

The Power of the Three is the third installment of The Gifter's Ring Saga, a story of a family unknowingly possessing the ability to see and destroy evil walking among the living. In The Power of the Three the family chooses to take the fight to the Brethren sacrificing any advantage they may have in order to take back what was stolen.

The Power of The Three

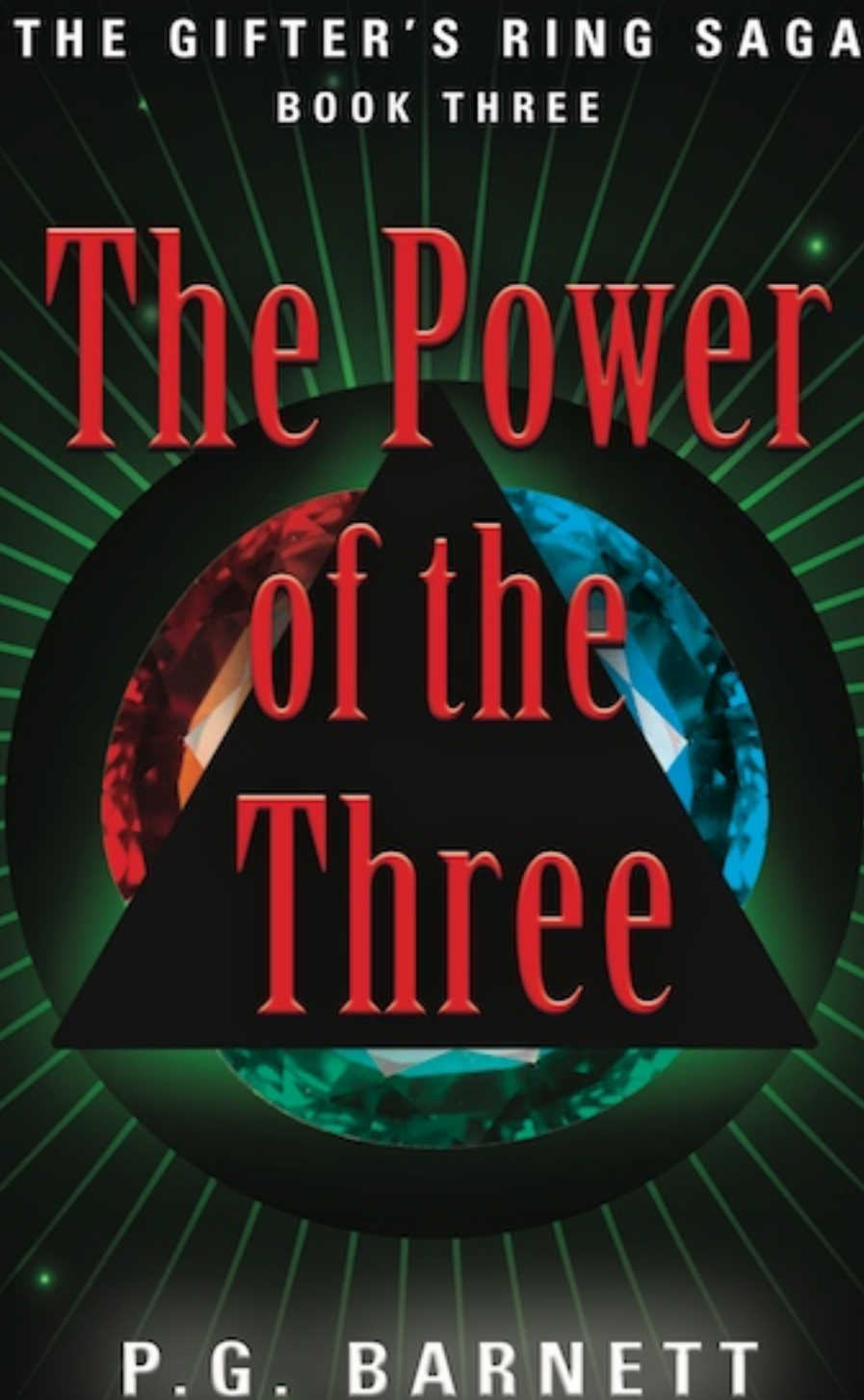
by P.G. Barnett

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THE GIFTER'S RING SAGA
BOOK THREE



The Power
of the
Three

P. G. BARNETT

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Where Bad Things Happened

At eleven fifty-nine on the evening of November 18 David Henry Cunningham was born. Forty-two seconds later his half-sister exited the same womb. Although his half-sister, Stacie, chose to test her lung capacity with long periods of wailing as she witnessed strange and foreign images, David did not. He had seen it before. Both he and his sister had been connected to their mother in the same traditional fashion, but David had a special connection. He saw what she saw, only not with his eyes. As he incubated he saw the images of what his mother saw in his thoughts, and although he didn't understand them, he catalogued each image in his memory. It wasn't until his mother's body served the eviction notice that David realized he'd traded a constricted but comfortable world of darkness for a much less restrictive but similar world of darkness. Brought into the land of the living blind, David didn't see the world as others did, but his ailment never prevented him from being able to see. The images presented to him by his mother were confusing and difficult to understand, but they provided him self-awareness, an understanding that the tiny rosy-cheeked, gray-eyed infant he was looking at, was himself. He soon learned to embrace the fact that as long as he was connected to any member of the family, a mere touch of his tiny hand against an arm or a shoulder, he could see. It was a different way of looking at things, but it soon became normal for him. Still, this unique vision had taken David several years to master, and when he wasn't connected, when his mother placed him in his crib, or laid him in his play pen, he returned to a world of darkness, left to ponder the images, both new and old. There were other things David saw when he was connected to his mother, things she wasn't seeing with her eyes, things that seemed to drift from her unconscious thought. On his tenth birthday images began to come to him regardless of whether or not he made contact with a family member. When they came, he saw strange and

frightening scenes of places he had never been, people he did not know, things happening beyond comprehension. David had no idea where the images were coming from and more importantly why he was seeing them, but a small spark of understanding inside told him there would come a time when what he saw would be of grave importance. There was something else he learned when the visions started. The sessions were insensitive to his normal routine, cared little for the fact he was a ten-year-old boy trying to live a normal childhood. Like a pesky neighbor showing up on a doorstep with a six-pack and hours to waste, they would rush into his head at any time of the day or night. They never penciled in a date or time, never set an appointment. And they always came in the same way; time stopped for David and for however long it took, the session was in control. This day was no different, and as usual he was forced to concentrate on nothing but the images whirling in his thoughts.

"David?"

David frowned. One of the most troubling things about these sessions was knowing when they were done with him and when they weren't. He thought about it for a moment asking himself if he'd ever experienced one where he'd heard a conversation.

"David?"

After chewing on it a couple of seconds he realized he'd never had a session where he'd heard a conversation.

"David Henry Cunningham, are you not paying attention?"

David catalogued the memories so he could analyze them later and responded, his voice apologetic.

"I'm sorry, Miss Ady, I really am. I just kinda spaced out for a minute."

He heard the unmistakable laugh of his sister and felt a flush of heat crawling up his neck, spearing his cheeks.

"I told you, you should have made him take his sunglasses off, Miss Ady," Stace quipped. "I betcha he's been sleeping the whole time."

"Bite my..."

"David, you know I won't tolerate that kind of language. Now we've got about fifteen minutes before we break for lunch, so let's

finish up this lesson and then you can both have some time to yourselves. Yesterday was national Pi day. What is Pi?"

David was silent. This last session had been so intense, so real that he couldn't put it away as he had all the others. Unlike other times when he'd been provided glimpses of the past, this seemed to be a future event with some serious consequences, with people dying. This was not like the times when he'd seen they were getting a new postal carrier, or the time he'd seen his mother place her cell phone on top of the car as she loaded groceries and then drove off without retrieving her phone. This was something large, something bigger than national Pi day, something much bigger and much more threatening. David conceded to himself that he was not going to be able to concentrate on anything else until he found an answer.

"Something you eat after a meal?" he replied.

He heard Stacie giggle and smiled.

"Very funny, Mr. Cunningham," Ady replied, "but certainly not very original. I feel you have your mother's penchant for sarcastic humor and though I find it an endearing quality in her it is not something which I expect to hear from you."

"Yes ma'am, sorry."

David heard Ady expel a long breath and he chose to clasp his hands together on top of his desk and roll his thumbs back and forth as he waited.

Ady said, "Okay you two, I believe this home school session is over for today."

"As in like done for the rest of the day?" his sister blurted.

"Yes. You've both been working rather hard and I believe today should be spent outside on the grounds enjoying the fresh air and the sunshine. We can resume your studies tomorrow."

"Don't have to tell me twice," David muttered. He twisted in the chair until his legs were free and extended his right arm and held it in place.

"Come on Chance, let's blow this joint."

He heard the rapid clicking of paws tick tacking across the hardwood floor and then felt the familiar cold nose. Chance nudged his

arm then slid her head beneath his hand and as he scratched behind her ears he stood and let his hand slide down until he found the grip.

"Okay girl, after you," David said.

"Hey, wait for me," Stacie called.

Once outside, David came to the realization that he loved the outdoors, especially today. He knew he needed to be soaking up the sun, listening to his sister while she chatted on forever about nothing, and tuning her out so he could concentrate on things. He loved days like this, but for some reason Stacie wasn't talking, and David had a sneaking suspicion that she had something else on her mind aside from the list of normal distractions. He let Chance lead him to a large brick and stone sunken patio just behind the house, and after easing his way down the steps, he settled into a cushioned chair nearest a large fire pit. David released his grip, leaned back and tilted his neck allowing the sun to warm his face. As was the normal routine, Chance chose a place at his feet and David was content to sit and think about nothing. When the seconds of silence turned into minutes of strained quiet, David guessed either Stacie wanted a more serious discussion or she'd left the minute he sat down. He leaned forward searching with his hands until he found the back of Chance's head.

"Where is she, girl? Show me."

When the image of his sister appeared in his head, she was sitting in one of the patio chairs next to him, her arms crossed, her face twisted into an expression of concern.

He watched her drop her hand to her lap as she pursed her lips to form a question.

"You had one just a minute ago, didn't you? That's why you were so quiet. You were having another vision, right?"

David shook his head. "Not another, the same one. I keep having the same one over and over. Each time I get to see a little bit more, but never enough to understand what's going on. Oh and by the way, your blouse looks yellow to Chance. I'm guessing it's not, right?"

"It's red, silly."

David nodded. "She doesn't see reds and greens very well, but she could probably find a quarter in the dark if the moon was shining."

He watched his sister return a finger to her mouth.

"So what's stopping you from using me? It wouldn't be the first time you know."

David frowned.

"I never told you about my..."

"You didn't have to. Every time you grabbed my hand or laid your hand on my shoulder I felt it. It was like you and I were..."

"Connected?"

David watched as she nodded her head.

"Yeah, connected. It was like you and I were in the same brain, sharing the same thoughts, and I knew it when you were there."

"Kinda creepy knowing that your older brother is inside your head, right?"

"Older by forty-two seconds and I'm perfectly willing to smack you right across the face if you try to go somewhere you shouldn't."

David laughed and released his grip on Chance, content to be plunged into a familiar world of darkness. He squirmed his back and shoulders into a more comfortable position on the cushion of the chair and tilted his head until he felt the warmth of the sun against his face.

"So this dream..."

"It's not a dream."

In his mind he pictured his sister rolling her eyes at him.

"Fine, this vision you keep having. Do you think it's something that's really going to happen?"

"Not sure."

"We need to talk to Mom about it, David. That's what we need to do."

David sighed and shook his head.

"And tell her what? That I'm having dreams about bon fires that move and a dead girl in a glass bubble? That somebody dies? You want me to tell her that my sister can make things move just by thinking about it?"

David heard Stacie gasp.

"How do you..."

David smiled and laced the fingers of both hands behind his head as he continued to offer his face to the warming rays of the sun.

"You keep forgetting that I use Chance to see things. I've seen plenty of times when you were too lazy to walk across your bedroom to get a book."

"You never said anything."

"And you never said anything about what's going on with me either, so I guess we're even."

"We need to tell Mom, David. Maybe she can help us understand what's happening."

David released his grip and let his hands fall to the arms of the chair. He shook his head.

"Don't think so."

"What about Aunt Irene? Maybe we could talk to her about it."

"Have you listened to Mom and Aunt Irene when they're together, Stace? One thing about being blind is that my other senses are working overtime to compensate. I hear them when they think I can't and it's always the same thing. Aunt Irene keeps telling Mom it's been ten years since Angie disappeared and that as bad as that day was, Mom needs to move on with her life."

"Is this the same Angie you keep telling me about?"

David nodded his head.

"Yeap, and she disappeared on the same day our father left. She was only five years old when she disappeared. It was just before you and I were born."

"How? Did she go with him?"

David frowned, "If I knew that we wouldn't be talking about it, would we?"

David heard the frame of a patio chair creak. When Stacie spoke he could tell she was standing.

"You better check that attitude of yours, David Henry. I'm just searching for clues just like you."

David nodded.

"I know, sis, come on sit down, will ya?"

He heard the chair creak again.

"The thing is Stace, there's something else, something that Mom refuses to talk about around us, something she won't let anybody, not Uncle Coop or Aunt Irene or Miss Ady, talk about around us. It's like

the entire family is hiding something. You remember when Miss Ady tried to tell us about that guy Mom visits at the cemetery?"

"You mean Ott?"

"How'd you know that?"

"I was there remember? I did the same thing you did and acted like I didn't hear a thing."

"Smart girl. Anyway remember how fast Mom shut her down? She was standing there almost yelling at Miss Ady telling her that she didn't need to upset us with such a terrible story. Remember that?"

"Yeah and wasn't that the night we got to stay up late and watch *Return of the Zombie Aliens*?"

"My point exactly. What could be more horrible than *Return of the Zombie Aliens*?"

"Nothing," Stacie shot back. "Okay, point made. So genius, what now? Something's going to happen and it seems that I'm not the only one sitting here in the dark."

"Not funny, Stace," David responded.

"Not trying to be funny big brother, but I have to call it like I see it."

"Butt face," David retorted.

"Pimple head," Stacie shot back.

"I love you too, sis," David replied with a snort of laughter.

"I know you do, but you haven't answered my question. What are we going to do?"

"We have to investigate the situation, assess the situation, adapt to the situation, and overcome the situation."

"Really David, really?" Stacie shot back. "You've been listening to another Matthew Livingston audio book again?"

"Hey, if he can do it we can do it."

"Fine, but I can't be Matthew Livingston. I'm a girl, remember?"

"Whatever, Stace. I'll be Matthew, you can be Friday."

"Friday? As in Friday Barnes?"

"One and the same," David replied.

"She is so super cool and a lot smarter than Matthew Livingston... you know that, right?"

"Whatever you say, sis. Let's go in the house and get some lunch. Then we plan our next steps. I don't know how much time we have but we need to be ready for it when it comes."

"Whatever it actually is," Stacie retorted.

As was the case in David's family, lunch was often taken with them all together in the kitchen dining area. Today he and Stacie sat at the table with Ady and his mother each of them lost in thought, the blaring sounds of silence filling the room. As had happened on other days, Stacie attempted to strike up a conversation about some new television series but as always the banalities along with the discussion died and the silence would again fill the void. Making matters worse was the inscrutable feeling David had that he was the cause of his families' discomfort. He could see the apprehensive looks on their faces with the aid of either his sister or Chance. They didn't know he could see the way they looked at him as they turned away as if ashamed or embarrassed. David knew it wasn't his looks that turned them away. It was something they all seemed to be feeling inside. When he was younger he had asked them why they didn't love him. He had asked them what was so wrong with him that made them act like they did and each time the answer was always the same.

"It's not you David, it's me, it's us. I love you; we love you more than life itself. One day you will understand."

David wasn't so sure he would ever understand, but two things he knew for sure. His sister Stacie understood how he felt, and more important, he could count on her to stand by his side. As was the case today, he and his sister were the last ones at the table. Ady and his mother had rushed to eat and then left, quick to rid themselves of the feelings he knew they were experiencing. For several moments he and Stacie sat in silence each in turn taking a few last bites of a sandwich or gulping down the last dregs of lemonade Ady had prepared for them. David was about to push away from the table when he heard the phone in the living room warble.

"So, what are our next steps?" Stacie whispered.

David raised his hand, palm out, "Hang on, I want to hear this."

"Hear what... the phone conversation? David, the phone's in the living room on the other side of the house. I barely heard it ring. How..."

"God Stace, will you just shut up for a minute? I may be blind but I'm not deaf."

He heard someone pick up the telephone receiver and then Ady's voice, *"Cunningham residence, may I help you? Oh, hello detective, how is everything going? Uh huh. Really? That's wonderful. After all these years it has finally been settled. Uh huh, yes, I'm sure Melissa will be relieved to hear it. Yes, I will let her know. What's that? They're fine. No, nothing yet, although they both seem a little distracted lately. I agree and that's why we hope to see you soon. So, when will you and your lovely wife be coming home? Excellent, I'll let her know. Have a safe flight and we'll see you Friday. Goodbye, detective."*

David hissed at Stacie, "What day is this?"

"Tuesday."

David brought a finger to his lips, "Shush."

He heard his mother speak, *"So?"*

"The case against Irene has finally been dropped," Ady replied. *"All charges, including discharging a weapon in a government building."*

"About damned time. At least one of us can get on with their life. So when are they coming home?"

"He said they'd be back this Friday."

"Good. Maybe things will get back to normal around here. I'm going to spend some time with Ott. You want to come along?"

"No, you go. It is not of my custom to..."

"I know," his mother interrupted, *"It's not your belief to idolize the death of another human being by standing in front of a tombstone. I get it. I'm just going to pay my respects, okay?"*

"As you wish."

"Is he still blaming himself?"

"Is Coop blaming himself for her disappearance? Do you not mean is he blaming himself in the same manner you're blaming

yourself and Irene is blaming herself? Is that what you mean by your question?"

"I just meant..."

"I know what you meant, Melissa. This must stop. When was the last time you even spoke to Coop or your sister about what happened? When was the last time you tried to comfort them; tried to help them cope with what happened? You don't and they won't come to you about it. They'd rather keep their distance, suffering as it eats away at them than approach you with their pain. This will destroy you if you let it. Is that what you wish to happen?"

David listened to several seconds of silence and then heard his mother's voice, a faint whisper echoing down the hallway from the living room.

"No."

"Then I suggest you do something about it before it's too late for all of us. And another thing. The children have a right to know."

"They're just kids, for God's sake! They won't be able to understand all of this; hell, even I don't understand all of this! They need to be protected from it!"

"And you wish to protect them by keeping them unaware of the danger?"

"Ady, stop it. I will not stand here and have you preach to me about how to take care of my own children. I'm going to pay Ott a visit, and when I get back we can discuss this or not... I don't really care."

"As you wish."

David heard the front door open and slam shut and listened to soft footsteps as Ady returned to the kitchen. He felt along the table until he found his lemonade, brought it to his lips and drained the glass as Ady walked in. When she spoke her voice was strained, and based on what David had just heard he guessed she was emotionally shaken.

"Stacie, are you and David finished with your meals?"

David returned his glass to the table and nodded.

"Yes Miss Ady, we're done," Stacie replied. "Can we go back outside?"

David felt his sister's fingers curl around the top of his hand and less than a second later Ady's image presented itself in the darkness of his thoughts. Today was not the first time he'd seen Ady, either through the eyes of Chance or his sister. Though the young woman had changed very little over the years, he always found himself a bit uncomfortable and taken aback when he saw the sallow, puckered socket where her left eye should have been, and the scars, angry red rivulets of acid burned flesh, cascading from her checks to the side of neck. It was the one story his mother would let her tell, how she was attacked as a child on her way to school, and then his mother would intervene and he would be left pondering the gaps, wondering how this young woman and his mother met, what drew them together.

"Yes, you may, but do not wander, and stay close to the house. I'll call for you when it is time to come in."

David felt Stacie's grip tighten around his hand and reached down beside his chair.

"Come on, Chance," he said and waited until the dog brushed against his hand and he found the handle of the grip.

With Chance in tow Stacie and David hurried across the patio to the steps which would take them down to the sunken patio and fire pit. Sitting in the same deck chairs as earlier in the morning, Stacie released her grip on David and began to pepper him with questions.

"Okay, spill it, big brother. What did you hear?"

"Hang on, hang on," David replied, "let me get my thoughts together."

With his aunt and uncle coming back, David realized he and his sister only had a couple of days to unravel this conundrum. Once his uncle got back, he and Stacie would be smothered with the man's attention, each of their comings and goings micromanaged as if David and Stacie were prisoners and Coop was the warden. David thought about what Miss Ady had said to his mother about Detective Cooper blaming himself. Until overhearing their conversation, David had never known his uncle was a detective.

"Well?" Stacie snapped at him.

"Did you know that Uncle Cooper is a detective of some kind?"

He told himself that he would have had to be a complete drooling idiot not to pick up on his sister's sarcasm when she replied.

"Oh wow, Davy. There you have it, the answer to all our riddles. That explains how I can move things just by thinking about it, and you and your stupid visions. It's because our uncle is a detective. Case solved."

"Don't call me Davy, and stop being such a smarty pants and listen to me. He blames himself about something that happened when our sister disappeared. Miss Ady said so."

"Big deal."

David shook his head.

"You just don't get it do you, Stace? That's why he's all over us when he's here. That's why he never lets us out of his sight except to go to the bathroom. He's trying to make up for some mistake he made in the past, a mistake he made when our sister disappeared."

Alone in the darkness of his own thoughts David listened to his sister's breathing, heard the incessant chirping of meadowlarks as they flitted about in the branches of oak trees ringing the patio, and then heard her exhale and draw in a breath to speak.

"You know this for sure? You heard Miss Ady say it just like that?"

David nodded, "Pretty much. She said he's still blaming himself for her disappearance. And she also told Mom that you and I have the right to know because of the danger."

"Right to know what?"

David shook his head again.

"Not sure. Mom got really pissed at her and then walked out of the house. She said she was going to see that guy at the cemetery..."

"Ott?"

"Yeah, that's right. She was going to pay him a visit she said."

David listened to the light tap, tap, tap of his sister's nails against her teeth. It was an unconscious habit when lost in thought. He waited, knowing that when the tapping stopped his sister would start talking. Seconds later, he heard the tapping stop and heard her draw in a deep breath.

"I have an idea."

"Oh Lord," David groaned, "this is probably not going to turn out good."

"Very funny, Mr. Wisenheimer. Listen to me. What's the one place Uncle Coop never lets us go near?"

"What are you talking about, Stace?"

"Come on lunkhead, think. Remember last summer when we went camping? Remember how Uncle Coop drove the cart around the entire place and I asked him to take us down that one trail and he said no. Remember what he said?"

"Not really."

David heard his sister expel a large breath.

"Wow, you really are clueless. And you want to be Matthew Livingston?"

"Stuff it sis, and get to the point," David growled.

"Fine. He said no one goes down that trail because it's too dangerous and that bad things could happen in the punch bowl."

For several seconds David mulled over her comment, trying to capture the memories of that day so he could analyze each fragment as he played out the moment like a slow motion video.

"Stace, you're on to something," he replied, "but is it possible that Uncle Coop said something else? Could he have said bad things happened in the punch bowl? Happened, not could happen? Could he have said something happened in the punch bowl and that's why nobody wants to talk about it?"

"I don't know I guess he could have."

David shrugged his shoulders, "So you think we should go and have a look for ourselves?"

"Yep, I do. You said Uncle Coop and Aunt Irene are coming back at the end of the week, right?"

David nodded his head. "Miss Ady said she'd see them this Friday."

"Okay, Mom's in town visiting her pal Ott, and Miss Ady probably won't come looking for us for hours so I'm guessing we've got time to have us a little adventure."

David remained silent. Everything his sister said made perfect sense, but when he tied what his uncle had said that day to what Miss

Ady said to his mother this morning David wasn't so sure he wanted to rush into things without a little more preparation. His sister was like that, always blasting a path through obstacles, rushing headlong into the breach without a ghost of a plan and yet somehow she always managed to come out unscathed. David wasn't a throw-caution-to-the-wind kind of boy even though there had been several times when he'd allowed his sister to pull him along the razor's edge. He'd shared moments with her, exhilarating rushes of adrenalin and euphoric giddiness, but he'd always known that consequences were associated with one of her schemes and sometimes the bad consequences could be very bad. He was starting to think that his sister's plan of action might have some of those bad consequences tied to it.

"What's the matter, Davy? You scared?"

"I want to know what's going on as bad as you do Stace, but I don't know what we're going to find. This could get very ugly very fast."

"You never will know if you keep sitting there."

"Yeah, but I'm not sure we'll be able to handle it if we do find something."

David heard Stacie's chair emit a succession of popping creaks.

"Tell you what big brother, you just stay here in your dark happy place, I'm going to go find some answers."

David extended his right arm out in front of him and twisted his hand palm up. "Hang on, Stace. I'll go, but you have to promise me that if things start to get weird we go home."

He felt his sister grasp his hand and a picture of his own face sprang out of the darkness of his thoughts. For a brief moment his sister kept her gaze focused on his face, allowing him a unique advantage of getting to see his expression masked by a pair of sunglasses and then she turned away and focused on the path and the stairs that would take them up and out of the patio.

"Let's go, Chance," David called as he and sister continued up the stairs.

The decision to take one of the golf carts was unspoken between the two of them as they crossed the wide, crushed gravel driveway to a shed opposite the house. David stood, his hand against the back of Chance's neck, watching as Stacie pushed aside the shed's sliding door,

stepped in and hopped into the front seat. She eased the cart out and stopped alongside David and then patted the bench seat

"All aboard."

David shook his head. With Chance in tow he crossed in front of the cart and stopped at the driver's side. He reached out and placed his hand on the steering wheel. "Don't think so, sis. The last time you drove we almost ended up wrapped around a tree. Slide over."

"Great," Stacie muttered as she slid along the bench seat. "This ought to be fun, tooling around the compound in a golf cart driven by a blind guy."

David released his grip on Chance and then slid beneath the wheel. Clutching the steering wheel with both hands, he positioned his foot just above the accelerator pedal.

"Chance get in back, and you dear sister of mine remember to keep contact with me and your eyes on the road, or we'll end up in a ditch."

"Fine," Stacie replied as she rested her hand on David's shoulder, "you got this?"

"Yep."

"Okay then let's go, Mario."

David pushed the pedal with the top of this tennis shoe and the cart lurched forward. He made a broad sweeping turn across the driveway and then steered in the direction of one of the many trails that ran throughout the compound. For as long as he could remember his aunt and uncle had provided both he and Stacie opportunities to get up close and personal with the wonders of nature. During the winter it was ripping along the trails atop snowmobiles, plumes of snow and ice spewing into the air, the frigid crush of chilled air stinging their cheeks. During the summer it was golf cart excursions along tar macadam trails. He remembered the scent of fresh tar and campfires and smores as night fell and the sounds of nocturnal creatures stirring into action. David nursed the cart along, trying to catch the familiar scents of the road and then remembered the work crews wouldn't be repaving the trails for at least a couple of months. As he guided the cart around a tight turn, the image of the road shifted to a large clump of sagebrush and a clump of trees. David bit his lip as he yanked his foot away from the accelerator pedal and mashed the brake, bringing

the cart to a lurching halt. He heard Chance yelp in surprise and felt Stacie pull her hand away. The image of the sagebrush and trees disappeared, replaced with his familiar world of darkness as his sister's shout of angered surprise reverberated into his ear canal sending a spike of pain to his forehead.

"What the heck are you doing, David?"

David tried to ease the pain in his head away with a few gentle rubs of his fingers and then replied, "The better question is, what the heck are you doing? You want to get us killed? What's so important about those trees that you had to take your eyes off the trail?"

When his sister failed to reply with her usual rapier wit, David smiled and pawed the edge of the bench seat until he brushed against the side of her jeans. He rested his fingertips against the side of her leg and said, "Okay show me, sis."

He had to admit it. What had captivated his sister's attention was certainly a sight to see. David watched in amazement as a spotted doe moved through the brush, her natural coat of camouflage almost masking her from sight. She was leading a pair of newborns, their gangly and tentative steps belying their recent arrival to the woods.

"Aren't they so cute?" Stacie breathed.

"Yeah, they are, but can we focus on what we're doing here?"

"Right, sorry."

David felt Stacie's hand on his shoulder again, then saw the image in his thoughts shift from the bevy of deer back to the trail. He steered the cart to the center of the trail and focused on what his sister was showing him until they came to a fork. David stopped the cart, content to let Stacie gaze at the trail on the left side. He and his sister both knew where that trail would take them. He thought of the gentle sloping clearings of flowers and grass and tall copses of trees and waterfalls fed by melting winter snows trickling into a large lake. He and Stacie called it Picnic World. Stacie eased her gaze away from the left side of the fork and stared at the trail to the right. This was the path he and Stacie intended to take today. It was the trail their aunt and uncle told them they must never ever take. It was the trail that would take them to the punch bowl where something bad had happened.

David squeezed the steering wheel with both hands until his fingers began to cramp.

"You sure you want to do this?"

"Sure," Stacie replied. "What could go wrong?"

David sensed that his sister's bravado was deteriorating more and more with each passing second. Almost in violent agreement with her, he felt like turning the cart around and going home, but something inside was urging him to continue. He had a longing to understand, a need to fill in the gaps and that, above all, was what spurred him on.

"Famous last words," he replied as he depressed the accelerator with his foot and steered the cart toward the trail. The path plunged into a sharp decline and David soon realized he could no longer use the accelerator and that he had to keep his foot on the brake. They continued down the trail, with David pressing on the brake then releasing it until they picked up too much speed and pressed the brake again. The decline worsened, forcing David to apply more pressure and when he heard a metallic screech from somewhere beneath the cart and smelled the faint odor of heated metal he realized that what could go wrong had just gone wrong.

"Stacie, don't take your eyes off the path, but we're going to have to jump," David said, trying to remain calm.

"What? Are you crazy?"

"Do you hear that, sis? That's the sound of the brakes about burn up and when they go we'll take off like a rocket to the bottom of this trail. We have to jump now."

"Oh my gawd David Henry, why do you have go Indiana Jones on me?"

"What the heck are you talking about?"

Stacie began slapping his hands away from the steering wheel with her free hand and then grasped the wheel.

"Here, give me the wheel and pay attention. This is how Friday Barnes would do it."

David dropped his hands away from the steering wheel and placed a hand on Stacie's pant leg. The image shifted away from the trail to a deep culvert running along the right side. He felt his sister's foot mash the top of his tennis shoe forcing his foot and the brake pedal all the

way to the floor. The cart slowed and Stacie spun the steering wheel toward the edge of the trail, chose the safest angle of decent into the culvert, and allowed the cart and gravity to do the rest. They swooped down the culvert wall, inched up the other side of the ravine, and then rolled backward until the back of the cart impacted the opposite side and the cart shuddered to a stop. As soon as the cart came to rest Chance bounded from the back seat and David and Stacie watched her scamper up the side of the ravine and disappear from sight. Hearing her continued barking growing fainter with each passing minute David guessed the dog had decided to continue down the trail without the two of them.

"Chance!" David called. "Wait up, girl."

"I think she's on a mission too, David."

David let out a long breath of air.

"You think we can get this thing turned around and get it back up the trail?"

"Yeah, we probably can. You thinking about going home?"

David nodded his head. "Yeah."

"What about why we're here, David? We've come this far, and when Mom finds out, cause she always does, we're going to get grounded till we die. I'm not doing the time if I don't do the crime."

David laughed and then fell silent.

"I'm sure we can walk the rest of the way," Stacie coaxed. "It can't be too far."

"Okay, but we take a quick look, and if we don't find anything we turn around get this cart back on the trail and go home. Deal?"

"Deal."

David swung his legs to the ground and eased himself out of the cart, waiting until his sister moved around and grasped his right hand in her left. Together they struggled up the ravine to the trail and began to walk. He heard Chance's continued barking as they traveled down the trail, both of them forced to lean back to counter the effects of the sharp incline. They'd only been walking for about fifteen or twenty minutes when they reached the bottom of the incline. The problem was that not only did they reach the bottom of the incline but they reached the end of the trail as well. Rounding a small curve David spotted

Chance running from one side of the trail to the other in front of a gigantic circular opening gouged out of the mountain wall. Across the opening, recessed back from the walls hung a pair of heavy looking metal grates, square at the bottom and round at the top, fashioned in such a way that it would be impossible to wedge between the squares of the grates, around the edges, over the top or beneath the bottom. As they neared Chance scampered away from the opening and met them, then turned and scampered back, but this time she stopped just inside the recessed wall of the opening and sat, her gaze fixed on something along the side of the wall.

He and Stacie walked over to Chance and David released his grip on Stacie's hand and placed his hand on the back of the dog's neck.

"So what do you see, girl?"

The image of a keypad sprang up in David's mind and beneath the keypad David saw a large sign. Although the paint had been weathered by years of changing seasons, David could make out a yellow triangle with a lightning bolt in the center. He guessed the letters below the emblem were supposed to be in red, but using Chance to see things sometimes had its disadvantages. At least he could make out the words.

He heard Stacie walking toward him in the direction of the gates, "Wonder if these things are locked."

"Stacie, stop!" David screamed. "Don't touch it! The gates are electrified!"

David spun away from the console and yanked Chance around, knowing the dog would focus on Stacie and watched his sister withdraw her hand and let her arm fall to her side. She turned and faced him, and then smiled, a beleaguered expression of relief pasted on her face.

"Good thing you paid attention during reading lessons, big brother."

"Very funny. Now get over here and help me figure this out."

Stacie joined him and examined the keypad and the warning sign, reading the words aloud.

"You are on private property! Any unauthorized access to this area is strictly forbidden by the owner. This gate and others on the

property are electrified. A single discharge will result in death. Proceed at your own risk."

"Wow," David muttered, "you think Mom knows about this?"

"Really David? I think Uncle Coop wanted to make sure we never came here. I bet he's the one that had this thing built and put this warning here."

"Dang, okay see the keypad? Got to be some kind of code that will deactivate the fence, maybe even unlock the gate."

"You are such a genius sometimes, big brother. I'm constantly amazed."

"You want to drop the sarcasm, sassy mouth?"

"Look, no duh it's a keypad. I don't suppose you have the secret code in your back pocket, do you?"

David knew his sister was right. Without the proper key code this adventure was officially over, but something inside of him kept telling it wasn't over. Something was telling him to focus, focus hard on the millions of bits of information he'd gleaned from his mother, Uncle Coop, and Aunt Irene. Something was telling him to focus on it because it was there and now he needed to find it, use it. It was a number; not just a number but an important number; a number which opened doors and unlocked gates, but it was more important than that. It had meaning, held a special place in the memories of his family. It was constantly used so it, so she, would never be forgotten.

"Try one, one, one, eight," David whispered.

He concentrated on his sister's index finger as she keyed in each digit, saw a light blink at the bottom of the keypad, and then seconds later heard the whine of electric motors as they spun up, unseen in the depths of the mountain walls. David eased Chance around in the direction of the sound, and watched the metal grates as they split in the center then disappeared into channels that were chiseled out on each side of the tunnel.

When the gates lumbered to a stop David stood in silence, his hand on the back of Chance's neck, staring into the darkness of the corridor. He sensed his sister standing by his side, released his hold on Chance, and took her hand in his.

"I don't even want to know how you did that."

David laughed. "Don't worry, Stace. A magician never reveals his tricks."

Using his sister's vision as she peered into the blackened depths of the corridor, David muttered a warning to Chance.

"Now stay with us this time, girl. Don't go running off. There's no telling what we're going to find."

Chance barked and then leaned against David's leg as if attempting to assure him that she wasn't going anywhere this time.

"Going to be slow going in the dark, but at least we have Chance," David said. "If there's anything in there she'll see it before we do."

"You're not giving me the warm and fuzzies, big brother."

David tugged at her hand and stepped into the corridor choosing to walk in the center of the tunnel and into the darkness, his constant companion. They had only traveled about twenty feet when a set of lights above them flickered on bathing them in harsh fluorescent light. When Stacie looked up David saw a pair of lights recessed in the ceiling of the tunnel above him. He frowned as Stacie refocused her attention on the corridor. Beyond the last glimmer of light lay more darkness.

"This doesn't make any sense," he wondered aloud.

"Yeah, one measly pair of lights to light up this entire tunnel?" his sister replied. "What were they thinking?"

David shrugged his shoulders and moved forward, and again, at about fifteen paces another pair of lights flickered on above them.

"Okay, I get it now," David announced. "The lights are attached to motion sensors. I bet if we keep walking another fifteen or twenty feet another set is going to come on."

"Mom must have spent a bazillion dollars on this place," his sister replied as they continued walking and another set of lights flickered to life above them.

"Guess so, but why?"

"That's what we're trying to figure out remember?"

David nodded and kept walking, Chance never far from his side, his sister's hand in his. When they reached the end of the corridor, they stopped. Through Stacie's eyes David saw an immense clearing void of trees but brimming with unruly patches of sagebrush grass. It seemed

lifeless, almost ancient to David. His sister was scanning the mountain walls and David saw swaths of blue and green lichen, and massive patches of moss blanketed by shade in several areas. Stacie shifted her gaze and that's when he saw something in the center of the clearing, almost in the bull's eye center. David knew that nature had taken no part in the construct of what he and Stacie were looking at.

"You see it?" he asked to no one in particular, because he knew Chance and Stacie were both seeing what he saw. It was how the arrangement worked.

"Yeah," Stacie whispered, "let's check it out."

Someone, and David assumed it had been his mother, had seen to it to have a similar tarmac trail constructed from the edge of the tunnel straight across the clearing to the center. As they walked closer, it was Chance and David who first recognized the overpowering stench of rotting flesh. Chance whimpered but continued to walk alongside while David gagged and pinched his nostrils together.

"Oh my Gawd, that's awful," David moaned, covering his mouth. He stifled an attempt to vomit, and then just as quick moved his hand back up to pinch his nostrils together. When he heard nothing from his sister he asked, "You can't smell that?"

"Yeah, but my sense of smell isn't as good as yours is, remember? It's bad, well it's really bad, but I can handle it. Come on, we're almost there."

As they neared the strange edifice resting in the center of the clearing David and his sister passed a small metal pole jutting up from the side of the trail. Atop the pole was a square metal box that David thought resembled a mailbox of some kind, but he knew that was crazy. There was no way his mother would take mail delivery in this clearing. He stopped and pulled Stacie back to him.

"That pole we passed? We need to take a look at it."

He watched as Stacie shifted her gaze in the direction of the pole, and together they stepped back to face it and stopped. David found a small handle on the front flap of the box and pulled it back toward his stomach. As the flap traveled perpendicular to the trail, another keypad, positioned flat on a metal looking tray, slid into view.

"Well, well, well," David exclaimed, "looks like someone's got a touch of the heebie jeebies going on here."

David took a wild guess and keyed in the four digit code he had used at the gate, saw a red light flicker off and then back on. He frowned and tried the same code again, this time choosing to key the code in backward. The red light flickered off and a light beneath it flickered green and then shined steady. David closed the box with an upward flip of his hand.

"Okay, let's see what this monstrosity is all about," he muttered.

The first thing David noticed, aside from the terrible smell, was the number of dead animals lying about the perimeter of what he could only describe as a Faraday cube on steroids. Remnants of coyotes, or at least he thought they were coyotes, there wasn't much left of the carcasses, ringed the outside of the cage. He waited until his sister focused on the cage again and figured out why they were there and he figured out where most of the smell was coming from. In the middle of the cage, a square concrete dais with steps from the ground to the top was piled with the carcasses of dead birds. He and Stacie stared at the decomposed bodies of large birds resembling turkey vultures interlaced with rotting husks of smaller birds that could have passed for wood hawks and tiny birds, blackened and shriveled examples of what might have at one time been a finch or a swallow. They were all dead, rotting in the sun, splayed across the flat concrete deck of the dais or wedged into the narrow space between the cage and concrete wall.

"This is disgusting, David," his sister moaned.

David nodded his head telling himself that the smell of death was something like a magic elixir for the animal kingdom. Under normal circumstances the predatory nature of an animal would be as nature allowed it to be, but this was a perpetual cycle of death and it wasn't natural. The birds would fall prey to the electrified cage, and the scavengers of the night would be drawn to them as they tried to forage a free meal. The only lucky recipients of this electrified food chain were the ones cunning enough to wait until dinner outside of the cage was served up in a crackling burst of electricity. Stacie shifted her view from the center of the dais and David saw the door.

"What the heck? Why would anyone put a door on this, this electrical killing box?" he asked, staring at the single throw bolt on a full sized door composed of the same type of metallic grid.

"No clue, big brother. I guess so whoever built this thing can get inside and clean up this mess."

"But why would Mom do this?" David pondered aloud. "Why would she have this electrified box built around these concrete steps and then put a gate on it?"

"I don't know. Like I said so she could get in there and clean it up?"

"Maybe the cage and the electricity isn't there to keep someone from going in. Maybe it's there to keep something from coming out," David replied.

Stacie laughed. "Like what, big brother?" She switched her gaze from the throw bolt back to the pile of bird carcasses on the top of the dais. "Do they look like they're trying to get out?"

David shook his head. "Not sure. Try the throw bolt." For several seconds he stared at the lock on the gate waiting to see the image of his sister's hand pulling it back.

"David, I'm not so sure we should do this. It's starting to get really weird. We need to go home."

David sighed. Using his sister's gaze he guided his hand to the lock bolt, wrapped his fingers around it, and slid the bolt to the right. There must have been some tension on the door, perhaps a set of tiny springs out of sight along the top and bottom of the gate, because as soon as David slipped the throw bolt all the way back the cage door sprang open. He and his sister watched the metal gate swing inward toward the dais and then shudder to a stop, allowing more than enough space for the two of them to enter.

He stared at the opening in silence, knowing what his sister was thinking, knowing that he was thinking the same thing. Everything they'd witnessed since choosing to travel down the path had been strange and foreign. He thought of his promise to Stacie, his guarantee that if things got weird they would turn around and go home. The minute they experienced the concrete corridor and the first electrified gate things had gotten weird. David realized that if he'd been a boy of

his word, if he'd ever had intent to keep his promise, they would both be sitting in the golf cart speeding toward home. And yet, something inside of him kept screaming at him, telling him he only had one decision to make but he wasn't so sure he wanted to know the truth. Sometimes the truth buries you beneath a heap of stinking garbage and you suffocate and die because of it, or even worse you kill yourself because you can't handle the reality. David knew all he had to do was pull the gate shut, throw the bolt closed, and he and Stacie could get away from this place. Standing at the opened gate, wondering if the answers he might find inside the cage would become a life lesson from which he would never survive, David realized he was only a few seconds away from a decision he knew would make Stacie very happy. Then Chance made the decision for both of them. Before he and Stacie could stop her, the dog bolted through the gate opening, scampered up the steps to the top of the dais, and paying little heed to the rotting bird carcasses at her feet, turned and stared at the both of them. She began to bark as if to say, ***"It's perfectly safe you two. What are you waiting for?"***

"Chance," Stacie said, "come down from there, girl!"

The dog continued to stand at the top of the dais and bark.

"Damn it Chance," Stacie swore, "Get down here right this minute!"

"Looks like you're going to have to go get her," David said.

"Oh no. I'm not going up there. You go."

David smiled and shot back, "I'm blind remember? I'll probably get halfway up and fall off the stairs and break my neck."

"And that's a bad thing, how?"

David sighed and shook his head.

"Okay, we both go up," he said. "I'll grab her by the leash. Then we can get out of here."

"Thank God. This place is giving me the creepy crawlies."

Hand in hand David and Stacie eased through the opening and took the stairway toward Chance who sat watching them as they approached. When they reached the top, David clutched his fingers around the grip of the harness and tugged it a couple of times, but Chance continued to sit, her tongue hanging lazily to one side of her

open jaw, her eyes closed. David knelt beside the dog and began to stroke the fur at the back of her neck. Chance opened her eyes, stared at him, and then glanced at Stacie who was standing beside David. She closed her eyes again.

"Looks like she's not ready to go just yet."

"Well that's not going to cut it," Stacie snapped. She stepped on the other side of Chance and grasped the handle of the harness. "Grab your side. We'll pull her off this thing if we have to." The moment David placed his hand on the harness, Chance stood, sandwiched between David and Stacie, her eyes wide open, her tongue disappearing into her mouth as she snapped her jaws shut. David frowned when he felt sensations rippling up his arms, at first tiny threads of tickling pinpricks as if the air around him had been charged with electricity. It was a sensation he'd never experienced before when he'd made contact with Chance, but there was something else strange about the moment. David realized he could see things. Not just things he saw when he connected to the dog and used the dog's vision as his own, but things happening around him as if he was no longer blind. He gazed across Chance's back and focused on his sister. Her eyes were wide and the puzzled expression on her face told him she was sensing it as well. David felt the sensations grow stronger as they rushed up his arms and poured into his body.

"One of us needs to let go!" David said. He saw his sister glance down at her hand gripped around the handle of the harness watching her as she struggled to unfurl her fingers and pull her hand away. When she looked up at David he could see terror in her expression.

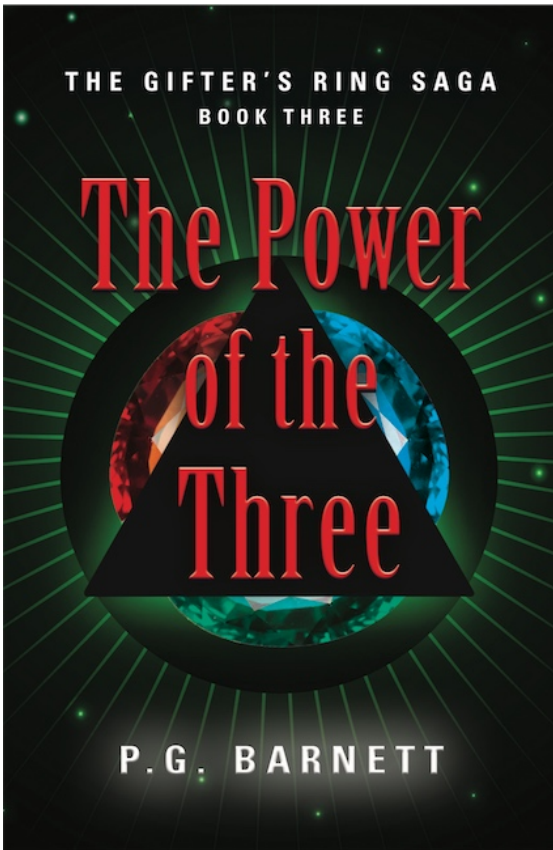
"I can't get my hand free, David!"

David tried to pull his hand away and after realizing that whatever was going on was happening to the both of them at the same time, nodded his head in the direction of the steps.

"Let's go, let's go! Pull her to the steps and let's get out of here!"

He and Stacie were able to take two steps in the direction of the stairs, dragging Chance along with them, when David saw the walls of light appear. In paralyzed amazement he watched as shimmering panels of light began to pulse from the edges of the dais and jut skyward, then flow across the top of the cage, boxing them in within

pulsating walls of energy. Then David saw the birds began to fly. Rotting corpses of bone-ridden husks that only a moment before were motionless on the steps and along the floor of the cage began to float, suspended in air as they began to whirl around them. It became a carousel of carrion, whirling collections of feathers, beaks and legs all spinning backwards in syncopation, building speed with each rotation. In less than the split of a second, it became a maelstrom so powerful David could see the pulsating walls bend in toward the outer bands of the tornado as if the whirlwind intended to take the walls with it. He stared at his sister, watching in horror as bits of her seemed to break away from her body and disappear into the darkness. Her mouth was open and he knew she was screaming, but he couldn't hear anything aside from the rushing, freight-train roar of the tornado as it plucked his sister away and then started chiseling away at his dog. It seemed like a million lifetimes but he was sure it was only a half breath of time when the vortex began to tear at him. He cocked his head in confused amazement as he watched his hands began to pixelate and fade away. Confused as the whirling vortex chipped away at his legs, then his upper torso, he felt a sudden overwhelming feeling of heaviness. At that moment, David realized it would be the last conscious thought he would have before the vortex reached him, and then his brain exploded, all of his memories and thoughts spewing into the spinning storm as he followed Chance and Stacie into the darkness.



The Power of the Three is the third installment of The Gifter's Ring Saga, a story of a family unknowingly possessing the ability to see and destroy evil walking among the living. In The Power of the Three the family chooses to take the fight to the Brethren sacrificing any advantage they may have in order to take back what was stolen.

The Power of The Three

by P.G. Barnett

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