's office, and then your choice to take an unauthorized, and expensive trip to find Irene? Why would you take matters into your own hands like that detective? What really drove your decision to abandon everything and come after my granddaughter? And what about Constance?"

"What about her?" Coop said.

He sensed a softening of the old woman's voice. *"You walked away from a woman you cared about, and to justify that sacrifice*

you told yourself that you had to bring my granddaughter to justice. It is your job, your mission in life. You do what you conceitedly assume no one else is willing to do. In true martyrdom fashion, you kicked your feelings about Constance, along with a wonderful relationship, to the curb and focused on finding Irene. Try as you may to justify all of it detective you were willing to sacrifice everything to get to the truth. It's your nature love. You have inspected and analyzed everything around you your entire life, always expecting reality to come at you from multiple angles. You have always told yourself and others I might add, that after you and you alone finish an investigation of the possibilities, what comes out on the other side of your analysis will be the reality, the real truth. So detective, you wanted to know what happened that night, what really happened that night? Now you do, and your thoughts are telling you that you have to make a decision. There are no more angles of possibilities, no more facts waiting to reveal themselves. You have what you need so I must ask what you intend to do with it. I don't believe after struggling so hard to get to this point you would be willing to turn your back on what you have discovered. I don't believe you are even capable of doing so are you?"

Coop was silent. It was as if this shimmering apparition who looked nothing like the older woman he'd first met had somehow managed to rip the bandage from a wound he'd been trying to heal for years. She had introduced his true alter ego to his larger-than-life persona and was effectively calling him out. So what made Daniel Bartholomew Cooper, the youngest detective with a shield in the history of the Santa Monica police department, tick? *"The truth*, he thought, *it's always been about the truth. I will sacrifice everything to get to it."*

"Exactly my point love," the woman responded, *"Now some advice if you don't mind. We both are being summoned back to the assemblage and I would like to prepare you as best I can. Imagine the overwhelming information overload that sent you to your hiding place as a whizzing stream of cars on a highway. Instead of being a drawbridge against the flow, be a tunnel. Allow the thoughts and experiences to pass through you, and for goodness*

sake, don't try to analyze and inspect each as you are prone to do. Just let them pass. You will see little more in your thoughts than a constant stream of energy, a blue-white bolt of light. Again, let it pass through your thoughts. Once you succeed in this you will then discover that thoughts and experiences important to you will somehow peel away from the main stream of consciousness, slow down and find their way to you. Think of it as if part of your tunnel is an off ramp and you are standing at the end of the off ramp waiting. The assemblage will end quickly after we join, and you may not be addressed by name or thought, but for now your absence is holding up the process."

"Really?" Coop said. *"This is like a whizzing stream of cars on a highway and I'm an off ramp?"*

"Have you ever seen the results of a poor squirrel that unsuccessfully attempts to run across a street in front of oncoming traffic?" the woman asked.

As if on cue, the image of mashed road kill materialized in his head

"I get your point, Mrs. Cunningham," Coop said, *"lead the way."* He saw the young woman step backward into the throbbing plume of light and then watched her shadow form and the blaze of light shrink into oblivion. At the same moment Coop felt a buzzing sensation in his head, growing stronger with each breath he took, an excruciating push of pressure from inside his head. *"Not like last time,"* he told himself. *"Not going to end up being road kill."* He thought about not thinking at all, choosing to let his brain slip into the same loop-the-loop pattern as before and soon discovered that the buzzing sensation had lessened to a degree he could tolerate. Although the sensation, and the buzzing was still echoing in his head, he discovered that by clearing his mind and giving himself up to the constant barrage it passed through him just as the old woman had said. Coop began to tire, forced to evacuate his brain of all thoughts, where even the simplest word, a sentence, or even an image, proved counterintuitive. It was taking every bit of his concentration and focus to maintain and he knew that if he had to keep it up much longer he would end up back in the solace of his happy place for

good this time. As if sensing that Coop had reached his tipping point, the rumbling freight train of thoughts blazed through his head with a single burst of energy that spiked into a brief moment of intense buzzing pain and then disappeared. For several seconds Coop tried to keep his concentration, knowing that at any moment the crush of thoughts and experiences could return, but when nothing happened he realized it was over. He felt a warming sensation on his face, thought about that for a second or two, and then realized his eyes were shut. At first he opened one eye and then followed with the other staring curiously at a steel gray donut of clouds above him and a lonesome shaft of sunlight that had chosen to bathe him from head to toe. Coop sucked in a large deep breath, almost tasting the moisture in the air, and then felt a tiny trace of mist against his cheeks. It dawned on him that he was lying on his back and he struggled to sit up, most of the muscles in his arms and legs trembling, and then stared across the center of the circle. Each stone was still in place, but the only thing Coop saw was tufts of peat and moss ringing the bases of the columns, threadbare paths of trodden soil interlaced among the stones and the dim shafts of afternoon sun as they peaked over the tops of the columns on their way to the center of the circle. There were none of the shadowy forms he'd seen before.

"Detective can I help you up?" Irene said. He turned his head and stared at her. Coop thought she looked none the worse for wear and wondered how many times she'd done this exercise in weirdness. **"She must be a pro at it by now,"** he told himself. He noticed that she had her sunglasses on again and as he squinted across the circle realized that Angie wasn't there. He shook his head, rolled over to his knees then eased himself up, bending at the waist and then straightening in order to allow his sense of balance to catch up with his movements.

"Where is she?" Coop said.

Irene pointed back in the direction they had come and when Coop turned he saw Angie running across the back of the farmhouse, her yellow rubbers and red ski jacket a bouncing blur of color as she barreled around the edge of the farmhouse and disappeared.

"Uh detective," Irene said. Coop turned back to Irene

"What?" he said.

Irene held up a handkerchief. "You may want to use this." He watched her grin as she made a rubbing gesture against her nose.

He grabbed the handkerchief and brought it to his nose. When he pulled the handkerchief away he saw crisp red swatches of blood. Coop placed the handkerchief back to his nose and held it there.

"Ah shit," he said, "haven't had a nose bleed in years."

"Not since you took a hardball right in the nose during that Little League championship game when you were eight, right?" Irene said as she turned and walked away.

"Right," Coop said. He inspected the handkerchief again. The blood stains were getting fainter. What Irene said hit him and he tore his attention away from the handkerchief and glared at her. "Would you for the love of God, stay outta my head?"

The early shadows of nightfall began to take form as they walked along the path in silence. Coop remained quiet, sensing that she wanted to ask, that she wanted him to tell her what he was going to do, but the more he thought about it the more he realized he had no clue what he was going to do. He knew any attempts at logic or reasoning would send him down a rabbit hole, and yet blind acceptance of what he'd just experienced could very well do the same only worse. "*I need some time to think about this,*" he kept telling himself, "*just a little bit of time to sort this all out.*" He followed Irene into the house and then stopped at the dining room and eased into the same cloth bound chair he'd sat in earlier, choosing to let his mind wander where it wanted to go, focusing on nothing and everything at the same time, a trick that had served him well in the past. Irene appeared from the double door entrance on the opposite of the dining room carrying a tray holding a tea pot and a pair of mugs.

"I thought you'd like some tea. Something to soothe the nerves so to speak," she said.

Coop watched her drape a tea bag into an empty mug, douse it with steaming hot water and then raise the saucer and mug with both hands toward him. He took the saucer, placed it on the table in front of him and then leaned back into the chair. "So, Miss Cunningham, if