

# Light of Logan

Regina Smeltzer

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### **Light of Logan**

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## *Dedication*

Light of Logan is dedicated to my parents, Dallas and Jean Baker, who gave me life and provided the light for my Christian growth. I love you both.



## *What People are Saying*

In *The Light of Logan*, Regina Smelzer provides gripping suspense with a surprising blend of the practical and the supernatural. Beautifully written. ~ author Donn Taylor



# 1

*Wednesday, May 8*

Mr. Charlie tapped the end of his white cane against the first of five steps leading up to the Logan County Courthouse. Groping for the metal railing already hot in the South Carolina sun, he lowered himself onto the third step and shifted his body to the right until he touched the coolness of the grass. Now, anyone with business in the large stone building could pass him.

He settled in to wait, just as he had for the past two years. But today his breaths were shallow. Tension stiffened his spine. They were gathering; time was short. He hoped he had prepared her enough.

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A single crow sat in the tall dogwood and cocked its head as Ruth Cleveland exited the door at the Anthony Dunlap Law Office. With the workday over, Ruth headed toward the center of town. The snapping sound of her worn sandals hitting the back of her feet mingled with the rumble of passing cars.

He would be there; she knew it.

Historic houses, now converted to professional offices, flanked both sides of Main Street. A passing bus spewed oily smoke into the air, and she held her

breath, hoping the evening's breeze would drag away the noxious fumes. She slowed, savoring the shade provided by the canopy of a live oak, then pushed herself back into a fast-paced stride as rivulets of sweat ran down her back. She was unsure why she felt a need to rush when she never had before. He would be there—and yet a strange unease disturbed her usual peace.

Five minutes later, the two lanes of Main Street widened into four. The smell of melted asphalt rose in twisted wisps as she passed City Bank. Ahead of her, built one against the other, stood Reiss Pharmacy, Hazel's Cut and Curl, Nola's Diner, and Spencer and Sons Hardware, with three abandoned storefronts set among them. By the time she reached the distant corner and spied the county courthouse—seven stories of gray, unimaginative block—she was almost running.

Professionals, laborers and secretaries joined Ruth on the sidewalk, cellphones pressed to their ears and one thought pounding in their brains: If they beat the traffic light, they could reach the parking lot thirty seconds sooner. Ruth wasn't headed to a parked car like the rest of them. She stood and waited with the crowd for the walk sign to signal go.

He was there, sitting on the courthouse steps just as he'd always been, Monday through Friday, for the past two years. His gnarled hands were wrapped around the white cane, and he seemed focused on the nothingness that drew him to the same spot each day. The sentinel of the county courthouse: that's what she liked to call him. Ruth had no idea why he kept this routine, and she never questioned him about it. They had forged a bond, she and Mr. Charlie, a friendship built on the simplicity of both of their lives. Ruth could



be mistaken, but she might be his only friend; she knew he was hers.

Mr. Charlie's mouth widened into a welcome; scattered teeth standing proudly along his gums, his ebony skin shiny with sweat. Cloudy eyes drifted left of her face.

A wave of nausea and dizziness swept over Ruth and passed a moment later. Everything around her remained the same, yet something had changed. Ruth's stomach tightened against the unknown threat.

"You're five minutes late." His voice scratched as if from disuse. "That boss give you trouble?"

Long ago, Ruth gave up challenging the blind man. Somehow, in his darkness, he just knew things—like when she was close by or how she was late when he didn't wear a watch. "Attorney Dunlap never gives me trouble; I was just busy." Ruth smoothed the back of her blue skirt and settled on the sunbaked step beside him.

"You need to quit that dead-end job and find yourself a better one. You can do more with your life."

Ruth sighed. How many times had he given her the same advice?

"A bright thing like you, young and full o' life. You must be what, twenty?"

"Twenty-three."

The light on the corner turned green, and cars accelerated.

Ruth hated the smell of exhaust. A pickup truck raced by—diesel engine from the sound of it. She covered her nose with her hand. A man in a gray suit unwrapped a piece of gum, folded the soft stick into his mouth and tossed the paper to the street where it fluttered like a discarded leaf before settling against

the curb.

"Twenty-three. Time to work for yourself." Mr. Charlie wouldn't stop until he had his say. Ruth listened, knowing he would soon run out of words. "There must be people who need papers typed. With your speed, you can crank out work faster'n they can get it to you."

That's what she feared—nothing stashed in the inbox. She had to prove she could live on her own and make good decisions in spite of her mother's lack of confidence—and the times she had proven her mother correct. Now distance separated her and her mom, and luck had helped her land a position at Attorney Dunlap's. Although the job was boring, she had no reason to leave. She had no reason to return to Atlanta where she would be forced to keep hidden why she left in the first place. Mr. Charlie tried to push her beyond her level of comfort, to make her believe she was more than she was.

"You find the work, Mr. Charlie, and I'll quit my job." A tired laugh rose from her throat only to become lost in the rumble of tires and the blare of rap music from a passing car, the base so high it vibrated the cement beneath her feet. Ruth rubbed her arms against the tingle on her skin. "Do you think it's going to rain?"

Mr. Charlie turned toward her and pinched his eyes together. If she didn't know better, she would think he was looking into her soul, assessing her hidden strengths and weaknesses, preparing her future resume. "It's not the rain that we need to worry about." He lifted his face toward the sky.

"I almost forgot to tell you," Ruth said, more to change the subject than anything else. "Mr. Dunlap is

taking his receptionist, Kathleen Martin, to the State House tomorrow, and he invited me to go along."

"What's the occasion?"

"I guess there's some vote that Mr. Dunlap wants to watch."

"Hmm." Mr. Charlie rubbed one gnarled hand with the other. "Just be careful Light of Logan." He often called her the light of Logan. All was fair.

She pulled a sandwich bag out of her purse and handed him several slices of apple. "Red Delicious today."

The sun dipped behind the courthouse at her back, and a blanketing shadow began its slow march across the street and up the deep yard on the other side. The stately brick church with its wide porch and towering front pillars occupied a whole block of valuable real estate in downtown Logan. But then, this was the Bible belt.

"The crows are gatherin'," the old man murmured, pulling a bit of apple peel from between his teeth.

Half a dozen dark specks circled in lazy patterns high above. "OK, how do you know that? You really can see, can't you?" She knew better, and she knew he knew. When had their minds become entwined?

"Yesterday there were only two."

"Don't birds roost at night? Maybe they're headed to their favorite tree before it gets too crowded." She folded the plastic bag and slipped it back into her purse.

"Something's gonna happen. It's not rain that's coming. You wait and see." He leaned toward her. "The crows are gatherin'. Nothing good'll come of it. Be watchful, little one."

The black specks continued to glide in a circle,

round and round, going nowhere, just like her life. A hot sigh escaped her lips. "I need to head on home." After a lingering look at her friend, Ruth stood and brushed off the back of her skirt.

Someone bumped against her. She stumbled and an arm caught her at the waist.

"Sorry." His voice was deep. "Are you all right?"

Looking up, she stiffened and pulled away.

Confusion spread across the man's face. "Sorry," he said again.

"Ruth?" Mr. Charlie's voice sounded tight.

Her face reddened. "I'm fine." Actually, she was far from fine. The stranger looked so much like Joe: the robin's egg blue eyes and sun-streaked blond hair. Figures, a reminder of Joe on a day when her skin already crawled with a strange anxiety.

With her heart hitting against her ribs, she took a deep breath. She reached for the chain around her neck as she stared at the man's back.

He bolted up the walk to the courthouse. At the door he called over his shoulder, "I really am sorry."

Mr. Charlie chuckled. "You've met Nate Bishop."

"He about knocked me down."

He gave a crackled laugh. "Knocked you right off your feet, did he?"

She bristled. "You know what I mean." This day needed to be over. She laid a hand on Mr. Charlie's shoulder. "I'll see you later."

Ruth walked a block beyond the courthouse before turning right onto Smith Road. A crow lighted on the branch of a crepe myrtle and cocked its shimmering head. Blunted by surrounding feathers, a thin pink scar ran from its right eye along the side of its head, only to be lost at the edge of its wing. Tiny round eyes peered

her way. Ruth clutched her purse to her chest. Mr. Charlie said the crows were gathering, whatever that meant.

The sense of being watched sent a shiver up her spine. As she half-ran toward home, the feeling deepened. But she knew if she looked, no one would be there.

## 2

*Thursday, May 9*

With the unsettled feeling of the previous day forgotten, Ruth scooted to the edge of the wooden seat in the gallery's front row, her mouth stretched into a grin. Excitement over seeing her favorite legislator in his own world made it impossible to sit still. She felt like a grade-school girl at a circus. The noise and energy that ricocheted between the walls fed her high spirits.

Ruth itched to touch the gold embossing on red wallpaper that extended from the lower chamber to the balcony where she sat. Instead, she forced herself back into the seat, folded her hands in her lap, and thought about the morning's drive.

From the back of the car, she had stroked the leather upholstery as the sound of the engine purred around her. Her boss's luxury sedan shared little with the cracked plastic and ear-splitting roar from the defective muffler on her over-the-hill clunker, now-deceased. She clutched the iced tea Mr. Dunlap bought her with both hands, terrified lest she spill even a single drop.

The three of them arrived in Columbia an hour and a half before the start of the House session. The gallery was almost full with reporters, notebooks in hand, anxious for the vote.

Attorney Dunlap managed to find seats for them.

He leaned toward the women. "This is one of the most important issues these folks will ever vote on." He gestured toward the chamber below. "History is in the making, ladies." He smiled and settled back to wait.

The first time she had ever seen Attorney Dunlap was when her car ran out of gas on her way back to Atlanta. She walked two miles to Logan, hoping to spend a day or two earning gas money to get her home. The first business she came to belonged to Attorney Anthony Dunlap. The two level, red brick building occupied the far-left corner, and beyond it stood old Victorian houses turned into offices. The reception area at Attorney Dunlap's was full of men standing in groups of two or three. Their muffled conversations formed layers of tension trapped in the small space. Sitting behind a polished desk against the back wall, the receptionist's hand hovered above the jangling phone, never quite reaching the receiver.

As Ruth tried to decide to stay or leave, a door on the back wall opened. She caught a glimpse of a long hall before she focused on the strange looking man who filled the doorway.

He stood well over six feet tall, with gangly arms that seemed to stretch on forever. Wispy salt and pepper hair on top of his head was cut short and in disarray while the remainder of his hair was pulled back with a rubber band. The goatee framing his chin needed trimming. He wore a white shirt and a navy tie. She remembered because she had on a white t-shirt and blue jeans. The room quieted as the tall man scanned the faces. He stopped on Ruth and frowned.

Her knees knocked. She wanted to run out the door, but she had nowhere to go. "I can type." The squeaky words scraped their way across the now-silent

room. "I just need to earn enough money to put gas in my car. If you don't like my work, you don't have to pay me."

The hippy-scarecrow man—she found out later it was Attorney Dunlap himself—continued to stare at her, his expression guarded. "I have some meeting minutes," he finally said. "Do a good job, and we'll talk." He turned to the receptionist and mumbled instructions.

At the end of the day, Mr. Dunlap offered her a part-time job. Over the next six months, her hours had increased, and now she was a full-time handy-person: running errands, cleaning, filing, doing computer research, and even filling in for Kathleen at the front desk on occasion.

She had rented a cheap apartment—the bottom of an old house—and by living frugally, she managed.

Now, here she was at the State House in Columbia. She leaned back in the balcony seat, a smirk of satisfaction etched on her face.

The legislators began to enter the chamber. Conversation in the balcony turned to whispers as spectators shifted half their attention to the scene below.

Ruth scrutinized the backs of each head, watching for her congressman, Representative Stewart Gleason. The room was filling and still he hadn't appeared. Ruth turned to Mr. Dunlap. "Where is he?" she whispered.

Her boss shrugged his shoulders. "It may be better if he doesn't show."

~\*~

Stewart Gleason inhaled the scent of furniture



polish and worn books as the memory of past legislators—tough men and women who stood for what was right even during tough times—swirled around him like old ghosts. He considered staying in the State House Library for the next couple of hours. Better yet, he could slip by his colleagues and forego the opportunity to be part of the biggest legislative debacle in history. Without voting, no one could lay the blame on him when, some day in the future, the dream shattered. The resulting anarchy would be more disastrous than the crisis the legislators were hoping to prevent.

He fingered an antacid tablet, blue this time, and shoved the remaining pack in his suit pocket. When the vote was over, perhaps guilt would stop eating his gut like maggots in a rotting possum. Support for the landmark legislation was expected to be strong. His opposing vote would be needed. Sighing, he rose from the wide leather chair.

In the lobby, dozens of school children, some in green and white uniforms, others in jeans and t-shirts, were herded in small groups, their giddy voices drifting upward toward the rotunda. Tight-faced adults walked among the children. Too many kids; too few teachers. The vote would help. That was the prevailing thought, anyway.

At the double-doors to the House of Representatives, assistants, dressed in navy suits, buzzed in and out like bees seeking the last bit of nectar before the sunset.

Representative Dennis Welch approached. "You ready for the vote?"

Stewart tipped his chin upward in the fashion familiar to southern men.

An aide, juggling a stack of binders, broke between the two men. "Sorry, sorry," she mumbled as she pressed forward, the scent of a floral cologne lingering in her wake.

Inside the chamber, Stewart walked down the right aisle. Filtered air sucked the moisture from his face. Conversations streamed, the words indistinct by sheer numbers and the cavernous space. However, one voice broke free, and Stewart cringed.

Young and tall, Joseph Ackerman puffed out his broad chest. "As you know, this bill has been called landmark legislation because we have chosen to take a stand against inequity. We"—he indicated those around him—"have carved our place in history."

Stewart Gleason grimaced. The smug first-termers had leaped to power because of his name, not by his accomplishments. Some of the congressmen hung on the young man's words, as though the greenhorn's opinion was more valid than anyone else's. It all came down to social power. Joseph Ackerman came from wealth, and he made sure everyone knew it. His family could buy South Carolina if they wanted. They already owned Georgia.

Todd Myers, representative from Darlington County, slid into the seat beside Stewart. He pulled a folder from his briefcase and tossed the green file onto the table. "Did you see the crows outside? Man, they're everywhere. Huge boogers. Must be a hundred of them on the lawn."

Stewart had seen the crows, and they gave him the willies because the birds didn't act like crows. Crows made noise, they ate anything they could get their beaks on, and they definitely did not sit in the grass and stare silently. Something was wrong with those

birds.

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Ruth scooted closer to the railing; Representative Gleason looked just as he did at the public meetings at the library. She never actually attended, but he always seemed sincere as she passed by. The congressman sat with his back straight. Such confidence! Ruth beamed with pride. She would never be able to stand in front of people as he did, sharing thoughts and swaying opinions. Thinking about it made her shudder.

A few straggling legislators entered the chamber. Some joined small groups engaged in conversation while others strode with determination directly to their assigned seats, dropping expensive-looking briefcases to the floor with as much regard as she gave her lunch sack.

While Ruth tried to absorb all the activity below, her gaze kept returning to a group of legislators who seemed spellbound by the man in the center. Chins were rubbed and heads bobbed up and down, but no one interrupted the speaker. Shifting for a better view, she still couldn't see who held their attention. Her pulse quickened as she thought of what it would be like to command such respect. The group broke apart and as she stared, the man in the center looked up into the gallery.

Ruth gasped. She pushed herself back into the seat, hoping to melt into the wood and metal framework. As his glance met hers, sourness burned the back of her throat. She had known that eventually she would see him again, but not like this: not serving as a member of the South Carolina House of

Representatives.

Below, the gavel sounded, and the man took his seat but not before Ruth saw the smirk. Even from the distance, he looked directly at her and winked. Her surprise turned to rage. Thankfully, anger bound her to the chair because she wanted to stand and scream at him in front of his friends, to ruin his life as his selfishness had ruined hers. Her clenched jaws hurt and she tried to pry her teeth apart. As she stared at his broad shoulders and flaxen hair, she blinked. For just a breath of a second, he had looked very much like a crow.

Why was he here? His family lived in Georgia, not South Carolina. She breathed in and out, trying to control her raging emotions, the landmark vote forgotten as her mind whisked back almost four years.

His family house in Atlanta looked like a castle made of towering white brick, manicured lawns, and orderly flowerbeds. Ruth's mother cleaned house for the Ackermans three days a week. Ruth had hitched a ride to the rich side of town with her boyfriend, Morgan, when he set out to test-drive a car brought into his dad's garage for repairs.

"This is where you want dropped off?" Morgan asked. His eyes bugged. "Who do you know who lives here?" His remark wasn't sarcastic, just realistic. The tired apartment Ruth and her mom rented was a world away from the Ackermans' three-floor mammoth.

"My mom cleans for them. Thought I'd surprise her. She hates the bus ride home, and I saved a trip on my pass today, thanks to you." She got out of the car and waved good-bye.

He roared the engine in response. Even though his dad owned a garage, Morgan's financial situation

wasn't that much better than hers. Any profit his dad made went back into the struggling business. But Morgan treated her well, and she envisioned a future with him. Morgan represented strength. He knew exactly what he wanted to do while she still floundered. It was May. Their senior year of high school was almost over. Because his dad needed him at the garage, Morgan planned to attend the community college.

She would bypass college and find a full-time job, maybe clerical, since she could type more words-per-minute than anyone else in the school. Not her dream, but then, this was life.

The day was hot, and sweat coated her face. The neighborhood seemed strangely quiet, and after a minute of contemplation, she realized the difference. This part of town lacked the smelly busses and exhaust-spewing semis that traversed her streets. A bird twittered, and she smiled, even though she couldn't spot the gleeful noisemaker among the young trees.

As she stood on the sidewalk staring up at the house, the front door opened, revealing the most handsome man she had ever seen. Her knees melted.

He'd been dressed in shorts and a polo shirt and held himself with an air that said money. His short, blond hair had been swept perfectly to one side. His chin was square and lifted just enough that his opinion of himself was instantly clear. "You need something?" he asked, a friendly smile curving perfect lips.

Embarrassment flushed her face as she tried to find her tongue now lost in her gaping mouth. "I'm waiting for my mom. Sorry if I bothered you." There was no law against standing on the sidewalk, yet she