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# A Midnight Clear

## Ciar Cullen

*Holiday eBook Freebie*

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*1878 — December 24. The interior of the Merchants' Shot Tower, southeast corner of Fayette and Front streets, an old landmark, and the most complete piece of work of that kind in the United States, was burned out entirely. In the darkness of the night the massive column of brick work, 217 feet high, resembled a gigantic torch, for its base was unscathed, while the flames flared out at the top, being visible many miles. While the members of No. 1 Hook and Ladder Company were assisting the members of No. 4 Engine Company with their hose up the steps leading into the tower, Mr. Simon V. Cullen, superintendent at the works, notified the firemen that there was fifteen tons of lead at the top. The men were ordered to run for their lives, and the last man just reached the pavement when this immense weight of lead was precipitated to the bottom of the tower. The absence of Mr. Cullen would probably have resulted in the killing of fifteen firemen. —from the official History of the Fire Department of Baltimore City*

Simon Cullen was my great grandfather. I'd heard this story many times from my grandmother, my best childhood friend. I spent every weekend at her Victorian mansion (or it seemed a mansion to me—it was in disrepair and not nearly as grand as it appeared to a child). I'd wriggle on the couch, struggling not to drop a stitch as her blue-veined hands gently guided mine. Her voice would hypnotize me with tales of the family, some true, some partly true. All of them were designed to teach heroism and moral character. I always wanted to know about the "old country", but Nan insisted that life started for the Cullens in America. In other words, we were poor potato-famine

immigrants. So I settled for learning to knit, watching Perry Mason on TV, eating Nan's terrible cooking, learning to play her tinny piano and listening to her stories.

If you ever drive down I-95 past Baltimore, look for the Shot Tower. Simply put, the shot tower made lead shot for guns and occasionally canons. The lead was hoisted to the top of the tower, heated to a molten state, and poured through giant sieves to form pellets that would cool in water below.

The neighborhood of my ancestors is in blight, but the tower stands still, a stubborn remnant of another time. It's appropriate for the family, as stubborn survival is certainly in the genes. Simon Cullen not only saved lives that night, but he got the girl. Good thing, or I wouldn't be around.

When I was older, shortly before she died, I humored Nan by asking for Simon Cullen's story. She looked at me with a twinkle in her eye, uncharacteristically letting her knitting rest untouched in a soft, colorful heap in her lap. "I suppose you are old enough to hear the rest of the story."

He'd stolen her glove. What kind of man steals a woman's glove? One besotted, desperate, angry, struggling to hold onto his pride while begging on one knee. Simon slipped his hand in his coat pocket to caress the soft leather with his calloused fingertips. He felt a tinge of guilt as he looked at the sleet battering the windows of the pub. No doubt they were her only gloves. Would a good man let the woman he loved go cold? Even if were just her left hand? Well, she deserved a little discomfort, perhaps.

"You're an idiot, boyo." Simon's brother Danny clapped him on the back so hard his pint emptied onto the grimy bar.

"And you aren't?"

They'd ducked into Patrick Healey's on Pratt Street as they had most every Saturday for five years. The lager was good enough and the food was free. Old Healey wasn't much for the Cullens, and Danny had the crooked nose to prove it. The Healey girls were average of face but generous to their customers, especially in the alley on balmy summer evenings. Try telling Patrick Healey his girls were loose. The man had fists the size of ham hocks. Only the intervention of the brothers' Uncle Vincent, the parish priest, had calmed both sides into an uneasy truce.

Danny blew out a tired breath and swatted his cap across his leg to free the worst of the furnace dust. "I like the sister well enough, but I've the sense to know that Knowles isn't letting a grimy tower worker marry one of his precious girls."

"I'm the supervisor, not just a worker." *And her Da isn't the problem. She's using him as an excuse, but truth be told, she doesn't want me.*

"You're a good-for-nothing, hot-headed tower worker without better prospects and a sick mother to tend to."

"I love you too."

"Forget her and drink up. We have a list a block long to buy for Ma before going home." Danny pulled the list from his shirt pocket. "A ham and potatoes, a piece of ribbon, a bit of pine for the door and a dram of whiskey for that God-awful pudding she makes."

Simon's heart dropped another inch. Christmas. He'd prayed on his knees each night for the money to buy a trinket for Carrie, to show her how he loved her, how he'd loved her shimmering gold hair and pale blue eyes, how he'd dreamed of her since they were tots. He'd worked long hours to save, counting the weeks until Christmas, hiding the extra coin in his mattress lest the watchful banker, his mother Anna, demand it go into the family kitty. A sliver of gold with a pale purple stone, he'd settled on it the instant

he'd seen it. But Carrie hadn't taken it, hadn't given him the chance. So he'd stolen her glove in childlike hurt.

"It's best if you leave me alone, Simon Cullen. I'm off to greener pastures."

Caroline Knowles had rehearsed for days, wondering how to tell the man she loved that she'd be leaving for New York on Christmas Day.

"As you like, Carrie." Simon tucked a lock of hair behind his ear and narrowed his deep brown eyes. He shoved a small box into his coat pocket and worried with his cap. Each twist and squeeze of the grimy tweed felt to Carrie like he had his hand around her heart.

She'd run up the stairs and slammed the door behind her before bursting into sobs. "Oh, sweet Mother of God, help me."

"Elizabeth, is that you?"

*No Father, it's not your engaged daughter Lizzie. I'll never have the man I love.*

"It's Carrie, Father. I'm going to freshen up, and then I'll see to dinner."

She crawled into her bed, wet coat, boots, hat and one glove, and pulled the covers over her head so her father wouldn't hear her pain. It's not his fault, she told herself again and again.

The coal was to blame. Carrie hated the coal. Its dust had coated her father's lungs, had made him ill, had put them in this position—they were a few days away from the poorhouse, without a job between them. He'd lost his home, her home, everything they cherished, including the city she loved.

Her sister Lizzie had found love, although she hadn't told Father yet that she wouldn't be going to New York to stay with their Aunt. No, it would just be Carrie, sewing or washing floors with the rest of New York's Irish scum.

What choice did she have? Best if Simon Cullen moved on to a new girl, a girl without responsibilities. She couldn't stand to tell Simon the truth—that they were so poor, they'd barely pulled together the train fare to New York.

"I won't go without Ma's things." Carrie had put her foot down when Father sought to sell the few pieces of china and lace that had come with them from Ireland to New Orleans before they had worked their way up to Baltimore. But she supposed that now those things would go to Lizzie, because she was to wed. It didn't matter. What did a girl need with a dowry when there was no betrothed?

One kiss. She would go to New York with one stolen kiss to remember him by. It had been nearly one year earlier to the day, but it lingered on her lips like an eternal prayer.

Father had just started the cough that crippled him, and she'd gone to midnight Mass alone. Lizzie had done the unthinkable, spending the evening with Danny Cullen instead of going to Mass. Carrie didn't mind so much, she was used to keeping Lizzie's secrets.

The faithful exited the church, and as if on cue to mark the holiday with the sounding of the cheerful church bell, snow swirled down upon them, blanketing them in wonder at the coincidence. Carrie stood still, watching the gaslight turn into a misty glow behind the flakes. A light tap on her back had made her jump, and she had turned to look into the wonderful dark eyes of Simon.

"You frightened me, Simon Cullen."

"Merry Christmas, Carrie." He'd offered his arm to her, and with a thrill, she'd looped hers through his. He was alone as well, for Danny was having a jolly time with Lizzie.

Carrie had walked in bliss along the slippery sidewalk, giggling nervously as she slid and steadied herself on Simon's arm. *May this walk take forever.*

As they had rounded the corner of Fayette, Carrie pointed to the Shot Tower and stopped. "Do you go to the top every day? Is it terrifying?"

Simon had laughed and brushed a strand of hair from her cheek. "No more terrifying than any work."

"If you fell, you'd surely die."

"I would die a happy man." He had turned her by the shoulders to face him.

"You're a loon, Simon. Why would you be happy?"

"Because I would have kissed the loveliest girl in town, and wanted for nothing more from this life." His warm hand had clutched the back of her neck, and he pulled her in close.

And for the first time in her life, Carrie had kissed a man. A wonderful, strong man with warm arms and thick hair and beautiful brown eyes. It had been a Christmas miracle, indeed.

Right after, father began to ail quickly, and his veiled threats to die if she were to venture out tormented her. Simon had called and been turned away many times. Harry Knowles kept his eldest prisoner with the worst kind of lock and key—guilt. If she didn't love him so, she'd hate him.

Simon squirmed under the watchful eye of his mother, knowing his brother was greatly amused this Christmas Eve.

"Shut up!"

"What? Shut up? I didn't say a thing, did I, Ma?" Danny smirked and leaned back in his chair, throwing an arm around his mother.

Anna sniffed out a laugh and pushed the last bit of her pudding onto her spoon. "Are you going to talk about it, Simon? Danny has already told me you're pining for one who won't have you."



"You're a bloody asshole, do you know that?" Simon flung a bit of pudding at his brother.

Anna arched her brows at the cursing. "If you weren't so big, you would be over my knee right now, Simon Cullen."

"Aw, do your worst, the both of you."

"So, I hear that Lizzie Knowles is engaged to John Murphy."

Simon laughed through his pain. "There, Danny, see how you feel about that one."

"Ah, let him have her. Murphy's stupid, for certain. Why would he buy that cow instead of milking her for free?"

"Cow, is she? Very nice, boyo. That leaves Carrie in a bit of a mess, doesn't it now? Old Knowles can't work, and he has to take his eldest to New York to live with his sister. Poor Carrie, she's not cut out for New York."

Simon's blood chilled. "New York? Where did you hear this?"

Anna wiped her mouth and rested her chin on one palm. "I've been thinking boys, that this house is a bit big for us since your Da passed and Molly and her husband moved out."

Danny nodded, and Simon noticed something pass between his mother and brother. "I'd say you're right, Ma. Two rooms open. Maybe we could take in a border?"

"Just wish I knew of someone reputable needing a home. A pity that. Of course, if one of you boys were to take a wife, she could live here. Only if her mother had died, God rest her, because it would be unnatural for a girl not to stay with her mother. If she had a living father without money and no place to stay, he could live here too, I suppose." Anna stared at Simon, who gaped like a dying fish. "You're as stupid as you are handsome, my boy. I've seen her look at you. What did you want her to say? She'd never shame her father."

“New York?”

“At midnight. The cheapest train fare they could manage. Imagine, at the holy hour.” Anna made a sign of the Cross and started clearing dishes.

“At midnight. At midnight.”

“I hear an echo,” Danny said as he helped his mother clear the table. “That gives you a few hours to practice your speech.”

Simon didn’t have a speech. He lay in his bed, staring at his father’s pocket watch, hand mocking him with each slow second, as if it whispered “Carrie. Carrie. Carrie.”

Was that it? She didn’t want to shame her father? Why hadn’t she said something, anything, to let him know why she’d shunned him?

Simon brushed the fog from the windowpane and stared onto the ghostly quiet street, the noise of a few carriages absorbed by the snow that had replaced the sleet.

An alarm bell broke his trance, and by the time he realized what it was, Danny was pounding at his door. “Sweet Jesus, it’s the tower!”

“It can’t be! The furnace has been cold for two days!”

“Well it’s not bloody cold now!”

When they ran to the porch, the horror stopped them in their tracks. Fire poured from the crown of the tower, like a giant torch. Neighbors bundled in coats and blankets yelled and pointed in fear.

But Simon’s worst fear was roaring past them, the crowds cheering as they went. Two horse-drawn fire carts, with at least two dozen men upon them, racing to the rescue.

Racing to their deaths. Didn’t they know?

Danny clutched at Simon’s sleeve. “Jesus, brother, what are they going to do?”

“Unless we get there first, they’re going to enter the fucking tower and die. How long do you think it’s been burning?”

“Not long enough. But there’s not much time. There was a full load of lead in the hopper. How can they not know?”

Hot lead pouring down on them...it would be Hell on Earth.

“No one thinks about how shot is made unless they’ve been inside. Jesus.”

Simon tore down the street, his brother following behind but losing ground, his mother calling to him from the porch. Four blocks. His lungs seared in the cold air as he struggled to overtake the carriages. He slipped twice in the snow.

Simon’s calls to John Murphy were muffled in the chaos. By the time he reached the tower, at least a dozen men had broken through the door and started up the winding steps to the top, where the fire raged unchecked.

“Look man, you can’t go in there! Leave it to the Engine companies.” John’s younger brother, Patrick pulled at Simon’s sleeve.

Simon turned on him. “Where’s your brother, Pat? How many are inside?”

“Move out of the way, I say, Simon. I know you think you own the tower, but it’s not the time for heroics!”

“How many, Pat?” Simon didn’t know if it was sweat or tears running down his cheeks, freezing against his skin in the bitter cold.

“All of Engine 4. Move aside so the rest can go up.”

Embers showered down upon them, black ashes on fresh white snow. “Holy hell.” Simon pushed Pat to the ground and tore into the tower, taking two steps at a time. The fumes were worse than the heat, and he shielded his nose against in the thick smoke until he reached the lowest man.

“Get down! Get down now!”

“Simon!” Danny was on his heels. “Come out, for the love of God. It’s no good, they can’t hear you.”

Simon turned to Danny in the black air. “Go out and tell Pat to ring the fire bell. Call them back.”

“Aye.”

He finally caught the last man by his coattails. John Murphy. Lizzie’s betrothed. Carrie’s new brother-in-law. Carrie. He pushed the thought away. A dozen men couldn’t die to give him the chance for love.

“John, there’s lead at the top!”

John stopped cold and in what seemed like the longest few seconds of Simon’s life, took his words in.

“John, did you hear me? Fifteen tons, melting, ready to kill you and your men. Get them out. Now!”

Simon blew out a breathe he didn’t know he was holding as John nodded and scurried to grab the man above him. “Pass it up the line, boys,” Simon heard him yell as the warning bell tolled from the fire truck outside.

“Abandon the tower,” the call echoed up. “Run for your lives, boys!”

Simon made his way outside, coughing up black dust and stumbling into the arms of his brother. One by one, the men emerged, with John Murphy pulling them away from the deathtrap. They sat a good distance away, watching the giant torch consume itself and listening to the lead shower down in pellets. An hour later, all that was left was the brick shell.

Danny leaned his head on Simon’s shoulder. “Well, there goes nothing, then.”

“What do you mean?”

“Our jobs, you idiot. Our lives.”

“Oh, don’t be an ass. The Merchant Company isn’t likely to go out of business that easily. We’ll be busy rebuilding for a year. The walls are still sound.”

“Then we won’t be paupers, like your Carrie. There’s still a chance she’d take you.”

No, there wasn’t. For Simon had watched the minutes pass by on his pocket watch, like they were the last of his life. Still, the second hand whispered “Carrie, Carrie, Carrie.”

Murphy joined them, squatting down to shake Simon’s hand. His lips quivered, and Simon feared he might break down. “Listen, John, there’s no need for all that. All’s well that ends well.”

“Aye. I’ll sound the all clear then. The trains have stopped outside the city. You could see the blaze for miles.”

The trains had stopped. Time had stopped.

Simon popped to his feet. “Are you thankful, John? Do you owe me a favor?”

“You know I do! Twelve men owe you their lives.”

“Then don’t sound the clear. Please, just give me twenty minutes, and one of your horses. That’s all I ask.”

“Both horses,” Danny corrected.

“They aren’t race horses, boys!” Simon clapped one hand on John’s shoulder and squeezed. “Oh, all right, take the whole carriage.”

“Twenty minutes, John. I’m begging you.”

Danny nudged Simon into the driver’s seat, and they bolted past amazed onlookers onto quieter snow-laden streets toward the B&O terminal. Simon was thankful Danny kept quiet, as he desperately hunted for words to say to Carrie, should she and her father be there.

*She must be there.*

“Aw, bloody hell. How are we going to explain the fire carriage? They’ll think we stole it.”

Simon called over his shoulder as he jumped out at the terminal entrance. “You’ll think of something.”

It struck him as odd that he’d never been inside the building until this Christmas night. He flew down the stairs to the track, scanning the small black-clad group huddled against the cold. Was she there? The women all looked alike, with bonnets and scarves shrouding their features.

He approached slowly, begging for inspiration, feeling a bit of a fool. What if Ma was wrong? What if Carrie thought nothing of him? Well, at least she would be out of the city.

Then he saw her, or more accurately, one ungloved hand straightening a bonnet. He reached into his pocket and pulled out her glove, caressing it in nervousness.

Her eyes widened in shock as she stared at him. “Simon? Is that you?”

“You’ve forgotten my likeness already?”

“You’re covered in soot. We heard about the Tower. I...I’m so sorry. You’ll need another job. Was anyone hurt?”

“No, all is well. We’ll rebuild.”

Harry Knowles stepped forward and nodded a greeting, one brow arched in concern. Silence built on silence as the three regarded one another.

“I found your glove, Carrie. I thought you’d be needing it in New York.”

Tears welled in her eyes and escaped down her cheeks. “I knew you had it.” Her sad smile nearly broke his heart. *Say something, you bloody fool. Anything.*

“So you came to see us off? That was kind.”

*Anything.*

"Ah, Mr. Knowles, I've something to say. My Ma..." *My Ma wants to take in borders, and we thought of you. We could find some light work for you around the house.*

"Yes, Cullen, your Ma...?"

"Oh, bloody hell. Excuse me, Carrie. It's just that I'm in love with your daughter, and I want her to stay here, in Baltimore. I want to marry her. I need your permission to tell her so."

Harry snickered, and his shoulders dropped a bit as he leaned on his cane. "I think you did just tell her so. I wouldn't stand between you, boy. On her deathbed, her mother made me promise never to force the girls towards or away from any man. It's a hard promise to keep, but I'm keeping it. It's Carrie's choice."

"There's a place for you, sir, if you want it. If she'll marry me. There's room aplenty, and Ma could use some help around, with her two boys at work long hours."

"You're speaking with the wrong Knowles, son."

"I know. It's just easier this way." Simon forced himself to turn to Carrie, who held one pale hand to her mouth.

"May the Lord help me." Simon dropped to one knee and held out his hand for Carrie as he cast his gaze to the ground. The paving seemed to roll and lurch, and he feared he might faint before getting out the words. The last thing he expected was her reprimand.

"You let us get all this way. Why Simon, couldn't you have said so a day ago, even an hour ago. Do you know what torture we've been through, getting ready for this trip? Do you know what I've been through, thinking I'd be leaving you behind?"

"Does that mean you'll be wanting this?" He pulled the box from his pocket and slipped out the tiny amethyst ring.

“Yes, I want that! It’s lovely, truly lovely.” She pulled it from his hand and pushed it onto her finger, then fell to her knees and took his hands in hers. “I love you so.” Tears streamed freely down her cheeks, and to Simon’s horror, he felt his own matching tears.

Simon helped her up and placed a gentle kiss on her lips as the clock struck midnight and the all-clear bell rang out.

“Merry Christmas, Carrie.”

“And to you, Simon.”

Harry tapped Simon on the shoulder with his cane. “You’ll look after her, or I’ll come back from New York and kill you with my own bare hands.”

“No, no, sir. You’re coming home with us.”

Harry scowled. “You don’t mean it. There’s no place for a crippled father-in-law in the Cullen household.”

“I’m fairly certain Ma has your bed made up already, sir. And if Danny hasn’t been thrown in jail, we even have a ride home.”

Simon and Carrie had five children, and lived in the Cullen house on Broadway until their deaths. My grandmother and mother both grew up in the same brick row house. Danny wasn’t thrown in jail that Christmas Eve, but tragically fell to his death from the top of the Tower a few years later.

My grandmother was never without that tiny gold and amethyst ring, and when my own mother died recently I stumbled upon the very ring amongst her things. Carrie’s ring, the one that bound her to Simon, the one I now wear. It’s just another Irish American Christmas tale, but it’s mine, and I’m so grateful to have you to share it with.



**Author Biography**

Ciar Cullen grew up in Baltimore, Maryland—Charm City—and has lived a charmed life. She worked for a decade as an archaeologist, summering on digs in Greece. Ciar has a strong interest in history of all periods. She worked for years in academic nonfiction publishing and is currently a bureaucrat at a prominent college. Ciar took up writing in 2004 to scratch an itch brought on by years of reading fantasy and romance fiction. She submitted her first book on a whim, and hasn't turned back. Her favorite authors are Terry Pratchett, Mark Twain, and Roger Zelazny. Ciar lives in New Jersey with her wonderful husband and magical cat.

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