

Book i



the Suburbs of Hell

Free e-book by debut novelist

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DEDICATION

To the loving memory of my beloved auntie who gave me wings.

Carol A. Mollica

(1951-2012)

INTRODUCTION

Like so many human creations, this story is based on a dream. It was a mere couple of weeks after my father, Joseph Anthony Seno (1947-2011), passed away. Thus, a morbid shroud weighed heavily upon me. In the dream, I died and went to Hell. In fact, the first two chapters (amongst other fragments) are a very vivid interpretation of what I dreamt I saw, felt, and experienced. This nightmare was so haunting that it overwhelmed my every thought until I succumbed to writing it down. I became obsessed with its resolve. Therefore, my imagination created characters that would bring its taunting to an end.

I am a devout Christian. Having come from me, this book has roots in my perspective and understanding of its corresponding religious dogma. However, I do not feel it belongs to the restrictive conditions of a Christian novel. In fact, I am not a fan of said genre.

Instead, it is a compilation of ideas to motivate – what I hope will be – an awareness of the readers own personal existence from an uncharted perspective. By all accounts, it was most definitely not created as a fear mongering tale warning the potential horrors that death may bring. Rather, I hope *The Suburbs of Hell* will inspire an enlightened appreciation for every aspect of your singularly unique life.

~ *Elena Michel*,
A sleepless night | 2012.10.15

CHAPTER 1

I Died

I had always imagined fire and brimstone. Thankfully, that Biblical fallacy disappoints. Hell's Waiting Room was surprisingly institutional. It was so clean, so organized. So unexpected.

Somewhere behind me a female voice murmured, "Well, this place could put the DMV to shame."

I remember falling. And falling and falling. The airy tussle of hair as it swept cold wet droplets from my eyelashes. The invisible resistance wafting my back. The brush of delicate arm hairs tickling my skin. A watercolor blur of grays and whites, shadows and light washing by. And then I was here; in line. From where I stood, I couldn't see the back of its procession. But it didn't matter; I could not recall ever standing at its end.

I was not impatient. I was not bored. I was not tired. I was not questioning, angry, defensive, or emotional. I was not indifferent. I was not without religion.

But, I was so very sad. I was so very disillusioned with myself. I was in Hell. I had not expected to end up here. My state of mind rested somewhere between absent and melancholy. I was simply here. I accepted it. I accepted being so very disappointed in me.

It would have bothered me in life, but Hell's Waiting room existed outside of building code requirements. The auditorium must have seated at least five thousand souls. The vertigo incline of the stacked rows did not have aisles running between them; just solid seating to accommodate the masses. Obviously, there was no need for fire escapes.

Architecture consists of two parts that make a whole: the *Discipline* and the *Profession*. Thus, 'learning' and 'practice.' Discipline wanted to meekly dwell in the background of my loathsome consciousness, but Profession searched scrutinizingly at the auditorium. Profession always seems to dominate Discipline upon achieving ones certification. In moments like this, a favorite undergraduate professor, Dr. Leo S. Kowski, transfigures in my imagination like a total recall of class lectures that never actually happened. I summoned Kowski's booming deep voice and rhythmic colonial-esque annunciation to rationalize my surroundings for me:

If the average adult human reaches a height of five-and-a-half feet (168 cm), and the average demon towers at seven-and-a-half (229 cm), demons certainly render the souls feeling very inadequate. The intimidation is reflected in Hell's Waiting Room which is scaled to demon proportions. The space is modeled after a featureless midcentury community college auditorium, and – although architecturally uninspiring – its exaggerated massing diminishes even the bravest soul.

Human imaginings which transcend time and mythology, have left us with the impression that Hell is a descend that burrows further and deeper into the bowels of misery. Maintaining this impression, the Waiting Room was designed for souls entering the auditorium to begin lining-up from a higher level and gradually move to the lower. But why would the Waiting Room simultaneously be aesthetically dull *and* symbolically flow downward? This complex answer is simple existentialism (but let's not digress into philosophy). At the top of the auditorium is a long hallway, in the middle is the descending seating area, and finally just before the elevated stage is the main/house floor (traditionally utilized as an orchestra pit).

In case, *you* the reader (academic, architect, or otherwise), get your hopes up that a diamond in the rough may be in store, I'll burst your bubble now. The floor finish is short

commercial-grade carpeting of a deep scarlet color throughout. Every bit of wall is smoothly sheetrocked and finished with generous coats of builder's beige (bought in bulk, I bet). And the ceiling is a typical suspended 'drop' with square, speckled tiles. But, reader – if it makes you feel better – every surface is free of debris and completely unblemished with a cleanliness that could almost be mistaken for Godliness.

The wide hallway at the top of the theater's auditorium seems unending in either direction beyond its approach and departure from the auditorium itself. A pair of ajar metal doors stream blinding light from an unknown source into the hallway indicating the beginning of the line. Of course, the other direction of the hallway is in itself an *opposite* with oppressive drop ceiling fixtures that seem to dim further beyond like a vast cave. This upper hallway opens up to the auditorium from an architrave nave via undecorated square columns with short walls separating them and unimpressive segmented arches atop.

A break in the short walls of the architrave meets the long wall of the auditorium. Its height begins at approximately thirty-feet (9.14 m) and maximized at seventy-five (22.86 m) before the stage. This tall wall is mirrored at the other side of the auditorium where they stand approximately one-hundred-fifty feet (45.72 m) apart. Naturally, the break in the architrave is where the line of souls begin their descend into the terraced seating area. Access to the seats is limited to the front, sides, and back of the cluster of seating to accommodate 2,000 patiently waiting souls. Oddly, there are no aisles or steps running through the massed cluster of retractable red-velvety seats.

Demons standing at podiums along the house floor issuing judgments and signal to another waiting nearby to usher souls through one of two doors flanking the stage. Eerily these doors' red glowing *exit* signs become the focal point; not the stage just beyond. Despite the stage's elevation, it is an eye soar. It gratuitously flaunts its exposed wings without even a modest curtain to veil the naked masonry blocks of the back wall. With houselights up... nothing is left to the imagination.

It was hopeless. We all knew it. Longing for or even envying a loved one – alive or Heaven-bound – was futile. No matter as a 'better place' comes to mind. Sad as I felt, emotions are redundant in Hell. Although I am certain beyond the exit signs a few too many souls deliriously screamed in agony for mom.

All of the retractable red seats were occupied. I wondered when I would sit in the red seats. It was clearly over capacity. I queued in the architrave nave at the very top of the theatre. Souls sat patiently until instructed to take the seat next to them and work their way across each aisle and down another row. Inching our way to the front of the stage might have been measured in endless hours or even days. Of course, that is if time still held any meaning.

We souls wore our belated human forms like costumes. And our faces like masks displaying variants of metamorphic and emotional shock. Saris and burkas, dashiki hats and denim shirts, clergy collars and towering turbans made for a multicultural cornucopia of international clothing clichés. I wish I could have convinced myself that I was at a Halloween party. People – the dead – came in all different shapes and sizes, creeds and races, colors and flavors.

Most of us did not look at one another let alone speak. We simply stared blankly at the back of each other's heads. It is difficult to imagine anyone growing impatient. There was no desire to be in a particular hurry. We had no need to complain about hunger or toilet breaks. These former habits were now deemed insignificant and no longer missed. Even biological urges could not have assisted with the passing of one moment to the next.

Demons stood in regimental formation in front of the stage and thereabouts. They had leathery skin in taupes and grays, exaggerated features, tall and muscular, long narrow bull horns, and eyes so wicked they couldn't be looked at directly. Even a distracted demon was intimidating when buzzing to and fro with PDA's and walkie-talkie headsets. Evil doesn't rest when there is a job to do. A full waiting room in Hell requires an organized team of demonic personal. Demons in matching black polo tees and lanyards may have supported corporate uniformity, but it certainly didn't put me at ease. Those working in earthly 'recruitment' must have found their jobs far more challenging than all this post-mortem bureaucracy.

I watched the demons assign each soul to their respective destination. The podiums were reminiscent of the narrow, tall stands at Customs in Gatwick; their droned facial expressions weren't all that far off either. Always, the interview concluded with the dead ushered to either the left and through a door where above a glowing red sign beckoned *exit*.

"Yeah, I'm stood right in front of her," a shorter NBA sized demon with blotchy clay skin spoke into his headset. Without acknowledgement he looked me up and down and reported in a dull voice, "Female. Ah, early to mid thirties. American. First language most likely English. Tall, plain, thin, dark hair, brown eyes." He listened. "Ah, negative, she's said nothing. Do you want me to move her to your queue?" Another listening pause. "Affirmative, I'm doing it now."

The demon cleared his throat and directed his stare at my face. Thankfully, he didn't seem offended when I could not bring myself to make eye contact. "We have reason to believe that you don't belong in this line," he reported with mechanical authority, "We are offering you the opportunity to move to a separate queuing area." Pausing for a moment to adjust his earpiece, the demon continued in a scripted tone, "Changing lines will in no way... excuse me," he held up a jagged skinny finger and said into his headpiece, "Affirmative, I'll stop saying *affirmative*, and don't be so *negative*. Over-and-out." The sarcasm seized and the composure resumed, "Where was I? Changing lines... right... will in no way lead to dismissal from Hell, but it may better clarify a more suitable allocation. The line will be shorter, but your interrogation may be more invasive."

I stared at his lanyard while digesting the offer carefully. The demon, Nysrogh the 15th of Level CXI seemed to be waiting patiently for my reply. Perhaps in death as in life, if God or demon alike opens a door, it may be fate calling. "Okay, I'll go to the other line."

Nysrogh walked, and I followed like a timid duckling in formation. He guided me past the others in line along the upper architrave. I could feel their eyes on me, but I was not interested enough to stare back. He stopped at the long, vast wall stretching from the back to the front of the theater. The demon pointed to the steps that would lead me down to the front of house-right and bypassing all the other souls tolerantly waiting in their respective seats.

“Follow the stairs, and join the others queuing on the last several steps.”

“Thank you,” I said softly and unable to gauge the volume of my voice. Besides, I was uncertain if earthly cordialities still applied. The thought flickered and died; there were too many thoughts streaming in countless directions. I descended solemnly down a hundred or more steps to join a short line of about a dozen souls. I could not ascertain if we were elitists or rejects. Whatever happened to me from that point on – good or bad – I surely deserved the latter.

The souls occupying the seats were mostly silent. Some conversed with their neighbor in whispers or pantomimed gestures. Otherwise, we were as quiet as the grave. The sounds of shuffling to the next seat interrupted the long intervals of silence.

Quality entertainment was at a minimum. The stage was occupied by a handful of demons ranging from ugly to deformed. I would have at least expected frightening theatrics or scary displays. But the company pranced about in nonsensical costumes pulling hats, props, and devil-knows-what out of oversized trunks and from behind a wicker folding screen. A synthetic tree steadied in a reflective silver pot did nothing to liven-up the bare set. However, to their credit, the demonic company did improvise the humiliating deaths of randomly selected audience members. Success was measured in embarrassment en lieu of applause. The boredom inspired demons portrayed a decapitation by garage door, stove top exploding lava lamp, video gaming fatigue via waste water intoxication, and suicide by asphyxiation with paper towels to the mouth. The audience of souls paid as little regard possible to the overly melodramatic theatrics.

Eventually, I found myself second in line. I tried not to eaves drop on the businessman in front of me. He even brought his laptop case to Hell. I wondered if he was going to ask if the broadband connection is any good down here. A tall, broad, and very dark demon interviewed the businessman. Appearing calm and to the point, he openly confessed his sins and made no justifications for his failings as a neglectful father and cheating husband. Their correspondence went back and forth. The questioning became more intensive; maybe even too personal for the businessman. The facade of his collected composure began to crack. The interrogation was clearly getting to him. The audience of souls began to stare as the businessman grew louder and more animated. A hideous demon actor with an equally offensive poodle skirt *booed* from the stage. The businessman finally raised an echo into the high ceilings to declare, “I don’t care! I don’t care anymore!”

The demon’s voice was deep and demeanor controlled, “You are indifferent?”

“Indifferent?” the businessman scoffed, “Indifferent doesn’t cut it. I don’t *care* who you are *or* what you do to me!”

“You don’t belong in this line.” The demon gestured to another, and the businessman was ushered by tightly grasped arms through the exit at the foot of stage left. I supposed arrogance had earned him flames. It was difficult to repress sympathy for him when we were all playing audience in Hell’s Waiting Room.

This demon must have been important. He wore a red polo with embroidered letters in a language I did not recognize. Unlike the others, he had a keycard on a retractable cord attached to his belt. His horns reminded me of an antiqued gold *cornicello* I picked up vacationing in Palermo. His lanyard read Demetri the 3rd, Level XXIV; his big, hollow black eyes read fierce.

Finally, it was my turn. Whatever fate delivered me, whatever sentence I had earned, I accepted it. Butterflies on speed fluttered manically where my stomach used to be. I would not

permit myself to be afraid when stood in front of the demon named Demetri as I was certain far worse things were to come. He looked me over thinking analytically; I could respect anyone thorough on the job. But, the aura coming through Demetri pierced into my restless soul and rattled it to fatigue. It was difficult to label all those emotions that were – up until recently – attached to bodily functions and their corresponding organs.

“Are you indifferent?” Demetri did not waste time getting to the point after the businessman’s performance. It was a leading question. Perhaps more than he would have liked it to seem.

“No.” It was truly how I felt. I hoped he could recognize that I was not merely avoiding the businessman’s fate. Besides, there was little hope of rousing a tantrum from me.

“Do you want to be here?”

I wonder if anyone has ever honestly answered ‘yes.’ “No,” I said flatly. I could not bring myself to lie. Even if I wanted to.

“What is your full name?”

“Bly Elizabeth Berg.”

“Interesting; Native-American for ‘tall.’ I thought that name was extinct,” Demetri muttered to himself while thumbing through a stack of yellowing papers on his podium. “Date of death was... two-thousand-nine, February, thirteen.

“My dad was supposedly part Sioux. The rest of me is Heinz-57.” Would I be segregated by nationality or based on *caffè latte* skin coloring? I always thought my chiseled facial features, angular body, and black hair styled in a severe bob made me look bold and ominous. Unfortunately, my dark brown puppy-dog eyes always gave me away. I’m about as badass as a hardboiled egg.

“Hum,” the demon paused for a thought, “Religion?”

“Yes.”

An eyebrow arched, “Care to specify?”

The question was rhetorical, and I really didn’t want to answer it. “Christian. Non-denominational.”

“What should you like us to do with you, Miss Berg?” There are many different places, experiences, and depths in Hell.”

“I don’t feel that should be up to me.” Did my humility humble me or was my humbleness humiliating? It’s not like I was given an amusement park map of Hell highlighting the main attractions. Also, how does a soul objectively personalized their eternal punishment?

With genuine interest the demon Demetri asked, “Why are you here?”

I possessed no instinct to guard my words in this Godless place. “I must have done something outside of Jesus’ favor. I must deserve to be here.” Consequences can truly be damned.

“Come with me.”

Anticipating flames, I followed Demetri through the door marked *exit*. But instead of bearing to the left, we veered to the right. We strode down a narrow hallway oppressively illuminated with canned ceiling incandescents that yellowed the beige walls and matching carpet tiles. We met a solid metal door. Demetri swiped his keycard. The small red light flashed to green. Demetri pushed the door open... and there was light.

CHAPTER 2

A New Home

The demon Demetri walked through the door and held it open with a perfect imitation of earthly etiquette. I crossed the threshold. I could hear the quiet hum of vacuumed air as the metal door met the frame. The place where I had just left and what my eyes saw before me simply did not match. The suburbs. I was in the suburbs.

I swung around to fathom the juxtaposition of a large theater amongst endless rows of cottagey, chocolate box bungalows. But it was not there. A house stood where the theater logically ought to. Could it be bigger on the inside? The partnership between logic and reality seemed to be at an end.

"This is where you'll be living," Demetri paused to see if I was digesting. I had almost forgotten he was there. "This is a place Lucifer constructed as a sort of experiment for people such as yourself. My lord finds it very entertaining."

Again, Demetri paused patiently to wait for my reaction. If I found it difficult to look a demon in the eye before, it certain became more impossible. It was hard to see anything outside of the perfectly manicured lawns and identical houses lined up like toy soldiers. A flawless black asphalt road stretched endlessly into opposite horizons. Antiquated street lamps illuminated an

iridescent gray sky; it resembled overcast clouds reflecting a soft amber glow of an old speckled mirror.

"The sky is ash, but you're in a sort of 'magical' bubble, if you will. It cannot touch you or harm you."

"Am I supposed to get a job?"

"Really? You're in Hell, and you're wondering how you're going to pay for it?" His tone might have been half mocking, but I'm fairly certain my face showed serious confusion.

"Let's put it this way, you've already paid for it. In advance, of course. You should be relaxing, Bly. You're dead."

Demetri raised his leathery hand before I could begin bombarding him with questions. He had to get his spiel out of the way. Clearly, the demon had a lot of work to get back to.

"Now, the only reality in Hell you need to concern yourself with is the absence of God. This one golden rule is to simply ignore His existence by accepting His absence. Therefore, this rule includes the following: communication with other residents about God, referencing the Holy Trinity, engaging in theological debate, quoting text inspired by the Higher Power, recreation of spiritual symbols, engaging in congregational celebrations, and religions of any and *all* dominations. Sanctuary does neither exist in this suburb nor is it available anywhere in the greater Hell area. We can't read your mind, but we strongly encourage you not to think about it as well. If you wish your death to be peaceful and quiet, obey this one golden rule."

"Or it will be flames for me?"

"Yes, or something worse, possibly. It depends upon how disruptive a soul may be," Demetri sighed, "And on a more positive note, welcome to the Suburb. Thank you for choosing Hell as your final destination. May your soul rest in peace." With that passing thought along with other well wishes, Demetri went back through what was now my front door. I followed, but

he was quick to close it before I could grasp the handle. I swung the door open fast. Demetri and the theater have been replaced with a living room.

Everything was off white. In life, I would have detailed it as 'eggshell' in a construction specification. It reminded me of one of my mother's stretched canvases awaiting its first coat of gesso. I would have preferred white. I suppose nothing is pure in Hell.

The living room was sparse and basic. Its unembellished furniture melted into the eggshell walls and feather soft carpet. A plush sofa the colored of Victorian lace sat under the two front windows with a textureless ivory colored coffee table. Two high back chairs the color of sheep's wool sat adjacent and flanked an opening into a dining room.

There was no break in the eggshell finishes from the living to dining room. A dinette the color of soy flour could comfortably seat six. I could not imagine myself entertaining five people in the suburbs of Hell. I instinctively ran my fingers across the table's smooth surface to find no trace of dust.

The dining room's glass French doors were wide open. I had half expected muslin curtains waving in a gentle breeze, but there were neither curtains nor wind. I stepped onto the back porch that mirrored the front. The short backyard's emerald green grass met a vast and endless golden meadow. The meadow had an eerie calm with no trees or topography to visually scale how far it might have stretched.

The bedroom was off the living room. The double bed did little to fill the empty space. Its soft magnolia linens looked inviting. My dead body would never again feel the fatigue of sleepiness. Unless a bed could satisfy my emotional weariness, I couldn't imagine it being much use to me.

As there was no kitchen, I should not have been so surprised to find no toilet. Off the bedroom, the bathroom contained a tub with bear claw feet, a pedestal basin, and a medicine

cabinet. The bathroom was tiled from floor to ceiling with almond colored squares. Glow from a small window bounced off all of the glossy surfaces. I caught an unexpected bright color from the corner of my eye.

My orange scrubs were blindingly reflective in the medicine cabinet mirror. I approached the pedestal sink to examine myself. Staring back at me in reverse was 207-BEB printed on my shirt. My face was as I remembered it in life, only free of blemishes and imperfections. I had been dying my hair *noir* since the age of twenty-two, but the dark brown with auburn highlights must be my natural color. I touched my face and felt no warmth. I looked at my toes and felt no cold from the tiles. I felt ribs, but no organs when I pressed my fingers into my middle. My body was like a balloon inflated with helium.

The niceties of all these distractions were simply just that... distractions. I felt an urge to sit down and digest my new life. With that thought, I had instantly struck 'digest' and 'life' from my vocabulary. Walking out of the front door for the second time did not have quite the impact that it did at the first. I sat on the front porch steps.

I was fidgety in life. I could never stop moving. My ex-husband used to complain about the twitches as I was falling asleep. I was amazed in death how still I was able to sit. There were no muscles to move and no lungs to draw air. There was just a sense that my soul was sleeping restlessly somewhere inside this shell; I wanted to wake it up. And so the coping mechanism is once again triggered.

Each house's façade was symmetrical. Each pair of houses were exact replicas mirroring each other from across the street. They stood in formation lined up in perfect parallel to the paved road. In itself, symmetry is hell to the Modernist.

There were no birds, bugs, bunnies, or beasts of any species or groups. The exception to their absence was cats. They were dotted about here and there. Once you caught a glimpse, it

was gone in a blink. Feral and timid they darted like ninjas into bushes. Apparently, all dogs do go to heaven.

No God. No religion. No salvation. I will spend eternity in the modest suburbs of Hell. I watched a few people emerge from their houses up and down the street going to and fro. They gleamed perfect lawns, deadheaded flowers, and hung awnings over windows that would never see the sun.

So, this was the amusing experiment that Satan found so entertaining. Perhaps, *people like me* were the dead who felt they deserved punishment by falling out of God's favor. The evil, malicious, self-righteous, unapologetic, and indifferent who justified their sins would suffer the blazing fires of Hell. Yet, the few apologetic souls found ourselves in this strange Godless eternal purgatory. On the surface, this looked the opposite of punishment.

A thought began to surface in my conscious. Is the one golden rule impossible to keep? I felt my soul waking from its slumber inside my shell. We're being tested to see how long it will be before we crack. I felt a madness building. An anxiety growing.

I love God. I wanted to have the chance to tell Him so. I could not go an eternity pretending He does not exist.

I resolved to sit on this step still and silent. I would follow the rule. I would keep my head down. I would be a model suburbanite. Even if it took me a thousand years to construct, I would escape from the suburbs of Hell.

CHAPTER 3

Green Golf Pants

Boredom, hunger, emails, appointments, ring tones, obligations, and a urinary track system would have pulled me away from any deep contemplative thought in my former existence. Nothing wanted or needed to distract me from where I sat. I spent all my life rushing and worrying and never really taking time to sit down and relax. Surely, that was justification enough to park myself and do nothing. I'm dead. Unfortunately, I found myself accidentally doing something. I was waiting.

I waited for the sky to change. It was still just ash fluttering. It was almost beautiful if it hadn't been so eerie. The ashen sky reflected the street lamps and all the other lights radiating down here. A constant reassuring glow from the pedestrian street lamps sat between each house gave the perfect asphalt street a warm sheen. Sometimes I thought I saw a star twinkle from above, but it was simply the suburb's glare striking the haze just right. I couldn't decipher where the source of light from above was hiding. It reminded me of Britain's perpetual overcast skies. I played pretend and imagined they were clouds that hid discover shapes begging to be discovered, but I quickly bored of the never ending bunny parade.

Then, I stared scrutinizing at the grass trying to find any imperfection in the emerald green carpet. The grass met the road with no curb, swell, sidewalk, or gap to separate them. I supposed there was no need to protect grass when there were no automobiles. It made little sense to me why the road could have been designed to accommodate two passing cars when they simply did not seem to exist here.

I busied myself further trying to notice the small differences of each cottagey bungalow. They were each timber clad and painted a soft cream color with gray asphalt shingles. Two pairs of double-hung windows were symmetrically poised on either side of the perfectly centered front door. Each front stoop led to a narrow long porch free of scuffs and debris. The covered porches, posts, and lattice style railings were as crisp as freshly painted wood. The only differentiation outside were the little touches suburbanites added to their yards; and most likely on the insides as well.

I had not stepped foot inside my own house since the initial tour. It wasn't a home to me. I hoped I wouldn't be here long enough for it to become one. After all, this house was designed to be a shell for the other shell (which resembled my body) that was formed to contain the only piece of me left in existences... my soul.

Kitty-corner to the left, a lady was fussing meticulously in her front yard. Any woman wearing matching capris, sunhat, and gardening gloves all in butter yellow with red polka-dots could find joy in a mundane *anything* of subjective beauty. She moved her hands as if to pantomime a gardening shovel, and it would miraculously materialize in her grasp. It was as if she imagined her ideal and watched it transpire in front of her eyes. It looked so very effortless as she shifted, dug, and adjusted every red geranium, purple pansy, or yellow marigold in a perfect imitation of how she may have gardened in life.

Two houses down from me, a man and woman made busy work tidying their already meticulous yard. They both had shaggy brown hair and were clothed head to toe in ocean blue. They constantly held intimate glances as if having rehearsed a well choreographed ballroom dance. Or perhaps they were more like bumblebees buzzing around one another, careful not to poke the other with their stinger.

Round and round, a young man peddled his cherry red, vintage bicycle down the road. Facial hair had to be a recent phenomenon when he left Earth. His lanky legs peddled steadily like an animatronic doll while his gaze was firmly fixed forward. The bicyclist always came from the horizon to the right and vanished into the left. He did this with an undaunted and unbreakable routine that could win notoriety from an eccentric community of persons proud to be OCD.

My thoughts continued to wander with little aim. But watching the suburbanites making busy work in death prompted me to reconsider my strategy. Adapting, without losing the goal, could rouse less suspicious. I had determined I could not stay in Hell eternally. That sickening feeling gradually ached more and more, moment to moment. So much of what made life on Earth special was brutally absent in Hell.

It took me by surprise how much I began to miss the company of children. I never had any of my own. I may have been confused about a good many things, but I was very certain that all children went to Heaven. It must have been why it felt far too quite here.

“You’re quiet.”

“What?” My trance was broken.

“I said, 'You’re quiet,’” said he. And he was wearing green golf pants and a cream polo shirt. I wondered if the golf club was for game playing or to complete the ensemble. “I was wondering when you were going to move from that spot. Porches are nice, but there's a lot more

to do in Hell then just sit there and stare blankly. Don't you find it a bit peculiar that you're the only one here not making the most of your death?"

British. Cocky SOB's. He probably came to heckle me or get up in my grill for his own amusement. They always expect you to agree with them when they hurl insults in the form of questions.

"I'm really not in the mood to talk."

"Yes you are," golf man said with a smooth but assured smile. I guess he was a bit easy on the eyes. Dark brown hair, bright blues eyes, and an athletic build. It certainly didn't hurt all the more to stare at him.

"What makes you so certain of yourself?"

"You've changed."

I too can play this game of *sarci* Brit, "How the 'ell would you know? You don't know me from Adam."

He laughed warmly with his eyes sparkling. I had clearly lost my edge. A Minnesotan saying anything in a common-as-muck Hampshire accent is begging for humiliation.

"I don't think you understood my meaning, Love."

"Okay...?"

"You were wearing some hideous orange get-up."

"Whatever. Just assume I died deer hunting if that satisfies your curiosity." Sarcasm was never one of my strengths.

"What you on about?" he chuckled through his teethe grin. Thankfully, they were an exception to the stereotype which made conversing more palatable. He gestured his free hand to me, "You've *literally* changed."

Literally. I looked down at myself. The scrubs, also known as the *hideous orange get-up*, were gone. I stood up slowly and looked down at myself brushing the smooth black velvet with my finger tips. “I had forgotten how much I missed this dress. Oh, and my shoes are here too. Oh, are my... oh, they are! My pearl set is complete. I can’t believe... where did this... how...?”

“You look stunning, if you ask me. It fits you like a glove, or like a very sexy night dress. The red heels are an unexpected nice touch, if I might add.”

“Wow. Sorry. I had completely forgotten that you were there.” I looked up at him and smiled widely. “This is *my* little black dress,” with my hands gesturing up and down like a baboon, I said as if making introductions at a social gathering.

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Little Black Dress,” he said to my middle. And to my eyes he said, “I’m David.”

CHAPTER 4

A Yellow Kitchen

It felt like defeat when I rose from the front porch step and entered my house for a second time. Twirling his driver like a baton, from the window I watched David the golfer cross the street to his bungalow. I wondered if he would frequently be curtain twitching as I had seemed to be doing in that particular moment. His offer of a guided tour to the resident village triggered an instinctive emotional recoil. After the divorce, I developed a severe psychological revulsion to any prospective affairs. I even started paying-as-you-go because I couldn't even commit to a cell phone contract.

He could be such a lovely distraction. Nevertheless, I had to maintain my primary objective. I fleetingly entertained a humorous mental image of myself as a seductive spy nuzzling up with the local hotty to extract information from him. The fantasy was quickly dismissed as pathetic.

It felt weird walking into a house and not feeling a nagging sense to take a bath, get something to drink, or throw on some PJ's to put as many minutes possible between unconsciousness and the alarm. Instead, I did what I always did when I couldn't sleep. I sat outside.

This time I opted for the back porch instead of the front so that David wouldn't feel compelled to stare at me. I picked up one of the dining room chairs and set it on the wooden planks with a firm *plunk*. No sooner had I sat, there was a knock on my front door. An instinctive thought like, *I wasn't expecting anybody*, popped into my consciousness with slight annoyance. However, I was doing nothing that couldn't be interrupted nor did I have any need for tedious scheduling in the foreseeable eternity. Walking to the door I quickly decided that I will look forward to unexpected company to break up the monotonous flow of nothingness that would defined my non-existence.

A pleasant voice chirped, "*Bonjour*," as I opened the front door. I recognized her immediately. She was the gardening lady in matching attire. I'm certain she shopped well beyond Menards in life.

"Hello," I echoed with a forced Minnesota-nice smile. "Please, won't you come in?" Dearly departed certainly does not constitute a loss of manners.

The petite woman with delicate features, porcelain skin, and slight frame bowed her head slightly as she entered my newly acquired abode. Her almond shaped green eyes paralleled the genuine smile she wore on her thin lips. She looked thirty but carried herself like a woman of sixty. The classic auburn haired beauty held such bewildering agelessness.

"Please," she said handing me a flowered plant in a terracotta pot, "For you."

"Thank you, it's so beautiful," I said surprised at my own words. I didn't expect beauty in Hell. Golden hairs stretched out from the flowers center surrounded by several curly long petals in translucent pinkish and purple hues. "I don't think I've ever seen a flower quite like this. Is it an orchid?"

"You have a good eye," she celebrated with an approving smile, "It 'tis a summer bloom called *Calypso Bulbosa*. Orchids are a symbol of refined beauty. You seemed at a distance that

it would suit you. We're going to become firm friends, I just know it." She rolled her eyes animatedly and clicked her tongue, "Oh, but I'm getting ahead of myself once again. Listen to me rambling on. I am Madame Henriette Gagnon. Welcome to the suburb."

"I'm Ms Bly Elizabeth Berg. And thank you for this beautiful plant," I said buying myself time as I set the orchid on the coffee table. The method of making polite small talk in Hell confounded me. Unfortunately, I couldn't resort to the weather. "So, you're French."

"Canadian."

"Oh, of course. Silly me." A backpack with a maple leaf patch might have helped. Sighing and smiling politely, I looked around the living room hoping my next words would jump out at me. Sofa. "Would you like to take a seat, Madame Gagnon?"

"Pleeeasse, call me Hanriette," she sighed as her face drew a blank looking around the off-white room, "Oh dear, I have not seen a house 'set to default' in such a long while. Do you not wish to decorate even a little? Make your house a home?"

"I can just do that?"

"Of course you can. Now surely you've been here long enough."

"How long?"

"No idea, long enough." Hanriette's pause was quick and left little room for further questioning, "Come to my home, and let me bake you a lovely cake."

For reals? I don't think I have ever met anyone quite so domestic in all my life. In passing from life to death, I was certain that Madame Gagnon – oops – *Hanriette* did not abandon an ounce of her refinement on Earth. I was not hungry for food and never would be again. Nevertheless, in Hell, curiosity clearly did not kill cats. It propelled them.

Hanriette's bungalow was a home every bit as elegant as she was. Swooping velvet drapes with tassels, plush high-back furniture fastened with upholstery tacks, generous

implementations of lace and linen, and several orchids in ornately detailed porcelain vases. She chose a subtle pallet of gentle greens and lavender hues and natural tones. It was easy to see how Hanriette could rest in peace amongst such pleasantries.

I always wanted a yellow kitchen when I was a little girl. In place of a sparse colorless dining room, Hanriette fabricated a quaint country *cuisine*. It was like something out of Green Gables complete with a whitewashed pantry, wood burning stove, dish cupboard, and a small pine farmhouse table with four perfectly-formed ladder-back chairs. The tablecloth, seat cushions, and fabric napkins were a matching floral set. A butler sink with running tap water was one of a few hints of modernization that the old fashioned kitchen possessed. For me, it was envy at first sight.

Hanriette gestured to a kitchen chair, and I obligingly sat. She did not pause for a moment, instead she went to the pantry and began filling up her arms with little paper bags weighty with powdery ingredients. A second trip to the pantry transpired brown eggs, three apples, and a mysterious tin that I would later discover contained nuts. Finally, the tools of her trade were being pulled out of cupboards and drawers and off of shelves.

“Here you go,” Hanriette said in an instructing tone placing the apples and a peeler in front of me, “Get to work.” We smiled to ourselves as we carried on feeling normalcy and comfort that only simple pleasures can inspire. Baking with Hanriette was quickly becoming one of them. It was easy to ignore that we were not really preparing food as the smell of cinnamon was so deeply etched into my memories that I nearly convinced myself I would be able to taste it.

“Do you know, Bly Elizabeth, that out of all of the suburbanites, I have been here the longest?” she stated with an assured grin. I was not certain if that was supposed to be considered a good or a bad thing in Hell. However, a rhetorical question from a Frenchwoman – French

Canadian – is always a cue to prompt the conversation on further in the direction of her choosing.

“Wow,” I tried to say enthusiastically, “You must have seen a lot of changes... and people from all sorts of places... and lots of stuff change over time.” I was really at a loss for the most appropriate words. I wanted to know more, but I was finding it difficult to tactfully compose a proper question. “So, how long have you been here?”

“Oh, silly, *mademoiselle*,” she giggled, “Souls are not privy to that information. Here there are no calendars. No clocks. Night and day does not even exist. And don’t even bother to look at the ash filled sky for so much as a hint; it surrenders nothing as the grey hues vary at will.” Hanriette sighed with amusement at my inexperience, “Besides, we have no need of time.” She had been so kind; I couldn’t bring myself to tell her that time still meant something to me. I proudly presented my peeled and chopped apples. I felt a bit like *Oliver Twist* coddling the bowl in both hands holding it up with a half cocked smile. “Ah, you’re done very well,” she said taking the bowl, “I can see you’re a very experienced *sous chef*.” The dry and wet ingredients all came together and were lovingly placed into the oven.

Hanriette sat back down across from me and stared warmly with her small head tilted to the side. She began to sense that I was beginning to introvert. After all, without a clock, how would I know when to stop mourning my death?

“Did you know that body markings like tattoos and scars or holes for ear jewellery never make it to the Waiting Room?” she said as a matter-of-factly. “It would not have mattered much to me. I certainly never had tattoos or earrings.” Hanriette leaned in close as if to divulge a scandalous piece of gossip, “Did you know, that in life, some souls had jewellery pierced into all sorts of incriminating places?”

I exploded with laughter. I quickly tried to compose myself as I did not want to offend her. Thankfully, Hanriette began to laugh at the silliness of her own juicy tidbit.

The apple cinnamon cake came out of the oven and was ready for us to enjoy. Timers did not exist and cakes never burn; whether it baked for a minute or a decade, it would still be perfect. The ritual of baking was unnecessary, but Hanriette so thoroughly enjoyed the feminine labours of homemaking that you might have mistaken her for being in Heaven.

As on Earth, taste was subjective. I complimented Hanriette on her liberal use of cinnamon. However, she insisted that she used nutmeg and could only taste nutmeg as she was never fond of cinnamon. To me it was the best apple cinnamon cake I had ever tasted. We became quite while enjoying the same apple cake with different taste sensations. I chewed, but there was nothing to swallow and nowhere for it to go. Each bite mysteriously dissolved in my mouth.

I was beginning to feel that Hanriette's prediction of us becoming *firm friends* was gradually taking shape. Although Hanriette appeared to be ageless, she was certainly a woman who lived a long and experienced life in a Quebecois age when the neighborly thing to do was always done. I felt like a baby bird being sheltered under her mother's wing in the pouring rain. Hanriette went to all this trouble for me, a perfect stranger, just because I sat sad and alone on a front porch step. Gratitude filled the place where my heart once was.

"Hanriette, can I ask you something?"

"But of course."

"Well, I just don't want you to think I'm being weird or paranoid or something," I started coyly, "What is the deal with all the cats?"

"Ah," she began as she dapped the corner of her mouth with a cloth napkin, "Stay clear of the cats. They are spies."

“Oh. I guess that would make sense how demons would know if you’ve broken the *one golden rule*.”

“Cats are sneaky creatures. They hide, and you cannot see them. They could be far or near, but you must always assume that one is lurking close by.”

Hanriette looked over her shoulder through the glass doors. I could see she was becoming nervous just at the thought of the cats. Thankfully, I was always a dog person.

“Typically, I like to be the first to welcome new neighbors into the suburb,” Hanriette began in the way a Frenchwoman does when she wishes to change the subject, “Nevertheless, I could not pass up the opportunity to watch David approach you. He was staring at you so intently that I postponed my usual introductions.”

Perhaps he isn’t the village bicycle after all. I tried to make light of Hanriette’s admiration for the golfer’s forwardness, “Well, the English are a very reserved culture.”

“Ah, you know all too well,” she agreed with eyebrows arched.

“You seem very fond of David.” Fence sitting was never my forte. Hanriette has managed to put me in two minds about the possibility of a contented existence in the suburb. However, it was very unlikely that she could persuade me to give the handsome golfer a chance.

“David is a soul of substance in his character. He is genuine and quite a lovely man. So, *oui, bien sûr*, I am fond of him.

“David mostly keeps to himself, and only really engages with people he knows well. It is a compliment to your looks that the enigmatic David has approached you. It is such a mysterious and romantic magic that bewitches us into doing things outside of one’s normalcy.

“Can I give you a tiny bit of advice...?” I would have said yes, but Henariette did not pause for the answer as her question was rhetorical. “There are two kinds of souls around here: those who shut themselves in their bungalows sulking in the absence of you-know-who and those

who enjoy their death. Either way, you're in *His* absence. So, curiosity, attraction, or just an eternity of time to kill are all very sound reasons to make yourself better acquainted with another soul. What have you got to lose, hum?'

CHAPTER 5

Lounge Wallpaper

It had taken many attempts and much coaxing to dislodge me from my front porch. More if Hanriette hadn't made such a good point in her yellow kitchen. Back and forth he strode across the street at random to forcibly engage me in polite small talk. It was becoming clear that David would be difficult to avoid *forever* as his house was directly across from mine. I had to reply, "I could murder one," when he finally worked up the nerve to ask, "Fancy a cuppa?"

David definitely did not expect that. He stuttered the verbal equivalent to a double-take. The walk across the street felt infinite. His broad shoulders slouched while his eyes met the asphalt undoubtedly contemplating his next move.

Success! I have stumped him with my female unpredictability. An internal self congratulation was in order as I caught the metaphorical ball bouncing into my court. My bursting ego concluded that conversationalism must be a women's art.

"It smells like Christmas in here." The aromas of Mum-in-law's Yorkshire puddings, brown Bisto gravy, and freshly peeled oranges permeated David's living room.

The door squeaked behind us as David pushed it shut. Thankfully, chivalry was not dead. His amused smile was sweet and subtle. “You’re the first soul ever to have to notice it. Naturally, I like it this way,” he confessed, “It reminds me of, well... you can imagine.”

“Yeah, I get it. It’s a bit like the squeaking door that shouldn’t logically squeak down here,” I said as the ball mindlessly slipped from my fingers and bounced into his court. Dang.

“Yes, well, right-o, I promised you a cuppa,” he said as he trotted off to his dining room.

“Do all Englishmen rock on the balls of their feet when they think of tea, or just the posh ones?” I called after him. It was a rhetorical question: all of ‘em. I just wanted the ball back.

“Have a seat. Preferably in the chair closest to the window,” David called from the dining room, “Oh, and one sugar or two?”

“White, one sugar. Please.” In truth, I always used honey instead sugar. I did make exceptions for raw organic sugar at cafes if need be. But what the hell; calories be damned.

Standing next to David’s front door, it felt like tunnel vision looking just across his elongated rectangular lounge. The floor’s wide timber planks pointed to a brick fireplace jutting from the wall. Ordaining the mantel was a modest wood Deco clock with a domed glass face and machine cut ornamentation defining the corners; well, as much of a clock as it could be without numbers or hands. The room itself was empty save for a matching pair of plush Queen Anne wingbacks in a subtle floral print. A small circular table sat unassumingly between the chairs as they were deliberately poised toward the fireplace. But it was the wallpaper that struck me – almost literally – with its big overstated gold flowers in a sea of deep *deep* green. Sandwiched between the picture rail and thick skirting, the lounge wallpaper was oddly restricted to the one wall.

“All Brit’s, men *and* women. What can I say, we love a good cuppa. I still like to set the kettle on the hob and go through the motions. There’s a sort of comfort in it,” he smiled at me as

he set the mugs down on the small table, “Clearly, we’ve been trained since birth, and apparently it follows us into death.” I smiled and half giggled as we both sat down. David couldn’t be anything but British when I observed coasters where there were once none as I lifted the little china mug to my mouth.

“Lovely,” we whisper at the exact same time. Golden brown. ‘Now that’s a proper cup of tea,’ I thought to myself. David must have been thinking the same. His nose hovered over the steamy cup cradled between gently clasping fingers. His physique looked more slender when sitting. One ankle perched on the other knee casually. He was still and quiet drinking in the fantasy liquid and bygones. David’s upper lip quivered slightly when pressed to the rim as if anticipating heat. They were really quite lovely lips; not too thin, not too thick, just right.

Shit. ‘Buck up, Bly, you need to get that ball back into your court,’ one Gemini twin screeched to the other. Darn you, internal dialogue.

“So...,” I started.

“The clock was grandad’s, so to speak,” he began musing, “Pardon me, I interrupted you – completely thoughtless – you were saying?”

“So...,” before my nerve could be lost, the naughty twin unceremoniously blurted, “How did ’ja die?”

It was the most impressive projection of any liquid I have witnessed sprayed from the mouth. He dropped the ball, and I was too embarrassed to pick it up. Mentally, I quickly retracted anything I previously determined on conversationalism and female art.

“Excuse me, I have never done that before. I am truly embarrassed, but,” he introduced the dreaded *but*, “I think you may have dropped the ball on that one.”

“I am pretty sure I never caught it,” I said giving myself no room for *but*s, “I am so sorry, David. I clearly said something wrong. I am the one who is embarrassed, *please* don’t be. I won’t ask....”

“It’s fine really. Not a single soul has probably mentioned to you that we simply don’t talk about that here. That experience – *death* – is deeply spiritual and personal, thus, typically – most definitely – involving G-O-D,” David whispered the spelled word as he glanced coyly out of his living room window.

“Religion and politics, aye?” I smiled remorsefully, “Again, I am really....”

“No, please, don’t, it’s... well look, the mess simply never existed,” David pointed out as he gestured to the fireplace hearth which should have been dripping with spit tea. We sat in awkward silence.

“Yes, I do think it’s a very nice clock,” I confirmed as I remembered that I could simply wish my cup empty rather than drinking it quickly, “I should probably go....”

“Bly.” It was the first time David said my name with a decisive and intimate tone. I betrayed myself by instantly hoping it would not be the last. His blue eyes locked mine in a temperate stare, “I would like to tell you this:

“The world is full of war and hatred. Of course, there are a few good bits in between the bad, but you’ve even got to fight for those moments. It’s as if we were navigating a labyrinth chalker-full of landmines of misery and hunger, poverty, murders and thieving, etcetera.

“It’s plain to see that you’re questioning why you’re here and dealing with your mortal loss. We all do when we first arrive. But each *sane* suburbanite comes to the same conclusion with only one question remaining: why on Earth – Heaven or even Hell – what will happen to my soul if I continue questioning what I’m doing here?”

“Yes, the absence of *Him* aches and hurts. But, in earnestness, Bly; really ponder this seriously. We have been abandoned by *Him*. But some supernatural being, however dark, created this beguiling place just for us. How can we risk questioning why we’re here?”

“That’s very self-seeking,” I retorted, but before I could expand upon my thought....

“How so? I gave my entire life to helping others. My entire *short* life. What did I get out of it? Nothing. Pardon my French, but absolute *shite*.

“I willingly abandoned the BBC and piles of book and Mum’s Sunday roast... cricket with me mates. I swapped my cozy Marks’ jumpers for a stiff uniform. I journeyed across the planet to hold hands with war-struck natives and broken soldiers in a third estate country. And when they broke-down, it was my duty to convince them that it was their ideals had failed them; thus, choose mine because we’ve got all the answers.

“I believed whole heartedly in all of it. Before I left England, I couldn’t understand why anyone could be so apprehensive to accept my faith. In Korea, my eyes were opened. It’s all a massive fecking failure. My religion failed me. I was failed. I’m here because hope is a lie, and faith is a delusion.

“Hell’s been good to me – once I got past all of my moping nonsense, of course. How do you know that some abstract ethical compass hasn’t pointed us in this direction? Maybe we weren’t quite good enough for Heaven, but not overly horrific for Hell proper. Perhaps the suburb is where our souls are meant to rest.

“How difficult is it really to simply accept that this is where you are meant to be, right here, enjoying a cup of tea with me?”

It’s just like a man to turn a philosophical conversation into self-glorification. Yet, I had a feeling that David shared more than he felt comfortable saying; as if it was bottled up inside for such a long time. I rested my head back onto the chair and pointed my eyes toward the ceiling.

“I don’t disagree that I belong here or that you do as well,” I sighed and looked at him, “I wouldn’t even pretend to be naive enough to ignore the fact that we’re here as a punishment for our sins. We all fall short of the glory. But something just doesn’t add up; it makes no sense. Yes, the absence of God is slowly eating away at my soul, but logically something just isn’t right.”

“Of course it’s not *right*,” David arched an eyebrow, “It’s Hell.”

CHAPTER 6

Painting the Town

“If you splash me, I’ll...” I’ll be unable to think of a snappy retort.

“You’ll what?” David egged me on in playful mockery, “Kill me?”

I smacked the water hard – *splash* – and laughed. Playing victim always worked with my sister to get the first splash in, and David’s face was successfully doused. He laughed lightly with his deep throaty voice through a wet grin. Now I was in for it.

Thankfully, the chase around the village fountain was not considered a public nuisance for any soul. The suburbanites seemed to enjoy playing in its pool of water. The village’s cobble stone road wrapped itself around the grand circular pool. Its circumference was wide with steps that carried you up its short stone wall and down deeper into its transparent waters. In its center was an epic fountain head spewing a mushroom cloud.

Eventually, David trapped me between the tall spray of water and its chiseled stone spout. “Now you’re trapped,” he said as he walked into the spray with an arm on either side of me. The water dripped down his head and plastered his wavy brown hair flat to his forehead. His grin was victorious. Such a confident ego begged to be deflated.

“It’s so weird to feel the consistency and moisture of water, but not its temperature.”

Besides, it was weird. Not just the water, but such a flirtatious Englishman who also happened to be sober.

“It’s not a tall queer. It’s what you’d expect without a nervous system. I’ve always thought of this body like an oyster shell and its pearl is my soul.”

That still didn’t explain the sensation of touch, but I didn’t want to ruin the moment, “That’s exactly the analogy I’ve been thinking of.” I wondered if David also felt the hollowness inside. “These shells are kind of like glorified transportation.”

David inhaled and laughed, “Sounds about right, but unfortunately my attempt to woo you with poetic profoundness is clearly at a loss.” He looked me up and down unrepentantly.

“Besides, in life were your breasts so perky and arse so tight?”

“Of course,” I smiled crookedly holding eye contact to maintain my conviction, “Absolutely.” It was a mere half truth. It seems that transforming a little black dress into a green hourglass bikini is just as simple as electing to wear the body I had at nineteen rather than that at my time of departure. Weekday workaholicism and wine bar weekends by thirty-three had graduated my dress size up by two and cellulite under my bottom. Thankfully, good genetics at least made me worth a second glance in my thirties. That was until incarceration left me gangly and scrawny. “What about you?”

“British Army. Died during the Korean War a young man. What you see is what you get.” What I saw was the athletic build of a young man in his mid-twenties. His broad shoulders made his average height appear taller. I tried not to imagine if his shell was anatomically correct underneath his swimming trunks.

“Really?” I looked at him with a confidence I couldn’t support, “I don’t believe it.”

“Alright, I had a tattoo, but it disappeared when I got here,” he confessed, “Satisfied?”

“Not really, I was hoping you’d say you were ginger so I could make fun of you.” We both laughed. I was glad that David never gave up his one man campaign to force me into fun. And David was fun. I felt fun just being with him. It was nice to feel something good again. David pushed me into the water playfully.

I discovered that I could stay under indefinitely as breathing was no longer required. I sat fully submerged in the fountain which probably accomplished a similar objective as putting ones head in the sand. I watched hazy legs like tree trunks swaying in the elements. It was hypnotic. I found myself quickly becoming philosophical. Big questions floated by me with each wave of activity: how did I get here, why me, does everyone else feel this way, are they all pretending to be happy on the surface?

The glow of the sky above the water was inviting. I must have been very rude to stay under for so long. I floated up and look worriedly around for David.

“I’m over here,” David called from the edge of the fountain. He was dry and dressed smartly in gray wool trousers and a crisp navy Oxford. As I walked toward him and ascended the fountain’s stone steps, my body dried with each rise liberating me from the water. I willed my little black dress to return. I hoped that wishing for flawless make-up and perfect hair would be enough for them to transpire as well.

David stood next to me closely and stared at my hand smiling to himself. He brushed his fingertips into my palm and then entwined his fingers with mine. There was no heat in his touch, but it felt nice in every other way. David looked down at me and smiled with sparkling eyes, “Let’s have a tour, shall we?”

David led me around the village for my first visit. Just as the cobblestone street encircled the fountain, so did a ring of shops reminiscent of old world charm with brick cladding, carved timber detailing, colorfully painted doors, and sweet window boxes. Souls wandered to and fro

with shopping bags full of delights. They conversed with gossip and gayeties. I could have almost forgotten I was in Hell but for the two breaks in the circle of stores where the asphalt road met the horizon to the right and the other to the left.

“Think of the paved road as a belt and the village as its buckle clasping at both ends.” He must have followed my eyes as I was looking around. David mused on my silent thoughts, “Now, imagine you’re stood on the buckle and walked along the belt. You’ll always end up back at the buckle.”

“But the paved asphalt road can’t be more than a mile or two, and there isn’t a significant gradient or drop in the horizon in any direction that indicates we would be going in circles.” I could still remember enough of Miss Lewis’ fourth grade lessons to know that Christopher Columbus held an orange to the ocean’s horizon and watched a distant ship gradually rise into full view. Oh, I was defeated. “Never mind, I forgot that the laws of physics are merely a suggestion here.”

Sensing my frustration, David squeezed my hand and was quick to make a proposal, “Let me take you into some of the shops. I think you’ll be impressed.”

And I was. Each shop was a little world onto its own. We wove in and out of them in an endless parade of diversions and novelties. There were lotions and bubble bath in every color of the rainbow, vibrant fabrics of every weave and texture, and sparkling trinkets to emphasize your most alluring qualities. A flower shop, boutique, house wares, and gardening gear to name a few. Amusements and games were played all in good fun with nothing to lose but a bit of pride.

Currency did not exist here. There were no cash registers or security. The shops were unmanned. The stock simply replenished itself.

There were no restaurants, cafes, or coffee houses. We souls had no need for food or drink. Curiously, the village had a pub. The joint was packed inside and out. I watched the

souls sat at the tables outside the Prince of Darkness guzzling proper pints from sweating glasses and frothed rims. I never fancied a pint when I was alive, and now I thirsted for one as intensely as a newborn vampire's lust for blood.

"David, heir!"

"Ah, Hamlin, hallo," David responded to a man waving from a crowded table. Their smiles were broad and familiar like two old friends reconnecting. With my hand still in his, David guided me through the maze of tables and bustling souls until we reached the owner of the voice.

"Oh, and *hallo*, Minne, you're as lovely as ever," he said to the woman sat next to the man called Hamlin. *"Minne, ich kann nicht glauben lassen Sie diese alten Hund aus dem Haus ohne Leine!"* They all laughed in unison.

The woman named Minne retorted, *"Er kratzt an der tür wenn ich nicht nehmen ihn mit!"* We all laughed. Even I couldn't help it. Laughing was a more appealing alternative to questioning my sudden and fluent comprehend of the German language. I felt I had reached my eternal quota of feeling like a dunce. Besides, one should never ignore an opportunity to enjoy a joke made by a German.

"Who is your new friend, David?" Hamlin promptly changed the subject, and proper introductions were made all around. I recognized them as the couple whose bungalow was two doors down from mine. Unfortunately for me, David turned down two chairs and some mouthwatering pints as we had merely stopped to say *hallo*.

Minne gave me a genuinely sorrowful face, "I almost didn't recognize you without the blindingly orange pajamas," I started to correct her, but Minne went on, "My husband and I left Earth together, sat in the waiting room together, and were brought to this suburb together. We are so happy to spend our eternity together. A Big-Old-Man, up there somewhere, who cares?"

My husband and I are together and that's all that matters to me." They were a smart looking pair in their early forties. I wondered if that was how old they were when they died, but I did not want to be rude and ask.

"Now, our dear friend David," Hamlin piped up, "must always have force to be social. We are ever so pleased that he has made such a lovely friend as you, Bly."

"You two are really too much," David half mockingly rolled his eyes, "And on that note, my *lovely* friend and I are off. Onwards and upwards." David straightened up and offered his hand which I took dutifully. I was still begrudged for being denied a pint. Nevertheless, my tour guide was restless. I was certain an opportunity to enjoy a drink with Hamlin and Minne at the Prince of Darkness would transpire again soon. We said our farewells and began our walk to leave the village hand-in-hand.

The ashen sky randomly shifted between a few shades of gray like a graphite scale in an artist's sketchbook. But as we walked down the paved road hand in hand the atmosphere was a deep dark gray. It was reminiscent of evening and made it feel somehow more romantic. The street lights were like beacons guiding me to my eternal resting place. Just like everything else in the suburbs of Hell, night and day is simply an illusion here. Routine was a habit for creatures bred to meticulously keep account of time. Scheduling became an unnecessary and abstract concept. Time did not rule us here as it once did on Earth.

"I used to find it unsettling that the sky never becomes black as night." David confessed, "But I suspect if I experienced total darkness it would probably leave me quite..."

"Scared?" his fishing for a word to describe the obvious was unsettling to me. I wished to myself secretly that he hadn't mentioned the illusion of this dusky sky. The spell had been broken, and that pit feeling in my middle was back. Complete darkness would be exactly what I might expect in Hell.

“Yeah, probably.”

“That is so like an Englishman to never admit defeat or fear,” I giggled and half smiled to lighten the mood. A squeeze of my hand and a half cocked smile was my reward for making an observation. His eyes sparkled so hypnotically in this light. The spell was cast once again, and the rhythmic sound of our shoes on the pavement carried us to my front porch steps.

David was taller than me. Not by much as I had always felt I was too tall. I supposed that I could decide to shrink an inch or two now, but it seemed silly as I had made several acquaintances in the village. Besides, I liked being eye to eye with David.

I leaned on the pillar with my arms firmly wrapped around it. It was not out of a need to balance myself. But the desire to fling my arms around David’s broad shoulders was far too tempting. I sighed, “Huh, I feel that I’ve been a bit unfair to you from the time we met up ‘til now.”

“Right, okay,” he arched his eyebrows, “I think I’m a bit confused now because I’ve had a lovely time with you. Especially in the pool,” he confided timidly.

“Yeah, I thought you might say that,” I paused to collect my thoughts, “You see, you sort of remind me of someone I used to know, but you’re not exactly like him, per say, but you’ve got the whole English charm thing going. Plus, you’re younger than me, and I don’t want to take advantage of you for the sake of nostalgia. I feel like I could easily let myself do that because it’s been longer than I’m willing to admit... well, since I’ve shared intimate... you get my drift.” Thankfully, lack of blood circulation spared me from blushing.

His smile broadened, and he leaned on the pillar just inches from my face. “I’m going to kiss you goodnight.” In life or death I don’t think I’d ever met a man who was so certain that I would let him. And I would have, but...

“We don’t have chemistry.”

David's head jolted back and his eyebrows wrinkled with a look of complete confusion on his face. "What are you on about? We have loads of chemistry. You've been anticipating my first move since I successfully commandeered you in the fountain."

Relieved that I hadn't deflated his ego, I pressed on with my original thought. "We physically don't have chemistry. We're dead. These aren't bodies as much as they are glorified transportation devices. Can't you feel the difference?" Frustration. "Besides were you listening to anything I was saying just now? I don't want to take advantage of..."

"We definitely have chemistry," he said sternly and smoothly moved back into position, "We don't need bodies for that." And without hesitation, David slipped an arm behind my waste and fingers explored the back of my neck. David's lips teased mine as they hovered close. "We also don't have to breathe, but when I inhale you, I can almost smell flowers on your skin. You're so fresh and new. I imagine you still smell like life."

Either embarrassed by his compliment or impatience overcame me, I pressed my lips on to his hard and fast. My soul swelled. I wildly drank in the new sensation.

David pulled away gently. "Go slow." Then he leaned in and kissed me slowly and tenderly with lips parted.

What felt like radiant light shot through all facets of my hollow body and filled me up. The emptiness was consumed by a supernatural glow within. I felt good and pure from head to toe. Everything around us just melted away. Chemistry was definitely overrated.

CHAPTER 7

Red Tape

* * *

Telegraph of the German Reich

Official Telegram

of

Berlin

<u>RECIEVER PAYING</u>	8061978	<u>NAME OF RECIPIENT</u>	
<u>DATE</u>	5.13.1939	Colonel R Gunther	
<u>TIME ORDERED</u>	11:45	<u>STREET ADDRESS</u>	RSHA
<u>WORDCOUNT</u>	56	<u>CITY, STATE</u>	Berlin

Your instinct was correct · 10:37 eight Jews apprehended at residence of Prof Hamlin Vogt and wife · Initiated recommendation based on your investigation · Jews transferred to

Berlin Ghetto · public execution of Vogt's in front of their
residence · Other suspected faculty offer information and Jews
in exchange for immunity · Full report to follow · Signed by
Major W Lehmann ·

[PROPOSALS CONCERNING THE COMPANY TREASURE OF HIS PATRONS ARE HIS SERVICE]

CHAPTER 7

Red Tape

* * *

Telegraphie des Deutschen Reich

amtliche telegramm

auf

Berlin

<u>ZAHL DES EMPFÄNGERS</u>	8061978	<u>NAME DES EMPFÄNGERS</u>	
<u>DATE</u>	5.13.1939		Staf R Günther
<u>ZEIT ORDNETE EIN</u>	14:45	<u>STRABEN ADRESSE</u>	RSHA
<u>WORTZAHL</u>	59	<u>STADT, ZUSTAND</u>	Berlin

Ihr instinkt war korrigieren · 10:37 acht Juden residenz des
 Profi Hamlin Vogt und frau festgenommen · Initiiert empfehlung
 auf der grundlage ihrer untersuchung · Juden übertragen Berlin

Ghetto · öffentliche hinrichtung von Vogts vor ihrem wohnort ·
Andere mutmaßliche Fakultät bieten informationen und Juden im
austausch für immunität · vollständigen bericht zu folgen · gez.
von Stubof W Lehmann ·

[DIE FIRMA SCHATZ VORSCHLÄGE VON SEINEN GÖNNERN BETREFFEND SIND SEINEN SERVICE]

CHAPTER 8

Strolling Around

Whack. It's one of my favorite sounds. A driver swinging through the air at ten miles per hour and hitting its invisible resistance as it disciplines the grass with a flick. It's a satisfying *ping* of metal hitting the small hard ball as it thrust up into the air sailing far beyond and out of sight.

Ball after ball, David methodically swung his driver mercilessly at the small round spheres. He launched them into flight to be lost forever in the vast meadow behind his backyard. David reached his hand into the pocket of his checked golf pants where an endless stream of balls materialized. I watched as his shoulder blades tensed then released under his green polo shirt as his legs shifted weight from one to the other. I studied his every movement like a painter longing to stroke their figure study.

"My Uncle Joe was a semi-pro golfer," I broke the silence to see if he remembered I was still there, "He let me be his caddy a of couple times." David turned around with a smile on his face that had suggested his concentration was pleasantly broken. Yes, he could see that I was still stretched out on the steps of his back porch in a knee length denim skirt and a lime green tank-top.

"I still can't believe that women of your day really go out into public dressed as you are." David still couldn't quite wrap his head around when *my day* was exactly. However, he never seemed to prompt for an explanation. I must be the first truly entertaining thing that he's experienced in the suburb.

"Yeah, bare feet really are offensive, aren't they?" I mused as I stretched a long leg and twinkled my toes. I was pleased that my subtle flirtation could generate such a hearty laugh.

"Fancy a go?"

"Sure." I got up gracelessly from my lounging position and took his place where he had gestured. I noticed that the driver looked brand new but was a vintage style. My uncle had plenty of drivers, but none that looked this dated. "So, where did you get this driver?"

"That's a silly question. Same place we get everything. Our minds, if you will." David sighed contemplatively and reached his arms around mine with his broad chest on my shoulder blades. He was careful not to press his groin on my ass, and I wasn't feeling bold enough to encourage that connection. He cuffed his hands around mine as we grasped the club together swinging it slowly back and forth to loosen up my body.

"My father had a driver just like this one." David paused as if debating with himself to share pieces of his life. "Well, it was the best, so I merely thought of the best when ushering it into existence." Unfortunately, his better judgment won the debate and he released me. "Try taking a few swings," he said as he pulled another golf ball from his pocket and dropped it in front of me.

Pathetic. Uncle Joe would be mortified; he always complained I didn't swing in my hips enough and exasperate the energy in my arms. I pelted the ground and arched the ball up too high in the air. Fifteen feet at best. David couldn't help himself but to laugh at me, and I could

not help joining him. The embracement was like out of a bad SNL sketch. "Well, that was the metaphorical last-nail-in-the-coffin of my golfing career."

I handed David his driver back, and he resumed where I had interrupted. Instead of sitting and watching again, I stood at the very edge of the grass where it neatly met the wispy tall stalks of the golden meadow. It waved hypnotically; yet, from where I stood on the green grass, there was no breeze. I had gained a better understanding of prairie madness. "I think this is the first time I have ever seen the meadow grasses move." I reached my arm over the invisible threshold and felt a subtle wind brush over my arm. In life, it would have been a pleasant sensation; in death, it was unsettling. The movement of air through my lungs and the wind tangling my hair were just memories.

"You shouldn't be doing that," David said without missing a beat in his swing.

"Why not?" I waited for him to answer. "What's out there?"

"Nothing." David took another swing and rested his driver on his shoulder, "Just disappointment."

"Is it the way out?" I said solemnly.

"It is bold and dangerous to talk of such things." David wore a serious expression of intensity that was new to me. All sense of lightheartedness drained from his face. He tightened his form as if ready to protectively pounce on me at any moment.

I jumped into the meadow with both feet. "What's going to happen to me that I don't already deserve?" I declared semi-mockingly, "David, I'm dead. I'm in Hell."

"Get out of the meadow, you foolish girl." David was trying to keep a cap on his anger, but his quivering voice couldn't conceal it. "There are spies everywhere. If they see you, Bly, you'll become a suspect."

"A suspect of what?" I was jeering him on guiltily, but I had to know.

"You know what!" David took a deep breath, lowered his tone, and heighten his emphasis, "Bly, there is nothing out there. It is *just* disappointment."

His blue eyes were glazed over with sentiment and fear in place of the affectionate gazes I had become accustomed to. David is not what brought me to the suburb; I couldn't let him be my reason for staying. The wind blew softly on my skin reminding me of what life felt like, and it made me more and more curious by the moment about what was out there.

"David, I have to know," and I turned around and walked into the meadow. David called after me with pleas and promises. I told myself I wouldn't look back. Of course I couldn't resist after walking no more than a hundred paces. I couldn't see his face clearly from such a distance, but he was most definitely watching my every step.

I kept walking. The wind picked up to a mild hum. With each gust, my shell felt like a chalkboard being scratched with rusty nails. Feeling anything resembling life filled me with a sort of pain a living body would recognize. I turned around again and could see the endless row of houses lined up in the distance like a picket fence. David was a mere dot on its horizon; no doubt, still staring right at me.

My walking became increasingly uneven, each step more labored. Screaming gales pressed against my shell pushing me back from where I came. With each gust, flashes of lightning exploded in my mind and blinded my sight with each burst. I could hear my voice unintelligibly argue against each bolt as I pressed my fingers on my head and felt my face cringe. Each step became more of a struggle against the now constant current of wind. It was too late to walk back the suburb; it was now completely out of my line of sight. The meadow stretched infinitely around me in all directions without a bend or a break. I had barely assessed my surroundings when cross winds violently pushed me to my knees. With much effort, I stood back up.

"I deserve whatever is out here! I need to know!" I screamed into the ashen sky, "Punish me! I'm a sinner, let me be punished!"

A drop wind pinned me to the ground hard onto my back. The wind felt like it was boring holes through the skin of my shell. It was impossible to rise. A storm erupted inside of me. The pain invaded every threshold of my being. I screamed in agony.

Flashes of my life – *my* life – flooded me: my older sister and I playing in the bath as children; my mother baking bread; my father coming home with a stray dog; my sister and I fighting over a doll; my father placing a kiss on my youthful forehead the last time I saw him; being unable to comfort my mom's distress in my teenage inexperience; my older sister as a young woman sitting us down for an unanticipated announcement.

* * *

"Mom, you remember Seth, right?" Dena looked timidly at us sitting on the loveseat in our living room. It was a modest home in Uptown. The best Mom could afford as a secretary for a small Minneapolis law firm. Dena focused her eyes on the Arts and Crafts stained glass windows flanking the boarded up fireplace; Mom said the insurance was too high to burn anything in it.

"Dena, we remember Seth," Mom tried to prompt her along, "He was our guest at Thanksgiving, right?" Mom knew darn well who Seth was, and I don't think either of us could consider him a welcomed guest. Guests don't just sit on the sofa and insist beer and dinner be delivered to them as any interruption from the football game was too much to ask. Dena attributed the lack of manners to a shyness that prevented him from joining us at the dining room table.

"Mom, well, Seth and I have been dating for some time now...."

"You're *still* dating?" I interjected impatiently, "It's almost summer, and you haven't even mentioned him once."

"Bly, don't interrupt, let Dena finish," Mom said as she patted my knee. It was like being a kid again with Mom sat between us in church to deter elbowing. She was clearly using this delay to calm herself. Dena had always been shy about dating. At twenty-one, she only had two boyfriends that lasted no more than a couple months each.

"Seth is kind of a keep-to-yourself kinda guy, Bly," Dena looked down, "And I respect that he's the kind of man who isn't afraid to just be himself."

"What? An asshole?"

"Bly Elizabeth, enough," Mom never hesitated to interject even if I was eighteen, "Dena Marie, out with it."

Dena put one of the throw pillows on her lap and began to play with its tassels. Maybe she thought its crochet knit would help her find the words. "I love him a lot, and we've decided that it's best to get married," Dena inhaled a gulp of air as if she had been holding her breath for too long. The rest just poured out of her mouth like a flood, "He says he loves me, and he wants to do the right thing. I love him, and I want to do the right thing too. We didn't do it on purpose. It wasn't planned. But we love each other so much, and that's all that matters. The baby will have two parents who love each other a lot. And, Seth has a good job, and...."

"*What?*" Mom dropped the grasp on her decorum. We simultaneously spewed questions, concerns, and our two cents at a rapid rate as our voices grew louder and louder. When Dena began to cry, Mom rested her hand back on my knee to quiet me. Red faced, she took a deep breath and composed herself as she shifted to the love seat and placed her arms around her daughter, "You and a boy named Seth..."

"Mom! He's not a boy! He's twenty-five."

“Stop,” Mom held up her hand, “You and this *young* man – whom apparently you've been dating for at least six months – are having a baby?”

Dena's flood of tears slowed to a snuffle, “Yes.”

* * *

I sat up and inhaled deeply as if coming up for air from a vast ocean. The winds had calmed and the meadow grasses gently waved as if to greet me upon my return. The soul inside of my shell felt as if it was swollen and humming off key. It was heavy, too heavy to get up. I felt like I was being roused from a coma.

It took several attempts, but I finally stood up gingerly to take in my surrounds and assemble my bearings. The meadow stretched in every direction. The bent stalks of the prairie grasses were the only evidence of what direction I had come from. I should be safe and sensible; go back the direction from which I came. Yet, doing the opposite of what is expected was a common theme in my life, why change course in death? I began to walk slowly and carefully away from where I had trodden.

The wind gently pushed me along this time. Rather than fighting me, it seemed to be apologizing for the hassle it had caused by guiding me along. The ease of this stroll caused my mind to wander back to the days after Dena told Mom and me that she was pregnant with Rachel.

It now seems so rash that I could have been so furious with Dena that day. There were far worse things to come for her. I knew that life wouldn't be a picnic married to a selfish jerk like Seth, but I felt at the time that she made her bed – literally – and ought to lie in it.

The naivety of youth carried me to Cambridge to study architecture. I thought somehow that if I left America, my problems couldn't follow me overseas: Dena's untimely marriage and motherhood, Mom's endless mourning over Dad's vanishing trick, and the aching hurt Dad

caused when he disappeared. Years of debating why and where, willingly or unwillingly, would or wouldn't he be back, pounded fractures in our family foundation that divided Dena and Mom forever. I abandoned all of it. I should have known that new problems would find me in England.

Cambridge was a fairytale. Gothic lintels rose and Baroque cills plummeted ornamenting the campus' yellowing stone facades. Neither gargoyle nor ghosts could penetrate the heavy thick arched doorways that the sanctuary of academia bestowed. I captured every inspiring perspective in pencil and charcoal. Cobble stone streets, tombstones growing mini moss ecosystems, fractured stained glass windows, and stone walls consumed with ivy. I sketched endlessly on thin white pages in dozens of notebooks during those three years.

I remember the first time we met. It was an unusually cloudless and sunny April day in 1997. I was sketching the grand arched gate, and Arthur sat next to me on the steps of the Great Court Fountain at Trinity College. I paid him no attention; in fact, I could not even recall his approach. He claimed to have been waiting a full ten minutes for me to acknowledge his presence before interrupting my drawing with a, "Hi'ya, you alright?"

Arthur was a Southampton native writing his thesis on the history of Mesopotamia. He was irresistibly handsome. His shaggy auburn hair and facial stubble were intentionally scruffy giving Arthur that intellectual master's student vibe. His charm was intoxicating. His intellect was inspiring. Like a moth to the flame, I was instantly captivated.

I graduated, and he moved me to his hometown where we were blissfully wed at the Bugle Street registrar's office. He taught at Southampton University while I worked at an architects' practice in Ocean Village. We began to carve out a nice little life for ourselves. Everything I had and was, I eagerly surrendered to Arthur in blind faith and unwavering love.

Like his vegetable garden, entrepreneurial endeavors, and his novel, I became a project he got bored of. He spent half of our seven year marriage cheating with an assortment of random women including a Pompi brunette and the busty blonde next door. I felt my sanity crumble as Arthur unremorsefully destroyed every promise with as little effort as crushing anneal glass.

I was destroyed. Shattered. I gathered what fragments of me remained and moved home seeking the comfort of my mother and sister. Broken, I tried to glue the pieces of my life back together.

Mom was the same as ever. Loving, supportive, and slightly disconnected. She was sincerely sorrowful that a failed marriage brought me home to her. However, she could only pray that the same would happen for Dena.

Dena had Rachel soon after I left for Cambridge. Blake came a few years later. They were beautiful children from what I gathered of the photos Mom mailed. I was a good auntie who sent cards and presents in packages for every holiday, birthday, and just because. I heard little from Dena those seven years. I had visited home just twice during that time. The only positive in moving home was to finally get to know my niece and nephew.

I found myself in the middle of a merciless Minnesota winter. Taking full advantage of a buyers' market in bad weather, I was quick to snatch-up a house in Saint Anthony Park which ideally rests in a quiet haven between the Twinned Cities. I worked in a notable architects practice in Saint Paul. Although disheartened at the time, I was thankful that Arthur was fair in our divorce settlement. By spring, I was comfortable, settled, and lonely.

Dena, though shy and reserved, was always a silent beauty. Petite and pair shaped like Mom. She was brown haired, brown eyed, and light brown skin from Dad's Native American roots. With her face in a book, all flirtations and advances were completely lost on her. Seth

was loud and dominant; he was difficult for her to overlook. I left a shy and reserved sister, and returned to a withdrawn and anxious Dena.

Mom and I saw Dena inconsistently. She canceled when fresh bruises surfaced and dropped by unexpectedly when avoiding new ones. Seth always enjoyed a good drink, but it became a habit when he lost his first full time job as an assistant manager at Rainbow Foods. He could not hold down a job for more than a year or two at a time. His drinking got worse, his temper raged more, and Seth took it out on Dena.

By summertime, I should have been enjoying the Midwest's heat and humidity. Instead, I worried solidly about Dena and the kids. Nightmares filled my sleep which caused my work to suffer. Designing buildings was the only respite I had during the decline of my marriage; it stopped doing me any good.

Our worst fears had transpired. It was only a matter of time. Seth had a new job working nights at a warehouse surrounded by degenerates and the socially inept. Dena said it was her fault for not being quiet enough during the day while he slept. Mom said he was suffering a bad hangover. I said enough was enough. The only good that came out of it was Rachel and Blake staying with Mom. Dena was in the hospital beaten half to death.

She wouldn't blame him. She wouldn't press charges. She wouldn't confess to the social worker who did it. She was too afraid. Dena feared Seth more than death.

I put in my two weeks notice. I liquidated my assets. In secret, I signed over my car, house, and bank accounts to Dena. I brought lunch to Mom's and enjoyed an afternoon with her and the kids playing in the backyard. I visited my sister in the hospital the day before her release.

Three weeks had passed. There was less than twenty-four hours before Dena would leave the hospital and return to Seth. It was time.

I knew that the weary feeling weighing me down could not have been physical as I continued drudging through the meadow. It was the memories. My mother would have said it was so much pain with so little gain. My soul wept.

God used to bring me comfort. I would pray and feel the Spirit fill me up with peace and clarity. There is no hope of God in Hell. The void inside my shell made my soul feel so alone. I ached.

As I walked forward in the vast and endless meadow, I spied what looked like a picket fence in the distance. It was a row of houses. I was approaching the suburb. I looked behind me and saw where my footsteps had crushed the tall blades of prairie grass in a line moving directly away from where I was going. I could not fathom how I had arrived at the start when I had been walking away.

Comfort and hopefully answers were waiting on the horizon. There was a green pin prick in the distance. David. It had to be. I was certain.

Drawing closer I recognized the backyard as being my own. I had not returned to David's house. It is as if the flat endless meadow was an illusion. I had traveled nearly the full radius of a sphere.

Just a few dozen paces away, David rose from the steps of my back porch. He looks so anxious at the edge of the green grass. The light breeze stopped tussling my hair as I crossed the threshold that separated the meadow from my lawn. I felt safer, but I longed to feel secure.

"David," I started but couldn't finish, "I was... I'm just so... I...." My voice was quivering. I felt foolish.

He wrapped his arms around me hard. "Hush now." It felt more like a request than a command. My soul began to ease inside my shell. David pulled my face into his chest and placed a long and firm kiss on the crown of my head.

CHAPTER 9

Gift Basket

“Stay with me,” I murmured into his chest. I was far too shaken by the madness in the meadow to feign pride. I waited for the, ‘I told you so’s,’ but thankfully they never came.

“I would stay even if you didn’t ask.” His grasp did not loosen as he kissed me again on my hair.

“I know, but I wanted to ask to....”

“Shh. I know that, too.” David moved his hands to my head and cradled my face lifting my eyes to his. “We must move inside. We don’t know whose watching.”

We ascended the porch steps quickly with his arms still around me. David only released me once we took sanctuary in my dining room. He closed the French doors quickly. David stood in front of the glass with outstretched arms, and in his grasp curtains transpired as he rapidly brought his arms together. The screening would do us little good, but he did it to make me feel safer.

“Let’s sit down,” he said as he pulled out a chair from the dining room table. I submissively took my seat. David sat next to me at the head of the table. We slide our fingers across the table’s smooth surface until they intertwined. Our eyes met.

“I am so very.... I just wish I had listened. I mean...” Tears would have welled up in my eyes if I still had the adequate plumbing. “I just don’t know how to say it.”

“Don’t say a word. It’s not for me to know.” The sparkle in David’s eyes was gone, hidden deep behind the intensity of his stare. I could not imagine them being any more captivating in life as they were in death. David’s eyes reminded me of a solar eclipse with rays of amber and green emanating from behind black pupils into sky blue irises.

We didn’t need to move. We did not even blink. We simply stared into each others’ eyes. We made no haste. We had an eternity.

Self consciousness in life would have diverted my eyes somewhere else. But I did not want to stop looking at him. I was looking into him. David’s beautiful soul was somewhere beyond the embodiment of his shell. Finally, I could truly see *him*.

I could see clearly into David’s strengths and weaknesses, gratification and grief. His character enduring and focus steady. He came from a time when courtesy was compulsory, yet his politeness was born from principle. David was not a judgemental man, but he would not abide barefaced cruelty. Even deeper within him, I glimpsed a sorrow that had consumed him before he ever entered this place; it was beginning to mend.

It was intimate. For a moment there was just him and me. There was no suburb or Hell. There was no life or death. Just us.

I was not just holding hands with David. We wilfully surrendered a secret glance into the very being of one another. The stories of our separate lives suddenly became very inconsequential. Meaningless. We were becoming enveloped into one another. Knit into the fabric of the other’s existence.

I let David see me. It was difficult. I felt vulnerable. But David did not break his stare. I am relieved that he saw something in me worth looking at.

“Please tell me how you died?” I wanted to know. I felt that somehow if I knew I could mend the past for him, and save David from Hell.

The wait for him to answer was met with a long pause. I knew David heard me because the corner of his mouth twitched without losing any of the intensity of his gaze. He wanted to tell me. “It’s not for you to know,” he said with some regret.

“But...,” I lost the staring contest. I diverted my eyes to our fingers tangled like a basket weave. “I don’t understand why you...”

“I love you.”

He captured my eyes once again in his. He wasn’t lying. He saw into the very depths of my soul. He saw me, and David loved me. I could see into him, and I knew he felt it completely.

“I cannot reveal to you how I passed. You know that. No one here ever should.” It was his turn to look down at our hands. “Bly, there are too many here. Divulging your death is dangerous. Death is religious, and there is too much risk in breaking the one rule.”

“I know,” I said smartly, “We can’t talk about God.”

“Don’t,” David’s tone changed quickly, “We have already caused enough suspicion for one day. Spies are everywhere.”

“But no one can hear us in here,” I said with as little defensiveness as possible.

“How do you know that?” David furrowed his eyebrows in frustration. “Listen to me carefully. Souls who confide in one another, bind themselves together. The details of our lives and how we died cannot be allowed to follow us here. They are worthless to your survival in the suburb. Something so inconsequential has huge consequences. Not just one of us would meet flames; both of us would. I won’t risk losing you when you’ve just come to me.”

“Well, then why would Hanriette say...?”

“No,” he interrupted with intensity, “You can’t trust a single soul.”

David took a deep breath and brought my hands to his mouth. He closed his eyes and kissed my fingers tips. I leaned toward him over the table.

“David, I do want to say *it* back to you, but it’s hard for me.” I pushed my chair back and stood up next to him. David wrapped his arms around my waste and pulled me close. I cradled his face in my hands tenderly as I stroked his cheeks with my fingertips.

David smiled at me warmly with his crooked grin. The sparkle was back in his eyes. I wondered how he could be so surprised and look so relieved that I could feel the same.

In that moment I thought about our first kiss. I was looking forward to loosing count of all the kisses to come, and I quietly celebrating within that I had something to look forward to. I leaned in to kiss him.

Knock, knock. A knuckle met wood as two loud raps struck my front door. I involuntarily grumbled as I threw my head back. David chuckled through his teeth in amusement of my frustrated groan.

“You had better get that just in case,” he said releasing me. I obliged with a kiss to this tip of his nose. I was curious myself to answer the door as the only soul who truly knew me was sitting in my dining room.

I slowly swung the door open to a gift basket. A big blue bow topped a grand basket filled with bath bombs, salts, and bubbles in the arms of a smiling Minne. This was unexpected.

“Hello, my darling,” she beamed. “I have been meaning to be a good neighbour and stop by since we met at the pub. I hope you’ll forgive me. Will you forgive me? Of course you will,” Minne said as she plopped the gift basket into my arms and stormed the threshold of my front door.

“Minne, *hallo, was machst du hier?*” David surprise matched mine as he stood up next to his chair. “Excuse me, I meant, how are you?”

“Oh, I see what is happening here,” she said glancing back and forth between us as if she were watching Wimbledon. David and I looked to one another for help with wide eyes like a deer in headlights. Paranoia was creeping up my spine.

“Am I being rude? Oh, well. I have come to ask the lovely Bly to accompany me to the pub for female bondage.”

Oh, relief.

“I think you mean ‘female bonding,’” I interjected hoping Minne wasn’t making a Freudian slip. I set the gift basket on the coffee table next to Hanriette’s orchid. I seemed to be accumulating quite the collection of neighborly novelties.

“Ah, good, we’re on the same page,” she said walking out the door, “Come, Bly, let’s go.”

David gently captured my arm in his hand. “You should go. It’s important that you don’t make yourself out to be a loaner. Oh, and no matter what transpires, *do not* drink a pint.”

“Stop whispering sweet nothings into her ear, David,” Minne disciplined like a playful nanny as her head poked through the open doorway, “We’ve got to gossip, darling.”

“*Sie haben eine Ewigkeit, Zeit in der Kneipe zu verbringen, und Sie in Eile sind?*”

Thankfully, David sounded as if he was jesting. He hid his anxieties well as any finely tuned Englishman could. Surely his quiet worrying would all be in vain while I was in Minne’s care.

Minne and I journeyed down the smoothly paved black road with the village as our destination. I was mostly silent as she yammered on about something. An encouraging ‘ah-huh’ between pauses were considered a sufficient enough response to Minne. My mind was elsewhere.

She locked her arm in mine which quickly prompted me to realize I was under dressed in a jean skirt and tank-top. Minne wore a forest green A-line dress that stopped just below her knees with long fitted sleeves and a scooped neck. Her red lipstick and curled brown hair reminded me of a 1930's silver screen siren.

A cat dashed across the road and dove under the porch of the nearest house. It was black, and it crossed our path. I instinctively stopped in my tracks allowing a superstitious habit to take hold.

“Don't worry about a silly feline,” Minne said playfully tugging my arm and wielding me forward. “How can things get worse? You're dead in Hell!” She threw her head back and laughed heartily at her own joke.

I couldn't help but to giggle at my own silliness. “Are you sure you're German?”

Minne suddenly looked concerned. “Why?”

“German's aren't naturally so funny,” I said with mocking seriousness. She threw her head back and laughed from her gut. I joined her as her reaction was more comical than the witty observation.

We finally reached the Prince of Darkness and took two seats at a small table outside. The pub was heaving with jolly souls filling the village square with the happy sounds of laughter and clinking glasses. I politely nodded my 'hellos' to suburbanites I was beginning to recognize by sight. Minne popped inside quickly to grab a pint and came back with two. A pint for her and a pint for me set on the table correspondingly.

“Oh, I really shouldn't.”

“Oh? Don't be silly,” Minne's face elongated with offense, “It's not as if you should be worried about the calories.” I didn't think a mock pouty face was really necessary. I had a feeling Minne was beginning to enjoy my company more and more with every passing moment.

My misplaced naiveté to our existence in the suburb must have been very amusing. And I couldn't think of a good enough comeback to disagree with her. I was not about to let the next statement from my mouth begin with, 'Well, David said....' Surely, drinking with Minne at a busy pub amongst fellow suburbanites would be an ideal opposition to loaner-ism.

Temptation. I gazed longingly at the golden liquid. Tiny bubbles scurried up the inside of the glass meeting a cloudlike froth spilling over the edge that gathered and pulled heavy droplets down to grace the table with a wet halo. A pint surely couldn't kill me now.

Minne lifted her glass and said, "*Salute.*" I lifted my pint to hers, and they made a familiar *clink* that sweetly reminded me of my Cambridge days.

"Mmm, it tastes like cream soda."

"You speak in such silly riddles," she sighed and smiled.

"You know, it's a sort of pop. Kinda tastes like root beer? Pop... soda pop... soft drink? Alright, I'm really reaching here... fizzy water?" I did a good imitation of lock jaw. "Really? Really."

She laughed one of her infamous Minne mockings and flicked her wrist dismissively. "Silly, darling, whatever time you come from must be a great distance from mine. And believe me when I say, 'I don't want to know any more than that,'" she smiled widely and took another sip. "Besides, it tastes like *Spaten* to me." Minne tucked a rebellious ringlet behind her ear and sighed with amusement.

"I really should stop talking if all I'm going to do is humiliate myself," I said with just the right amount of light heartedness with a pinch of embarrassment.

"Oh, you most certainly should not," she said with cheerful confidence, "It's terribly entertaining." Minne shifted forward, and her tone turned surprisingly serious, "Now listen.

Hamlin and I positively adore David. We are so pleased that he has met such a lovely lady as you. He has been lonely for some time. He never said, but we could just tell.

“I cannot imagine death without Hamlin. We are very fortunate to be together. There is nothing more important to me in all of existence than my husband. Although most souls are perfectly contented to rest in peace in the suburb just as they are, David is just that rare sort who needs a special someone to penetrate his well guarded complexities. Perhaps you two are the perfect complement to one another to spend your existence together in passionate bliss,” she sighed and looked off into the distance. I could see some misshapen fairy tale illuminating her face.

“Are you suggesting that David and I are like soul *mates*?” I tried to say it with as little cheesiness in my tone as possible.

“Oh, my darling, now that is a very rare and serious thing. You should hope that you are not. Besides, this isn’t pixie princess land; you’re in Hell. Enjoy yourself!” She offered her glass, and they collided for second celebratory *clink*.

I didn’t feel comfortable divulging to Minne the intense affection David and me were beginning to feel for one another. But I was at least glad that they could see David was happier having known him for seemingly much long. I just smiled back at her and took another sip from my glass.

Several of the other suburbanites approached Minne with hearty laughter, pats on the back, and hello nods in my direction. The Prince of Darkness began to gather with souls chattering and laughing at the impromptu party. Making new friends was as easy as *clinking* the nearest glass.

Taste may have been subjective, but I was beginning to wonder if everyone was experiencing that warm tingling sensation inside. It started in my throat. The more I drank, the

further it spread its way through my shell like warm molasses dripping down a wooden spoon. The golden liquid filled me up as I drained my pint; and then another, and another, and another, and perhaps another. The delightful tickling feeling wrapped itself around my soul and enveloped the emptiness with a pulsating pleasure.

I talked, conversed, gossiped, chatted, joked, discussed, mused, debated, listened, and above all I engaged. The five 'W's' and a lonesome 'H' had disappeared. My questions were replaced with rose tinted deliriums minus the eyewear. The village glowed neon, and I was the black light. Shimmering auras wrapped themselves around every soul like vibrant blankets collectively rippling like a radiant rainbow. I felt so good.

Alas, in the distance beyond the fountain's sprinkling spout was the young man on his red bike. I watched him peddle through one village gate and out the other. For a fleeting moment I paused to ask myself, "Why is he there and not here?"

CHAPTER 10

Checklist

I laid completely submerged in the long claw foot tub. Amplified was the sound of popping bubbles with my ears under the water. Tiny prisms danced in the frothy domes, swishing back and forth at the surface with the slightest movement of my fingertips. A naked bulb dangled from the bathroom ceiling bouncing a golden glow from the tiles to the ceramics, the ceramics to the water, and the water to my eyes. Streaks of milky light waving in the waters gentle ripples hypnotized me. It helped me relax. I needed it.

Our first argument was trying for us both. David was right about avoiding the pints at the Prince of Darkness Pub. Euphoric withdrawal from the intoxicating brew in-part contributed to heightening my already bad mood upon confessing bandwagon tumbling.

David felt it was best to hit golf balls into the meadow's abyss for a while. He claimed it clears his head. Fortunately for him, the meadow still freaked me out; fortunately for me, I discovered that a bath could declutter my mind.

The chaos in my mind and restlessness in my soul began to ease inside my shell the more I allowed myself to be mesmerized by the foamy water. At first I was able to slow down the erratic streaming thoughts: the suburb, Hell, David, the pub. After a while, I just thought about

the water and it's sounds and light and ripples. Finally, I stopped thinking at all. But just like water, sub-consciousness also has depth and weight.

Memories began to surface. They came at first in soft waves. But it was already too late; an undercurrent of waking nightmares pulled me under. I sunk to the bottom of the hard ceramic tub pinned by a heavy guilt.

* * *

In my left hand I mechanically turned my driver's license and cash in my hoodie pocket again and again. I hoped to conceal my nervous fidgeting from the taxi driver. The rear view mirror framed the glaring eyes of a balding middle aged man in the driver's seat. Suspicion surrounds any single woman out alone in Minneapolis at three am on a Tuesday.

The driver pulled up to the loading docks of the warehouse. The glare of the orange sulfur lights made the brick building look even dirtier and darker. I silently handed the driver the fifty with no intention of collecting the change.

"Wait here," I tried to say sternly, "And there'll be more cash in it for you." I hated lying to him. But I surely was not going to confess that any suspicions he may have had were about to be confirmed.

I felt like I was going to throw up as I opened the door of the taxi and stepped out. The summer's cool night air took the edge off that overwhelming sick feeling inside. I stayed focused as I made the short walk from the taxi to the open garage doors streaming with sobering stark light and blaring rock music.

Seth and his colleagues were laughing and sharing crude jokes while lounging on boxes and sucking down sandwiches on their break. He was easy to spot out of the dozen or so men as the whitest guy in the group. Seth pretended not to be put-off when he saw me coming. Instead,

Seth announced my arrival to his fellow minions with a perverse remark about his sister-in-law in the company of dogs. The men roared with laughter and whistled mockingly.

I had to be trembling. I kept my hands firmly inside of my hoodie feeling the warm sweat build on the steel in my right hand. My eyes were locked on the target. I repeated in my head over and over, “Stay focused. Stay focused. Stay focused....”

The disrespect and heckling persisted but were drowned out by the loud pounding of blood coursing through my head. My eyes were locked on his. His face made me feel even sicker. I was determined to erase the smirk off of it. I was so close I could smell his hot breath as he jeered and egged me on.

I said nothing. I was fast. I had to be.

I withdrew the gun from my pocket. I aimed it an inch from his forehead. I shot Seth point blank.

My ears rang with the resonance of the gunshot. The grin was gone. Seth was no more. Just a limp corpse sprawled on cement. Open eyes frozen in shock. Blood streamed from its head.

I shook uncontrollably. Freedom for Dena was worth the agony of my premeditated fate. I carefully set the gun on the floor and violent vomiting followed. I wiped my mouth on my sleeve, straightened up, and slowly put my hands behind my head. The formerly arrogant men were weak with fear as they cowered behind boxes and lay face down on the cold concrete floor.

I forcefully recovered a trembling voice, “I’m not here to hurt any of you. I’ve done what I came to do. Please, call the police.”

* * *

I shot out of the bathtub and leapt naked onto the bare tiles. My dripping body drenched the floor. Hit first with fury, I aggressively threw Minne’s bath gifts in the corner of the room

where a small plastic bin appeared to accommodate and promptly disappeared taking the bottles with it. Anger was quickly replaced with guilt and remorse and then hopelessness. I took a moment to collect myself. There was little hope that deep breathing would do me any good now. I shut my eyes and imagined the comfort of my cotton U of MN pajama bottoms and faded gray Alice in Chains t-shirt.

I was an architect, a daughter, a sister, an aunt, a wife, and then an ex-wife all before I became a murder. Specifically, I was a first degree murder. Seth may have deserved it, but guilt is a complex emotion that attacks every corner of the mind like a devouring cancer. It is too late for remorse in Hell.

I had to push it out of my mind. The bath clearly failed to relax me. It was time to change direction. I had to do what I always did in moments of extreme anxiety. Fixate my thoughts on DIY with obsessive stamina.

My house was the same as all the others. But I was not like all the others. My neighbors added personal touches to their front yards with flower beds, wicker chairs, potted plants, and other little details. I could do better than that. Courtesy of the AIA, I was a certified over achiever with an eternity to perfect the exterior of my house. Even biological urges could not stand in my way.

I perpetually sighed often with dramatic dismay as I stood outside in my pajamas staring at the front of my house. I just could not get the color right. Butter yellow with green shutters and a forest green asphalt roof looked too track-house trite. Violet with charcoal trim and a corrugated steel roof look far too Neo-Goth wannabe. Weathered cedar shingles cascading from the rooftop ridge to the foundation accented with mustard colored flower boxes and a cherry red door was way too Cape Cod gay. My final attempt looked like Charles Moore vomited on the façade as I thought a rainbow of random colors it. There's no substitute for pure white.

Slam. My focus was ripped away from the house and to Hamlin and Minne as they disappeared behind their slamming front door. In the road, the young bicyclist turned around in a flawless one-eighty, haunched up on his legs, and pressed down hard with his feet peddling fast in the direction from which he came. Souls scattered in all directions going back into their houses. Cats took cover under porches and darted into bushes. Hanriette caught my eye and offered a maternal warning look, disengaged from her gardening, and solemnly disappeared behind her front door.

Looking up, the ash sky was just as grey and dreary as ever. Everyone was gone, and they took all the sounds with them making it as quiet as the proverbial graveyard. The houses were as always standing perfectly in line like tin soldiers. My eyes raced up and down the street. A long forgotten emotion filled the empty chasms of my shell. Fear.

I refused to move. I could not forget for a moment that I was in Hell. Whatever was coming, I more than deserved.

I finally spied the object of all this hubbub walking up the road from the village. My soul felt sick. My focus waned while nausea overwhelmed. Yet as he drew closer and closer, it was difficult to feel intimidated when any creature – Earthly, Hellish or otherwise – was holding a clipboard. The demon Demetri was the last thing I expected.

The flashback in the tub had already left my mood in a heightened state of angst. I missed being able to pray my anxieties into submission. On Earth, I reached out to God; in Hell, I had to settle for a demon.

I sped walked across my lawn. I caught up with Demetri just as he was passing my house. I walked quickly along side of him to keep up with his long legged pace. It prompted me to think of a sarcastic observation about a gigantesque and a little person.

The clipboard was far more impressive than any I'd ever seen. Holographics hovered around the screen making 3D technology look like a child's toy. Colors, lines, and squiggles boogied around his fingers like a well choreographed dance making me feel a bit self-conscious about my modest ninety words a minute.

"Holy shit, is that some sort of big iphone?"

I felt an unexpected glance come from the corner of his bull-like face, "Watch your language, Ms. Berg."

"Bly, and really? You can't say s-h-i-t in Hell?"

"That's ridiculous," he sighed, "Shit, fuck, asshole, bloody, damn, and so forth and so on are perfectly acceptable and encouraged in Hell. But you said the 'H' word."

Holy. I surprised myself by feeling embarrassed. This persistent Opposite Day was getting old. I felt like I should apologize for offending the demon, but I couldn't bring myself to defy God. Even in His *holy* absence. I said nothing.

The demon interjected my contemplative silence, "Besides, it's not a Mac. It's Windows based."

"I was always more of an Apple person in life," I said reminiscently like a kindergartener eager to share during show-and-tell.

"I prefer Apple as well, but we have to use PC's on the job. We've got seventy-nine-and-a-quarter years left on our exclusive corporate contract."

"That would explain the unnatural longevity of Windows."

A low laugh escaped his nose like a snort.

We walked in the middle of the road in silence. I jumbled words around in my head trying to find the best way to ask the questions on my mind and if I could get away with asking

them. I had to muster up some courage as that restlessness inside my shell was vibrating like butterflies on speed.

“Technology must have jumped ahead quite a lot. So,” I attempted to say casually, “How long have I been down here anyways?”

“Long enough that you wouldn’t recognize the place.”

He could see that I wasn’t satisfied with his answer. I was never very good at masking my emotions, especially disappointment. The demon sighed.

“Listen, it doesn’t matter. You are a spiritual being who had a temporary physical experience. The body and place you inhabited are gone. This place has been designed for you to enjoy your death without any of the inconveniences that mortality holds.”

Nostalgia for pizza rolls cravings, evading frostbite with two pairs of socks, and debating a new kitchen over Paris surfaced to mind. Presenting a mere object called money in exchange for another object was such a novel inconvenience. Most of all, I missed freedom.

With feigned authority, I established my audacity, “Listen, I appreciate I’m no better or worse than most people who grace the planet. So,” with frustration building, “why in God-frey’s name am I made privileged enough to have this cushy death in a place renowned for blazing fire and unbearable torture?”

“Oh, Bly, you are asking all the wrong questions. Besides, even if I were to answer all of your queries in great depth, you’d still never comprehend the magnitude of this experience. My lord has specially designed this place for people like you. And you know what kind of people *you* are, so don’t provoke me to indulge you.”

My mouth snapped shut.

“*A sofferir tormenti, caldi e geli – simili corpi la Virtù dispone – che, come fa, non vuol ch’a a noi si sveli,*” he quoted flawlessly.

“That Power that will not allow its ways – to be revealed to us gives us bodies like this – to suffer torments and to burn and freeze,” I parroted. “I don’t know why I still feel such an urge to translate, but that was beautiful. Who said it?”

“Again, you’ve asked the wrong question,” he sighed and looked down at me, “Dante. *Purgatorio*. If you must know. In English the P in Power is capitalized. In your situation, it’s best to analyze it in the lower case.”

The demon began to move his dark hand furiously on the clipboard while his thick brow wrinkled in concentration over his deep eye sockets. “My work is done here. You should go back to your home.” Demetri gestured to my house.

The house was back to its off-white normal self as if someone had pushed the ‘default’ button. We had been walking together without stopping, and now we’re stood in front of it. I had no recollection of walking through the village or even having journeyed the suburb’s full loop. Sarcastically I started, “So, has the H-O-A been by?” but I was just talking to myself.

Without hesitation or goodbyes, Demetri continued walking briskly on the asphalt road. I stood in the middle of the street watching the demon’s back grow smaller and smaller with each step. Demetri was leaving. He was leaving the suburb. He knew the way out.

I began to follow Demetri with increasing pace. My walk became a jog when he seemed to disappear at the horizon line. I stopped in place and whipped my head around trying to spy where he had disappeared to. I had to discover the way out. I had to escape.

David flashed into my mind. Pangs from love fostered panic. We didn’t belong in Hell. We had to escape.

A vicious wild roar erupted from massive jagged teeth dripping with saliva. With no warning, the furious demon was an inch from my face. Demetri lowered his gaze to meet my shock. A growl vibrated from his broad chest. His onyx eyes pierced my soul like shards of

glass pressed into an open wound. His eyes, his evil unrepentant eyes, were a window to Hell. It was like I was being plummeted into a black bottom pit falling past demons of hideous ilk as they inflicted torture, beatings, abuse, and humiliations to souls screaming in despairing agony. Their faces – human faces – were twisted and deformed as they screamed in anguish. These souls were corpses that will never lay dead as they twitched and cried and begged for an entreating madness that will never come. Demetri gifted me a glimpse of no hope.

I fell backwards gripping my middle. My soul throbbed in anguish sending shockwaves through every fiber of my shell. A mass of confusion and shame overwhelmed my consciousness. “That could have been me. That could have been me,” I recited over and over again, “That should have been me.” A renewed relief surfaced when as quickly as he appeared, he disappeared.

I crossed my legs like a pretzel as I sat in the middle of the asphalt road. I felt the coarse black asphalt under my open palms. Wrapping my arms around my knees as I pulled them to my chest, I soaked in the surrounds of the familiar suburb which stood completely unchanged by my traumatizing revelation. I instantly missed ignorant bliss.

CHAPTER 11

Censorship

Creaking doors, shuffling footsteps, and muffled whispers broke my trance. I felt awkward sitting in the middle of the black asphalt road with my knees to my chest and arms wrapped firmly around them. The eyes on me were my cue to quickly exit public view. I walked swiftly into my house where I could safely retreat back into myself. It became more of a home with each passing incident.

Post-traumatic stress disorder was not a foreign emotion to me. Self diagnosis wasn't either. My soul wanted to scratch its way out of its shell. The vision of Hell through Demetri's wicked eyes left me traumatized. Souls were being tortured somewhere beyond that ashen sky – not with off white architecture or hallucinogenic beers or prairie madness – but with beatings and torture and ugliness and unremorseful brutality.

I stood like a statue in my living room staring at the cream colored carpet and the eggshell colored walls and the ivory colored furniture. A newly acquired appreciation was building for its monochromatic mediocrity. Fury forcefully freed the question from my subconscious, “Why?”

Self preservation. Instincts. Disambiguation. Survival of the fittest. However *it* could be defined, I clung to it.

“Bly?” Hanriette startled me. Her muffled voice projected through my front door followed by two soft knocks. “Is everything alright? I saw you outside with Demetri the 3rd.” Two more soft taps demonstrated her persistence. “Bly, it couldn’t have been very pleasant. Let’s talk about it over a pint. Bly, please.”

I took a deep sigh and closed my eyes. I turned around and faced the door. I pressed my hands and then my cheek to its smooth surface. I cleared my throat out of habit hoping it would make my voice sound chipper. “Hanriette, I’m absolutely fine. I was just in the bath. I ran from the tub... which means I’m not decent.” That was a weak excuse. “Can I come see you in a bit?”

“Bly?” A hushed pause followed a loud sigh. “But of course. Whenever you are ready, I am here.” Hanriette’s delicate footsteps regretfully trotted across my porch, down the stair, and tempered away.

Finally, I was alone. Peace and quiet is always short lived in my head. A tangent ran through my mind and escaped with a thought. “How did it go, how did it go? ‘The Power...’ lowercase the p. ‘The *power* won’t let its ways be revealed to us – me – giving bodies like this.’ So Satan gave us these shells for our souls, but, ‘to suffer,’ something, something, ‘tortures to burn and freeze.’ But we’re not burning or freezing. I’m confusing myself and talking out loud,” I sighed, “I need to look it up, and... Bly, stop talking out loud.”

I sat on the sofa and tapped on the coffee table as if it were a keyboard. I typed out ‘Dante’ and *Purgatorio* into an imagined search engine. A laptop flashed and faded. I persisted, but the laptop would not transpire tangibly for longer than the blink of an eye. I pressed my thumb and forefingers together to write the quote on the coffee table’s surface; paper and pen flashed and faded. I mimed opening the book and flipping through *Purgatorio*’s pages; it flashed

and faded. I pounded my fist in frustration, “Damn you, coffee table!” The coffee table flashed and faded and disappeared into oblivion. Hanriette’s orchid hit the floor, and the delicate pot split dotting the off white carpet with brown soil.

Note to self, “The damned shall not damn objects within damnation.”

I had to get out of the living room. The front porch wasn’t private enough. The back porch faced the eerie meadow. The bathroom contains the bathtub. And the dining room isn’t nearly as inviting without David in it. That left the bedroom.

I pushed the ajar bedroom door fully open and stared at the bed. It was just a bed; I had never actually touched it. Not even once. I only experienced it in passing having never even set shoes on the other side of the room to look out of the window. Whether I had been in the suburb for days or years, the bed was just as foreign to me as everything north of Duluth.

I walked to the other side of the bed to sit in front of the window. The outline of my feet on the untouched carpeting reminded me of footsteps in freshly fallen snow. I sat on the plush crisp linens and watched my neighbors playact normalcy with small talk, fussing in their yards, and making way for the young man peddling by on his red vintage bike.

I sat and stared. I couldn’t bring myself to move. I was a danger to myself, let alone David. I was determined to just sit on the bed and cause no more trouble. Perhaps I would become like one of those souls Hanriette paid little heed to because they just sat in their houses and pouted. I pressed my palms into the duvet and gathered the fabric into clenching fists. I bowed my head and mentally recited children’s songs over and over to avoid feeling anything.

Footsteps on the porch, then the front door softly opened and closed, feet shuffled on the carpet, and finally the bedroom door quietly shut. I did not dare move. I had done it again. I felt like an antisocial teen waiting to be berated by the school principal.

“Bly?” He waited for my reply. “You alright?”

“David, you should leave,” I said with conviction.

There was a pause. I did not need to turn around to know that David was silently thinking. I always appreciated how he thought before he spoke. “Bly, I don’t want to leave,” he began carefully, “I know why you want me to go, but you don’t realize...”

“David!” I exploded, “I put myself in danger. I get small town mentality. If our relationship is obvious to one, it’s gossip for all. It’s like I can’t stop being self-destructive! And there’s hardly anything left of me to destroy. I cannot be with you because it puts *you* in danger, too. You need to leave – so just go!”

“Right, okay.” The sigh that followed made me feel like an asshole. “Listen, Bly. I’m going to finish what I was going to say before you interrupted. Otherwise, if you don’t let me finish, I will leave and come back later when you’ve come to your senses. Then we’ll simply have to start this conversation all over again.”

British soldiers really are gifted at disarming resistant forces. I grumbled melodramatically to save face, “Fine.”

“By all accounts, yes, what you did was dangerous. Very dangerous. But it wasn’t enacted out of foolishness. It was brave. You were brave, Bly.

“We all cower in fear when Demetri does his rounds. We’re all just trying to forget where we are and scrape by without going batty. I know you’re just as scared as everyone else, but you refuse to let fear debilitate you.

“The meadow, the pints, the demon. I look at all of that, and I’m ashamed at myself for cowering in the face of my own fears. I hope you’ll forgive me for constantly scolding you like a child.

“I’m proud of you, Bly.”

I did not expect that. His compliment caught me off guard. I loosened my grip on the duvet.

“Well, I take it by your silence that you’re either shunning me out the door *or* my endearing charms are weakening your defences.”

Thankfully, my back to him implied shunning. However, David would have seen that the later was more apt if he had not been standing behind me. Collecting my reserve I reminded, “David, this is very serious.”

“Come on. Lay down with me.” I felt the mattress bounced as David sat behind me on the opposite side of the bed. The springs cried out as he shifted on the bed and each shoe clonked to the floor one at a time. I almost took flight as he tossed himself on the bed and let out a relaxed moan. He tapped the bed with his hand, “Come on, Bly.”

If only I had weary bones to rest. Willpower was never my forte. I reclined, and we lay shoulder to shoulder on top of the feathery soft bedding. I stubbornly stared at the ceiling, but I felt his eyes on me.

“Blimey, do you always wear shoes in bed?”

I rolled my eyes as I kicked off a shoe one at a time with my toes. “Happy now?” I figured if I didn’t make eye contact, resistance might not be futile.

“Not yet.”

Smartass. “Why can’t I read a book or write anything?” I blurted out frustrated.

“Now, that is a random thought.” David rolled onto his side and perched his head on his arm. He lay so close, but he did not touch me. It was as if an imaginary chalk line were drawn down the middle of the bed; nevertheless, I had unsuccessfully defined boundaries. His eyes felt like they were burrowing a hole in the side of my head. David filled the intense silence with an answer.

“Censorship.”

I turned my head to look at him. His blue eyes were very serious. David’s face was soft. I liked the look of him laying next to me. Laying next to a man holds twice the intimacy of sitting across a table and four times the intensity as a tumble in the sheets.

“If you can muster up a book then it’s too easy to get a hold of religious doctrine. Consider this, even if it isn’t directly sacred, there is always going to be some sort of moral dilemma or undertone. Fiction or nonfiction, religion creeps into every facet of earthliness.

“If you can write, you can recreate doctrine or write your own. The same goes for all forms of art. Artistic expression – positive or negative – regarding religion still provokes reaction or conversation and debates, so on and so forth. Next thing you know, you’ve got some sort of mutiny.

“Maintaining the one golden rule means stripping souls of the one truth that frees us from eternal longing. These shells are just encasements of our memories as physical beings, but they’re not bodies. The tortures of Hell are purely psychological – with or without the flames. Denying us... *God...* is the crux of Hell’s power to inflict anguish. They’re watching us torture ourselves, Bly. We’re slowly driving ourselves to the brink of mental anguish.”

I wondered how much time had gone by since David had last allowed the name of God to escape from his lips. These lonely thoughts had clearly been lingering inside for too long. I felt such comfort hearing God’s name said out loud. I looked at him with a gentle appreciation hoping that he would talk to me more about these well guarded thoughts. “David, if they want us to torture ourselves, surely it would be more effective if they gave us reminders of our faith in Hell.”

“Hell is *hell* because it is a place void of God. Too much of the Almighty – or any at all – causes spiritual fractures and rifts in the fabric of this evil place. Thus, we must always be

very quiet and careful. Besides, it's far too entertaining of a conundrum to give us everything we could have ever desired in life, and deny us the one thing we truly yearn for in death."

His blue eyes searched mine for doubt or a hint of betrayal, but David did not see such in me. David may have called me brave, but I knew that he was equally courageous by blatantly breaking his silence. He trusted me.

"Why us? What makes us so special?" Knowing what made David special did not explain how I ended up in the suburb.

"I'm guessing that I've been here a very long time, and I dare not think about that too often. But I have spent a lot of this existence thinking about that very question. There must be common threads that braid all of the suburbanites together. Maybe it's our faith or lack thereof, or our guilt or loyalty. In life, perhaps we lived to serve *Him*, but we felt unworthy.

"In the end... we chose Hell. Consciously or subconsciously, all of the guilt or distress of feeling unworthy became self destroying. Maybe we were too angry with God to love Him. Either way, we willingly damned ourselves to this place."

We laid in silence. I supposed I should have known that I did this to myself. It would not have been the first time I chose incarceration over freedom.

"Thank you for telling me all of this. I know it couldn't have been easy. And you were right the first time when I wandered into the meadow; it was dangerous, and I've probably behaved foolishly again."

David's throaty chuckle sent reverberations through the mattress. The twinkle was back. I missed it.

"Probably?" he smiled, "Are you havin' a laugh? I'd hate to ever be owed an apology by you, Miss Berg, based on that confession alone."

"It's not actually *miss*." Details. They are such attractive subject changers.

“Oh,” his expression became serious as his body stiffened, “You’re married.”

“Would it matter? We’re in Hell,” I pointed out making a mental note that during the course of this conversation I had thus far earned two gold stars. “I’m actually embarrassed to tell you this. I don’t know why. Anyways, I’m divorced. I hadn’t mentioned it before because I didn’t want it to come between us.”

“What happened?”

“Arthur cheated on me... a lot.” Somehow it was more difficult to say his name than it was to say God’s. Even in Hell.

“Good,” he said as his demeanor relaxed, “I knew you were for me.”

“Possessive much?” I joked to lighten the tone, but David was un-phased... or just unaccustomed to American sarcasm.

“From the moment I saw you, my spirit became ecstatic. I was pulled directly to you as if our souls were linked with a cord. Before you came here, my soul was gradually building layer upon layer of hurt. It was hard and heavy. The closer I came to you, the lighter and lighter my soul felt inside.”

I could hardly imagine a more beautiful thing to say. Before I could speak, David opened his lips...

“I loved you instantly. I loved you like a darling, precious thing that I have to protect and embrace. I wanted to kiss you and cuddle you and make everything all better. You’re the closest thing to life I have felt since I surrendered to death. You might not realize it, but you sense life in me as well. God is life. We sustain one another. Keep the torture of madness at bay. We’re soulmates.”

My soul leapt with joy. David. He was just there, right in front of me. Death brought us together. A bittersweet irony.

No one in life could ever know me so completely and love me ever more absolutely. Lounging next to me on a pillow like a demigod was the only soul – in life or death – who ever bared himself to me. David was stunning.

“I love you with the entirety of my being,” I professed like an innocent in a confessional, “I could lay here with you forever.”

“Let’s.” David put his hand on my hip and coaxed me across the bed to meet him in the middle. I laid on my back nuzzled up against his body. He propped his head up on his hand and grasped mine with his left. I brushed his smooth cheek with my nose begging silently for a kiss. He played with my fingertips in his. David gently lifted my left hand to his lips and kissed my ring finger, and a thin glimmering gold band wrapped itself around it. “You’re mine,” he said softly.

David turned his face to my eyes as I brought his hand to my lips and kissed the tip of his ring finger. A gold band transpired.

“You’re mine,” I whispered.

And the deal was sealed with a kiss. Our eyes closed, and our lips parted. Violent longing and pent-up desire exploded. Clothing dissolved into thin air with the caressing of wandering hands.

It felt like our souls were enveloped in euphoric bliss. Light radiated through our skin setting us ablaze. We glowed with a living vitality that defied any breathing creature. Our radiating spirits bathed the room in a luminous and pure white blush.

David rolled on top of me, and face to face, two became one. Our souls embraced. We bound ourselves together eternally as each other’s one promise.

CHAPTER 12

Sweet Dreams

“Dad, you’re kinda quiet. What are ya thinkin’ about?” I questioned adjusting my plastic turquoise sunglasses. I was in tune to my father’s frame of mind. Even as a tween.

Dad’s lanky body came to life like a marionette puppet as he straightened his back and stretched his long limbs. The dinghy rocked a little as he began to reel in his fishing line. He inhaled the fresh spring air and cleared his throat, “I was just thinking about your Grandma.”

“I miss her, too, Dad,” I attempted to comfort. It felt like more than six months since cancer robbed us of her life. Dad’s Scandinavian self typically forced a stiff upper lip in the daily grind, but the majestic Boundary Waters always provoked his Native American side into unavoidable and obvious self realizations. He missed his mother.

I always looked forward to our annual May camping trip. I did not envy my classmates whose parents would rather battle June tourists instead of their kids missing a few days of school. Nevertheless, I was certain that my sister quietly disagreed. Dena and Mom could be pacified with a compromise that involved selling the tent and renting a cabin ever since the incident with a very curious racoon. The grumbling was well worth the moments Dad and I

spent together on one of Minnesota's 10,000 lakes. We would spend the day fishing on quiet waters amongst tall lush trees stretching to meet a cloudless baby blue sky.

"You wanna know something, Bly Elizabeth?"

"What?" I offered encouragingly.

"Grandma isn't far away at all. Her body might be gone, but she's still here," he mused while his eyes wandered, "She's everywhere now."

My initial thought was that Dad was losing it, but going crazy wasn't his style. At least he was talking. I threw my line back into the water. The fish were more eager in the morning, and there was little hope of catching any more in the afternoon's warm sun.

"I don't get it," I confessed, "What'd you mean?"

"Okay, well, I was just thinking that we're like these fish in the net." Dad pointed to the nylon net submerging our catch in the water, "So that makes the net like the whole wide world. Now, imagine that this entire lake is the whole of existence. Do you remember Sunday school talkin' about the Alpha and the Omega?"

"Yeah, it's the beginning and the end, right?"

"Good job, it is. So, God is the Alpha and the Omega. Therefore, He is the beginning and the end of existence. He's all of it, this whole lake, and the lake surrounds the fish and stretches far beyond it. Now remember that there are fish outside of the net. What do the fish inside of the net and the fish outside of the net have in common?"

"Uh, they're still in the water?" my voice trailed up to emphasize my uncertainty.

"Exactly. So, imagine that a fish left our net to go into the lake just like Grandma left Earth to go to Heaven and be with the Lord. God is all of existence, Grandma is with God, and we're with God, too. So, we're all still together in the Lord."

"Yeah, but what happens if you're on the shore?"

Dad's shoulders bounced as he laughed indulgently in my youthful limitedness, "Well then, I guess you'd better pray for rain!"

* * *

Bang. I was startled awake. The loud thump of David's shoe hitting the glazing was followed by the muffled sound of a shrieking cat outside. It quickly leapt from the windowsill and dashed out of sight.

"I'm sorry," he apologized softly, "I didn't mean to rouse you."

All was forgiven instantly when I looked at him tensely sat up in bed. David was most handsome naked. His curly brown hair was all a mess, and his blue eyes were intensely fixed on the window.

I inched my way closer to him and rested my hand on his arm. I loved the sound of the duvet shuffling on top of us with each little movement. "David, I don't think we've done anything wrong. Come lay down with me. Besides, what's done is done."

"You're blindsided with euphoria," he grinned widely as if to congratulate himself. He turned his sparkling blue eyes in my direction and slowly leaned his body on mine. David teased my lips by brushing them softly against mine.

"I'll accept your apology contingently," I smirked with lashes all aflutter.

His eyes smiled down at me as he leaned in to meet my nose with his, "What can I do to become worthy of your forgiveness?"

"Kiss me." My demand was met with a gentle press of his lips on the corner of my mouth, then on my cheek, my neck, and finally my collar bone. David rested his head on my chest and sighed with such contentment; I could not bring myself to complain that his lips should have travelled farther. "You're worried about the cat, aren't you?"

"Well, perhaps a bit. It's probably nothing, really."

“How expressively non-committed English of you,” I jested to lighten the mood. He half forced an amused snicker in appreciation of my attempt at British wit. I wrapped my arms around him and brushed my face in his wavy brown hair. “I love you with the entirety of my being, my darling David.”

David looked at me. He brought his hand to my cheek. His lips pressed firmly on mine moving slowly and tenderly. David pulled away gently and looked into my eyes searching for the soul within. When he found it, he confessed, “My spirit is so weary. This place exhausts me.”

“We’re going to lay like this forever. Remember?” I soothed, “We need nothing but each other... a second heaven just for us. Let’s become ignorant to everything outside of this little room. Just like we were two lost souls wandering the vastness of space and time until we collided and became one.” I was too infatuated to consider that what I thought was poetic was actually a Doctor Who paraphrase.

I brought my hand to his cheek and pressed my lips to his forehead. There was nowhere and nothing out there for us. Nothing tempted me to say no. “Sleep in my arms if you’re tired, and dream of the sweet things in your former life. I’ll be right here still holding you when you wake up. At least it can take you away from this place for a while; unlike the nightmares I seem to have.”

David half sat up and propped himself on his elbow. His expression became seriously perplexed. “What do you mean? What are you talking about?”

“Well, you know. When you sleep – sort of – you dream of things that happened in life like you’re reliving them.”

“Bly, is that what happens to you when you ‘sleep’ here?”

“Yeah, why? Isn’t it the same for us all?” I should have kept my mouth shut and pursued sex a bit more aggressively a moment ago. Fabulous.

“Bly, do you watch these life events of yours from the outside like an observer, or through your own eyes as you experienced them?”

“The second, but I really don’t understand where you’re going with this. It’s just a dream.” I vetoed groping him to bring back the moment. David was relentlessly un-distractible.

His eyes narrowed, “Tell me more about what it’s like being *there* in your life.”

“Well, it’s more like I’m an observer inside my old-self watching it all happen again. Just as it all went down back-in-the-day.” I rolled over for a kiss, and David obliviously sat up leaning his back against the pillows. He stared at the wall with his woven fingers resting on his belly. His thumbs twiddled like a hamster running in a wheel powering a light bulb.

“Seriously? I was totally trying to make-out with you just now.” I hated it when frustration led to elongated vowels. I inhaled deeply to suppress the rebellious Fargo-esque accent. David didn’t budge. “Okay. What I was *trying* to say was, ‘who cares about dreams?’ We were just saying super romantic stuff like, ‘We’re gonna lay here forever.’ Taking being dead out of the equation – surely, all that matters is that we’re together. So, let the dream stuff go; it doesn’t even matter.”

“Bly, Bly... Bly!” he groaned as he brought his hands up to his forehead, “No one sleeps here let alone dreams. It’s not possible; how is this possible? A quiet thoughtless meditative state, perhaps, but dreaming? You’re a damned time bomb!” David tossed the duvet off of his body as he sprung to his feet and hastily began pulling his clothes back on. “Bloody hell, woman. You could have told me this sooner!”

“David, where in Hell are you going?” I sat up in protest. “We’re supposed to lay in bed *forever*,” I mocked. Flinging the duvet on the floor, I rose to my knees on the mattress to meet

his height. Thankfully, my vanity was spared when my exposed naked body caused slight hesitation. David paused with clothes dishevelled and hair all a mess. He placed his hands gently on my shoulders.

“Bly, we *are* going to lay in bed forever. I promise to explain everything once I know more. But for now, I have to leave and... never mind,” David paused and kissed me gently on the cheek, “Just trust me. I promise I’ll be back.”

“Okay,” I assured, but my voice betrayed in protested.

In two great strides, David opened the bedroom door and gestured to leave when he turned around quickly. My soul leapt with joy at the false hope that he may have changed his mind and was coming back to bed. I hoped I hadn’t imagined the look of regret for leaving me.

“Bly, stay put. And whatever you do... don’t go to sleep.”

CHAPTER 13

The Substance of Patience

19 February 1951

Dearest Mum and Dad,

I am glad to hear that all is well at home. Congratulations on the fate's second prize for your onion marmalade – no surprise to me that it's a winner. It sounds like quite a few of Dad's elderly parishioners have passed away recently – I'm especially sorry about Mrs Hotchkiss, she was a lovely dear (the Victoria sponge will never be the same).

All is well here, considering the circumstance. Again, there is no need to worry, Mum. I'm not allowed to pinpoint my precise whereabouts, but I'm assuredly miles away from the action. It's my job to fight spiritual battles – not corporal ones. Besides, we're most needed at the medical unit. It's natural for the injured men to cling to God the closer their brush with death

may have brought them. Father, I know you'd be proud as my senior, Revd Harris (CF2), and I have made great strides with some of the more dejected men.

Also, I've invested a lot of time in a neighboring village. It's a small village of no more than 700 civilians, and just a 4 km stroll from our unit. Their houses are made of earth with straw rooftops – sound familiar? I'd say we're on the brink of a revival – well at least for one girl anyhow. But, I continue to be inspired by showing the villagers the emptiness of their worldly rituals by bringing them hope through our living faith. I am blessed to be ordained to conduct God's will.

Send Nanny and Grandad my love. Please don't forget to give Chip a cuddle from me – the dogs out here are sorely neglected. Send my love all around.

Your loving son, David

Oh, how I've come to loathe letter writing. Slightly less than I hate lying to them. But what was I supposed to say? Pain, destruction, violence? I cannot even begin to dignify saturating a letter home with petty grumbles like cardboard appearing more appetising than our rations let alone the constant stiffness in my back thanks to the barrack bed. I wouldn't want a reputation as being five plonks short of a bone.

The smell of formaldehyde permeates. The chemical's airborne sting is almost enough to cover the odour of damp canvas, burnt provisions, and human decay. It is a nauseous stench that I have marginally become accustomed to.

I feel guilty when overwhelmed by such trivial nuisances. Men – two, three, sometimes four years my younger – witness daily what I can only imagine to be in complete contrast to our human nature to preserve our species. Not only are these lads commanded to destroy life, they watch their brethren fall one by one. I cannot ascertain if my Grandfather's romanticised tales of chaplainhood in the First Great War were either highly exaggerated or alarmingly delusional.

I secured my letter by sealing it tidily in its envelope and deposited it at the mess hall postbox. I was at least pleased that my words would not threaten the comfortable lives of quite Milford. I used to miss the endless rows of idyllic terraces and cups overflowing with proper tea. But after seven months in Korea, I have come to realise that even those homey comforts are a façade. Whether it is on display or not, *misery* is an unstoppable plague that penetrates every facet of our existence. If it was not, then that sun would be incapable of shining evermore brightly *here* than in England.

I came to Korea basking in an ignorant blaze of spiritual fire. But war – for me – has been a rude awakening. The pointlessness of all of this anguish and death makes me constantly sick to my stomach. I lose more and more of myself with every passing day. I pantomime in my role as Captain Chaplain to the Forces Fourth Class; a rank reduced to three insignificant little characters: CF4.

I've lost interest in being human. I'm unworthy to bear the badge burned into the flesh above my heart: In This Sign Conquer. I dishonour the crest and the great men who bare it. I'm a disgraceful jack. The patience that once accompanied my faith has worn itself unsubstantially thin.

All available jeeps are engaged, and we're not meant to travel unaccompanied. But it's been a quiet couple of weeks, and the walk will do me good to clear me head. A chipboard sign with black stenciled letters points me due west as I turn my back on the M.A.S.H. unit. I packed

my cargo bag lightly with essentials that the villagers may be needing: communion kit, altar wine, wafers, prayer cards, little crosses, and pamphlets in Korean. A small leather bound KJV Bible being the only exception. That means the Webley Revolver is my occasional unofficial borne weapon.

Tis a glorious day. Not a cloud in the sky threatening rain. I used to imagine that this is what it must look like to be on holiday in summertime Brighton or the Isle of Jersey or even exotic Portugal. But I can't fake pleasure in it any longer.

Everything is green. The majesty of nature is dulled by these selfsame uniforms the colour of sick. Seen one tree, seen 'em all. I walk a worn dirt road that slices through the green like a stripe on a uniform. Even a chirping bird is simply the dampened high pitch of a bomb squealing just before it smashes to the earth.

Religion is as real and damaging as war. Where is God in all of this? I haven't seen Him or heard Him. Where is His mercy, and why doesn't He stop this madness? I cannot move mountains when the mustard seed has been crushed under my own heel. Storing up treasures in Heaven is not nearly as appealing as grasping hold of any earthly joy and not letting go.

In Korean, her name means 'brightness'. Kyon has become my reason for rising every morning. Her family and neighbours do well keeping us apart. Mostly, we steal glances and exchange smiles from across the village square. But every so often, Kyon and I talk; my polite Korean and her broken English isn't much. Her eyes fluttering to her feet and shy smile speak volumes more than ever words could. It's as if she's saying to me, 'I also see you'. I always pluck a wildflower with hopes of getting a chance to hold our limited conversation. The quick brush of her fingertips on mine sends tingles through my skin. Kyon always tucks the stem of the delicate violet blossom in the knot of her *jeogori* shirt.

She has brought light in my life since the moment I first saw her. It was a mere four months ago. I do know God is to be thanked for sustaining my life just for that first glimpse of Kyon. She looked like a white cloud that floated down from the sky in her cotton *hanbok* dress. Kyon's hair was – and is always – parted in the middle with a few rebellious strands freeing themselves from its tightly wound bun; I wonder how long her hair would be if it were completely free. Unlike British women, Kyon doesn't need cosmetics to accentuate her features; her round face is as delicate as a demigod with her long nose, almond shaped eyes, plump lips and flushed cheeks. I constantly fixate upon her image – and each beautiful encounter – in my mind over and over again. She drowns out the ugliness.

I cannot fathom ever going home changed as I am. But I could face returning if Kyon were with me. *Juseyo – jega dangsin ttal-eul gyeolhon. Juseyo – jega dangsin ttal-eul gyeolhon.* I practice over and over in my head, '*Juseyo – jega dangsin ttal-eul gyeolho?*' Today is the day I will pluck up the courage to ask. I pray Kyon's father will say 'yes'.

The birds hum a high pitched note, but their whistle doesn't break for breath. A sudden sour taste in my mouth is quickly followed by the hairs standing up on the back of my neck. I dive into the scrub growing wildly in the ditch. The texture of branches scrapping my skin does not register any discomfort in my heightened state of alarm.

Bombs furiously rain down upon the earth. It's a mindless cleansing of anything in its path. Death does not drive my fear, but knowledge of my own blasphemous thoughts. Besides, no one is immune to survival instincts in an air-raid attack.

With my eyes tightly shut and body in a fetal position, I know there wouldn't be much to look at even if I could. Singed branches and warm pebbles collide into my cargo pack protecting my back from the debris that builds a small cocoon around me. The earth trembles in protest. The high pitched ringing in my ears dulls the whistling and smashing of bombs.

A mere 200 metres down the gravel road is a sleepy village frightfully awoken where my beloved Kyon cowers as I do. I am defenseless to protect her. I want to make a run for it, but exploding debris, gagging thick air and parading bombs would surely put an end to any heroic endeavours inspiring irrational chivalry. Patience is a cosmic joke.

My ears ring so loudly that it takes me a moment longer to realize that the ground has stopped trembling. The air-raid has ceased. I worm my way out of the debris and shakily rise to my feet. The earth may have stopped moving, but my body is still vibrating. I wipe the dust from my eyes as I climb from the ditch back up to the dirt road. The world is coated in a finely soiled mist clouding the warm sun. Trees creak in distress as their branches reluctantly break loose.

It took me more than a minute for my legs to run as quickly as my brain. As the ringing subsides in my head, all I can hear is my quick thick breath and heart pounding to meet the pace of my legs. I repress the stinging feeling in my body; it would slow me down.

My thoughts are streaming a rhythm of *musts*. I *must* get to Kyon. I *must* see her safe. I *must* rescue her off to England. My speed quickens.

The village is in ruins. Flattened. The thick gray smoke veils its full devastation. I stop in my tracks as my breath chokes in my throat. I will not go into shock now; I can't stop moving. One single unfocused thought and my faculties will be lost. I block out the moaning and coughing rising from the steaming rubble. Kyon is the only thing in the world I want. She is what I've come to live for. Narrow paths where there were once wide roads and lonely walls that once held buildings navigate me through the nearly unrecognizable cartography.

Hope swells inside my heart turning the corner into her street. It fell instantly. Her home is devastated. Snapped timber beams scattered the compact earth into mounds of dust. Half of the heavy thatched roof is collapsed into the house. I gravely dread what I will find. Trembling,

I cross the threshold into Kyon's home. Just a half hour ago I imagined being invited in and humbling myself to her father to prove my worthiness. Instead, the gravity of his own roof silenced him. His arms wrapped tightly around his wife as if they were dreaming peacefully. The small still feet of her brother and even tinier fingers of her sister were enough to tell me that they too would never awaken. Tears welled in my eyes. Her grandmother and another brother may be under the rubble somewhere.

The only *must* remaining is to dig them out one by one until I find her.

'Da-p-id'.

A small, airless whisper escaped the darkest corner of the long, one room house. My head was ripped away from my grief. I shakily tiptoed into the half of the house that remained. A thin trail of dark red led to a curtain. I gingerly pushed it aside. Shock gracelessly dropped me to my knees.

"Kyon... oh, dear God, why?" I cupped her beautiful face in my hands; it was white. The bed mat soaked in blood. My vision was clouded with tears while I hesitantly reached for the timber stake that mercilessly impaled itself into her stomach. Her cotton dress was as dense and red as velvet. Calculating the risks, I knew I couldn't get her to the unit fast enough, but if I removed it quickly and applied pressure I might be able to stabilise....

"*Ani,*" Kyon's lips quivered softly, "N-o." Her delicate, shaking hand slowly grasped mine. Kyon places it back on her cheek. Her shallow breaths are labouring. I pressed my lips gently on her Kyon's lips, and my tears dripped onto her face. I moved the salty water across her soft cheeks to cleanse it of dust and dried blood. We stared at one another's eyes knowingly. I looked at her with such helplessness. I felt my life dying with hers. What could I possibly say to her that could be of any comfort in these quickly disappearing seconds?

"*Juseyo – jega dangsin ttal-eul gyeolhon?*"

Kyon's smile brightens her entire face. She sighs quietly. Kyon chest rises as she takes a deep breath. Her eyes close softly as the air presses out of her lungs. Kyon's chest falls and does not rise again. She was gone from me in an instant.

I lost her, and I lost myself. Cradling her lifeless body in my arms, I rock back and forth, sobbing uncontrollably. It hurts unbearably. My skin crawls from the inside out. It feels like tiny explosions in my brain are splotching my sight with light and dark patches. Irrepressible wailing chokes my breath. My head is on fire. I bury my face in her hair. She smells like flowers. A damp smooth petal presses into my cheek. I pulled my face away carefully and brought my hand to her head; from her tangled hair I held a wilting violet wildflower.

My grief hit a wall. Somberly, I gently laid her back onto the stained mat. I arrange Kyon's hands over her still heart, entwining the flower's stem in her delicate fingers. I smooth her hair out around her face. On her forehead I place one last kiss.

I reached for the holster on my belt. My trembling seises as I wrapped my fingers around the cold hard steel. The gun feels unusually heavy in my hand. Kneeling next to Kyon, I looked down at her one last time assuring myself that I'll be with her soon. I lifted my head, placed the barrel to the roof of my mouth and tightly shut my eyes. My finger froze on the trigger.

'No. I won't do this. It's wrong,' I command to myself, 'I am overwhelmed with grief, but this would be a mistake. I won't let you die in vain. I swear, I will bury you and your family properly. I will honour you, my beloved Kyon, and help your village recover from this insanity'.

I retire my revolver to its holster and close my eyes with my face pointed to Heaven. My fury directed at The Lord, 'You could have stopped this. In time perhaps my anger will subside, but until then, God of Heaven, leave me be. I wish you *not* beside me today'.

In a howling gust of wind, the creaking rafters screeched an objection. One loud break, and the roof humbled me. It was so fast. Painless. I didn't feel a thing.

CHAPTER 14

Star Crossed

“Blah blah blah, Bly-n-bye, blah blah blah, Bly-n— shy, fry, my, sigh, tie,” I pushed a loud dramatic sigh from my lips, “I’m bored, and I’m talking to myself. Bored, bored, bored, bored... ford, hoard, *toard*, board, lord, cord, mord— mortar.” Another neglected sigh passes, “Bustling boredom briskly blossoms into blasphemous... *frustration!*” My fists pound and bounce off the mattress. With the exception of being naked and laying sideways on a full-size bed, this is exactly what prison felt like. Well, infrequently naked.

“David told me to stay put. Yet! Yet, when have I ever listened to what a man told me to do? Exactly, and that turned out brilliantly. Bloody, Arthur.”

Both my external and internal dialogues were beginning to turn against me. Being alone too long is never a comfort. It is agonizing. The aching feeling inside my shell was throbbing again. I was quickly beginning to differentiate between being in love and being with David. Being in love isn’t enough to stop my soul from paining. I felt David’s absence. Love is a creation of God. Together we stay sane in the suburb.

I leapt off the bed and was instantly dressed as I strode towards the bedroom door in a pinafore of ninety-percent gray and ten-percent *off*-white. Stepping onto the porch, I expected to feel the air change and the warmth of sunshine on my face. But it was just the suburb in the glow of a dismal ashen sky. It was just as I had left it an indeterminate amount of time ago. Well, at least it was a break from staring at the builder's beige ceiling as it slowly grew popcorn; the aesthetic nightmare shot phantom chills up my nerveless spine.

The sound of sunshine is a melody composed of birds chirping, children playing, lawn mowers buzzing, and a gentle breeze rustling the soft green leaves high above in the tree tops. I missed the sun. I closed my eyes to imagine the warmth on my face, droplets of water on my brow, and an orange glow behind my eyelids. For a moment, it was such a vivid imagining that when my day dream was interrupted, it was a rude awakening. A neighborly, "*Hallo*," was like a finger snap in my face. I opened my eyes to find myself back under the ash filled sky draining the suburb of vibrant color in its perpetual gloom.

I strode towards Minne and Hamlin reclining side-by-side in lounge chairs on their front lawn. The sight of the matching couple in *snazzy* vintage swimwear covered in thin navy blue stripes was definitely worth getting out of bed for. Their thick early-plastic rimmed sunglasses with olive tinted lenses and metallic tanning collars were easy enough to appreciate, but it was a mystery how Minne could justify wearing a swim cap.

"You're in my sun," Minne sighed bleakly.

"But there is no..."

"Darling, work with me," Minne pleaded, "I pretend."

"*Hallo*, Bly," a smiling Hamlin chirped as he stretched his neck to meet my gaze, "You look like a book I read many years ago."

“How can someone look like a book, Hamlin? You sound ridiculous,” Minne’s tongue click suggested playfully sarcasm. It’s nice to see a couple so fond of one another. It makes what David and I have seem more rational in this quite literal hellhole.

“I can’t remember. The title escapes me.”

“Is it, *The Gray Cloth*?” I offered encouragingly.

“Ah, yes, *Das graue Tuch zehn Prozent Weiss*, by,” he smiled to himself reliving some long ago memory, “Scheerbart was a peer of Papa’s. An eccentric man, if I recall rightly.”

“Hamlin, you’re so boring,” Minne interrupted his recollection, “Besides, talk of books leads to other types of conversation. And, you know how I detest cats, Hamlin.”

We fell silent, and I felt awkward hovering over them. I put my empty fists together to open a materializing Grandma’s vintage aluminium frame lawn chair woven with olive and brown striped straps. I plopped down next to Minne. She continued to ‘sun’ herself whilst Hamlin and I watched the young man on the red vintage bike cycle from one flat horizon to the other. My curiosity about the cyclist peeked. “So does that guy live anywhere, or does he just bike around and around?” I asked Hamlin as I twirled my right pointer finger in the air.

“Ah, you mean Ben. Yes, he lives four doors on the right before you enter the village from the horizon to your left. You know, just between Deedra the Jamaican and the Kiwi who always wears tweed; *schesse*, his name escapes me.”

“Aata,” Minne corrected.

I had to confess, “I don’t know either of those souls. In fact, I don’t know all that many suburbanites by name.”

“You would recognize Deedra if you saw her; she is a common fixture at the Prince of Darkness. But it isn’t a wonder you do not know Aata,” Minne attempted to reassure, “He disappeared behind his door long before you arrived.”

“I suppose that is why Ben never stops riding his bike. Perhaps he just keeps peddling because he feels if he ever stopped, he would go into his house and never leave,” Hamlin offered as Minne nodded agreeingly.

“What is stopping the New Zealander from leaving his houses? Is he a prisoner?”

“Of sorts,” Hamlin explained, “He has imprisoned himself when he surrendered his soul to madness. A cloud of darkness has descended upon Aata...”

“Don’t be so dramatic, Hamlin,” Minne clicked her tongue, “Bly, darling, Aata’s gone mad in the absence of You-Know-Who. And instead of assimilating, he became a shut-in.”

“So the other houses – that appear to be empty – they’re full of shut-in souls too?”

“Well, Hamlin estimates that...”

“...Approximately, 5% of the dwellings are unoccupied, 23% are shut-ins, and the remaining seventy-two are...”

“At the pub!” Minne laughed heartily at her joke.

“Well, not literally, Minne.”

We lounged in a contented quiet on an imagined summer’s day and delighted in one another’s company. Minne and Hamlin appeared to have ‘resting in peace’ down to an art. Hamlin extended his hand to affectionately pat Minne’s placed lightly on her armrest. She smiled to herself. It made me miss David all the more in my pathetic puppy-like pining.

“So,” I broke the silence, “It must be easier knowing that you two will always have each other. I mean, unlike some others who have gone mad with loneliness.”

“Oh, it was not *loneliness* that drove the souls mad,” Minne corrected, “It was the absence of *Him* – up there somewhere – who is not *here*.”

“Minne and I are not bound to one another. We cannot prevent the other from going mad. Our accountability towards one another is purely choice. And as deep as our affection and

love may go emotionally, we are still individual souls. Thankfully, and most certainly, we are not soul mates,” Hamlin once again completed Minne’s thought with an almost scripted rhythm.

I began to feel nervous at the prospect of being half of a whole soul: luminous light when we make love, the increasing ache in my soul when we’re apart, the way we can look into the very depths of one another just through the eyes. “What would happen if... a couple, such as yourselves, were soul mates?”

‘Bly, I happen to know a little bit about astrology...”

“Hamlin, you’re being modest. You know everything there is to know about astrology.”

“*Danke, Maus*, you flatter me, but it was just a hobby...”

“Are you going to tell Bly your theory, or are you going to continue boasting?”

“Yes, my little *maus*, you’re right,” Hamlin cleared his throat for dramatic effect, “The planets and stars rotate in a glorious composition that strings together the keeping of time with global navigation. The ancients saw the future in the stars as well as astrological personality categorization....”

“Hamlin.” No doubt Minne was sharing my thought on her husband’s professor-of-whatever-esque ability to vaguely respond to a straightforward question. Ugh, tangents.

“*Ja, ja*,” he pauses to recall his thoughts, “For example, the planets in our solar system will never perfectly align, and they only semi-align millenniums apart. For the same reason, two souls born under a matching sky have a connection. Two babies born on the same night in the same city is very common, but what about two born under a similar sky within the same lifetime? Can you just imagine the significance for those two souls who were born under the same sky many *many* years apart?” Hamlin pauses to subtly survey our surrounds and lowering his voice he leans in closer over his arm rest. “I have developed a theory here that there is a reason why it all rotates the way it does. It prevents soul mates from ever meeting on Earth, let

alone Hell. The significance, the coincidence is too great with all of that miraculous energy building – who knows how long – from one birth to the other.”

Minne took off her sunglasses and looked at my face. “Cats seem to be gravitating towards your bungalow when you and David are secluded inside.”

I looked away to conceal my dread, “Are you implying...?”

Hamlin’s light hearted voice became serious, “We do not imply.”

“We care very much for David; and, in turn, have come to care for you. Be cautious, darling.”

I was touched by their friendship. My soul suddenly felt quite vulnerable; as if it was exposed and no longer had a shell to protect it. “I like what you two have. I can see David and me living contentedly as you do. In fact, I would like to show you just how much we care for you also. We’ll have a dinner party to christen my boring dining room.” They smiled reassured that I understood what I had to do to exist cautiously. “There is just one thing I want to do first. I want to go visit Aata the New Zealander. I need to see it for myself.” Cracking a semi-cynical smile, “I suppose you’re going to tell me not to go.”

Minne propped her sunglasses back on the bridge of her nose, “No, I think it will be good for you.”

“Really?”

Hamlin assured, “*Ja, es ist gut für Sie.*”

* * *

The walk down the unending asphalt road felt quite lonely after leaving the friendly couple. Nevertheless, I knew I had to take this journey alone. Even if David hadn’t run off to who-knows-where, it was still an experience that would have to be my own. It was to be my last

adventure; the last *hurrah* before I would transform into a model suburbanite. Not simply pretend to be one in a disillusioned false hope of escaping Hell.

“Okay, there’s the village,” I murmur to myself, “One-two-three-four-five, the fifth door on my right.” The house looked the same as all the others, I assured myself, “I’ll knock politely. I just want to ask him a couple of questions. Maybe I should materialize a gift basket; no, that would be awkwardly pedantic.”

I stepped lightly across the perfectly manicured lawn so as to not disturb the quiet of Aata’s house. The bent blades of grass under my feet retracted like springy hinges erasing my every step as if it never happened. I heard the sound of a small animal scuttling under the porch beneath my creaking footsteps. I knocked. I waited, and there was no response. I knocked a little louder, and the door silently swayed open. The perfect and unblemished exterior was starkly contrasted by its dank, dark inside.

There wasn’t a stick of furniture. Paint peeled from the walls. Fallen ceiling plaster formed small chalky heaps on the buckled and splintered wood floor. The windows were fogged and filthy. Black mould peppered every surface. The living room looked as if the air ought to be thick and damp with a musty odour and hauntingly creaky floorboards; but it wasn’t. It was dead quiet.

I offered a ‘hello’ into the silence. But my voice made no sound. I doubted if I had even spoken.

My soul felt rock hard; swelling my shell from the inside out. It was behaving like a magnet being pulled along an invisible path. I was drawn to the dining room and crept gingerly across its threshold. A grey silhouette of a man stood at the grimy glass doors. I cautiously drew closer. It was the tweed clothed Kiwi. He did not move. I stepped next to Aata. His forehead

was pressed against the glass. His unblinking eyes were wide open. They watched the still meadow perhaps waiting for something to change.

He was average height and slender build. His neatly pressed collared shirt was meticulously tucked into this belted gray tweed trousers. Both hands were firmly placed in the pockets. The matching suit jacket was draped over his left arm. Aata's face was mature, but his features were youthful. His creamy Arian skin seemed invitingly soft.

"Aata," the word was voiceless. I tried again a little louder, "Aata, what do you need?" Nothing. I shouted, "AATA!" My voice was replaced with a crippling high pitched feedback amplifying outward from the center of my soul. I grasped my middle as my shell keeled over throbbing. As fleeting as an echo, it was gone. Aata must not have heard it or even felt it; he remained a statue.

Aata's face did not convey agony or fear let alone contentment or indifference. It may as well have been a blank mask. It was expressionless. Just as his house and tweed suit bore the impression of perfection, they were veils concealing the decay within. What rot must be collecting inside his soul. Caged animals who are socialized are less likely to go mad than their isolated counterparts. Hell is certainly no place to find salvation, but at least the suburb could offer the damned some amnesty.

I lightly pulled Aata's unresponsive hand out of his pocket and into mine to drag him gently from the window. He was not resistant. He began to follow my lead. Perhaps getting him outside would be enough to break this metaphoric spell. Aata needs a cold pint next to the *figuratively* warm hearth at the Prince of Darkness. Perhaps, whoever said 'hell hath no heroes' was in league with the fury of scorned women.

His grip tightened. Alarmingly tight. I quickly dismissed it as a good sign when he stopped dead in place. Aata wouldn't release me. His grasp tightened as his lips began to snarl

with flared nostrils and narrowing eyes. The tweed jacket silently dropped to the floor. Aata threw me to the wall and pinned me tightly against it with his hand gripping my throat. A horrid, vile sound airlessly screamed from his mouth. When a living body no longer buffers the pain, a naked soul feels it all the more. A violent electric pulse excruciatingly erupted through my shell, engulfing my soul in its ferocity. Fear embraced me.

He drew his face close to mine. It blurred, twitched, flashed, and misshapen. His skin became sickly like it was ravaged with disease.

I could not find my voice. Shock overwhelmed, and I was petrified. My soul was on fire, and its burning was agony. I had to get free. My instincts screamed, "Run, damn it!" With the full force of my arms, Aata's shell made a thud as his back slammed the floor. The shrieking stopped. He lay like a chalk-lined victim with open eyes and a vacant body. Aata's skin returned to normal. His torment retreated within devouring Aata's soul completely. The backdraft was once again contained. It was too late for the tweed clothed Kiwi.

My footsteps stomped loudly towards the front door. It banged in protest as I carelessly shoved it with too much force. In a daze and feeling like a fool, I stumbled onto the front lawn and into the road. Across the street a crotchety old man wearing chequered shorts and a fishing hat shouted expletives in my direction with a noise pollution complaint. A bicycle bell chimed, and I was knocked over before I could register its source.

"I do apologize for my clumsiness, Ma'am," said the young man who I now recognized as a Southerner. Ben helped me up, but never took his eyes off the bike. Once I was stable on my feet and before I could offer my own apologies, he was off. Ben cycled on his red vintage bike, past his house, and headed towards the village without missing a beat.

CHAPTER 15

Highly Suspect

“Well, I hope you considered yourself forewarned, by me, of course,” Hanriette scolded, “I will not say, ‘I told you so.’”

“That’s a very French way of indirectly telling me, ‘You told me so,’” I retorted with slight angst. “Oh,” I felt embarrassed, “That was rude of me. I’m sorry, Hanriette.”

“It was rude. After all, I am Canadian.” She cracked a sweet little smile, and I could not help but to reciprocate. Of all the people I could have bumped into on the walk home, Hanriette was certainly my first choice in that moment. The bright yellow buttercups ornamenting the bold pattern her dress would have to be my sunshine in that moment. After all, I was destined to commence sulking in bed, but a good pint and an even better friend were all the more comforting.

We sat outside, but there were plenty of seating choices both inside and out. The Prince of Darkness was unusually quiet. Suspiciously quiet. Even the plaza was sparse. Not a single soul swam in the fountain or splashed under its spout. I sipped my pint slowly so as to avoid any overwhelming hallucinogenic consequences.

“Aata is lost to us, Bly Elizabeth. But you are not. I am not. David and Minne and Hamlin and so many others are not. Focus on the things that make you happy.” It was a bizarre sort of encouragement coming from a woman imprisoned in Hell’s suburb. But at this point, I’d take anything. “Besides, the grapes are going sour,” Hanriette looked over her shoulders to make certain that no eaves were dropping.

“I don’t think I understand.”

“I’ve seen it before. Many times. There is a soul breaking the one golden rule. First, it starts with more frequent cat sightings. Then thin needlepoint rays of white light piece down through the ash above. Have you seen them?”

“No. I’m confused: how does light even penetrate...?”

“It is so quick; like an eye blink,” Hanriette demonstrated with her own version of exasperated lid twitching. She’s so adorable. “Then the sky darkens and the demons come to snatch her up.” Hanriette clenched her fist to further emphasize the point.

“As horrifying as that sounds, what is the big deal about the golden rule? Satan’s already won our souls. Some of us will even go mad which has to be the icing on the cake. I don’t get it.”

“Hell is no place for God – *torrieu*,” she spat, “We break that one rule, it invites *Him* in. It causes rifts in Hell so powerful that it would threaten the very authority Lord Satan has over his dark kingdom.”

My bulging eyes were glued to Hanriette’s intense face. “Cheese-and-rice, I cannot believe you just said the G-word! You’d better be careful, or you’ll be who they’re...” my voice trailed off while my eyes slowly strayed upward.

“*Silence*,” Hanriette turned slowly in her chair and looked up.

The fountain stopped spouting. My soul began to throb like a stressed heartbeat. All souls at the pub and in the piazza stood like marble sculptures. All eyes intensely watching the ever darkening ashen sky. It began to swirl and swell into a threatening horizontal vortex. Yellow sparks danced in its ever growing fury of blackening smog. The suburb shadowed into greys, blues, and blacks. It mesmerized. Motionless we watched the ashen sky change. Like captives in a city under siege, we were victims frozen in fear and wonder as to where the bomb would drop.

A glint of shiny red metal spun quickly across my peripheral vision. Ben stamped down hard on the bike's breaks just short of the fountain. He felt my eyes on him, and he stared back in alarm. Just a handful of paces stood between us. I felt an urge to protect him. His eyes were wide like prey anticipating the predators inevitable devouring.

Five smoking black comets spun loose from the sky and hurled themselves at the ground. The brick pavers trembled sending a violent quake through everything. Souls screamed and scattered in fear. I couldn't move; I would not move. I couldn't abandon him. My eyes were locked with Ben's. He was trembling with distress. Rising from the craters of rubble and debris were hideous demons with distorted features, rough scales, claws, and fangs. Salivating in anticipation the gruesome fiends crouched and snarled at Ben like he was a piece of meat. He was surrounded. The ambush was lightning quick. The demons lunged and seized, and in a flash they catapulted into the ashen sky in a great rock with black smoke steaming behind. Ben was gone.

The sky returned to normal and with it the square was restored erasing all traces of the happening. I walked shakily towards the abandoned vintage bike. It lay crumpled and broken. A lonesome wheel spun as if struggling in vain to faithfully finish its master's course. The wheel gradually slowed and then reluctantly stopped.

I had not noticed Hanriette stood next to me until she slipped her hand into mind.

“Come, Bly Elizabeth. It is best I take you home.” Arm in arm, we walked in mourning silence.

Soon, my house was in sight, and I was feeling guilt in my gloom. I could understand how I felt this way for disturbing Aata, but I couldn't shake the feeling I was responsible for Ben. I reassured myself that a collision and a few polite words hardly warranted fault. Yet, here was Hanriette, and I was the one who set the tone and provoked our dismal conversation. Arm in arm, I felt compelled to reset the mood.

“David would probably say something like, ‘the later events had surmised to be catastrophic,’” my exaggerated British accent awkwardly interrupted the quiet. An attempt at a giggle was more of a mournful smile accompanied by an exhale. Dear God, how I craved David's comfort.

Hanriette's pity grin ever so sweetly confirmed my obvious longing for him. “*Oui*, David is ever so... stoic; in a British way, of course.” She gently patted my shoulder.

The comforts of home were a few footsteps away. My living room curtains were drawn. A yellow glow of a tungsten bulb illuminated the window and bled through the fabric's overstated gold flowers in a sea of deep *deep* green. It was particularly peculiar as I didn't have a lamp or living room curtains. I stopped walking and calmly grasped Hanriette's arm. I brought my finger to my hushed lips; she nodded understandingly.

Hanriette followed my tiptoe around to the side of the porch. There were voices: one I loved, the other I feared. Through a slight parting in the curtain, the Demon Demetri paced irately while an interrogated David sat uneasily with eyes fixed on the floor. The big demon tried to haunch but his long horns still scraped my ceiling; unfortunately, its comedy didn't diminish Demetri's furious and powerful might. Frightfully, we pressed our ears close to the living room window.

Murmurs became intelligible as Demetri's voice boomed angrily, "...manner at which this whole ordeal was presented to us. It was not only handled with great haste, but also with utmost professionalism. To order a collection involves not one, not two, but three separate departments. Which – as you well know – impinges upon *my* Waiting Room staff, but..."

"I fear I may have made a mistake..." David's composed shell shuddered slightly.

"*But*, also a team from the Department of Torture. Both of which required approval from the red-tape fanatics at the Registrar!" Demetri's voice became deeper and more controlled, "Don't let it escape you that each department is already stressed enough with an unfathomable load of work."

"I'm sorry," the remorse in David's voice suggested lament beyond simply upsetting the furious demon.

"Sorry! Sorry?" Demetri poached aggressively, "Aloof or aloft, there is no room in Hell for remorseful afterthoughts dripping with apologetic mumblings! What's done is done," Demetri turned away from David and inhaled deeply. Nostrils flared and fists clenched behind his back. "If we were not so very desperate to raise our devil recruitment rate..." he paused and turned back towards David, "I will be frank. You show promise. At the very least, I am confident that you know where you will end up if you continue to test my patience. Don't encourage me to alter this assessment of you."

David was quite. He had no response. A yes was nodded. He understood; I wished that I could.

"Furthermore, I am not here to receive *confession*. The purpose for this conversation was meant to be purely procedural," Demetri's tone became abruptly formal, "David Fitzgerald Williams, it is my duty to inform you of your current account balance. Your newly opened account has been credited 'one soul'. Therefore, you have achieved one-sixth impunity.

Importantly, it is the responsibility of the account bearer – i.e. yourself – to keep the balance’s tally until it has reached its intended maximum. Thus, an additional five souls – totalling six – will qualify you with....”

Hanriette tugged on my arm and led me away from the window. Demetri’s stern voice became a distant hum. I followed her across the street and into her quiet bungalow. My soul ached for David. I was powerless to defend and comfort.

“If his soul has not been harmed by now, Demetri the 3rd has no intention of doing so,” Hanriette comforted intuitively, “There was no reason to hover about and upset yourself further.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right. I just wish I could help him,” I did my best to hide my frustration, “I wish I knew what the *hell* they were talking about.”

Hanriette gestured to her high-back davenport while she sat in the plush chair next to it. I sat obediently. I was not in the mood for a chat. Resting in peace next to David was what I craved most.

“I am fairly certain you and David will reunite soon. Until then, I can explain to you everything.”

Frustrated with my ignorance, I questioned, “You know what they were talking about? And you will tell me *everything*?” A long forgotten emotion fluttered to the surface: hope.

“*Oui*,” she nodded. Hanriette’s eyebrows arched to communicate a grave posture, but an ill repressed smirk on her lips oozed wicked delight. “I will paint a picture of the entire scene, but be aware... I cannot erase it once it has been unveiled.”

CHAPTER 16

Every Bit of Average

Life for the little girl was ordinary. She was not special, her looks were middling, her intelligence proper, and little more heed was paid to Hanriette in comparison to the any other child. The pickets of the white washed fence surrounding her modest home could easily number the population of the small hill town in western Quebec. The three-up, three-down little wooden house was painted salmon and considered a bit ostentatious for the town's Protestant liking.

It was the girl's mother— naturally, hailing from the city — who was responsible for choosing the colour in question as she outshone average in every way. Fortunately, as the reverend's wife, it was excused within no less than seventeen months after his bride's arrival. Some say it was her Sunday best smile every day of the week or her apple nutmeg cake or her willingness to sacrifice a win simply to brighten another's day. But for those in the know or a keen sense of intuition, she demonstrated humility when she birthed an average baby girl for her average husband on stand-by. No sooner had the infant grown into a toddler, the mother succumb to puerperal fever.

Hanriette had no memory of her mother, but instead she entertained sweet imaginings surrounding the bride in the greying photograph framed on the mantel. Her relationship with the reverend was typical, but in her imaginings, she laughed endlessly with Mama. Milking the cow, sweeping the porch, sewing wobbly buttons, and pulling weeds would cease being chores and

transform into joyous servitude if Mama were there to offer praise and encouragement. The little town agreed that although the girl was average, the dazzling smile Hanriette inherited from her mother was a foreshadowing that she could blossom into the beauty that was the belated. But for this very reason, Hanriette daydreamed of Mama and wished away her life's greatest adversary.

Aunt Amer was the reverend's, mother's, half-brother's, father's, daughter. She was also the family's only unattached woman on hand to raise little Hanriette which freed her father to tend at the flock. Despite Aunt Amer's portrayal as intentional, she was not a spinster by choice as her looks were plain, intelligence low, attitude miserable, and presence nil. She was a mean lady, but disguised it reasonably well; thus, she was neither particularly liked nor intrinsically disliked. The little girl was the exception receiving Aunt Amer's suppressed loathing and hypocritical resentments. Sadly, Hanriette alone suffered these misdirected miseries behind closed doors. Hanriette did not share the townsfolk's indifference towards Aunt Amer – she hated her – and not just a little, but very *very* much.

Defiance was punished with hair pulling, untidiness with a slap to the thigh, fussing with starvation, disobedience with solitude in a locked wardrobe, crying with a pinch under the arm, and any combination of two or more were punishable with belt slaps to the back. Hanriette's body hurt, but Aunt Amer's cruel words wounded the little girl's heart with sores that would never heal.

Over time, the salmon paint peeled away from the cladding as Hanriette began to grow. And just as the townspeople supposed, her beauty began to blossom. She was on the edge of girlhood and expecting the change at any day. Life by Aunt Amer's hand had made Hanriette bolder, stronger, and devilishly clever. The aging spinster grew older with brittle bones and hunching spine, but her tongue was still sharp and reflexes too well refined.

Hanriette made a habit of leaving for the schoolhouse early, walking very slowly along lonely hill paths, and was most often the first to arrive. She claimed to be the classroom aide which the schoolmarm did not deny and fortunately was never questioned about her pet's early arrival. One fine spring morning, Hanriette was reaching for the kitchen door knob when a tremendous thud startled the quiet house. Hanriette's instinctual reaction was to cry out *Papa*, but she quickly recalled that he was in the city attending a reverends' revival.

At the bottom of the stairs, the frail old woman was collapsed on her stomach. Twisted legs lay limp on the steps while moans of agony were wailed into the floor. She reached for Hanriette thanking God that her dear little girl had not yet left for school. Hanriette saw her future in a flash as nursemaid to a cripple with a wicked tongue and unflinching hands that were mercifully spared. Amer lay helplessly howling in pain and pleading for help. Hanriette stood over her and looked down at vulnerable Aunt Amer crying and begging for the doctor. Hanriette was still and thoughtful. She neither spoke comforting words nor ran for help. Hanriette lifted her foot and placed it on Aunt Amer's lower spine. With some effort, the old woman's frail bones cracked under the girl's heel. The aged body of the decaying bitter life went limp and quiet.

Hanriette fled running fast and hard. Her haste ensured she was still the first to arrive at the schoolhouse. Her breathing relaxed leaving a slight flush lingering in the cheeks. Soon Hanriette was joined by the schoolmarm and classmates to commence a typical day of learning.

Hanriette's palms sweat as her heartbeat sped unusually fast. Rather than paying much attention copying arithmetic to her slate, she stared out the window and watched the sunny spring day grow gradually grey. The first wave of relief came when Hanriette was collected by a grave faced parishioner bearing sad news. She came to discover that displayed emotions of guilt can easily be misinterpreted as grief. Genuine remorse soon followed.

Despite of all this, the young lady Hanriette blossomed into an exemplary woman. She never again broke God's Sixth Commandment; even spending the remainder of a very long life tirelessly avoided any and all infractions that may threaten the remaining nine. Yet, Hanriette – a mainstay of the parish – manoeuvred surreptitiously in life's 'grey areas' where obstacles beckoning compromise were targeted and readily extinguished so as to clear the path to her heart's desires.

CHAPTER 17

The Hunt

“It began with Judas Iscariot. It was Jesus’ idea, although he did not know it at the time, ‘Have I not chosen you Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!’¹” Hanriette’s tone became grim and serious. I saw a shadow of this contrast to her typical carefree whims at the pub before Ben was taken. A suppressed darkness was rising; ready to overflow. Truly, who was this soul? Words of David’s began to surface and were quickly cut-off.

“Iscariot was overwhelmed with guilt and shame. With the thirty pieces of silver, he took possession of a field bearing a tall dead tree, ready to take his life for betraying of the King of kings. Iscariot was just a small pawn in a great war raging for millennia longer than we will ever fathom. But of course, the pearly gates were wide open for Judas, offering redemption and grace. But Lucifer was waiting for him at the tree in *Akeldama* – the Field of Blood. He coerced Judas, ‘Your name will everlastingly be synonymous with liars, hypocrites, and betrayers. Jesus is the Son of God, and He will become a martyr who will forever be loved and worshiped. But you – they will spit your name when spoken. Heaven waits on the other side of this rope to reward you for your place in history, but it matters not as this world will never see you as the courageous man who set Jesus’ fated crucifixion in motion.’

¹ John 6:70 KJV

“Judas pondered these things in his heart. He became filled with rage. He felt used and betrayed. An eternity with a God who allows the besmirching of Judas’ name and dignity was no paradise. He implored Lucifer, ‘What will you have me do?’

“‘Meet *me* on the other side, and those thirty pieces of silver will pale in comparison to the rewards that will await you. We will build an army of *devils*, and you will be their *general*: the commander of damned souls that will grow my kingdom to rise up against these injustices. After all, what kind of God claims to love you, yet manipulates Judas Iscariot for His own benefit?’”

Stunned, I stared open mouthed at Hanriette. I felt compelled to defend God. I wanted to remind her that our idea of Judas could have been very much altered if he had just waited a few more days.

“Judas climbed the tree, firmly fastened the noose around his neck, and jumped. He accepted Lucifer’s offer and joined him in Hell. Lucifer had his new general plotting days before a bloated body – with guts oozing – was discovered on the hard ground crushed beneath the snapped bough which aided his suicide.”

“Why are you telling me this?” My voice was panicked, “What does it mean to us?”

Hanriette’s thin lips curled up at the corners as she tilted her head slightly, “Bly Elizabeth, is it not obvious?” She glared at my expression waiting for understanding to illuminate my face. “You silly girl! Lord Satan is recruiting. We don’t simply die and burn up! That would be such a waste. The suburb is one of many testing grounds to see which souls have what it takes to fight in General Iscariot’s army.” Hanriette paused and waited. A tongue click and eye roll said enough, but that didn’t stop her from patronizing me further. “It is a spiritual battle. The war for souls... to save them *or* to destroy them. When Lucifer and his supporters liberated themselves from God’s oppressive absolutism, they lunged from Heaven – as refugees

– and began their own world... in the earth’s deepest and most forgotten crevices. They called it *Aralu*; it was the first utterance of Hell.

“People are stupid enough to send themselves here either by their own idiotic will or pathetic guilt. Oh, but there are those – those deliciously devious souls – radiating raw, unadulterated wickedness. It’s a privilege – you know – being so wholly evil that you come to this place cordially. A rejection from Heaven is an esteemed invitation in Hell. Thankfully, for souls like me, there’s this little test; upon passing I will join his magnificent army.

“After all, demons tried to breed with humans to spread the cause, but their vigour diluted with generations of human mating. The Son of Man tore open the curtain separating God from humanity; Lucifer had to think bigger. It’s not as if demons can procreate amongst themselves, and only some are even compatible for human impregnation. Have you really considered how bold it is when a creative yet abstract human births a demented thought and enacts it? They can alter the mundane fabric of reality and infuse their own destructive narrative. Why waste such enthusiasm; such initiative? Even in death, these souls may continue to push back on our enemy.”

Sadly, my knowledge of military strategy was limited to what I knew about the sheer quantity of American soldiers tipping the scales to win WWII. Defensively I blurted, “But what is the point for the rest of us? Wouldn’t all those other millions of souls burning up just be a waste? Why not quantity over quality?”

“Tisk-tisk,” she patronized, “The greater the loss Heaven suffers, the greater we debilitate their morale.”

“Why, Hanriette, why?” I pleaded, “We have it so cushy in the suburb. I really looked up to you. I really felt like you... like I loved you like a mother-figure.”

“Oh, but love...,” she swooned mockingly, “Love is as trivial as faith. Look at the mess it’s gotten you two in. Love is of God; a useless invention. When you *make* love, you pull God into the depths of Hell. Dreams of humanity are things of the Earth, and man is made in the image of God. You disgust me.”

Horrified, my soul twinged in alarm as David’s words fully echoed inside – *you can’t trust a single soul*. “I should go,” I stood shakily, “David’s meeting with Demetri must be finished by now, and he’ll be waiting for me. Thank you for... whatever....”

“David was the one who requested Benjamin’s removal,” Hanriette slowly rose to her feet. Unconvinced, I turned my back and began walking towards the door. “He did it to protect you.” I stopped dead in place. “He came to me and told me all about your dreams. He sought my advice. How’s that *love* for you?”

I pivoted slowly to face her. The little yellow buttercups in the pattern of her dress withered and frosted. The small woman had grown herself several inches to invasively stare me in the eyes. I looked away; my soul was not hers to search. “Are you trying to tell me that I’m responsible for Ben’s abduction?” Anger bubbled to the surface.

Hanriette gloated having captured my undivided focus. She strolled casually with her arms clasped behind her back and stopped at a mahogany Tutor-Revival curio cabinet. Three crystal figurines ironically posed as pagan idols stood encased behind the glass. Their eerie translucent eyes gazed vacantly. Hanriette opened the cabinet and took one in her hand. “I will not insult you by rhetorically asking if you wish to learn what Demetri the 3rd and David were discussing. I will tell you directly.” Hanriette inched closer and placed the statue in my hands of a rigid, expressionless Minerva. “Six souls. It takes only six. The imperfect number just falling short of seven. But we all fall short of *that* glory.” Hanriette searched my face for a reaction.

Poker was never my forte. “Demetri the 3rd has allowed me – nay gifted me – the privilege of creating these three little mementos of my previous conquests.”

The words felt stuck in my throat, “You’re one-half devil,” I murmured. She ignored me still rambling on and enjoying the sound of her own voice.

“...You assumed the cats were Hell’s spies, did you not? They all do.”

“Let me guess,” I backlashed, “We’ve been encapsulated in a metaphorical matrix built upon abstracted contradictions?”

“So many flowery words that say so very little,” she mocked, “*Pourquoi, ma biche*, haven’t we an eternity to...?”

“Spit it out so that I can walk out of here and never set eyes on you again,” I was curt. She was a wolf teasing the cornered doe before pouncing. “Seriously Hanriette, I have lost all faith in you!”

“Faith... intangible. Hell is no place for faith,” she tisked flatly, almost sadly. “The demon was outlining David’s account status. As it stands, your beloved David is now an unimpressive one-sixth-fraction towards earning full citizenship of Hell. A mere one-sixth devil.”

“You’re policing us,” my lips curled into a disgusted snarl. “You would prefer to damn souls to an eternity of torture rather than exist idly in this *bizarre* Purgatory?” It was more of an accusation than a question.

“*Salope!* I have damned no one! Souls damn themselves,” Hanriette appeared offended whilst basking in an unearned arrogance. “I am neither the first nor the last. True, I am the oldest resident of the suburb, but those before me were in the very same predicament we find ourselves now.”

My shell trembled with fury, “I’m leaving.” I felt all the more foolish as I once again spun in a seemingly choreographed soap-star-esque turn-n-trot.

“Will you really run off to your *galant*?” She mocked as the word belittled us. “David is one-sixth devil. His soul is tainted – corrupted. Darkening.

“It will slowly devour his soul like the sting of poison rippling ecstasy through the bloodstream. Surely,” Henriette beckoned, “the hurt would be far less if I were to expose you both, Bly Elizabeth, than to wait in knowing that your lover may betray you.”

I could say nothing.

“If I am certain of anything, it is this,” Hanriette boasted confidently, “David will be my number four, his Benjamin will become *my* five, and you will be my beloved number six. Now, all I must do is wait. You two will dream or fuck or whisper, the cats will gather, and I will blow the whistle. My impressive strategy will promote me to lieutenant demon upon entry to General Iscariot’s army.”

I realized I was still holding the crystal figurine; a keepsake trophy formed by a sadistic soul. I squeezed it tightly and repressed a distracting impulse to mourn this fallen Minerva.

“Do you like my pretty statue?” she antagonized, “I can’t wait until I have three more.”

With my back still turned to Hanriette, “I can’t tell if you’re sick, bored, or just a self-indulgent.” I placed Minerva gently on the floor, and I started towards the door.

“As the Demon Demetri often recites, ‘*A sofferir tormenti, caldi e geli – simili corpi la Virtù dispone – che, come fa, non vuol ch’a a noi si sveli,*’” Hanriette quoted flawlessly. “Here, Lord Satan is the power in Hell, and he shan’t reveal his methods. Our souls are housed in these feeble shells because *he* wills it so. Thus, you and I are Satan’s figurines in an arena of his making. He shall do with us as he sees fit.”

CHAPTER 18

Run

There was no point in running. I walked. I could feel that wicked bitch's prying eyes on me as the distance grew marginally wider. I assured myself, "This is how Eve felt after she tasted the fruit of knowledge," but, in itself, awareness is a blunt contrast to reassurance. Who else among us feigns friendship to captivate their target in this predator and prey dēcosystem? I waved politely and forced a smile at Hamlin and Minne still sunlessly bathing in their front yard; they really had a knack for dragging things out. By the time my feet crossed the threshold, I knew David and I had just two options: burn in Hell or never *ever* be alone together again. Even PDA was definitely out; just the brush of his fingertips in my palm could ignite an explosive lightshow.

I shut the front door behind me and reluctantly surrendered myself to a sort of depressive numbness. It may become my dearest friend for the duration of eternity. I could bear Hell's torture if it meant David was safe in the suburb. But Hanriette would continue preying upon him; waiting to pounce.

The green and gold curtains and standing brass lamp with the cut-corner shade were lovely gifts. The light thoughtfully switched itself on enveloping the room a genial golden glow like a tender hug. I went to the sofa and I knelt on the cushions placing my hands on its sturdy back and was reassured by the soft cotton fabric. I partially drew open a curtain panel to spy a

shadowy figure framed in David's window. Binoculars accommodated two circles I made with my hands as I brought them to my eyes. He was staring back at me through what looked like military issue binoculars. David raised a hand, and I reciprocated.

David pointed to himself, then me and mouthed, "*Can I come over?*"

"*No.*"

Perhaps it was the lenses or a jaded female perspective, but Dave seemed to make a sort of wounded puppy dog look as the binoculars lowered. Men, even the dead ones, really do only think about one thing. Well, at least part of him was still alive.

The pup whimpered, "*Why?*"

"*Because we're fu... ah!*" My line of sight was filled with fuzzy blue. Game over! The binoculars fell behind the sofa as I lurched back. Thankfully, I hadn't hit KO quite yet. It was just Hamlin's sweater amplified in my line of sight.

David was opening his front door as Hamlin strode up the porch steps. And then I became aware that next door to him another pair of eyes spied me with far less affection through lace curtains. I hastily shut the drapes. I had to think of what to do next. I had to focus. Then it became obvious what the next most logical course of action had to be. I shut my eyes and imagined the comfort of my cotton U of M pajama bottoms and faded gray Alice in Chains t-shirt. Now, I could bounce ideas off of Ben and Jerry with my nose in a pint of Peanut Butter and Jelly resurrected from the flavor graveyard.

In life, some of the most disheartening moments are rather small and seemingly insignificant. Accidentally stepping on a shell and crushing the snoozing snail within. Spilling almost an entire cup of grated parmesan cheese on a very recently mopped kitchen floor. Or being a poor undergraduate who budgeted 58p for a week's worth of groceries to find the bill totaling 59p. Just to name a few. For me, this included the first glimpse of white cardboard

peeking through the last remaining mouthfuls of ice cream. And I was no closer to whatever peace-of-mind or concocted clever scheme that would release my aching soul from this hellish situation.

I found myself waiting. Again. Waiting for something to change. It was futile; there was nothing of substance I could see in front of me that motivated change. Such an exercise seemed all the more pointless than when I first arrived in the suburb. There was nothing to look forward to; no touch, no kiss, no endearments, no sparkling blue eyes. I stared into the melancholy of monochromatic space. Even if timepieces were permitted, could the hypnotic *tick-tock* of a wall clock keep tempo with the passing of time to whisk me from one moment to the next? If sound could not save me, could sight? There is no sun to set or moon to raise that could progress dark shadows across the room. The remaining three senses are also useless; not to mention the now not-so-mysterious sixth. Well, there's always the pub.

Oh, how I longed to sleep. I would have even settled for the sensation of sleepiness. Oh, to dream of my family, sunshine, pens and paper, and I stopped myself there. I could not allow myself to dare think of it. God. The sofa was so soft, 100% cotton upholstery free from any interwoven artificial material and stuffed with duck down. The lamp light dimmed. I thought, perhaps, if I closed my eyes and simply concentrated – meditated upon nothingness – surely dreams could not follow where sleep never started.

Click, click, click. A pair of heels clacked on the back porch steps and caused me alarm. I sprang like a cat and was on my feet in a jiff. My eyes were as big as saucers.

“I startled you,” she smirked, “Who do you think you were expecting?”

“A deranged Hoser swinging a beaver-beater stick.”

“*Pfui*,” Minne tiskied, “Most of those words are strangely *dumm*. Besides, you cordially invited us over for a dinner party.” Minne held no prop like a host gift or bottle of wine. It was so very outside of character. Besides two for dinner is hardly a party.

“Yes,” I floundered, “Yes, I did.” Minne stared at me dubiously with narrowing eyes. Perhaps hailing in German was more appeasing, “*Ja, ich habe!*”

“Well done, *kamerad*.” She gestured a sweeping arm through the dining room, “I wish to stand on the rear veranda with you.”

It felt like one of those scenes nearer the end of a film where the hero is beckoned into the unknown by the villain. The hero must choose between fleeing impending doom or well-mannered obedience when the friend turns foe. I weighed my options quickly: scream like a pansy, literally run in circles, or decline politely. Since my last visit with Hanriette, I found myself rather limited in my abilities to weigh options; however, my list building capabilities were at a record high. Nevertheless, when faced with a no win situation, choose the option your adversary would least expect. I followed Minne onto the back porch to boldly challenge my impending doom.

Minne stood with hands on hips, staring into the meadow. Her eyes scanned the endless horizon. I wondered if she and Hamlin had ever tried to take the journey. She inhaled deeply as if drawing in the sweet bouquet of nature; or at least her memory of it.

“True friendship is a rare commodity in life, and even more so in this death.” I waited nervously for a conversation turning *but*. “Bly, I am so grateful to have you as my friend.”

“But?”

“No but,” with her eyes fixed on the meadow, Minne reached for my hand, I took it and held it lightly. David was wrong, there are souls you can trust; otherwise, how could I even begin to trust him? I felt like a fool.

“Me, too,” I squeezed her hand gently, “and I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” she grinned. Hand in hand we continued to gaze over the still meadow. Its eerie calm mesmerized. Such was an agreeable contentment. My soul felt a little lighter.

A slight rustle in the prairie grass procured a pair of tortoiseshell gems gazing at me from beneath the shadows of tall blonde stalks. It isn’t the cats that the suburbanites fear; it’s the unwanted attention they bring to those who may tempt the golden rule. I stared back, but Minne was unfazed. She was clearly better practiced at being unperceptive.

“One of the benefits of being married as long as we have is the ability to instantly comprehend one another’s thoughts. Not a word need spoken.” Minne was not her usual joking self. The tone was soft, but her words were somber. “You and David should really give it a try some time.

“Besides, not everyone cracks in the suburbs, you know? Some of us are not here to become devils or go mad. Some of us are just here so that Lucifer can validate his godlikeness, to prove to himself – or prove to The One – that he is capable of fostering contentment in his Maker’s absence. Hamlin and I are contented here, but we can see that you and David can’t be.” Minne’s sweet smile was filled with warmth as she turned to look at me. She delivered a peck on my cheek and hastily whispered into my ear, “*Auf Wiedersehen, darling.*”

Minne kicked off her peep toe heels one at a time into the grassy side yard. She trotted down the wooden steps and jogged towards her backyard scooping up one shoe at a time in each extended hand. I watched her jump her back porch steps and disappear into the house. This was one of those ‘goodbyes’ that would sting all the more later. Too much haste.

A brush of soft fur and quivering purr on my legs snapped me to attention. My head darted back and forth to make certain that I was not being watched. I was. The woman next door was dressed in a floral housecoat carrying a full laundry basket to a transfiguring

clothesline. A few curlers popped off her head as she dropped the basket and ran into her bungalow. The slamming door projected a thunderous echo. Crossing my arms I rolled my eyes to the heavens (I presumed) and murmured through clenched lips, “Oh, for the love of all that’s holy.”

The calico cat sprang up onto the deck railing. It meowed at me twice. He curled up his tail pointing the furry tip like a finger towards the boundless prairie horizon. “I don’t speak cat, but I’m guessing that my choices are limited, and – despite my feelings about the meadow – I should just trust you anyways,” I translated matter-of-factly. He leapt down to the green emerald grass and looked back at me with paws poised and arched tail directing our course. The golden grasses began to rustle and swish as the agile feline advanced. An animesque bubble of air ballooned behind him; I knew I had to run inside its current.

I jumped off the deck barefoot and landed on two feet securely laced into my jogging shoes. I met the tail end of the air current with ease, but I was being jostled like a compact car barreling down the highway behind a semi-truck. The tops of the tall grasses swung violently like grasping claws with jagged nails. My pajamas were catching, and I was lagging too far behind. I staggered as gusts of furious crosswinds nipped at my heels. My living life flashed in my mind: fishing with Dad, Mom and Dena crying, busting Arthur, Rachel and Blake playing, Seth’s head exploding, and falling and falling and.... “Snap out of it!” I shouted. Grunting, I pumped my legs harder and pushed my momentum to the brink. My pajamas disintegrated from my figure and sprayed like liquid behind me staining a dirty spray of faded browns and grays. I was sleek in my fitted running attire. I was gaining speed and ran steadier inside the bubble the closer I caught up to the cat. It was like my soul was a muscle pumping numinous adrenaline through the very fabric of my shell. I felt amazing.

CHAPTER 19

The Escape

The cat halted, and I almost ran past him. Him being David. He was reclining in a small clearing of bent stalks petting a gray tabby cat.

“She’s really quite sweet,” he purred, “I’ve forgotten how much I miss animal companionship.”

I felt an urgency to be a killjoy. “Have you noticed the sky is getting darker again?”

“Yes,” David surrendered an unbothered sigh, “It’s all about to go pair shaped.”

“We’ll just have to stick together as long as we can,” I looked up musingly, “But at least we can avoid being another notch in Hanriette’s broomstick.”

He forced a sympathetic laugh. David stood up and looked me over longingly. We moved to embrace and thought better of it. I was so happy to see him.

“Well,” he broke the silence, “I suppose Minne spoke with you in mixed metaphors using exaggerated hand gestures.” David’s imitation was quite canning, and frightfully feminine.

“Not exactly, but I suppose that’s what Hamlin did. And he told you about Hanriette’s intentions as well?”

“Quite,” David smiled timidly; just like when we first met. We stood awkwardly watching the two cats watch us. Their heads bobbed back and forth like engrossed match

spectators following the tennis ball bounce back and forth, back and forth. “I can’t believe that French *chinne* set us up.”

“Canadian.”

“Right...,” David cleared his throat and scratched the back of his neck mechanically, “Yes, well....”

“So,” I started nonchalantly swinging my arms, “You’re a sixth devil, huh?”

David laughed like a pirate with hands on hips, “I almost wish I had a swallow of tea to spray!” My face went blank and for a moment my soul felt disconnect from him. “I’m sorry, that wasn’t funny,” he apologized as he shifted his weight regrettably. “My sense of humor has gone a bit askew since the deposit was made into my account.”

“Yeah, also, what is the deal with these *accounts*, and how can they even exist?”

“I am the account.” David paused to see if I comprehended. I didn’t. “It’s simple, really. A piece of my soul is now one-sixth evil. They’re just expressions... accounts... deposits... deposits made into accounts....”

Ouch. “Oh.” I watched him hesitantly search my face for a reaction. “It’s okay. I understand.” Now it made too much sense. It’s like his pure soul was a wholesome yellow cupcake suffocated in a sickening sugary frosting with a dusting of evil sprinkles seeping through the goo. It made me ache.

“This is silly. In for a penny, in for a pound.” David reached his arms out and shook into existence a plaid picnic blanket to cover the scratchy prairie grass. He said, “Come here,” as he sat down and patted the blanket. We lay on the rough grass watching the sky grow darker. David folded an arm beneath his head and extended the other as a pillow for mine. My calico cat sat on the corner of the blanket and stared at us dubiously; however, the gray tabby cat curled up on David’s belly for a nap.

We lay quietly side by side staring upwards. The ashen sky looked as if it was congealing in spots like drips of gray food coloring slowly spreading in soiled water. I felt much better knowing that we could boldly face our impending doom together. We waited under the ever darkening ashen sky.

“I love you so much, David.”

“I love you, Bly,” he bent his elbow to grasp the hand resting at my shoulder, “It is ironic that I am better with you in death than I ever was in life.”

“You know we’re screwed, right?”

“Pardon?” David turned his head to face me with arched eyebrows.

“It means that,” I thoughtfully paused, “it’s all gone ‘tits up’,” I explained in my unintentionally offensive Cockney.

“Ha!” David laughed inopportunely, again. “I understand... the cap’s on a bit tight – *screeeww’d.*”

I gave him the look perfected by all wives and mothers earthbound or otherwise. Wow. Talk about surrendering all seriousness.

“Oh, I’ve done it again, haven’t I?” He sucked air through his teeth like an Englishman staring regretfully at the bottom of an empty bottle. “Yes, well, our burning in Hell appears to be inevitable.”

“While we’re on the subject,” with a figurative pin ready to burst the metaphorical bubble, “I am grateful for what you did to protect me, but framing Benjamin was wrong.”

David scoffed like a teenage boy busted with a six pack of Leinenkugel, “It’s a bit naive to assume a moral code exists here. He probably had it coming, Ben died and descended into Hell without any help from me, didn’t he?” An exasperated sigh quickly followed, “I can’t believe I just said that. Never mind me – I feel so peculiar. We’re suburbanites because we have

morals. You're right, it was grossly wrong to frame the poor lad. I wish I could go back and change it or make it up to him one way or another. I'm sorry, my love."

"I forgive you...." Of course, forgiveness was easy. Forgetting would be harder. How could I forget? David framed Ben just because he conveniently peddled in circles and may or may not have been in proximity when love-was-in-the-making or perhaps dreams-were-being-dreamt. Ben was a magician's deflection; gee Satan, look what's in my right hand while I flip a coin in the left. Now, all we had to do is stop all the things that were drawing attention to us, and Benjamin would have inherited full blame while burning up. Already it seemed Ben's sacrifice was going to be in vain.

"But, I'll tell you this," he piped up, "I can't go on... like *this*." David tapped a finger on his chest, "I am already feeling detached from my senses. More specifically, my soul. It's like being a bit pissed-up with my inhibitions pulled down around me ankles. And I'm restless, to say the least."

"I can see that," I empathized, "I hurt for you." And I did.

His blue eyes looked at me gravely. "I feel awful that you do."

"Well, at least that stick has been pulled out of your ass." Finally, we both had something to laugh about together. If the place, circumstance, and atmosphere were subtracted, it could have been a lovely little moment cuddled up on a picnic blanket in the great wide open. The grass blades stretched up and beyond our lounging bodies like babies secure in their bassinets. But most securities are false.

The dozing tabby's tail tip flickered from time to time encouraging David to continue scratching behind her fuzzy ears. "It's nice that they can shield us for a little while at least."

"How does it – I mean *they* – work exactly?"

“You mean the cats?” he looked at me from pensively, “I don’t know exactly. They’ve got to be dead like us, otherwise how would they get here?” The contented gray tabby purred approvingly and slightly opened her squinting eyes. David rubbed the back of her ears and encouraged in a baby voice, “You’re a pretty girl, you are. Are you dead, are you? Yes, you are; yes you are, pretty girl.” The gray tabby lifted her head and pawed a fluffy foot on David’s chest.

I wrinkled my eyebrows and lifted my head slightly. “She answered you, David.” I looked over at the crabby calico staring at me sternly and then up again at the darkening ashen atmosphere. It felt like the sky was encroaching like a ravenous wolf tracking bunny prints in fresh snow. “David,” I tapped his side, “Ask her where they’re from.”

David, catching on, cooed, “Pretty girl, are you from Hell? Are you; are you a pretty hellish kitty?” Huh?” Tabby curled her head back into her fluffy body and closed her eyes drowsily. We looked at each other wide eyed.

“That looks like a ‘no,’” I translated.

“Pretty girl,” David encouraged playing with her tail, “are you a ghostly ghost kitty cat from earthly Earth? Aye?” Tabby didn’t move a muscle. There was only one option left, and it seemed impossible. Hope bubbled to the surface of our minds. Hesitantly and almost afraid of the answer, David probed, “Uh, are you from Heaven?”

The tabby cat uncurled her back and downward-dog-stretched, pawing at David’s chest. Sitting up she meowed an approving smile. The calico cat meowed annoyedly a sound reminiscent of a 90’s sitcom-esque *duh*.

The calico cat then meowed a few choruses to which the tabby turned her head and seemed to answer back. The calico stood and arched his back in agitation. Finally, the tabby

stretched and grudgingly sprang from David's chest to join the calico. She casually licked her paw. Another angry hissy meow probed us to unwillingly rise as well.

"He's definitely trying to tell us something," David deduced looking down at them.

"Excellent," I Watson-ed.

Previously, I would have certainly insisted that felines don't speak human, but that was before I witnessed a calico cat sighing annoyedly in our direction. The added eye roll was probably unnecessary. He stood on all four paws and turned around. The calico cat curled the tip of his tail all the way down to its base making an almost perfect fuzzy ring. The tabby cat also turned around, but instead pushed the length of her tail in and out through the calico's circled tail. The point having been received, he sprang into the meadow. The gray tabby cat brushed an affectionate goodbye on David's leg and darted into the tall grasses following after the other.

A gentle breeze was a foreshadowing of the violent gales coming soon. The bubble was bursting, cracking like domed glass, and the gloom of the ashen sky began to intensify. Its dreary mass began to swell and spiral. But when it is most dark, one must switch on the light.

Enlightenment burst from David's sparkling eyes. Inhaling deeply a sweet smile delivered an unalterable reality, "For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.¹"

We were fish flailing on hot dry dirt; a good rain will wash us back into the lake. The net was immaterial. I saw it. Literally, metaphysically, or whatever... faith, love, hope are free of all boundaries. The Truth reigns, "And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from

¹ Romans 8:38-39, King James Version (KJV); King James authorized the Church of England in 1604, the first addition was completed in 1611.

God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.² Amen! Now we just had to make it rain.

A current swept across the meadow. The tall jostling stalks danced in all directions. There wasn't a moment to lose. But like the initial burst of intoxicating chemistry, the body cannot be willed to take it slow. The desire to consume overpowers. Our bodies collided and our clothes melted off of us with rips and pulls. Our shells went hard, and our souls glowed blurring the line between his body and mine.

David's groping hands moved down my back and rolled over my butt. The tall grasses rose and to meet my posture and bounced my fall as David lifted my parted legs. The meadow lifted to entwine a cushion for his knees. He pressed into me. The blades of grass met his fingers as he grasped my wrists to gain leverage. I met his thrusting with a rise and an arch. I spread my legs further and moved my hands to grasp his tight broad shoulders. In and out the grass met his knees and arched my back. We were exposed and wild.

Needle point prisms of light rained down dotting the blackening sky and piercing through the darkness. Several dozen thunderous meteors plummeted from above like steaming coals. They spun and whistled like bombs falling to the earth. All around us they quaked the ground with violent tremors. The craters began to crack; hideous demons were hatching. But it didn't stop us; it didn't even slow us down.

A dome of light illuminated around us in a perfect cylindrical cocoon. The meadow stalks pulsated in waves and gusts around us to the rhythm of our impulsion. Nothing – not even

² Romans 8:38-39, New Living Translation (NLT); first published by an American based publishing house in 1996.

evil – could come near us. The prairie grasses grew and stretched above us as they wove and intertwined an impenetrable sanctuary. Their golden texture diluted into the wash of pure radiant light in our orgasm. The ground fell beneath us, and we were suspended in the center of the sphere.

Bliss of epic magnitude washed over us. Two became one as the quivering pounding of our every member pulsated in a harmony that could not be distinguished one from another. And for a beautiful thoughtless moment, consciousness floated, gravity soared, and ecstasy embraced as we transparently gazed into one another's eyes and deep into the other's soul. We eased into euphoric tranquility.

The meadow disappeared. The light went out. The dome collapsed and the ground swallowed us whole. We were buried somewhere below. And finally, an unadulterated unfeeling, engulfing blackness descended.

CHAPTER 20
Moments Later

“And so we begin our quest – full of mystery and intrigue – stumbling blindly through the darkest, most lonesome void of Hell. Our hero can’t see his hand in front of his face, but it doesn’t matter because he’s holding hers – the woman he loves. Only one thought lingers in their minds: will our journey towards the Waiting Room end in a successful escape... or agonizing torture...?”

“David, are you narrating us?”

“Yeah,” his tone drummed an upbeat, “I’m doing a dramatic voiceover, like in an art nouveau film.”

“It’s bad enough that we’re stumbling around in the dark, but someone might hear you.”

“Well, if we can’t see him, he can’t see us.”

“How do you know if... never mind, are you done rambling on?” I stage whispered, “We’ve got to get out of here.”

A silence that began awkwardly soon became depressing. The cavern certainly paralleled the mood. We blindly tiptoed through the narrow cave with fingers grasping damp edges and feet navigating the rocky uneven floor. Any conjuring trick that could illuminate the cave had not sustained outside of the suburb. Oh, the darkness felt far lonelier once David stopped talking.

“Bly?”

“Yes, David?”

“Do *you* want to narrate for a little while?”

I pensively paused then sighed, “Even though it was super-darker than any night sky our heroes had ever seen, venturing into the unknown was a lot less scary because even Hell could not extinguish their love. They felt hope that they could escape from Hades. After all, the two soul mates met there, fell in love there, and together fled the Suburbs of Hell....”

THE SUBURBS OF HELL

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DEDICATION

To the loving memory of my beloved auntie who gave me wings.

Carol A. Mollica

(1951-2012)

INTRODUCTION

Like so many human creations, this story is based on a dream. It was a mere couple of weeks after my father, Joseph Anthony Seno (1947-2011), passed away. Thus, a morbid shroud weighed heavily upon me. In the dream, I died and went to Hell. In fact, the first two chapters (amongst other fragments) are a very vivid interpretation of what I dreamt I saw, felt, and experienced. This nightmare was so haunting that it overwhelmed my every thought until I succumbed to writing it down. I became obsessed with its resolve. Therefore, my imagination created characters that would bring its taunting to an end.

I am a devout Christian. Having come from me, this book has roots in my perspective and understanding of its corresponding religious dogma. However, I do not feel it belongs to the restrictive conditions of a Christian novel. In fact, I am not a fan of said genre.

Instead, it is a compilation of ideas to motivate – what I hope will be – an awareness of the readers own personal existence from an uncharted perspective. By all accounts, it was most definitely not created as a fear mongering tale warning the potential horrors that death may bring. Rather, I hope *The Suburbs of Hell* will inspire an enlightened appreciation for every aspect of your singularly unique life.

~ *Elena Michel*,
A sleepless night | 2012.10.15

CHAPTER 1

I Died

I had always imagined fire and brimstone. Thankfully, that Biblical fallacy disappoints. Hell's Waiting Room was surprisingly institutional. It was so clean, so organized. So unexpected.

Somewhere behind me a female voice murmured, "Well, this place could put the DMV to shame."

I remember falling. And falling and falling. The airy tussle of hair as it swept cold wet droplets from my eyelashes. The invisible resistance wafting my back. The brush of delicate arm hairs tickling my skin. A watercolor blur of grays and whites, shadows and light washing by. And then I was here; in line. From where I stood, I couldn't see the back of its procession. But it didn't matter; I could not recall ever standing at its end.

I was not impatient. I was not bored. I was not tired. I was not questioning, angry, defensive, or emotional. I was not indifferent. I was not without religion.

But, I was so very sad. I was so very disillusioned with myself. I was in Hell. I had not expected to end up here. My state of mind rested somewhere between absent and melancholy. I was simply here. I accepted it. I accepted being so very disappointed in me.

It would have bothered me in life, but Hell's Waiting room existed outside of building code requirements. The auditorium must have seated at least five thousand souls. The vertigo incline of the stacked rows did not have aisles running between them; just solid seating to accommodate the masses. Obviously, there was no need for fire escapes.

Architecture consists of two parts that make a whole: the *Discipline* and the *Profession*. Thus, 'learning' and 'practice.' Discipline wanted to meekly dwell in the background of my loathsome consciousness, but Profession searched scrutinizingly at the auditorium. Profession always seems to dominate Discipline upon achieving ones certification. In moments like this, a favorite undergraduate professor, Dr. Leo S. Kowski, transfigures in my imagination like a total recall of class lectures that never actually happened. I summoned Kowski's booming deep voice and rhythmic colonial-esque annunciation to rationalize my surroundings for me:

If the average adult human reaches a height of five-and-a-half feet (168 cm), and the average demon towers at seven-and-a-half (229 cm), demons certainly render the souls feeling very inadequate. The intimidation is reflected in Hell's Waiting Room which is scaled to demon proportions. The space is modeled after a featureless midcentury community college auditorium, and – although architecturally uninspiring – its exaggerated massing diminishes even the bravest soul.

Human imaginings which transcend time and mythology, have left us with the impression that Hell is a descend that burrows further and deeper into the bowels of misery. Maintaining this impression, the Waiting Room was designed for souls entering the auditorium to begin lining-up from a higher level and gradually move to the lower. But why would the Waiting Room simultaneously be aesthetically dull *and* symbolically flow downward? This complex answer is simple existentialism (but let's not digress into philosophy). At the top of the auditorium is a long hallway, in the middle is the descending seating area, and finally just before the elevated stage is the main/house floor (traditionally utilized as an orchestra pit).

In case, *you* the reader (academic, architect, or otherwise), get your hopes up that a diamond in the rough may be in store, I'll burst your bubble now. The floor finish is short

commercial-grade carpeting of a deep scarlet color throughout. Every bit of wall is smoothly sheetrocked and finished with generous coats of builder's beige (bought in bulk, I bet). And the ceiling is a typical suspended 'drop' with square, speckled tiles. But, reader – if it makes you feel better – every surface is free of debris and completely unblemished with a cleanliness that could almost be mistaken for Godliness.

The wide hallway at the top of the theater's auditorium seems unending in either direction beyond its approach and departure from the auditorium itself. A pair of ajar metal doors stream blinding light from an unknown source into the hallway indicating the beginning of the line. Of course, the other direction of the hallway is in itself an *opposite* with oppressive drop ceiling fixtures that seem to dim further beyond like a vast cave. This upper hallway opens up to the auditorium from an architrave nave via undecorated square columns with short walls separating them and unimpressive segmented arches atop.

A break in the short walls of the architrave meets the long wall of the auditorium. Its height begins at approximately thirty-feet (9.14 m) and maximized at seventy-five (22.86 m) before the stage. This tall wall is mirrored at the other side of the auditorium where they stand approximately one-hundred-fifty feet (45.72 m) apart. Naturally, the break in the architrave is where the line of souls begin their descend into the terraced seating area. Access to the seats is limited to the front, sides, and back of the cluster of seating to accommodate 2,000 patiently waiting souls. Oddly, there are no aisles or steps running through the massed cluster of retractable red-velvety seats.

Demons standing at podiums along the house floor issuing judgments and signal to another waiting nearby to usher souls through one of two doors flanking the stage. Eerily these doors' red glowing *exit* signs become the focal point; not the stage just beyond. Despite the stage's elevation, it is an eye soar. It gratuitously flaunts its exposed wings without even a modest curtain to veil the naked masonry blocks of the back wall. With houselights up... nothing is left to the imagination.

It was hopeless. We all knew it. Longing for or even envying a loved one – alive or Heaven-bound – was futile. No matter as a 'better place' comes to mind. Sad as I felt, emotions are redundant in Hell. Although I am certain beyond the exit signs a few too many souls deliriously screamed in agony for mom.

All of the retractable red seats were occupied. I wondered when I would sit in the red seats. It was clearly over capacity. I queued in the architrave nave at the very top of the theatre. Souls sat patiently until instructed to take the seat next to them and work their way across each aisle and down another row. Inching our way to the front of the stage might have been measured in endless hours or even days. Of course, that is if time still held any meaning.

We souls wore our belated human forms like costumes. And our faces like masks displaying variants of metamorphic and emotional shock. Saris and burkas, dashiki hats and denim shirts, clergy collars and towering turbans made for a multicultural cornucopia of international clothing clichés. I wish I could have convinced myself that I was at a Halloween party. People – the dead – came in all different shapes and sizes, creeds and races, colors and flavors.

Most of us did not look at one another let alone speak. We simply stared blankly at the back of each other's heads. It is difficult to imagine anyone growing impatient. There was no desire to be in a particular hurry. We had no need to complain about hunger or toilet breaks. These former habits were now deemed insignificant and no longer missed. Even biological urges could not have assisted with the passing of one moment to the next.

Demons stood in regimental formation in front of the stage and thereabouts. They had leathery skin in taupes and grays, exaggerated features, tall and muscular, long narrow bull horns, and eyes so wicked they couldn't be looked at directly. Even a distracted demon was intimidating when buzzing to and fro with PDA's and walkie-talkie headsets. Evil doesn't rest when there is a job to do. A full waiting room in Hell requires an organized team of demonic personal. Demons in matching black polo tees and lanyards may have supported corporate uniformity, but it certainly didn't put me at ease. Those working in earthly 'recruitment' must have found their jobs far more challenging than all this post-mortem bureaucracy.

I watched the demons assign each soul to their respective destination. The podiums were reminiscent of the narrow, tall stands at Customs in Gatwick; their droned facial expressions weren't all that far off either. Always, the interview concluded with the dead ushered to either the left and through a door where above a glowing red sign beckoned *exit*.

"Yeah, I'm stood right in front of her," a shorter NBA sized demon with blotchy clay skin spoke into his headset. Without acknowledgement he looked me up and down and reported in a dull voice, "Female. Ah, early to mid thirties. American. First language most likely English. Tall, plain, thin, dark hair, brown eyes." He listened. "Ah, negative, she's said nothing. Do you want me to move her to your queue?" Another listening pause. "Affirmative, I'm doing it now."

The demon cleared his throat and directed his stare at my face. Thankfully, he didn't seem offended when I could not bring myself to make eye contact. "We have reason to believe that you don't belong in this line," he reported with mechanical authority, "We are offering you the opportunity to move to a separate queuing area." Pausing for a moment to adjust his earpiece, the demon continued in a scripted tone, "Changing lines will in no way... excuse me," he held up a jagged skinny finger and said into his headpiece, "Affirmative, I'll stop saying *affirmative*, and don't be so *negative*. Over-and-out." The sarcasm seized and the composure resumed, "Where was I? Changing lines... right... will in no way lead to dismissal from Hell, but it may better clarify a more suitable allocation. The line will be shorter, but your interrogation may be more invasive."

I stared at his lanyard while digesting the offer carefully. The demon, Nysrogh the 15th of Level CXI seemed to be waiting patiently for my reply. Perhaps in death as in life, if God or demon alike opens a door, it may be fate calling. "Okay, I'll go to the other line."

Nysrogh walked, and I followed like a timid duckling in formation. He guided me past the others in line along the upper architrave. I could feel their eyes on me, but I was not interested enough to stare back. He stopped at the long, vast wall stretching from the back to the front of the theater. The demon pointed to the steps that would lead me down to the front of house-right and bypassing all the other souls tolerantly waiting in their respective seats.

“Follow the stairs, and join the others queuing on the last several steps.”

“Thank you,” I said softly and unable to gauge the volume of my voice. Besides, I was uncertain if earthly cordialities still applied. The thought flickered and died; there were too many thoughts streaming in countless directions. I descended solemnly down a hundred or more steps to join a short line of about a dozen souls. I could not ascertain if we were elitists or rejects. Whatever happened to me from that point on – good or bad – I surely deserved the latter.

The souls occupying the seats were mostly silent. Some conversed with their neighbor in whispers or pantomimed gestures. Otherwise, we were as quiet as the grave. The sounds of shuffling to the next seat interrupted the long intervals of silence.

Quality entertainment was at a minimum. The stage was occupied by a handful of demons ranging from ugly to deformed. I would have at least expected frightening theatrics or scary displays. But the company pranced about in nonsensical costumes pulling hats, props, and devil-knows-what out of oversized trunks and from behind a wicker folding screen. A synthetic tree steadied in a reflective silver pot did nothing to liven-up the bare set. However, to their credit, the demonic company did improvise the humiliating deaths of randomly selected audience members. Success was measured in embarrassment en lieu of applause. The boredom inspired demons portrayed a decapitation by garage door, stove top exploding lava lamp, video gaming fatigue via waste water intoxication, and suicide by asphyxiation with paper towels to the mouth. The audience of souls paid as little regard possible to the overly melodramatic theatrics.

Eventually, I found myself second in line. I tried not to eaves drop on the businessman in front of me. He even brought his laptop case to Hell. I wondered if he was going to ask if the broadband connection is any good down here. A tall, broad, and very dark demon interviewed the businessman. Appearing calm and to the point, he openly confessed his sins and made no justifications for his failings as a neglectful father and cheating husband. Their correspondence went back and forth. The questioning became more intensive; maybe even too personal for the businessman. The facade of his collected composure began to crack. The interrogation was clearly getting to him. The audience of souls began to stare as the businessman grew louder and more animated. A hideous demon actor with an equally offensive poodle skirt *booed* from the stage. The businessman finally raised an echo into the high ceilings to declare, “I don’t care! I don’t care anymore!”

The demon’s voice was deep and demeanor controlled, “You are indifferent?”

“Indifferent?” the businessman scoffed, “Indifferent doesn’t cut it. I don’t *care* who you are *or* what you do to me!”

“You don’t belong in this line.” The demon gestured to another, and the businessman was ushered by tightly grasped arms through the exit at the foot of stage left. I supposed arrogance had earned him flames. It was difficult to repress sympathy for him when we were all playing audience in Hell’s Waiting Room.

This demon must have been important. He wore a red polo with embroidered letters in a language I did not recognize. Unlike the others, he had a keycard on a retractable cord attached to his belt. His horns reminded me of an antiqued gold *cornicello* I picked up vacationing in Palermo. His lanyard read Demetri the 3rd, Level XXIV; his big, hollow black eyes read fierce.

Finally, it was my turn. Whatever fate delivered me, whatever sentence I had earned, I accepted it. Butterflies on speed fluttered manically where my stomach used to be. I would not

permit myself to be afraid when stood in front of the demon named Demetri as I was certain far worse things were to come. He looked me over thinking analytically; I could respect anyone thorough on the job. But, the aura coming through Demetri pierced into my restless soul and rattled it to fatigue. It was difficult to label all those emotions that were – up until recently – attached to bodily functions and their corresponding organs.

“Are you indifferent?” Demetri did not waste time getting to the point after the businessman’s performance. It was a leading question. Perhaps more than he would have liked it to seem.

“No.” It was truly how I felt. I hoped he could recognize that I was not merely avoiding the businessman’s fate. Besides, there was little hope of rousing a tantrum from me.

“Do you want to be here?”

I wonder if anyone has ever honestly answered ‘yes.’ “No,” I said flatly. I could not bring myself to lie. Even if I wanted to.

“What is your full name?”

“Bly Elizabeth Berg.”

“Interesting; Native-American for ‘tall.’ I thought that name was extinct,” Demetri muttered to himself while thumbing through a stack of yellowing papers on his podium. “Date of death was... two-thousand-nine, February, thirteen.

“My dad was supposedly part Sioux. The rest of me is Heinz-57.” Would I be segregated by nationality or based on *caffè latte* skin coloring? I always thought my chiseled facial features, angular body, and black hair styled in a severe bob made me look bold and ominous. Unfortunately, my dark brown puppy-dog eyes always gave me away. I’m about as badass as a hardboiled egg.

“Hum,” the demon paused for a thought, “Religion?”

“Yes.”

An eyebrow arched, “Care to specify?”

The question was rhetorical, and I really didn’t want to answer it. “Christian. Non-denominational.”

“What should you like us to do with you, Miss Berg?” There are many different places, experiences, and depths in Hell.”

“I don’t feel that should be up to me.” Did my humility humble me or was my humbleness humiliating? It’s not like I was given an amusement park map of Hell highlighting the main attractions. Also, how does a soul objectively personalized their eternal punishment?

With genuine interest the demon Demetri asked, “Why are you here?”

I possessed no instinct to guard my words in this Godless place. “I must have done something outside of Jesus’ favor. I must deserve to be here.” Consequences can truly be damned.

“Come with me.”

Anticipating flames, I followed Demetri through the door marked *exit*. But instead of bearing to the left, we veered to the right. We strode down a narrow hallway oppressively illuminated with canned ceiling incandescents that yellowed the beige walls and matching carpet tiles. We met a solid metal door. Demetri swiped his keycard. The small red light flashed to green. Demetri pushed the door open... and there was light.

CHAPTER 2

A New Home

The demon Demetri walked through the door and held it open with a perfect imitation of earthly etiquette. I crossed the threshold. I could hear the quiet hum of vacuumed air as the metal door met the frame. The place where I had just left and what my eyes saw before me simply did not match. The suburbs. I was in the suburbs.

I swung around to fathom the juxtaposition of a large theater amongst endless rows of cottagey, chocolate box bungalows. But it was not there. A house stood where the theater logically ought to. Could it be bigger on the inside? The partnership between logic and reality seemed to be at an end.

"This is where you'll be living," Demetri paused to see if I was digesting. I had almost forgotten he was there. "This is a place Lucifer constructed as a sort of experiment for people such as yourself. My lord finds it very entertaining."

Again, Demetri paused patiently to wait for my reaction. If I found it difficult to look a demon in the eye before, it certain became more impossible. It was hard to see anything outside of the perfectly manicured lawns and identical houses lined up like toy soldiers. A flawless black asphalt road stretched endlessly into opposite horizons. Antiquated street lamps illuminated an

iridescent gray sky; it resembled overcast clouds reflecting a soft amber glow of an old speckled mirror.

"The sky is ash, but you're in a sort of 'magical' bubble, if you will. It cannot touch you or harm you."

"Am I supposed to get a job?"

"Really? You're in Hell, and you're wondering how you're going to pay for it?" His tone might have been half mocking, but I'm fairly certain my face showed serious confusion.

"Let's put it this way, you've already paid for it. In advance, of course. You should be relaxing, Bly. You're dead."

Demetri raised his leathery hand before I could begin bombarding him with questions. He had to get his spiel out of the way. Clearly, the demon had a lot of work to get back to.

"Now, the only reality in Hell you need to concern yourself with is the absence of God. This one golden rule is to simply ignore His existence by accepting His absence. Therefore, this rule includes the following: communication with other residents about God, referencing the Holy Trinity, engaging in theological debate, quoting text inspired by the Higher Power, recreation of spiritual symbols, engaging in congregational celebrations, and religions of any and *all* dominations. Sanctuary does neither exist in this suburb nor is it available anywhere in the greater Hell area. We can't read your mind, but we strongly encourage you not to think about it as well. If you wish your death to be peaceful and quiet, obey this one golden rule."

"Or it will be flames for me?"

"Yes, or something worse, possibly. It depends upon how disruptive a soul may be," Demetri sighed, "And on a more positive note, welcome to the Suburb. Thank you for choosing Hell as your final destination. May your soul rest in peace." With that passing thought along with other well wishes, Demetri went back through what was now my front door. I followed, but

he was quick to close it before I could grasp the handle. I swung the door open fast. Demetri and the theater have been replaced with a living room.

Everything was off white. In life, I would have detailed it as 'eggshell' in a construction specification. It reminded me of one of my mother's stretched canvases awaiting its first coat of gesso. I would have preferred white. I suppose nothing is pure in Hell.

The living room was sparse and basic. Its unembellished furniture melted into the eggshell walls and feather soft carpet. A plush sofa the colored of Victorian lace sat under the two front windows with a textureless ivory colored coffee table. Two high back chairs the color of sheep's wool sat adjacent and flanked an opening into a dining room.

There was no break in the eggshell finishes from the living to dining room. A dinette the color of soy flour could comfortably seat six. I could not imagine myself entertaining five people in the suburbs of Hell. I instinctively ran my fingers across the table's smooth surface to find no trace of dust.

The dining room's glass French doors were wide open. I had half expected muslin curtains waving in a gentle breeze, but there were neither curtains nor wind. I stepped onto the back porch that mirrored the front. The short backyard's emerald green grass met a vast and endless golden meadow. The meadow had an eerie calm with no trees or topography to visually scale how far it might have stretched.

The bedroom was off the living room. The double bed did little to fill the empty space. Its soft magnolia linens looked inviting. My dead body would never again feel the fatigue of sleepiness. Unless a bed could satisfy my emotional weariness, I couldn't imagine it being much use to me.

As there was no kitchen, I should not have been so surprised to find no toilet. Off the bedroom, the bathroom contained a tub with bear claw feet, a pedestal basin, and a medicine

cabinet. The bathroom was tiled from floor to ceiling with almond colored squares. Glow from a small window bounced off all of the glossy surfaces. I caught an unexpected bright color from the corner of my eye.

My orange scrubs were blindingly reflective in the medicine cabinet mirror. I approached the pedestal sink to examine myself. Staring back at me in reverse was 207-BEB printed on my shirt. My face was as I remembered it in life, only free of blemishes and imperfections. I had been dying my hair *noir* since the age of twenty-two, but the dark brown with auburn highlights must be my natural color. I touched my face and felt no warmth. I looked at my toes and felt no cold from the tiles. I felt ribs, but no organs when I pressed my fingers into my middle. My body was like a balloon inflated with helium.

The niceties of all these distractions were simply just that... distractions. I felt an urge to sit down and digest my new life. With that thought, I had instantly struck 'digest' and 'life' from my vocabulary. Walking out of the front door for the second time did not have quite the impact that it did at the first. I sat on the front porch steps.

I was fidgety in life. I could never stop moving. My ex-husband used to complain about the twitches as I was falling asleep. I was amazed in death how still I was able to sit. There were no muscles to move and no lungs to draw air. There was just a sense that my soul was sleeping restlessly somewhere inside this shell; I wanted to wake it up. And so the coping mechanism is once again triggered.

Each house's façade was symmetrical. Each pair of houses were exact replicas mirroring each other from across the street. They stood in formation lined up in perfect parallel to the paved road. In itself, symmetry is hell to the Modernist.

There were no birds, bugs, bunnies, or beasts of any species or groups. The exception to their absence was cats. They were dotted about here and there. Once you caught a glimpse, it

was gone in a blink. Feral and timid they darted like ninjas into bushes. Apparently, all dogs do go to heaven.

No God. No religion. No salvation. I will spend eternity in the modest suburbs of Hell. I watched a few people emerge from their houses up and down the street going to and fro. They gleamed perfect lawns, deadheaded flowers, and hung awnings over windows that would never see the sun.

So, this was the amusing experiment that Satan found so entertaining. Perhaps, *people like me* were the dead who felt they deserved punishment by falling out of God's favor. The evil, malicious, self-righteous, unapologetic, and indifferent who justified their sins would suffer the blazing fires of Hell. Yet, the few apologetic souls found ourselves in this strange Godless eternal purgatory. On the surface, this looked the opposite of punishment.

A thought began to surface in my conscious. Is the one golden rule impossible to keep? I felt my soul waking from its slumber inside my shell. We're being tested to see how long it will be before we crack. I felt a madness building. An anxiety growing.

I love God. I wanted to have the chance to tell Him so. I could not go an eternity pretending He does not exist.

I resolved to sit on this step still and silent. I would follow the rule. I would keep my head down. I would be a model suburbanite. Even if it took me a thousand years to construct, I would escape from the suburbs of Hell.

CHAPTER 3

Green Golf Pants

Boredom, hunger, emails, appointments, ring tones, obligations, and a urinary track system would have pulled me away from any deep contemplative thought in my former existence. Nothing wanted or needed to distract me from where I sat. I spent all my life rushing and worrying and never really taking time to sit down and relax. Surely, that was justification enough to park myself and do nothing. I'm dead. Unfortunately, I found myself accidentally doing something. I was waiting.

I waited for the sky to change. It was still just ash fluttering. It was almost beautiful if it hadn't been so eerie. The ashen sky reflected the street lamps and all the other lights radiating down here. A constant reassuring glow from the pedestrian street lamps sat between each house gave the perfect asphalt street a warm sheen. Sometimes I thought I saw a star twinkle from above, but it was simply the suburb's glare striking the haze just right. I couldn't decipher where the source of light from above was hiding. It reminded me of Britain's perpetual overcast skies. I played pretend and imagined they were clouds that hid discover shapes begging to be discovered, but I quickly bored of the never ending bunny parade.

Then, I stared scrutinizing at the grass trying to find any imperfection in the emerald green carpet. The grass met the road with no curb, swell, sidewalk, or gap to separate them. I supposed there was no need to protect grass when there were no automobiles. It made little sense to me why the road could have been designed to accommodate two passing cars when they simply did not seem to exist here.

I busied myself further trying to notice the small differences of each cottagey bungalow. They were each timber clad and painted a soft cream color with gray asphalt shingles. Two pairs of double-hung windows were symmetrically poised on either side of the perfectly centered front door. Each front stoop led to a narrow long porch free of scuffs and debris. The covered porches, posts, and lattice style railings were as crisp as freshly painted wood. The only differentiation outside were the little touches suburbanites added to their yards; and most likely on the insides as well.

I had not stepped foot inside my own house since the initial tour. It wasn't a home to me. I hoped I wouldn't be here long enough for it to become one. After all, this house was designed to be a shell for the other shell (which resembled my body) that was formed to contain the only piece of me left in existences... my soul.

Kitty-corner to the left, a lady was fussing meticulously in her front yard. Any woman wearing matching capris, sunhat, and gardening gloves all in butter yellow with red polka-dots could find joy in a mundane *anything* of subjective beauty. She moved her hands as if to pantomime a gardening shovel, and it would miraculously materialize in her grasp. It was as if she imagined her ideal and watched it transpire in front of her eyes. It looked so very effortless as she shifted, dug, and adjusted every red geranium, purple pansy, or yellow marigold in a perfect imitation of how she may have gardened in life.

Two houses down from me, a man and woman made busy work tidying their already meticulous yard. They both had shaggy brown hair and were clothed head to toe in ocean blue. They constantly held intimate glances as if having rehearsed a well choreographed ballroom dance. Or perhaps they were more like bumblebees buzzing around one another, careful not to poke the other with their stinger.

Round and round, a young man peddled his cherry red, vintage bicycle down the road. Facial hair had to be a recent phenomenon when he left Earth. His lanky legs peddled steadily like an animatronic doll while his gaze was firmly fixed forward. The bicyclist always came from the horizon to the right and vanished into the left. He did this with an undaunted and unbreakable routine that could win notoriety from an eccentric community of persons proud to be OCD.

My thoughts continued to wander with little aim. But watching the suburbanites making busy work in death prompted me to reconsider my strategy. Adapting, without losing the goal, could rouse less suspicious. I had determined I could not stay in Hell eternally. That sickening feeling gradually ached more and more, moment to moment. So much of what made life on Earth special was brutally absent in Hell.

It took me by surprise how much I began to miss the company of children. I never had any of my own. I may have been confused about a good many things, but I was very certain that all children went to Heaven. It must have been why it felt far too quite here.

“You’re quiet.”

“What?” My trance was broken.

“I said, ‘You’re quiet,’” said he. And he was wearing green golf pants and a cream polo shirt. I wondered if the golf club was for game playing or to complete the ensemble. “I was wondering when you were going to move from that spot. Porches are nice, but there’s a lot more

to do in Hell then just sit there and stare blankly. Don't you find it a bit peculiar that you're the only one here not making the most of your death?"

British. Cocky SOB's. He probably came to heckle me or get up in my grill for his own amusement. They always expect you to agree with them when they hurl insults in the form of questions.

"I'm really not in the mood to talk."

"Yes you are," golf man said with a smooth but assured smile. I guess he was a bit easy on the eyes. Dark brown hair, bright blues eyes, and an athletic build. It certainly didn't hurt all the more to stare at him.

"What makes you so certain of yourself?"

"You've changed."

I too can play this game of *sarci* Brit, "How the 'ell would you know? You don't know me from Adam."

He laughed warmly with his eyes sparkling. I had clearly lost my edge. A Minnesotan saying anything in a common-as-muck Hampshire accent is begging for humiliation.

"I don't think you understood my meaning, Love."

"Okay...?"

"You were wearing some hideous orange get-up."

"Whatever. Just assume I died deer hunting if that satisfies your curiosity." Sarcasm was never one of my strengths.

"What you on about?" he chuckled through his teethe grin. Thankfully, they were an exception to the stereotype which made conversing more palatable. He gestured his free hand to me, "You've *literally* changed."

Literally. I looked down at myself. The scrubs, also known as the *hideous orange get-up*, were gone. I stood up slowly and looked down at myself brushing the smooth black velvet with my finger tips. “I had forgotten how much I missed this dress. Oh, and my shoes are here too. Oh, are my... oh, they are! My pearl set is complete. I can’t believe... where did this... how...?”

“You look stunning, if you ask me. It fits you like a glove, or like a very sexy night dress. The red heels are an unexpected nice touch, if I might add.”

“Wow. Sorry. I had completely forgotten that you were there.” I looked up at him and smiled widely. “This is *my* little black dress,” with my hands gesturing up and down like a baboon, I said as if making introductions at a social gathering.

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Little Black Dress,” he said to my middle. And to my eyes he said, “I’m David.”

CHAPTER 4

A Yellow Kitchen

It felt like defeat when I rose from the front porch step and entered my house for a second time. Twirling his driver like a baton, from the window I watched David the golfer cross the street to his bungalow. I wondered if he would frequently be curtain twitching as I had seemed to be doing in that particular moment. His offer of a guided tour to the resident village triggered an instinctive emotional recoil. After the divorce, I developed a severe psychological revulsion to any prospective affairs. I even started paying-as-you-go because I couldn't even commit to a cell phone contract.

He could be such a lovely distraction. Nevertheless, I had to maintain my primary objective. I fleetingly entertained a humorous mental image of myself as a seductive spy nuzzling up with the local hotty to extract information from him. The fantasy was quickly dismissed as pathetic.

It felt weird walking into a house and not feeling a nagging sense to take a bath, get something to drink, or throw on some PJ's to put as many minutes possible between unconsciousness and the alarm. Instead, I did what I always did when I couldn't sleep. I sat outside.

This time I opted for the back porch instead of the front so that David wouldn't feel compelled to stare at me. I picked up one of the dining room chairs and set it on the wooden planks with a firm *plunk*. No sooner had I sat, there was a knock on my front door. An instinctive thought like, *I wasn't expecting anybody*, popped into my consciousness with slight annoyance. However, I was doing nothing that couldn't be interrupted nor did I have any need for tedious scheduling in the foreseeable eternity. Walking to the door I quickly decided that I will look forward to unexpected company to break up the monotonous flow of nothingness that would defined my non-existence.

A pleasant voice chirped, "*Bonjour*," as I opened the front door. I recognized her immediately. She was the gardening lady in matching attire. I'm certain she shopped well beyond Menards in life.

"Hello," I echoed with a forced Minnesota-nice smile. "Please, won't you come in?" Dearly departed certainly does not constitute a loss of manners.

The petite woman with delicate features, porcelain skin, and slight frame bowed her head slightly as she entered my newly acquired abode. Her almond shaped green eyes paralleled the genuine smile she wore on her thin lips. She looked thirty but carried herself like a woman of sixty. The classic auburn haired beauty held such bewildering agelessness.

"Please," she said handing me a flowered plant in a terracotta pot, "For you."

"Thank you, it's so beautiful," I said surprised at my own words. I didn't expect beauty in Hell. Golden hairs stretched out from the flowers center surrounded by several curly long petals in translucent pinkish and purple hues. "I don't think I've ever seen a flower quite like this. Is it an orchid?"

"You have a good eye," she celebrated with an approving smile, "It 'tis a summer bloom called *Calypso Bulbosa*. Orchids are a symbol of refined beauty. You seemed at a distance that

it would suit you. We're going to become firm friends, I just know it." She rolled her eyes animatedly and clicked her tongue, "Oh, but I'm getting ahead of myself once again. Listen to me rambling on. I am Madame Henriette Gagnon. Welcome to the suburb."

"I'm Ms Bly Elizabeth Berg. And thank you for this beautiful plant," I said buying myself time as I set the orchid on the coffee table. The method of making polite small talk in Hell confounded me. Unfortunately, I couldn't resort to the weather. "So, you're French."

"Canadian."

"Oh, of course. Silly me." A backpack with a maple leaf patch might have helped. Sighing and smiling politely, I looked around the living room hoping my next words would jump out at me. Sofa. "Would you like to take a seat, Madame Gagnon?"

"Pleeeasse, call me Hanriette," she sighed as her face drew a blank looking around the off-white room, "Oh dear, I have not seen a house 'set to default' in such a long while. Do you not wish to decorate even a little? Make your house a home?"

"I can just do that?"

"Of course you can. Now surely you've been here long enough."

"How long?"

"No idea, long enough." Hanriette's pause was quick and left little room for further questioning, "Come to my home, and let me bake you a lovely cake."

For reals? I don't think I have ever met anyone quite so domestic in all my life. In passing from life to death, I was certain that Madame Gagnon – oops – *Hanriette* did not abandon an ounce of her refinement on Earth. I was not hungry for food and never would be again. Nevertheless, in Hell, curiosity clearly did not kill cats. It propelled them.

Hanriette's bungalow was a home every bit as elegant as she was. Swooping velvet drapes with tassels, plush high-back furniture fastened with upholstery tacks, generous

implementations of lace and linen, and several orchids in ornately detailed porcelain vases. She chose a subtle pallet of gentle greens and lavender hues and natural tones. It was easy to see how Hanriette could rest in peace amongst such pleasantries.

I always wanted a yellow kitchen when I was a little girl. In place of a sparse colorless dining room, Hanriette fabricated a quaint country *cuisine*. It was like something out of Green Gables complete with a whitewashed pantry, wood burning stove, dish cupboard, and a small pine farmhouse table with four perfectly-formed ladder-back chairs. The tablecloth, seat cushions, and fabric napkins were a matching floral set. A butler sink with running tap water was one of a few hints of modernization that the old fashioned kitchen possessed. For me, it was envy at first sight.

Hanriette gestured to a kitchen chair, and I obligingly sat. She did not pause for a moment, instead she went to the pantry and began filling up her arms with little paper bags weighty with powdery ingredients. A second trip to the pantry transpired brown eggs, three apples, and a mysterious tin that I would later discover contained nuts. Finally, the tools of her trade were being pulled out of cupboards and drawers and off of shelves.

“Here you go,” Hanriette said in an instructing tone placing the apples and a peeler in front of me, “Get to work.” We smiled to ourselves as we carried on feeling normalcy and comfort that only simple pleasures can inspire. Baking with Hanriette was quickly becoming one of them. It was easy to ignore that we were not really preparing food as the smell of cinnamon was so deeply etched into my memories that I nearly convinced myself I would be able to taste it.

“Do you know, Bly Elizabeth, that out of all of the suburbanites, I have been here the longest?” she stated with an assured grin. I was not certain if that was supposed to be considered a good or a bad thing in Hell. However, a rhetorical question from a Frenchwoman – French

Canadian – is always a cue to prompt the conversation on further in the direction of her choosing.

“Wow,” I tried to say enthusiastically, “You must have seen a lot of changes... and people from all sorts of places... and lots of stuff change over time.” I was really at a loss for the most appropriate words. I wanted to know more, but I was finding it difficult to tactfully compose a proper question. “So, how long have you been here?”

“Oh, silly, *mademoiselle*,” she giggled, “Souls are not privy to that information. Here there are no calendars. No clocks. Night and day does not even exist. And don’t even bother to look at the ash filled sky for so much as a hint; it surrenders nothing as the grey hues vary at will.” Hanriette sighed with amusement at my inexperience, “Besides, we have no need of time.” She had been so kind; I couldn’t bring myself to tell her that time still meant something to me. I proudly presented my peeled and chopped apples. I felt a bit like Oliver Twist coddling the bowl in both hands holding it up with a half cocked smile. “Ah, you’re done very well,” she said taking the bowl, “I can see you’re a very experienced *sous chef*.” The dry and wet ingredients all came together and were lovingly placed into the oven.

Hanriette sat back down across from me and stared warmly with her small head tilted to the side. She began to sense that I was beginning to introvert. After all, without a clock, how would I know when to stop mourning my death?

“Did you know that body markings like tattoos and scars or holes for ear jewellery never make it to the Waiting Room?” she said as a matter-of-factly. “It would not have mattered much to me. I certainly never had tattoos or earrings.” Hanriette leaned in close as if to divulge a scandalous piece of gossip, “Did you know, that in life, some souls had jewellery pierced into all sorts of incriminating places?”

I exploded with laughter. I quickly tried to compose myself as I did not want to offend her. Thankfully, Hanriette began to laugh at the silliness of her own juicy tidbit.

The apple cinnamon cake came out of the oven and was ready for us to enjoy. Timers did not exist and cakes never burn; whether it baked for a minute or a decade, it would still be perfect. The ritual of baking was unnecessary, but Hanriette so thoroughly enjoyed the feminine labours of homemaking that you might have mistaken her for being in Heaven.

As on Earth, taste was subjective. I complimented Hanriette on her liberal use of cinnamon. However, she insisted that she used nutmeg and could only taste nutmeg as she was never fond of cinnamon. To me it was the best apple cinnamon cake I had ever tasted. We became quite while enjoying the same apple cake with different taste sensations. I chewed, but there was nothing to swallow and nowhere for it to go. Each bite mysteriously dissolved in my mouth.

I was beginning to feel that Hanriette's prediction of us becoming *firm friends* was gradually taking shape. Although Hanriette appeared to be ageless, she was certainly a woman who lived a long and experienced life in a Quebecois age when the neighborly thing to do was always done. I felt like a baby bird being sheltered under her mother's wing in the pouring rain. Hanriette went to all this trouble for me, a perfect stranger, just because I sat sad and alone on a front porch step. Gratitude filled the place where my heart once was.

"Hanriette, can I ask you something?"

"But of course."

"Well, I just don't want you to think I'm being weird or paranoid or something," I started coyly, "What is the deal with all the cats?"

"Ah," she began as she dapped the corner of her mouth with a cloth napkin, "Stay clear of the cats. They are spies."

“Oh. I guess that would make sense how demons would know if you’ve broken the *one golden rule*.”

“Cats are sneaky creatures. They hide, and you cannot see them. They could be far or near, but you must always assume that one is lurking close by.”

Hanriette looked over her shoulder through the glass doors. I could see she was becoming nervous just at the thought of the cats. Thankfully, I was always a dog person.

“Typically, I like to be the first to welcome new neighbors into the suburb,” Hanriette began in the way a Frenchwoman does when she wishes to change the subject, “Nevertheless, I could not pass up the opportunity to watch David approach you. He was staring at you so intently that I postponed my usual introductions.”

Perhaps he isn’t the village bicycle after all. I tried to make light of Hanriette’s admiration for the golfer’s forwardness, “Well, the English are a very reserved culture.”

“Ah, you know all too well,” she agreed with eyebrows arched.

“You seem very fond of David.” Fence sitting was never my forte. Hanriette has managed to put me in two minds about the possibility of a contented existence in the suburb. However, it was very unlikely that she could persuade me to give the handsome golfer a chance.

“David is a soul of substance in his character. He is genuine and quite a lovely man. So, *oui, bien sûr*, I am fond of him.

“David mostly keeps to himself, and only really engages with people he knows well. It is a compliment to your looks that the enigmatic David has approached you. It is such a mysterious and romantic magic that bewitches us into doing things outside of one’s normalcy.

“Can I give you a tiny bit of advice...?” I would have said yes, but Henariette did not pause for the answer as her question was rhetorical. “There are two kinds of souls around here: those who shut themselves in their bungalows sulking in the absence of you-know-who and those

who enjoy their death. Either way, you're in *His* absence. So, curiosity, attraction, or just an eternity of time to kill are all very sound reasons to make yourself better acquainted with another soul. What have you got to lose, hum?'

CHAPTER 5

Lounge Wallpaper

It had taken many attempts and much coaxing to dislodge me from my front porch. More if Hanriette hadn't made such a good point in her yellow kitchen. Back and forth he strode across the street at random to forcibly engage me in polite small talk. It was becoming clear that David would be difficult to avoid *forever* as his house was directly across from mine. I had to reply, "I could murder one," when he finally worked up the nerve to ask, "Fancy a cuppa?"

David definitely did not expect that. He stuttered the verbal equivalent to a double-take. The walk across the street felt infinite. His broad shoulders slouched while his eyes met the asphalt undoubtedly contemplating his next move.

Success! I have stumped him with my female unpredictability. An internal self congratulation was in order as I caught the metaphorical ball bouncing into my court. My bursting ego concluded that conversationalism must be a women's art.

"It smells like Christmas in here." The aromas of Mum-in-law's Yorkshire puddings, brown Bisto gravy, and freshly peeled oranges permeated David's living room.

The door squeaked behind us as David pushed it shut. Thankfully, chivalry was not dead. His amused smile was sweet and subtle. “You’re the first soul ever to have to notice it. Naturally, I like it this way,” he confessed, “It reminds me of, well... you can imagine.”

“Yeah, I get it. It’s a bit like the squeaking door that shouldn’t logically squeak down here,” I said as the ball mindlessly slipped from my fingers and bounced into his court. Dang.

“Yes, well, right-o, I promised you a cuppa,” he said as he trotted off to his dining room.

“Do all Englishmen rock on the balls of their feet when they think of tea, or just the posh ones?” I called after him. It was a rhetorical question: all of ‘em. I just wanted the ball back.

“Have a seat. Preferably in the chair closest to the window,” David called from the dining room, “Oh, and one sugar or two?”

“White, one sugar. Please.” In truth, I always used honey instead sugar. I did make exceptions for raw organic sugar at cafes if need be. But what the hell; calories be damned.

Standing next to David’s front door, it felt like tunnel vision looking just across his elongated rectangular lounge. The floor’s wide timber planks pointed to a brick fireplace jutting from the wall. Ordaining the mantel was a modest wood Deco clock with a domed glass face and machine cut ornamentation defining the corners; well, as much of a clock as it could be without numbers or hands. The room itself was empty save for a matching pair of plush Queen Anne wingbacks in a subtle floral print. A small circular table sat unassumingly between the chairs as they were deliberately poised toward the fireplace. But it was the wallpaper that struck me – almost literally – with its big overstated gold flowers in a sea of deep *deep* green. Sandwiched between the picture rail and thick skirting, the lounge wallpaper was oddly restricted to the one wall.

“All Brit’s, men *and* women. What can I say, we love a good cuppa. I still like to set the kettle on the hob and go through the motions. There’s a sort of comfort in it,” he smiled at me as

he set the mugs down on the small table, “Clearly, we’ve been trained since birth, and apparently it follows us into death.” I smiled and half giggled as we both sat down. David couldn’t be anything but British when I observed coasters where there were once none as I lifted the little china mug to my mouth.

“Lovely,” we whisper at the exact same time. Golden brown. ‘Now that’s a proper cup of tea,’ I thought to myself. David must have been thinking the same. His nose hovered over the steamy cup cradled between gently clasping fingers. His physique looked more slender when sitting. One ankle perched on the other knee casually. He was still and quiet drinking in the fantasy liquid and bygones. David’s upper lip quivered slightly when pressed to the rim as if anticipating heat. They were really quite lovely lips; not too thin, not too thick, just right.

Shit. ‘Buck up, Bly, you need to get that ball back into your court,’ one Gemini twin screeched to the other. Darn you, internal dialogue.

“So...,” I started.

“The clock was grandad’s, so to speak,” he began musing, “Pardon me, I interrupted you – completely thoughtless – you were saying?”

“So...,” before my nerve could be lost, the naughty twin unceremoniously blurted, “How did ’ja die?”

It was the most impressive projection of any liquid I have witnessed sprayed from the mouth. He dropped the ball, and I was too embarrassed to pick it up. Mentally, I quickly retracted anything I previously determined on conversationalism and female art.

“Excuse me, I have never done that before. I am truly embarrassed, but,” he introduced the dreaded *but*, “I think you may have dropped the ball on that one.”

“I am pretty sure I never caught it,” I said giving myself no room for *buts*, “I am so sorry, David. I clearly said something wrong. I am the one who is embarrassed, *please* don’t be. I won’t ask....”

“It’s fine really. Not a single soul has probably mentioned to you that we simply don’t talk about that here. That experience – *death* – is deeply spiritual and personal, thus, typically – most definitely – involving G-O-D,” David whispered the spelled word as he glanced coyly out of his living room window.

“Religion and politics, aye?” I smiled remorsefully, “Again, I am really....”

“No, please, don’t, it’s... well look, the mess simply never existed,” David pointed out as he gestured to the fireplace hearth which should have been dripping with spit tea. We sat in awkward silence.

“Yes, I do think it’s a very nice clock,” I confirmed as I remembered that I could simply wish my cup empty rather than drinking it quickly, “I should probably go....”

“Bly.” It was the first time David said my name with a decisive and intimate tone. I betrayed myself by instantly hoping it would not be the last. His blue eyes locked mine in a temperate stare, “I would like to tell you this:

“The world is full of war and hatred. Of course, there are a few good bits in between the bad, but you’ve even got to fight for those moments. It’s as if we were navigating a labyrinth chalker-full of landmines of misery and hunger, poverty, murders and thieving, etcetera.

“It’s plain to see that you’re questioning why you’re here and dealing with your mortal loss. We all do when we first arrive. But each *sane* suburbanite comes to the same conclusion with only one question remaining: why on Earth – Heaven or even Hell – what will happen to my soul if I continue questioning what I’m doing here?”

“Yes, the absence of *Him* aches and hurts. But, in earnestness, Bly; really ponder this seriously. We have been abandoned by *Him*. But some supernatural being, however dark, created this beguiling place just for us. How can we risk questioning why we’re here?”

“That’s very self-seeking,” I retorted, but before I could expand upon my thought....

“How so? I gave my entire life to helping others. My entire *short* life. What did I get out of it? Nothing. Pardon my French, but absolute *shite*.

“I willingly abandoned the BBC and piles of book and Mum’s Sunday roast... cricket with me mates. I swapped my cozy Marks’ jumpers for a stiff uniform. I journeyed across the planet to hold hands with war-struck natives and broken soldiers in a third estate country. And when they broke-down, it was my duty to convince them that it was their ideals had failed them; thus, choose mine because we’ve got all the answers.

“I believed whole heartedly in all of it. Before I left England, I couldn’t understand why anyone could be so apprehensive to accept my faith. In Korea, my eyes were opened. It’s all a massive fecking failure. My religion failed me. I was failed. I’m here because hope is a lie, and faith is a delusion.

“Hell’s been good to me – once I got past all of my moping nonsense, of course. How do you know that some abstract ethical compass hasn’t pointed us in this direction? Maybe we weren’t quite good enough for Heaven, but not overly horrific for Hell proper. Perhaps the suburb is where our souls are meant to rest.

“How difficult is it really to simply accept that this is where you are meant to be, right here, enjoying a cup of tea with me?”

It’s just like a man to turn a philosophical conversation into self-glorification. Yet, I had a feeling that David shared more than he felt comfortable saying; as if it was bottled up inside for such a long time. I rested my head back onto the chair and pointed my eyes toward the ceiling.

“I don’t disagree that I belong here or that you do as well,” I sighed and looked at him, “I wouldn’t even pretend to be naive enough to ignore the fact that we’re here as a punishment for our sins. We all fall short of the glory. But something just doesn’t add up; it makes no sense. Yes, the absence of God is slowly eating away at my soul, but logically something just isn’t right.”

“Of course it’s not *right*,” David arched an eyebrow, “It’s Hell.”

CHAPTER 6

Painting the Town

“If you splash me, I’ll...” I’ll be unable to think of a snappy retort.

“You’ll what?” David egged me on in playful mockery, “Kill me?”

I smacked the water hard – *splash* – and laughed. Playing victim always worked with my sister to get the first splash in, and David’s face was successfully doused. He laughed lightly with his deep throaty voice through a wet grin. Now I was in for it.

Thankfully, the chase around the village fountain was not considered a public nuisance for any soul. The suburbanites seemed to enjoy playing in its pool of water. The village’s cobble stone road wrapped itself around the grand circular pool. Its circumference was wide with steps that carried you up its short stone wall and down deeper into its transparent waters. In its center was an epic fountain head spewing a mushroom cloud.

Eventually, David trapped me between the tall spray of water and its chiseled stone spout. “Now you’re trapped,” he said as he walked into the spray with an arm on either side of me. The water dripped down his head and plastered his wavy brown hair flat to his forehead. His grin was victorious. Such a confident ego begged to be deflated.

“It’s so weird to feel the consistency and moisture of water, but not its temperature.”

Besides, it was weird. Not just the water, but such a flirtatious Englishman who also happened to be sober.

“It’s not a tall queer. It’s what you’d expect without a nervous system. I’ve always thought of this body like an oyster shell and its pearl is my soul.”

That still didn’t explain the sensation of touch, but I didn’t want to ruin the moment, “That’s exactly the analogy I’ve been thinking of.” I wondered if David also felt the hollowness inside. “These shells are kind of like glorified transportation.”

David inhaled and laughed, “Sounds about right, but unfortunately my attempt to woo you with poetic profoundness is clearly at a loss.” He looked me up and down unrepentantly.

“Besides, in life were your breasts so perky and arse so tight?”

“Of course,” I smiled crookedly holding eye contact to maintain my conviction, “Absolutely.” It was a mere half truth. It seems that transforming a little black dress into a green hourglass bikini is just as simple as electing to wear the body I had at nineteen rather than that at my time of departure. Weekday workaholicism and wine bar weekends by thirty-three had graduated my dress size up by two and cellulite under my bottom. Thankfully, good genetics at least made me worth a second glance in my thirties. That was until incarceration left me gangly and scrawny. “What about you?”

“British Army. Died during the Korean War a young man. What you see is what you get.” What I saw was the athletic build of a young man in his mid-twenties. His broad shoulders made his average height appear taller. I tried not to imagine if his shell was anatomically correct underneath his swimming trunks.

“Really?” I looked at him with a confidence I couldn’t support, “I don’t believe it.”

“Alright, I had a tattoo, but it disappeared when I got here,” he confessed, “Satisfied?”

“Not really, I was hoping you’d say you were ginger so I could make fun of you.” We both laughed. I was glad that David never gave up his one man campaign to force me into fun. And David was fun. I felt fun just being with him. It was nice to feel something good again. David pushed me into the water playfully.

I discovered that I could stay under indefinitely as breathing was no longer required. I sat fully submerged in the fountain which probably accomplished a similar objective as putting ones head in the sand. I watched hazy legs like tree trunks swaying in the elements. It was hypnotic. I found myself quickly becoming philosophical. Big questions floated by me with each wave of activity: how did I get here, why me, does everyone else feel this way, are they all pretending to be happy on the surface?

The glow of the sky above the water was inviting. I must have been very rude to stay under for so long. I floated up and look worriedly around for David.

“I’m over here,” David called from the edge of the fountain. He was dry and dressed smartly in gray wool trousers and a crisp navy Oxford. As I walked toward him and ascended the fountain’s stone steps, my body dried with each rise liberating me from the water. I willed my little black dress to return. I hoped that wishing for flawless make-up and perfect hair would be enough for them to transpire as well.

David stood next to me closely and stared at my hand smiling to himself. He brushed his fingertips into my palm and then entwined his fingers with mine. There was no heat in his touch, but it felt nice in every other way. David looked down at me and smiled with sparkling eyes, “Let’s have a tour, shall we?”

David led me around the village for my first visit. Just as the cobblestone street encircled the fountain, so did a ring of shops reminiscent of old world charm with brick cladding, carved timber detailing, colorfully painted doors, and sweet window boxes. Souls wandered to and fro

with shopping bags full of delights. They conversed with gossip and gayeties. I could have almost forgotten I was in Hell but for the two breaks in the circle of stores where the asphalt road met the horizon to the right and the other to the left.

“Think of the paved road as a belt and the village as its buckle clasping at both ends.” He must have followed my eyes as I was looking around. David mused on my silent thoughts, “Now, imagine you’re stood on the buckle and walked along the belt. You’ll always end up back at the buckle.”

“But the paved asphalt road can’t be more than a mile or two, and there isn’t a significant gradient or drop in the horizon in any direction that indicates we would be going in circles.” I could still remember enough of Miss Lewis’ fourth grade lessons to know that Christopher Columbus held an orange to the ocean’s horizon and watched a distant ship gradually rise into full view. Oh, I was defeated. “Never mind, I forgot that the laws of physics are merely a suggestion here.”

Sensing my frustration, David squeezed my hand and was quick to make a proposal, “Let me take you into some of the shops. I think you’ll be impressed.”

And I was. Each shop was a little world onto its own. We wove in and out of them in an endless parade of diversions and novelties. There were lotions and bubble bath in every color of the rainbow, vibrant fabrics of every weave and texture, and sparkling trinkets to emphasize your most alluring qualities. A flower shop, boutique, house wares, and gardening gear to name a few. Amusements and games were played all in good fun with nothing to lose but a bit of pride.

Currency did not exist here. There were no cash registers or security. The shops were unmanned. The stock simply replenished itself.

There were no restaurants, cafes, or coffee houses. We souls had no need for food or drink. Curiously, the village had a pub. The joint was packed inside and out. I watched the

souls sat at the tables outside the Prince of Darkness guzzling proper pints from sweating glasses and frothed rims. I never fancied a pint when I was alive, and now I thirsted for one as intensely as a newborn vampire's lust for blood.

"David, heir!"

"Ah, Hamlin, hallo," David responded to a man waving from a crowded table. Their smiles were broad and familiar like two old friends reconnecting. With my hand still in his, David guided me through the maze of tables and bustling souls until we reached the owner of the voice.

"Oh, and *hallo*, Minne, you're as lovely as ever," he said to the woman sat next to the man called Hamlin. *"Minne, ich kann nicht glauben lassen Sie diese alten Hund aus dem Haus ohne Leine!"* They all laughed in unison.

The woman named Minne retorted, *"Er kratzt an der tür wenn ich nicht nehmen ihn mit!"* We all laughed. Even I couldn't help it. Laughing was a more appealing alternative to questioning my sudden and fluent comprehend of the German language. I felt I had reached my eternal quota of feeling like a dunce. Besides, one should never ignore an opportunity to enjoy a joke made by a German.

"Who is your new friend, David?" Hamlin promptly changed the subject, and proper introductions were made all around. I recognized them as the couple whose bungalow was two doors down from mine. Unfortunately for me, David turned down two chairs and some mouthwatering pints as we had merely stopped to say *hallo*.

Minne gave me a genuinely sorrowful face, "I almost didn't recognize you without the blindingly orange pajamas," I started to correct her, but Minne went on, "My husband and I left Earth together, sat in the waiting room together, and were brought to this suburb together. We are so happy to spend our eternity together. A Big-Old-Man, up there somewhere, who cares?"

My husband and I are together and that's all that matters to me." They were a smart looking pair in their early forties. I wondered if that was how old they were when they died, but I did not want to be rude and ask.

"Now, our dear friend David," Hamlin piped up, "must always have force to be social. We are ever so pleased that he has made such a lovely friend as you, Bly."

"You two are really too much," David half mockingly rolled his eyes, "And on that note, my *lovely* friend and I are off. Onwards and upwards." David straightened up and offered his hand which I took dutifully. I was still begrudged for being denied a pint. Nevertheless, my tour guide was restless. I was certain an opportunity to enjoy a drink with Hamlin and Minne at the Prince of Darkness would transpire again soon. We said our farewells and began our walk to leave the village hand-in-hand.

The ashen sky randomly shifted between a few shades of gray like a graphite scale in an artist's sketchbook. But as we walked down the paved road hand in hand the atmosphere was a deep dark gray. It was reminiscent of evening and made it feel somehow more romantic. The street lights were like beacons guiding me to my eternal resting place. Just like everything else in the suburbs of Hell, night and day is simply an illusion here. Routine was a habit for creatures bred to meticulously keep account of time. Scheduling became an unnecessary and abstract concept. Time did not rule us here as it once did on Earth.

"I used to find it unsettling that the sky never becomes black as night." David confessed, "But I suspect if I experienced total darkness it would probably leave me quite..."

"Scared?" his fishing for a word to describe the obvious was unsettling to me. I wished to myself secretly that he hadn't mentioned the illusion of this dusky sky. The spell had been broken, and that pit feeling in my middle was back. Complete darkness would be exactly what I might expect in Hell.

“Yeah, probably.”

“That is so like an Englishman to never admit defeat or fear,” I giggled and half smiled to lighten the mood. A squeeze of my hand and a half cocked smile was my reward for making an observation. His eyes sparkled so hypnotically in this light. The spell was cast once again, and the rhythmic sound of our shoes on the pavement carried us to my front porch steps.

David was taller than me. Not by much as I had always felt I was too tall. I supposed that I could decide to shrink an inch or two now, but it seemed silly as I had made several acquaintances in the village. Besides, I liked being eye to eye with David.

I leaned on the pillar with my arms firmly wrapped around it. It was not out of a need to balance myself. But the desire to fling my arms around David’s broad shoulders was far too tempting. I sighed, “Huh, I feel that I’ve been a bit unfair to you from the time we met up ‘til now.”

“Right, okay,” he arched his eyebrows, “I think I’m a bit confused now because I’ve had a lovely time with you. Especially in the pool,” he confided timidly.

“Yeah, I thought you might say that,” I paused to collect my thoughts, “You see, you sort of remind me of someone I used to know, but you’re not exactly like him, per say, but you’ve got the whole English charm thing going. Plus, you’re younger than me, and I don’t want to take advantage of you for the sake of nostalgia. I feel like I could easily let myself do that because it’s been longer than I’m willing to admit... well, since I’ve shared intimate... you get my drift.” Thankfully, lack of blood circulation spared me from blushing.

His smile broadened, and he leaned on the pillar just inches from my face. “I’m going to kiss you goodnight.” In life or death I don’t think I’d ever met a man who was so certain that I would let him. And I would have, but...

“We don’t have chemistry.”

David's head jolted back and his eyebrows wrinkled with a look of complete confusion on his face. "What are you on about? We have loads of chemistry. You've been anticipating my first move since I successfully commandeered you in the fountain."

Relieved that I hadn't deflated his ego, I pressed on with my original thought. "We physically don't have chemistry. We're dead. These aren't bodies as much as they are glorified transportation devices. Can't you feel the difference?" Frustration. "Besides were you listening to anything I was saying just now? I don't want to take advantage of..."

"We definitely have chemistry," he said sternly and smoothly moved back into position, "We don't need bodies for that." And without hesitation, David slipped an arm behind my waste and fingers explored the back of my neck. David's lips teased mine as they hovered close. "We also don't have to breathe, but when I inhale you, I can almost smell flowers on your skin. You're so fresh and new. I imagine you still smell like life."

Either embarrassed by his compliment or impatience overcame me, I pressed my lips on to his hard and fast. My soul swelled. I wildly drank in the new sensation.

David pulled away gently. "Go slow." Then he leaned in and kissed me slowly and tenderly with lips parted.

What felt like radiant light shot through all facets of my hollow body and filled me up. The emptiness was consumed by a supernatural glow within. I felt good and pure from head to toe. Everything around us just melted away. Chemistry was definitely overrated.

CHAPTER 7

Red Tape

* * *

Telegraphie des Deutschen Reich

amtliche telegramm

auf

Berlin

<u>ZAHL DES EMPFÄNGERS</u>	8061978	<u>NAME DES EMPFÄNGERS</u>	
<u>DATE</u>	5.13.1939		Staf R Günther
<u>ZEIT ORDNETE EIN</u>	14:45	<u>STRABEN ADRESSE</u>	RSHA
<u>WORTZAHL</u>	59	<u>STADT, ZUSTAND</u>	Berlin

Ihr instinkt war korrigieren · 10:37 acht Juden residenz des
 Profi Hamlin Vogt und frau festgenommen · Initiiert empfehlung
 auf der grundlage ihrer untersuchung · Juden übertragen Berlin

Ghetto · öffentliche hinrichtung von Vogts vor ihrem wohnort ·
Andere mutmaßliche Fakultät bieten informationen und Juden im
austausch für immunität · vollständigen bericht zu folgen · gez.
von Stubof W Lehmann ·

[DIE FIRMA SCHATZ VORSCHLÄGE VON SEINEN GÖNNERN BETREFFEND SIND SEINEN SERVICE]

CHAPTER 8

Strolling Around

Whack. It's one of my favorite sounds. A driver swinging through the air at ten miles per hour and hitting its invisible resistance as it disciplines the grass with a flick. It's a satisfying *ping* of metal hitting the small hard ball as it thrust up into the air sailing far beyond and out of sight.

Ball after ball, David methodically swung his driver mercilessly at the small round spheres. He launched them into flight to be lost forever in the vast meadow behind his backyard. David reached his hand into the pocket of his checked golf pants where an endless stream of balls materialized. I watched as his shoulder blades tensed then released under his green polo shirt as his legs shifted weight from one to the other. I studied his every movement like a painter longing to stroke their figure study.

"My Uncle Joe was a semi-pro golfer," I broke the silence to see if he remembered I was still there, "He let me be his caddy a of couple times." David turned around with a smile on his face that had suggested his concentration was pleasantly broken. Yes, he could see that I was still stretched out on the steps of his back porch in a knee length denim skirt and a lime green tank-top.

"I still can't believe that women of your day really go out into public dressed as you are." David still couldn't quite wrap his head around when *my day* was exactly. However, he never seemed to prompt for an explanation. I must be the first truly entertaining thing that he's experienced in the suburb.

"Yeah, bare feet really are offensive, aren't they?" I mused as I stretched a long leg and twinkled my toes. I was pleased that my subtle flirtation could generate such a hearty laugh.

"Fancy a go?"

"Sure." I got up gracelessly from my lounging position and took his place where he had gestured. I noticed that the driver looked brand new but was a vintage style. My uncle had plenty of drivers, but none that looked this dated. "So, where did you get this driver?"

"That's a silly question. Same place we get everything. Our minds, if you will." David sighed contemplatively and reached his arms around mine with his broad chest on my shoulder blades. He was careful not to press his groin on my ass, and I wasn't feeling bold enough to encourage that connection. He cuffed his hands around mine as we grasped the club together swinging it slowly back and forth to loosen up my body.

"My father had a driver just like this one." David paused as if debating with himself to share pieces of his life. "Well, it was the best, so I merely thought of the best when ushering it into existence." Unfortunately, his better judgment won the debate and he released me. "Try taking a few swings," he said as he pulled another golf ball from his pocket and dropped it in front of me.

Pathetic. Uncle Joe would be mortified; he always complained I didn't swing in my hips enough and exasperate the energy in my arms. I pelted the ground and arched the ball up too high in the air. Fifteen feet at best. David couldn't help himself but to laugh at me, and I could

not help joining him. The embracement was like out of a bad SNL sketch. "Well, that was the metaphorical last-nail-in-the-coffin of my golfing career."

I handed David his driver back, and he resumed where I had interrupted. Instead of sitting and watching again, I stood at the very edge of the grass where it neatly met the wispy tall stalks of the golden meadow. It waved hypnotically; yet, from where I stood on the green grass, there was no breeze. I had gained a better understanding of prairie madness. "I think this is the first time I have ever seen the meadow grasses move." I reached my arm over the invisible threshold and felt a subtle wind brush over my arm. In life, it would have been a pleasant sensation; in death, it was unsettling. The movement of air through my lungs and the wind tangling my hair were just memories.

"You shouldn't be doing that," David said without missing a beat in his swing.

"Why not?" I waited for him to answer. "What's out there?"

"Nothing." David took another swing and rested his driver on his shoulder, "Just disappointment."

"Is it the way out?" I said solemnly.

"It is bold and dangerous to talk of such things." David wore a serious expression of intensity that was new to me. All sense of lightheartedness drained from his face. He tightened his form as if ready to protectively pounce on me at any moment.

I jumped into the meadow with both feet. "What's going to happen to me that I don't already deserve?" I declared semi-mockingly, "David, I'm dead. I'm in Hell."

"Get out of the meadow, you foolish girl." David was trying to keep a cap on his anger, but his quivering voice couldn't conceal it. "There are spies everywhere. If they see you, Bly, you'll become a suspect."

"A suspect of what?" I was jeering him on guiltily, but I had to know.

"You know what!" David took a deep breath, lowered his tone, and heighten his emphasis, "Bly, there is nothing out there. It is *just* disappointment."

His blue eyes were glazed over with sentiment and fear in place of the affectionate gazes I had become accustomed to. David is not what brought me to the suburb; I couldn't let him be my reason for staying. The wind blew softly on my skin reminding me of what life felt like, and it made me more and more curious by the moment about what was out there.

"David, I have to know," and I turned around and walked into the meadow. David called after me with pleas and promises. I told myself I wouldn't look back. Of course I couldn't resist after walking no more than a hundred paces. I couldn't see his face clearly from such a distance, but he was most definitely watching my every step.

I kept walking. The wind picked up to a mild hum. With each gust, my shell felt like a chalkboard being scratched with rusty nails. Feeling anything resembling life filled me with a sort of pain a living body would recognize. I turned around again and could see the endless row of houses lined up in the distance like a picket fence. David was a mere dot on its horizon; no doubt, still staring right at me.

My walking became increasingly uneven, each step more labored. Screaming gales pressed against my shell pushing me back from where I came. With each gust, flashes of lightning exploded in my mind and blinded my sight with each burst. I could hear my voice unintelligibly argue against each bolt as I pressed my fingers on my head and felt my face cringe. Each step became more of a struggle against the now constant current of wind. It was too late to walk back the suburb; it was now completely out of my line of sight. The meadow stretched infinitely around me in all directions without a bend or a break. I had barely assessed my surroundings when cross winds violently pushed me to my knees. With much effort, I stood back up.

"I deserve whatever is out here! I need to know!" I screamed into the ashen sky, "Punish me! I'm a sinner, let me be punished!"

A drop wind pinned me to the ground hard onto my back. The wind felt like it was boring holes through the skin of my shell. It was impossible to rise. A storm erupted inside of me. The pain invaded every threshold of my being. I screamed in agony.

Flashes of my life – *my* life – flooded me: my older sister and I playing in the bath as children; my mother baking bread; my father coming home with a stray dog; my sister and I fighting over a doll; my father placing a kiss on my youthful forehead the last time I saw him; being unable to comfort my mom's distress in my teenage inexperience; my older sister as a young woman sitting us down for an unanticipated announcement.

* * *

"Mom, you remember Seth, right?" Dena looked timidly at us sitting on the loveseat in our living room. It was a modest home in Uptown. The best Mom could afford as a secretary for a small Minneapolis law firm. Dena focused her eyes on the Arts and Crafts stained glass windows flanking the boarded up fireplace; Mom said the insurance was too high to burn anything in it.

"Dena, we remember Seth," Mom tried to prompt her along, "He was our guest at Thanksgiving, right?" Mom knew darn well who Seth was, and I don't think either of us could consider him a welcomed guest. Guests don't just sit on the sofa and insist beer and dinner be delivered to them as any interruption from the football game was too much to ask. Dena attributed the lack of manners to a shyness that prevented him from joining us at the dining room table.

"Mom, well, Seth and I have been dating for some time now...."

"You're *still* dating?" I interjected impatiently, "It's almost summer, and you haven't even mentioned him once."

"Bly, don't interrupt, let Dena finish," Mom said as she patted my knee. It was like being a kid again with Mom sat between us in church to deter elbowing. She was clearly using this delay to calm herself. Dena had always been shy about dating. At twenty-one, she only had two boyfriends that lasted no more than a couple months each.

"Seth is kind of a keep-to-yourself kinda guy, Bly," Dena looked down, "And I respect that he's the kind of man who isn't afraid to just be himself."

"What? An asshole?"

"Bly Elizabeth, enough," Mom never hesitated to interject even if I was eighteen, "Dena Marie, out with it."

Dena put one of the throw pillows on her lap and began to play with its tassels. Maybe she thought its crochet knit would help her find the words. "I love him a lot, and we've decided that it's best to get married," Dena inhaled a gulp of air as if she had been holding her breath for too long. The rest just poured out of her mouth like a flood, "He says he loves me, and he wants to do the right thing. I love him, and I want to do the right thing too. We didn't do it on purpose. It wasn't planned. But we love each other so much, and that's all that matters. The baby will have two parents who love each other a lot. And, Seth has a good job, and...."

"*What?*" Mom dropped the grasp on her decorum. We simultaneously spewed questions, concerns, and our two cents at a rapid rate as our voices grew louder and louder. When Dena began to cry, Mom rested her hand back on my knee to quiet me. Red faced, she took a deep breath and composed herself as she shifted to the love seat and placed her arms around her daughter, "You and a boy named Seth..."

"Mom! He's not a boy! He's twenty-five."

“Stop,” Mom held up her hand, “You and this *young* man – whom apparently you've been dating for at least six months – are having a baby?”

Dena's flood of tears slowed to a snuffle, "Yes."

* * *

I sat up and inhaled deeply as if coming up for air from a vast ocean. The winds had calmed and the meadow grasses gently waved as if to greet me upon my return. The soul inside of my shell felt as if it was swollen and humming off key. It was heavy, too heavy to get up. I felt like I was being roused from a coma.

It took several attempts, but I finally stood up gingerly to take in my surrounds and assemble my bearings. The meadow stretched in every direction. The bent stalks of the prairie grasses were the only evidence of what direction I had come from. I should be safe and sensible; go back the direction from which I came. Yet, doing the opposite of what is expected was a common theme in my life, why change course in death? I began to walk slowly and carefully away from where I had trodden.

The wind gently pushed me along this time. Rather than fighting me, it seemed to be apologizing for the hassle it had caused by guiding me along. The ease of this stroll caused my mind to wander back to the days after Dena told Mom and me that she was pregnant with Rachel.

It now seems so rash that I could have been so furious with Dena that day. There were far worse things to come for her. I knew that life wouldn't be a picnic married to a selfish jerk like Seth, but I felt at the time that she made her bed – literally – and ought to lie in it.

The naivety of youth carried me to Cambridge to study architecture. I thought somehow that if I left America, my problems couldn't follow me overseas: Dena's untimely marriage and motherhood, Mom's endless mourning over Dad's vanishing trick, and the aching hurt Dad

caused when he disappeared. Years of debating why and where, willingly or unwillingly, would or wouldn't he be back, pounded fractures in our family foundation that divided Dena and Mom forever. I abandoned all of it. I should have known that new problems would find me in England.

Cambridge was a fairytale. Gothic lintels rose and Baroque cills plummeted ornamenting the campus' yellowing stone facades. Neither gargoyle nor ghosts could penetrate the heavy thick arched doorways that the sanctuary of academia bestowed. I captured every inspiring perspective in pencil and charcoal. Cobble stone streets, tombstones growing mini moss ecosystems, fractured stained glass windows, and stone walls consumed with ivy. I sketched endlessly on thin white pages in dozens of notebooks during those three years.

I remember the first time we met. It was an unusually cloudless and sunny April day in 1997. I was sketching the grand arched gate, and Arthur sat next to me on the steps of the Great Court Fountain at Trinity College. I paid him no attention; in fact, I could not even recall his approach. He claimed to have been waiting a full ten minutes for me to acknowledge his presence before interrupting my drawing with a, "Hi'ya, you alright?"

Arthur was a Southampton native writing his thesis on the history of Mesopotamia. He was irresistibly handsome. His shaggy auburn hair and facial stubble were intentionally scruffy giving Arthur that intellectual master's student vibe. His charm was intoxicating. His intellect was inspiring. Like a moth to the flame, I was instantly captivated.

I graduated, and he moved me to his hometown where we were blissfully wed at the Bugle Street registrar's office. He taught at Southampton University while I worked at an architects' practice in Ocean Village. We began to carve out a nice little life for ourselves. Everything I had and was, I eagerly surrendered to Arthur in blind faith and unwavering love.

Like his vegetable garden, entrepreneurial endeavors, and his novel, I became a project he got bored of. He spent half of our seven year marriage cheating with an assortment of random women including a Pompi brunette and the busty blonde next door. I felt my sanity crumble as Arthur unremorsefully destroyed every promise with as little effort as crushing anneal glass.

I was destroyed. Shattered. I gathered what fragments of me remained and moved home seeking the comfort of my mother and sister. Broken, I tried to glue the pieces of my life back together.

Mom was the same as ever. Loving, supportive, and slightly disconnected. She was sincerely sorrowful that a failed marriage brought me home to her. However, she could only pray that the same would happen for Dena.

Dena had Rachel soon after I left for Cambridge. Blake came a few years later. They were beautiful children from what I gathered of the photos Mom mailed. I was a good auntie who sent cards and presents in packages for every holiday, birthday, and just because. I heard little from Dena those seven years. I had visited home just twice during that time. The only positive in moving home was to finally get to know my niece and nephew.

I found myself in the middle of a merciless Minnesota winter. Taking full advantage of a buyers' market in bad weather, I was quick to snatch-up a house in Saint Anthony Park which ideally rests in a quiet haven between the Twinned Cities. I worked in a notable architects practice in Saint Paul. Although disheartened at the time, I was thankful that Arthur was fair in our divorce settlement. By spring, I was comfortable, settled, and lonely.

Dena, though shy and reserved, was always a silent beauty. Petite and pair shaped like Mom. She was brown haired, brown eyed, and light brown skin from Dad's Native American roots. With her face in a book, all flirtations and advances were completely lost on her. Seth

was loud and dominant; he was difficult for her to overlook. I left a shy and reserved sister, and returned to a withdrawn and anxious Dena.

Mom and I saw Dena inconsistently. She canceled when fresh bruises surfaced and dropped by unexpectedly when avoiding new ones. Seth always enjoyed a good drink, but it became a habit when he lost his first full time job as an assistant manager at Rainbow Foods. He could not hold down a job for more than a year or two at a time. His drinking got worse, his temper raged more, and Seth took it out on Dena.

By summertime, I should have been enjoying the Midwest's heat and humidity. Instead, I worried solidly about Dena and the kids. Nightmares filled my sleep which caused my work to suffer. Designing buildings was the only respite I had during the decline of my marriage; it stopped doing me any good.

Our worst fears had transpired. It was only a matter of time. Seth had a new job working nights at a warehouse surrounded by degenerates and the socially inept. Dena said it was her fault for not being quiet enough during the day while he slept. Mom said he was suffering a bad hangover. I said enough was enough. The only good that came out of it was Rachel and Blake staying with Mom. Dena was in the hospital beaten half to death.

She wouldn't blame him. She wouldn't press charges. She wouldn't confess to the social worker who did it. She was too afraid. Dena feared Seth more than death.

I put in my two weeks notice. I liquidated my assets. In secret, I signed over my car, house, and bank accounts to Dena. I brought lunch to Mom's and enjoyed an afternoon with her and the kids playing in the backyard. I visited my sister in the hospital the day before her release.

Three weeks had passed. There was less than twenty-four hours before Dena would leave the hospital and return to Seth. It was time.

I knew that the weary feeling weighing me down could not have been physical as I continued drudging through the meadow. It was the memories. My mother would have said it was so much pain with so little gain. My soul wept.

God used to bring me comfort. I would pray and feel the Spirit fill me up with peace and clarity. There is no hope of God in Hell. The void inside my shell made my soul feel so alone. I ached.

As I walked forward in the vast and endless meadow, I spied what looked like a picket fence in the distance. It was a row of houses. I was approaching the suburb. I looked behind me and saw where my footsteps had crushed the tall blades of prairie grass in a line moving directly away from where I was going. I could not fathom how I had arrived at the start when I had been walking away.

Comfort and hopefully answers were waiting on the horizon. There was a green pin prick in the distance. David. It had to be. I was certain.

Drawing closer I recognized the backyard as being my own. I had not returned to David's house. It is as if the flat endless meadow was an illusion. I had traveled nearly the full radius of a sphere.

Just a few dozen paces away, David rose from the steps of my back porch. He looks so anxious at the edge of the green grass. The light breeze stopped tussling my hair as I crossed the threshold that separated the meadow from my lawn. I felt safer, but I longed to feel secure.

"David," I started but couldn't finish, "I was... I'm just so... I...." My voice was quivering. I felt foolish.

He wrapped his arms around me hard. "Hush now." It felt more like a request than a command. My soul began to ease inside my shell. David pulled my face into his chest and placed a long and firm kiss on the crown of my head.

CHAPTER 9

Gift Basket

“Stay with me,” I murmured into his chest. I was far too shaken by the madness in the meadow to feign pride. I waited for the, ‘I told you so’s,’ but thankfully they never came.

“I would stay even if you didn’t ask.” His grasp did not loosen as he kissed me again on my hair.

“I know, but I wanted to ask to....”

“Shh. I know that, too.” David moved his hands to my head and cradled my face lifting my eyes to his. “We must move inside. We don’t know whose watching.”

We ascended the porch steps quickly with his arms still around me. David only released me once we took sanctuary in my dining room. He closed the French doors quickly. David stood in front of the glass with outstretched arms, and in his grasp curtains transpired as he rapidly brought his arms together. The screening would do us little good, but he did it to make me feel safer.

“Let’s sit down,” he said as he pulled out a chair from the dining room table. I submissively took my seat. David sat next to me at the head of the table. We slide our fingers across the table’s smooth surface until they intertwined. Our eyes met.

“I am so very.... I just wish I had listened. I mean...” Tears would have welled up in my eyes if I still had the adequate plumbing. “I just don’t know how to say it.”

“Don’t say a word. It’s not for me to know.” The sparkle in David’s eyes was gone, hidden deep behind the intensity of his stare. I could not imagine them being any more captivating in life as they were in death. David’s eyes reminded me of a solar eclipse with rays of amber and green emanating from behind black pupils into sky blue irises.

We didn’t need to move. We did not even blink. We simply stared into each others’ eyes. We made no haste. We had an eternity.

Self consciousness in life would have diverted my eyes somewhere else. But I did not want to stop looking at him. I was looking into him. David’s beautiful soul was somewhere beyond the embodiment of his shell. Finally, I could truly see *him*.

I could see clearly into David’s strengths and weaknesses, gratification and grief. His character enduring and focus steady. He came from a time when courtesy was compulsory, yet his politeness was born from principle. David was not a judgemental man, but he would not abide barefaced cruelty. Even deeper within him, I glimpsed a sorrow that had consumed him before he ever entered this place; it was beginning to mend.

It was intimate. For a moment there was just him and me. There was no suburb or Hell. There was no life or death. Just us.

I was not just holding hands with David. We wilfully surrendered a secret glance into the very being of one another. The stories of our separate lives suddenly became very inconsequential. Meaningless. We were becoming enveloped into one another. Knit into the fabric of the other’s existence.

I let David see me. It was difficult. I felt vulnerable. But David did not break his stare. I am relieved that he saw something in me worth looking at.

“Please tell me how you died?” I wanted to know. I felt that somehow if I knew I could mend the past for him, and save David from Hell.

The wait for him to answer was met with a long pause. I knew David heard me because the corner of his mouth twitched without losing any of the intensity of his gaze. He wanted to tell me. “It’s not for you to know,” he said with some regret.

“But...,” I lost the staring contest. I diverted my eyes to our fingers tangled like a basket weave. “I don’t understand why you...”

“I love you.”

He captured my eyes once again in his. He wasn’t lying. He saw into the very depths of my soul. He saw me, and David loved me. I could see into him, and I knew he felt it completely.

“I cannot reveal to you how I passed. You know that. No one here ever should.” It was his turn to look down at our hands. “Bly, there are too many here. Divulging your death is dangerous. Death is religious, and there is too much risk in breaking the one rule.”

“I know,” I said smartly, “We can’t talk about God.”

“Don’t,” David’s tone changed quickly, “We have already caused enough suspicion for one day. Spies are everywhere.”

“But no one can hear us in here,” I said with as little defensiveness as possible.

“How do you know that?” David furrowed his eyebrows in frustration. “Listen to me carefully. Souls who confide in one another, bind themselves together. The details of our lives and how we died cannot be allowed to follow us here. They are worthless to your survival in the suburb. Something so inconsequential has huge consequences. Not just one of us would meet flames; both of us would. I won’t risk losing you when you’ve just come to me.”

“Well, then why would Hanriette say...?”

“No,” he interrupted with intensity, “You can’t trust a single soul.”

David took a deep breath and brought my hands to his mouth. He closed his eyes and kissed my fingers tips. I leaned toward him over the table.

“David, I do want to say *it* back to you, but it’s hard for me.” I pushed my chair back and stood up next to him. David wrapped his arms around my waste and pulled me close. I cradled his face in my hands tenderly as I stroked his cheeks with my fingertips.

David smiled at me warmly with his crooked grin. The sparkle was back in his eyes. I wondered how he could be so surprised and look so relieved that I could feel the same.

In that moment I thought about our first kiss. I was looking forward to loosing count of all the kisses to come, and I quietly celebrating within that I had something to look forward to. I leaned in to kiss him.

Knock, knock. A knuckle met wood as two loud raps struck my front door. I involuntarily grumbled as I threw my head back. David chuckled through his teeth in amusement of my frustrated groan.

“You had better get that just in case,” he said releasing me. I obliged with a kiss to this tip of his nose. I was curious myself to answer the door as the only soul who truly knew me was sitting in my dining room.

I slowly swung the door open to a gift basket. A big blue bow topped a grand basket filled with bath bombs, salts, and bubbles in the arms of a smiling Minne. This was unexpected.

“Hello, my darling,” she beamed. “I have been meaning to be a good neighbour and stop by since we met at the pub. I hope you’ll forgive me. Will you forgive me? Of course you will,” Minne said as she plopped the gift basket into my arms and stormed the threshold of my front door.

“Minne, *hallo, was machst du hier?*” David surprise matched mine as he stood up next to his chair. “Excuse me, I meant, how are you?”

“Oh, I see what is happening here,” she said glancing back and forth between us as if she were watching Wimbledon. David and I looked to one another for help with wide eyes like a deer in headlights. Paranoia was creeping up my spine.

“Am I being rude? Oh, well. I have come to ask the lovely Bly to accompany me to the pub for female bondage.”

Oh, relief.

“I think you mean ‘female bonding,’” I interjected hoping Minne wasn’t making a Freudian slip. I set the gift basket on the coffee table next to Hanriette’s orchid. I seemed to be accumulating quite the collection of neighborly novelties.

“Ah, good, we’re on the same page,” she said walking out the door, “Come, Bly, let’s go.”

David gently captured my arm in his hand. “You should go. It’s important that you don’t make yourself out to be a loaner. Oh, and no matter what transpires, *do not* drink a pint.”

“Stop whispering sweet nothings into her ear, David,” Minne disciplined like a playful nanny as her head poked through the open doorway, “We’ve got to gossip, darling.”

“*Sie haben eine Ewigkeit, Zeit in der Kneipe zu verbringen, und Sie in Eile sind?*”

Thankfully, David sounded as if he was jesting. He hid his anxieties well as any finely tuned Englishman could. Surely his quiet worrying would all be in vain while I was in Minne’s care.

Minne and I journeyed down the smoothly paved black road with the village as our destination. I was mostly silent as she yammered on about something. An encouraging ‘ah-huh’ between pauses were considered a sufficient enough response to Minne. My mind was elsewhere.

She locked her arm in mine which quickly prompted me to realize I was under dressed in a jean skirt and tank-top. Minne wore a forest green A-line dress that stopped just below her knees with long fitted sleeves and a scooped neck. Her red lipstick and curled brown hair reminded me of a 1930's silver screen siren.

A cat dashed across the road and dove under the porch of the nearest house. It was black, and it crossed our path. I instinctively stopped in my tracks allowing a superstitious habit to take hold.

“Don't worry about a silly feline,” Minne said playfully tugging my arm and wielding me forward. “How can things get worse? You're dead in Hell!” She threw her head back and laughed heartily at her own joke.

I couldn't help but to giggle at my own silliness. “Are you sure you're German?”

Minne suddenly looked concerned. “Why?”

“German's aren't naturally so funny,” I said with mocking seriousness. She threw her head back and laughed from her gut. I joined her as her reaction was more comical than the witty observation.

We finally reached the Prince of Darkness and took two seats at a small table outside. The pub was heaving with jolly souls filling the village square with the happy sounds of laughter and clinking glasses. I politely nodded my 'hellos' to suburbanites I was beginning to recognize by sight. Minne popped inside quickly to grab a pint and came back with two. A pint for her and a pint for me set on the table correspondingly.

“Oh, I really shouldn't.”

“Oh? Don't be silly,” Minne's face elongated with offense, “It's not as if you should be worried about the calories.” I didn't think a mock pouty face was really necessary. I had a feeling Minne was beginning to enjoy my company more and more with every passing moment.

My misplaced naiveté to our existence in the suburb must have been very amusing. And I couldn't think of a good enough comeback to disagree with her. I was not about to let the next statement from my mouth begin with, 'Well, David said....' Surely, drinking with Minne at a busy pub amongst fellow suburbanites would be an ideal opposition to loaner-ism.

Temptation. I gazed longingly at the golden liquid. Tiny bubbles scurried up the inside of the glass meeting a cloudlike froth spilling over the edge that gathered and pulled heavy droplets down to grace the table with a wet halo. A pint surely couldn't kill me now.

Minne lifted her glass and said, "*Salute.*" I lifted my pint to hers, and they made a familiar *clink* that sweetly reminded me of my Cambridge days.

"Mmm, it tastes like cream soda."

"You speak in such silly riddles," she sighed and smiled.

"You know, it's a sort of pop. Kinda tastes like root beer? Pop... soda pop... soft drink? Alright, I'm really reaching here... fizzy water?" I did a good imitation of lock jaw. "Really? Really."

She laughed one of her infamous Minne mockings and flicked her wrist dismissively. "Silly, darling, whatever time you come from must be a great distance from mine. And believe me when I say, 'I don't want to know any more than that,'" she smiled widely and took another sip. "Besides, it tastes like *Spaten* to me." Minne tucked a rebellious ringlet behind her ear and sighed with amusement.

"I really should stop talking if all I'm going to do is humiliate myself," I said with just the right amount of light heartedness with a pinch of embarrassment.

"Oh, you most certainly should not," she said with cheerful confidence, "It's terribly entertaining." Minne shifted forward, and her tone turned surprisingly serious, "Now listen.

Hamlin and I positively adore David. We are so pleased that he has met such a lovely lady as you. He has been lonely for some time. He never said, but we could just tell.

“I cannot imagine death without Hamlin. We are very fortunate to be together. There is nothing more important to me in all of existence than my husband. Although most souls are perfectly contented to rest in peace in the suburb just as they are, David is just that rare sort who needs a special someone to penetrate his well guarded complexities. Perhaps you two are the perfect complement to one another to spend your existence together in passionate bliss,” she sighed and looked off into the distance. I could see some misshapen fairy tale illuminating her face.

“Are you suggesting that David and I are like soul *mates*?” I tried to say it with as little cheesiness in my tone as possible.

“Oh, my darling, now that is a very rare and serious thing. You should hope that you are not. Besides, this isn’t pixie princess land; you’re in Hell. Enjoy yourself!” She offered her glass, and they collided for second celebratory *clink*.

I didn’t feel comfortable divulging to Minne the intense affection David and me were beginning to feel for one another. But I was at least glad that they could see David was happier having known him for seemingly much long. I just smiled back at her and took another sip from my glass.

Several of the other suburbanites approached Minne with hearty laughter, pats on the back, and hello nods in my direction. The Prince of Darkness began to gather with souls chattering and laughing at the impromptu party. Making new friends was as easy as *clinking* the nearest glass.

Taste may have been subjective, but I was beginning to wonder if everyone was experiencing that warm tingling sensation inside. It started in my throat. The more I drank, the

further it spread its way through my shell like warm molasses dripping down a wooden spoon. The golden liquid filled me up as I drained my pint; and then another, and another, and another, and perhaps another. The delightful tickling feeling wrapped itself around my soul and enveloped the emptiness with a pulsating pleasure.

I talked, conversed, gossiped, chatted, joked, discussed, mused, debated, listened, and above all I engaged. The five 'W's' and a lonesome 'H' had disappeared. My questions were replaced with rose tinted deliriums minus the eyewear. The village glowed neon, and I was the black light. Shimmering auras wrapped themselves around every soul like vibrant blankets collectively rippling like a radiant rainbow. I felt so good.

Alas, in the distance beyond the fountain's sprinkling spout was the young man on his red bike. I watched him peddle through one village gate and out the other. For a fleeting moment I paused to ask myself, "Why is he there and not here?"

CHAPTER 10

Checklist

I laid completely submerged in the long claw foot tub. Amplified was the sound of popping bubbles with my ears under the water. Tiny prisms danced in the frothy domes, swishing back and forth at the surface with the slightest movement of my fingertips. A naked bulb dangled from the bathroom ceiling bouncing a golden glow from the tiles to the ceramics, the ceramics to the water, and the water to my eyes. Streaks of milky light waving in the waters gentle ripples hypnotized me. It helped me relax. I needed it.

Our first argument was trying for us both. David was right about avoiding the pints at the Prince of Darkness Pub. Euphoric withdrawal from the intoxicating brew in-part contributed to heightening my already bad mood upon confessing bandwagon tumbling.

David felt it was best to hit golf balls into the meadow's abyss for a while. He claimed it clears his head. Fortunately for him, the meadow still freaked me out; fortunately for me, I discovered that a bath could declutter my mind.

The chaos in my mind and restlessness in my soul began to ease inside my shell the more I allowed myself to be mesmerized by the foamy water. At first I was able to slow down the erratic streaming thoughts: the suburb, Hell, David, the pub. After a while, I just thought about

the water and it's sounds and light and ripples. Finally, I stopped thinking at all. But just like water, sub-consciousness also has depth and weight.

Memories began to surface. They came at first in soft waves. But it was already too late; an undercurrent of waking nightmares pulled me under. I sunk to the bottom of the hard ceramic tub pinned by a heavy guilt.

* * *

In my left hand I mechanically turned my driver's license and cash in my hoodie pocket again and again. I hoped to conceal my nervous fidgeting from the taxi driver. The rear view mirror framed the glaring eyes of a balding middle aged man in the driver's seat. Suspicion surrounds any single woman out alone in Minneapolis at three am on a Tuesday.

The driver pulled up to the loading docks of the warehouse. The glare of the orange sulfur lights made the brick building look even dirtier and darker. I silently handed the driver the fifty with no intention of collecting the change.

"Wait here," I tried to say sternly, "And there'll be more cash in it for you." I hated lying to him. But I surely was not going to confess that any suspicions he may have had were about to be confirmed.

I felt like I was going to throw up as I opened the door of the taxi and stepped out. The summer's cool night air took the edge off that overwhelming sick feeling inside. I stayed focused as I made the short walk from the taxi to the open garage doors streaming with sobering stark light and blaring rock music.

Seth and his colleagues were laughing and sharing crude jokes while lounging on boxes and sucking down sandwiches on their break. He was easy to spot out of the dozen or so men as the whitest guy in the group. Seth pretended not to be put-off when he saw me coming. Instead,

Seth announced my arrival to his fellow minions with a perverse remark about his sister-in-law in the company of dogs. The men roared with laughter and whistled mockingly.

I had to be trembling. I kept my hands firmly inside of my hoodie feeling the warm sweat build on the steel in my right hand. My eyes were locked on the target. I repeated in my head over and over, “Stay focused. Stay focused. Stay focused....”

The disrespect and heckling persisted but were drowned out by the loud pounding of blood coursing through my head. My eyes were locked on his. His face made me feel even sicker. I was determined to erase the smirk off of it. I was so close I could smell his hot breath as he jeered and egged me on.

I said nothing. I was fast. I had to be.

I withdrew the gun from my pocket. I aimed it an inch from his forehead. I shot Seth point blank.

My ears rang with the resonance of the gunshot. The grin was gone. Seth was no more. Just a limp corpse sprawled on cement. Open eyes frozen in shock. Blood streamed from its head.

I shook uncontrollably. Freedom for Dena was worth the agony of my premeditated fate. I carefully set the gun on the floor and violent vomiting followed. I wiped my mouth on my sleeve, straightened up, and slowly put my hands behind my head. The formerly arrogant men were weak with fear as they cowered behind boxes and lay face down on the cold concrete floor.

I forcefully recovered a trembling voice, “I’m not here to hurt any of you. I’ve done what I came to do. Please, call the police.”

* * *

I shot out of the bathtub and leapt naked onto the bare tiles. My dripping body drenched the floor. Hit first with fury, I aggressively threw Minne’s bath gifts in the corner of the room

where a small plastic bin appeared to accommodate and promptly disappeared taking the bottles with it. Anger was quickly replaced with guilt and remorse and then hopelessness. I took a moment to collect myself. There was little hope that deep breathing would do me any good now. I shut my eyes and imagined the comfort of my cotton U of MN pajama bottoms and faded gray Alice in Chains t-shirt.

I was an architect, a daughter, a sister, an aunt, a wife, and then an ex-wife all before I became a murderer. Specifically, I was a first degree murderer. Seth may have deserved it, but guilt is a complex emotion that attacks every corner of the mind like a devouring cancer. It is too late for remorse in Hell.

I had to push it out of my mind. The bath clearly failed to relax me. It was time to change direction. I had to do what I always did in moments of extreme anxiety. Fixate my thoughts on DIY with obsessive stamina.

My house was the same as all the others. But I was not like all the others. My neighbors added personal touches to their front yards with flower beds, wicker chairs, potted plants, and other little details. I could do better than that. Courtesy of the AIA, I was a certified over achiever with an eternity to perfect the exterior of my house. Even biological urges could not stand in my way.

I perpetually sighed often with dramatic dismay as I stood outside in my pajamas staring at the front of my house. I just could not get the color right. Butter yellow with green shutters and a forest green asphalt roof looked too track-house trite. Violet with charcoal trim and a corrugated steel roof look far too Neo-Goth wannabe. Weathered cedar shingles cascading from the rooftop ridge to the foundation accented with mustard colored flower boxes and a cherry red door was way too Cape Cod gay. My final attempt looked like Charles Moore vomited on the façade as I thought a rainbow of random colors it. There's no substitute for pure white.

Slam. My focus was ripped away from the house and to Hamlin and Minne as they disappeared behind their slamming front door. In the road, the young bicyclist turned around in a flawless one-eighty, haunched up on his legs, and pressed down hard with his feet peddling fast in the direction from which he came. Souls scattered in all directions going back into their houses. Cats took cover under porches and darted into bushes. Hanriette caught my eye and offered a maternal warning look, disengaged from her gardening, and solemnly disappeared behind her front door.

Looking up, the ash sky was just as grey and dreary as ever. Everyone was gone, and they took all the sounds with them making it as quiet as the proverbial graveyard. The houses were as always standing perfectly in line like tin soldiers. My eyes raced up and down the street. A long forgotten emotion filled the empty chasms of my shell. Fear.

I refused to move. I could not forget for a moment that I was in Hell. Whatever was coming, I more than deserved.

I finally spied the object of all this hubbub walking up the road from the village. My soul felt sick. My focus waned while nausea overwhelmed. Yet as he drew closer and closer, it was difficult to feel intimidated when any creature – Earthly, Hellish or otherwise – was holding a clipboard. The demon Demetri was the last thing I expected.

The flashback in the tub had already left my mood in a heightened state of angst. I missed being able to pray my anxieties into submission. On Earth, I reached out to God; in Hell, I had to settle for a demon.

I sped walked across my lawn. I caught up with Demetri just as he was passing my house. I walked quickly along side of him to keep up with his long legged pace. It prompted me to think of a sarcastic observation about a gigantesque and a little person.

The clipboard was far more impressive than any I'd ever seen. Holographics hovered around the screen making 3D technology look like a child's toy. Colors, lines, and squiggles boogied around his fingers like a well choreographed dance making me feel a bit self-conscious about my modest ninety words a minute.

"Holy shit, is that some sort of big iphone?"

I felt an unexpected glance come from the corner of his bull-like face, "Watch your language, Ms. Berg."

"Bly, and really? You can't say s-h-i-t in Hell?"

"That's ridiculous," he sighed, "Shit, fuck, asshole, bloody, damn, and so forth and so on are perfectly acceptable and encouraged in Hell. But you said the 'H' word."

Holy. I surprised myself by feeling embarrassed. This persistent Opposite Day was getting old. I felt like I should apologize for offending the demon, but I couldn't bring myself to defy God. Even in His *holy* absence. I said nothing.

The demon interjected my contemplative silence, "Besides, it's not a Mac. It's Windows based."

"I was always more of an Apple person in life," I said reminiscently like a kindergartener eager to share during show-and-tell.

"I prefer Apple as well, but we have to use PC's on the job. We've got seventy-nine-and-a-quarter years left on our exclusive corporate contract."

"That would explain the unnatural longevity of Windows."

A low laugh escaped his nose like a snort.

We walked in the middle of the road in silence. I jumbled words around in my head trying to find the best way to ask the questions on my mind and if I could get away with asking

them. I had to muster up some courage as that restlessness inside my shell was vibrating like butterflies on speed.

“Technology must have jumped ahead quite a lot. So,” I attempted to say casually, “How long have I been down here anyways?”

“Long enough that you wouldn’t recognize the place.”

He could see that I wasn’t satisfied with his answer. I was never very good at masking my emotions, especially disappointment. The demon sighed.

“Listen, it doesn’t matter. You are a spiritual being who had a temporary physical experience. The body and place you inhabited are gone. This place has been designed for you to enjoy your death without any of the inconveniences that mortality holds.”

Nostalgia for pizza rolls cravings, evading frostbite with two pairs of socks, and debating a new kitchen over Paris surfaced to mind. Presenting a mere object called money in exchange for another object was such a novel inconvenience. Most of all, I missed freedom.

With feigned authority, I established my audacity, “Listen, I appreciate I’m no better or worse than most people who grace the planet. So,” with frustration building, “why in God-frey’s name am I made privileged enough to have this cushy death in a place renowned for blazing fire and unbearable torture?”

“Oh, Bly, you are asking all the wrong questions. Besides, even if I were to answer all of your queries in great depth, you’d still never comprehend the magnitude of this experience. My lord has specially designed this place for people like you. And you know what kind of people *you* are, so don’t provoke me to indulge you.”

My mouth snapped shut.

“*A sofferir tormenti, caldi e geli – simili corpi la Virtù dispone – che, come fa, non vuol ch’a a noi si sveli,*” he quoted flawlessly.

“That Power that will not allow its ways – to be revealed to us gives us bodies like this – to suffer torments and to burn and freeze,” I parroted. “I don’t know why I still feel such an urge to translate, but that was beautiful. Who said it?”

“Again, you’ve asked the wrong question,” he sighed and looked down at me, “Dante. *Purgatorio*. If you must know. In English the P in Power is capitalized. In your situation, it’s best to analyze it in the lower case.”

The demon began to move his dark hand furiously on the clipboard while his thick brow wrinkled in concentration over his deep eye sockets. “My work is done here. You should go back to your home.” Demetri gestured to my house.

The house was back to its off-white normal self as if someone had pushed the ‘default’ button. We had been walking together without stopping, and now we’re stood in front of it. I had no recollection of walking through the village or even having journeyed the suburb’s full loop. Sarcastically I started, “So, has the H-O-A been by?” but I was just talking to myself.

Without hesitation or goodbyes, Demetri continued walking briskly on the asphalt road. I stood in the middle of the street watching the demon’s back grow smaller and smaller with each step. Demetri was leaving. He was leaving the suburb. He knew the way out.

I began to follow Demetri with increasing pace. My walk became a jog when he seemed to disappear at the horizon line. I stopped in place and whipped my head around trying to spy where he had disappeared to. I had to discover the way out. I had to escape.

David flashed into my mind. Pangs from love fostered panic. We didn’t belong in Hell. We had to escape.

A vicious wild roar erupted from massive jagged teeth dripping with saliva. With no warning, the furious demon was an inch from my face. Demetri lowered his gaze to meet my shock. A growl vibrated from his broad chest. His onyx eyes pierced my soul like shards of

glass pressed into an open wound. His eyes, his evil unrepentant eyes, were a window to Hell. It was like I was being plummeted into a black bottom pit falling past demons of hideous ilk as they inflicted torture, beatings, abuse, and humiliations to souls screaming in despairing agony. Their faces – human faces – were twisted and deformed as they screamed in anguish. These souls were corpses that will never lay dead as they twitched and cried and begged for an entreating madness that will never come. Demetri gifted me a glimpse of no hope.

I fell backwards gripping my middle. My soul throbbed in anguish sending shockwaves through every fiber of my shell. A mass of confusion and shame overwhelmed my consciousness. “That could have been me. That could have been me,” I recited over and over again, “That should have been me.” A renewed relief surfaced when as quickly as he appeared, he disappeared.

I crossed my legs like a pretzel as I sat in the middle of the asphalt road. I felt the coarse black asphalt under my open palms. Wrapping my arms around my knees as I pulled them to my chest, I soaked in the surrounds of the familiar suburb which stood completely unchanged by my traumatizing revelation. I instantly missed ignorant bliss.

CHAPTER 11

Censorship

Creaking doors, shuffling footsteps, and muffled whispers broke my trance. I felt awkward sitting in the middle of the black asphalt road with my knees to my chest and arms wrapped firmly around them. The eyes on me were my cue to quickly exit public view. I walked swiftly into my house where I could safely retreat back into myself. It became more of a home with each passing incident.

Post-traumatic stress disorder was not a foreign emotion to me. Self diagnosis wasn't either. My soul wanted to scratch its way out of its shell. The vision of Hell through Demetri's wicked eyes left me traumatized. Souls were being tortured somewhere beyond that ashen sky – not with off white architecture or hallucinogenic beers or prairie madness – but with beatings and torture and ugliness and unremorseful brutality.

I stood like a statue in my living room staring at the cream colored carpet and the eggshell colored walls and the ivory colored furniture. A newly acquired appreciation was building for its monochromatic mediocrity. Fury forcefully freed the question from my subconscious, “Why?”

Self preservation. Instincts. Disambiguation. Survival of the fittest. However *it* could be defined, I clung to it.

“Bly?” Hanriette startled me. Her muffled voice projected through my front door followed by two soft knocks. “Is everything alright? I saw you outside with Demetri the 3rd.” Two more soft taps demonstrated her persistence. “Bly, it couldn’t have been very pleasant. Let’s talk about it over a pint. Bly, please.”

I took a deep sigh and closed my eyes. I turned around and faced the door. I pressed my hands and then my cheek to its smooth surface. I cleared my throat out of habit hoping it would make my voice sound chipper. “Hanriette, I’m absolutely fine. I was just in the bath. I ran from the tub... which means I’m not decent.” That was a weak excuse. “Can I come see you in a bit?”

“Bly?” A hushed pause followed a loud sigh. “But of course. Whenever you are ready, I am here.” Hanriette’s delicate footsteps regretfully trotted across my porch, down the stair, and tempered away.

Finally, I was alone. Peace and quiet is always short lived in my head. A tangent ran through my mind and escaped with a thought. “How did it go, how did it go? ‘The Power...’ lowercase the p. ‘The *power* won’t let its ways be revealed to us – me – giving bodies like this.’ So Satan gave us these shells for our souls, but, ‘to suffer,’ something, something, ‘tortures to burn and freeze.’ But we’re not burning or freezing. I’m confusing myself and talking out loud,” I sighed, “I need to look it up, and... Bly, stop talking out loud.”

I sat on the sofa and tapped on the coffee table as if it were a keyboard. I typed out ‘Dante’ and *Purgatorio* into an imagined search engine. A laptop flashed and faded. I persisted, but the laptop would not transpire tangibly for longer than the blink of an eye. I pressed my thumb and forefingers together to write the quote on the coffee table’s surface; paper and pen flashed and faded. I mimed opening the book and flipping through *Purgatorio*’s pages; it flashed

and faded. I pounded my fist in frustration, “Damn you, coffee table!” The coffee table flashed and faded and disappeared into oblivion. Hanriette’s orchid hit the floor, and the delicate pot split dotting the off white carpet with brown soil.

Note to self, “The damned shall not damn objects within damnation.”

I had to get out of the living room. The front porch wasn’t private enough. The back porch faced the eerie meadow. The bathroom contains the bathtub. And the dining room isn’t nearly as inviting without David in it. That left the bedroom.

I pushed the ajar bedroom door fully open and stared at the bed. It was just a bed; I had never actually touched it. Not even once. I only experienced it in passing having never even set shoes on the other side of the room to look out of the window. Whether I had been in the suburb for days or years, the bed was just as foreign to me as everything north of Duluth.

I walked to the other side of the bed to sit in front of the window. The outline of my feet on the untouched carpeting reminded me of footsteps in freshly fallen snow. I sat on the plush crisp linens and watched my neighbors playact normalcy with small talk, fussing in their yards, and making way for the young man peddling by on his red vintage bike.

I sat and stared. I couldn’t bring myself to move. I was a danger to myself, let alone David. I was determined to just sit on the bed and cause no more trouble. Perhaps I would become like one of those souls Hanriette paid little heed to because they just sat in their houses and pouted. I pressed my palms into the duvet and gathered the fabric into clenching fists. I bowed my head and mentally recited children’s songs over and over to avoid feeling anything.

Footsteps on the porch, then the front door softly opened and closed, feet shuffled on the carpet, and finally the bedroom door quietly shut. I did not dare move. I had done it again. I felt like an antisocial teen waiting to be berated by the school principal.

“Bly?” He waited for my reply. “You alright?”

“David, you should leave,” I said with conviction.

There was a pause. I did not need to turn around to know that David was silently thinking. I always appreciated how he thought before he spoke. “Bly, I don’t want to leave,” he began carefully, “I know why you want me to go, but you don’t realize...”

“David!” I exploded, “I put myself in danger. I get small town mentality. If our relationship is obvious to one, it’s gossip for all. It’s like I can’t stop being self-destructive! And there’s hardly anything left of me to destroy. I cannot be with you because it puts *you* in danger, too. You need to leave – so just go!”

“Right, okay.” The sigh that followed made me feel like an asshole. “Listen, Bly. I’m going to finish what I was going to say before you interrupted. Otherwise, if you don’t let me finish, I will leave and come back later when you’ve come to your senses. Then we’ll simply have to start this conversation all over again.”

British soldiers really are gifted at disarming resistant forces. I grumbled melodramatically to save face, “Fine.”

“By all accounts, yes, what you did was dangerous. Very dangerous. But it wasn’t enacted out of foolishness. It was brave. You were brave, Bly.

“We all cower in fear when Demetri does his rounds. We’re all just trying to forget where we are and scrape by without going batty. I know you’re just as scared as everyone else, but you refuse to let fear debilitate you.

“The meadow, the pints, the demon. I look at all of that, and I’m ashamed at myself for cowering in the face of my own fears. I hope you’ll forgive me for constantly scolding you like a child.

“I’m proud of you, Bly.”

I did not expect that. His compliment caught me off guard. I loosened my grip on the duvet.

“Well, I take it by your silence that you’re either shunning me out the door *or* my endearing charms are weakening your defences.”

Thankfully, my back to him implied shunning. However, David would have seen that the later was more apt if he had not been standing behind me. Collecting my reserve I reminded, “David, this is very serious.”

“Come on. Lay down with me.” I felt the mattress bounced as David sat behind me on the opposite side of the bed. The springs cried out as he shifted on the bed and each shoe clonked to the floor one at a time. I almost took flight as he tossed himself on the bed and let out a relaxed moan. He tapped the bed with his hand, “Come on, Bly.”

If only I had weary bones to rest. Willpower was never my forte. I reclined, and we lay shoulder to shoulder on top of the feathery soft bedding. I stubbornly stared at the ceiling, but I felt his eyes on me.

“Blimey, do you always wear shoes in bed?”

I rolled my eyes as I kicked off a shoe one at a time with my toes. “Happy now?” I figured if I didn’t make eye contact, resistance might not be futile.

“Not yet.”

Smartass. “Why can’t I read a book or write anything?” I blurted out frustrated.

“Now, that is a random thought.” David rolled onto his side and perched his head on his arm. He lay so close, but he did not touch me. It was as if an imaginary chalk line were drawn down the middle of the bed; nevertheless, I had unsuccessfully defined boundaries. His eyes felt like they were burrowing a hole in the side of my head. David filled the intense silence with an answer.

“Censorship.”

I turned my head to look at him. His blue eyes were very serious. David’s face was soft. I liked the look of him laying next to me. Laying next to a man holds twice the intimacy of sitting across a table and four times the intensity as a tumble in the sheets.

“If you can muster up a book then it’s too easy to get a hold of religious doctrine. Consider this, even if it isn’t directly sacred, there is always going to be some sort of moral dilemma or undertone. Fiction or nonfiction, religion creeps into every facet of earthliness.

“If you can write, you can recreate doctrine or write your own. The same goes for all forms of art. Artistic expression – positive or negative – regarding religion still provokes reaction or conversation and debates, so on and so forth. Next thing you know, you’ve got some sort of mutiny.

“Maintaining the one golden rule means stripping souls of the one truth that frees us from eternal longing. These shells are just encasements of our memories as physical beings, but they’re not bodies. The tortures of Hell are purely psychological – with or without the flames. Denying us... *God...* is the crux of Hell’s power to inflict anguish. They’re watching us torture ourselves, Bly. We’re slowly driving ourselves to the brink of mental anguish.”

I wondered how much time had gone by since David had last allowed the name of God to escape from his lips. These lonely thoughts had clearly been lingering inside for too long. I felt such comfort hearing God’s name said out loud. I looked at him with a gentle appreciation hoping that he would talk to me more about these well guarded thoughts. “David, if they want us to torture ourselves, surely it would be more effective if they gave us reminders of our faith in Hell.”

“Hell is *hell* because it is a place void of God. Too much of the Almighty – or any at all – causes spiritual fractures and rifts in the fabric of this evil place. Thus, we must always be

very quiet and careful. Besides, it's far too entertaining of a conundrum to give us everything we could have ever desired in life, and deny us the one thing we truly yearn for in death."

His blue eyes searched mine for doubt or a hint of betrayal, but David did not see such in me. David may have called me brave, but I knew that he was equally courageous by blatantly breaking his silence. He trusted me.

"Why us? What makes us so special?" Knowing what made David special did not explain how I ended up in the suburb.

"I'm guessing that I've been here a very long time, and I dare not think about that too often. But I have spent a lot of this existence thinking about that very question. There must be common threads that braid all of the suburbanites together. Maybe it's our faith or lack thereof, or our guilt or loyalty. In life, perhaps we lived to serve *Him*, but we felt unworthy.

"In the end... we chose Hell. Consciously or subconsciously, all of the guilt or distress of feeling unworthy became self destroying. Maybe we were too angry with God to love Him. Either way, we willingly damned ourselves to this place."

We laid in silence. I supposed I should have known that I did this to myself. It would not have been the first time I chose incarceration over freedom.

"Thank you for telling me all of this. I know it couldn't have been easy. And you were right the first time when I wandered into the meadow; it was dangerous, and I've probably behaved foolishly again."

David's throaty chuckle sent reverberations through the mattress. The twinkle was back. I missed it.

"Probably?" he smiled, "Are you havin' a laugh? I'd hate to ever be owed an apology by you, Miss Berg, based on that confession alone."

"It's not actually *miss*." Details. They are such attractive subject changers.

“Oh,” his expression became serious as his body stiffened, “You’re married.”

“Would it matter? We’re in Hell,” I pointed out making a mental note that during the course of this conversation I had thus far earned two gold stars. “I’m actually embarrassed to tell you this. I don’t know why. Anyways, I’m divorced. I hadn’t mentioned it before because I didn’t want it to come between us.”

“What happened?”

“Arthur cheated on me... a lot.” Somehow it was more difficult to say his name than it was to say God’s. Even in Hell.

“Good,” he said as his demeanor relaxed, “I knew you were for me.”

“Possessive much?” I joked to lighten the tone, but David was un-phased... or just unaccustomed to American sarcasm.

“From the moment I saw you, my spirit became ecstatic. I was pulled directly to you as if our souls were linked with a cord. Before you came here, my soul was gradually building layer upon layer of hurt. It was hard and heavy. The closer I came to you, the lighter and lighter my soul felt inside.”

I could hardly imagine a more beautiful thing to say. Before I could speak, David opened his lips...

“I loved you instantly. I loved you like a darling, precious thing that I have to protect and embrace. I wanted to kiss you and cuddle you and make everything all better. You’re the closest thing to life I have felt since I surrendered to death. You might not realize it, but you sense life in me as well. God is life. We sustain one another. Keep the torture of madness at bay. We’re soulmates.”

My soul leapt with joy. David. He was just there, right in front of me. Death brought us together. A bittersweet irony.

No one in life could ever know me so completely and love me ever more absolutely. Lounging next to me on a pillow like a demigod was the only soul – in life or death – who ever bared himself to me. David was stunning.

“I love you with the entirety of my being,” I professed like an innocent in a confessional, “I could lay here with you forever.”

“Let’s.” David put his hand on my hip and coaxed me across the bed to meet him in the middle. I laid on my back nuzzled up against his body. He propped his head up on his hand and grasped mine with his left. I brushed his smooth cheek with my nose begging silently for a kiss. He played with my fingertips in his. David gently lifted my left hand to his lips and kissed my ring finger, and a thin glimmering gold band wrapped itself around it. “You’re mine,” he said softly.

David turned his face to my eyes as I brought his hand to my lips and kissed the tip of his ring finger. A gold band transpired.

“You’re mine,” I whispered.

And the deal was sealed with a kiss. Our eyes closed, and our lips parted. Violent longing and pent-up desire exploded. Clothing dissolved into thin air with the caressing of wandering hands.

It felt like our souls were enveloped in euphoric bliss. Light radiated through our skin setting us ablaze. We glowed with a living vitality that defied any breathing creature. Our radiating spirits bathed the room in a luminous and pure white blush.

David rolled on top of me, and face to face, two became one. Our souls embraced. We bound ourselves together eternally as each other’s one promise.

CHAPTER 12

Sweet Dreams

“Dad, you’re kinda quiet. What are ya thinkin’ about?” I questioned adjusting my plastic turquoise sunglasses. I was in tune to my father’s frame of mind. Even as a tween.

Dad’s lanky body came to life like a marionette puppet as he straightened his back and stretched his long limbs. The dinghy rocked a little as he began to reel in his fishing line. He inhaled the fresh spring air and cleared his throat, “I was just thinking about your Grandma.”

“I miss her, too, Dad,” I attempted to comfort. It felt like more than six months since cancer robbed us of her life. Dad’s Scandinavian self typically forced a stiff upper lip in the daily grind, but the majestic Boundary Waters always provoked his Native American side into unavoidable and obvious self realizations. He missed his mother.

I always looked forward to our annual May camping trip. I did not envy my classmates whose parents would rather battle June tourists instead of their kids missing a few days of school. Nevertheless, I was certain that my sister quietly disagreed. Dena and Mom could be pacified with a compromise that involved selling the tent and renting a cabin ever since the incident with a very curious racoon. The grumbling was well worth the moments Dad and I

spent together on one of Minnesota's 10,000 lakes. We would spend the day fishing on quiet waters amongst tall lush trees stretching to meet a cloudless baby blue sky.

"You wanna know something, Bly Elizabeth?"

"What?" I offered encouragingly.

"Grandma isn't far away at all. Her body might be gone, but she's still here," he mused while his eyes wandered, "She's everywhere now."

My initial thought was that Dad was losing it, but going crazy wasn't his style. At least he was talking. I threw my line back into the water. The fish were more eager in the morning, and there was little hope of catching any more in the afternoon's warm sun.

"I don't get it," I confessed, "What'd you mean?"

"Okay, well, I was just thinking that we're like these fish in the net." Dad pointed to the nylon net submerging our catch in the water, "So that makes the net like the whole wide world. Now, imagine that this entire lake is the whole of existence. Do you remember Sunday school talkin' about the Alpha and the Omega?"

"Yeah, it's the beginning and the end, right?"

"Good job, it is. So, God is the Alpha and the Omega. Therefore, He is the beginning and the end of existence. He's all of it, this whole lake, and the lake surrounds the fish and stretches far beyond it. Now remember that there are fish outside of the net. What do the fish inside of the net and the fish outside of the net have in common?"

"Uh, they're still in the water?" my voice trailed up to emphasize my uncertainty.

"Exactly. So, imagine that a fish left our net to go into the lake just like Grandma left Earth to go to Heaven and be with the Lord. God is all of existence, Grandma is with God, and we're with God, too. So, we're all still together in the Lord."

"Yeah, but what happens if you're on the shore?"

Dad's shoulders bounced as he laughed indulgently in my youthful limitedness, "Well then, I guess you'd better pray for rain!"

* * *

Bang. I was startled awake. The loud thump of David's shoe hitting the glazing was followed by the muffled sound of a shrieking cat outside. It quickly leapt from the windowsill and dashed out of sight.

"I'm sorry," he apologized softly, "I didn't mean to rouse you."

All was forgiven instantly when I looked at him tensely sat up in bed. David was most handsome naked. His curly brown hair was all a mess, and his blue eyes were intensely fixed on the window.

I inched my way closer to him and rested my hand on his arm. I loved the sound of the duvet shuffling on top of us with each little movement. "David, I don't think we've done anything wrong. Come lay down with me. Besides, what's done is done."

"You're blindsided with euphoria," he grinned widely as if to congratulate himself. He turned his sparkling blue eyes in my direction and slowly leaned his body on mine. David teased my lips by brushing them softly against mine.

"I'll accept your apology contingently," I smirked with lashes all aflutter.

His eyes smiled down at me as he leaned in to meet my nose with his, "What can I do to become worthy of your forgiveness?"

"Kiss me." My demand was met with a gentle press of his lips on the corner of my mouth, then on my cheek, my neck, and finally my collar bone. David rested his head on my chest and sighed with such contentment; I could not bring myself to complain that his lips should have travelled farther. "You're worried about the cat, aren't you?"

"Well, perhaps a bit. It's probably nothing, really."

“How expressively non-committed English of you,” I jested to lighten the mood. He half forced an amused snicker in appreciation of my attempt at British wit. I wrapped my arms around him and brushed my face in his wavy brown hair. “I love you with the entirety of my being, my darling David.”

David looked at me. He brought his hand to my cheek. His lips pressed firmly on mine moving slowly and tenderly. David pulled away gently and looked into my eyes searching for the soul within. When he found it, he confessed, “My spirit is so weary. This place exhausts me.”

“We’re going to lay like this forever. Remember?” I soothed, “We need nothing but each other... a second heaven just for us. Let’s become ignorant to everything outside of this little room. Just like we were two lost souls wandering the vastness of space and time until we collided and became one.” I was too infatuated to consider that what I thought was poetic was actually a Doctor Who paraphrase.

I brought my hand to his cheek and pressed my lips to his forehead. There was nowhere and nothing out there for us. Nothing tempted me to say no. “Sleep in my arms if you’re tired, and dream of the sweet things in your former life. I’ll be right here still holding you when you wake up. At least it can take you away from this place for a while; unlike the nightmares I seem to have.”

David half sat up and propped himself on his elbow. His expression became seriously perplexed. “What do you mean? What are you talking about?”

“Well, you know. When you sleep – sort of – you dream of things that happened in life like you’re reliving them.”

“Bly, is that what happens to you when you ‘sleep’ here?”

“Yeah, why? Isn’t it the same for us all?” I should have kept my mouth shut and pursued sex a bit more aggressively a moment ago. Fabulous.

“Bly, do you watch these life events of yours from the outside like an observer, or through your own eyes as you experienced them?”

“The second, but I really don’t understand where you’re going with this. It’s just a dream.” I vetoed groping him to bring back the moment. David was relentlessly un-distractible.

His eyes narrowed, “Tell me more about what it’s like being *there* in your life.”

“Well, it’s more like I’m an observer inside my old-self watching it all happen again. Just as it all went down back-in-the-day.” I rolled over for a kiss, and David obliviously sat up leaning his back against the pillows. He stared at the wall with his woven fingers resting on his belly. His thumbs twiddled like a hamster running in a wheel powering a light bulb.

“Seriously? I was totally trying to make-out with you just now.” I hated it when frustration led to elongated vowels. I inhaled deeply to suppress the rebellious Fargo-esque accent. David didn’t budge. “Okay. What I was *trying* to say was, ‘who cares about dreams?’ We were just saying super romantic stuff like, ‘We’re gonna lay here forever.’ Taking being dead out of the equation – surely, all that matters is that we’re together. So, let the dream stuff go; it doesn’t even matter.”

“Bly, Bly... Bly!” he groaned as he brought his hands up to his forehead, “No one sleeps here let alone dreams. It’s not possible; how is this possible? A quiet thoughtless meditative state, perhaps, but dreaming? You’re a damned time bomb!” David tossed the duvet off of his body as he sprung to his feet and hastily began pulling his clothes back on. “Bloody hell, woman. You could have told me this sooner!”

“David, where in Hell are you going?” I sat up in protest. “We’re supposed to lay in bed *forever*,” I mocked. Flinging the duvet on the floor, I rose to my knees on the mattress to meet

his height. Thankfully, my vanity was spared when my exposed naked body caused slight hesitation. David paused with clothes dishevelled and hair all a mess. He placed his hands gently on my shoulders.

“Bly, we *are* going to lay in bed forever. I promise to explain everything once I know more. But for now, I have to leave and... never mind,” David paused and kissed me gently on the cheek, “Just trust me. I promise I’ll be back.”

“Okay,” I assured, but my voice betrayed in protested.

In two great strides, David opened the bedroom door and gestured to leave when he turned around quickly. My soul leapt with joy at the false hope that he may have changed his mind and was coming back to bed. I hoped I hadn’t imagined the look of regret for leaving me.

“Bly, stay put. And whatever you do... don’t go to sleep.”

CHAPTER 13

The Substance of Patience

19 February 1951

Dearest Mum and Dad,

I am glad to hear that all is well at home. Congratulations on the fate's second prize for your onion marmalade – no surprise to me that it's a winner. It sounds like quite a few of Dad's elderly parishioners have passed away recently – I'm especially sorry about Mrs Hotchkiss, she was a lovely dear (the Victoria sponge will never be the same).

All is well here, considering the circumstance. Again, there is no need to worry, Mum. I'm not allowed to pinpoint my precise whereabouts, but I'm assuredly miles away from the action. It's my job to fight spiritual battles – not corporal ones. Besides, we're most needed at the medical unit. It's natural for the injured men to cling to God the closer their brush with death

may have brought them. Father, I know you'd be proud as my senior, Revd Harris (CF2), and I have made great strides with some of the more dejected men.

Also, I've invested a lot of time in a neighboring village. It's a small village of no more than 700 civilians, and just a 4 km stroll from our unit. Their houses are made of earth with straw rooftops – sound familiar? I'd say we're on the brink of a revival – well at least for one girl anyhow. But, I continue to be inspired by showing the villagers the emptiness of their worldly rituals by bringing them hope through our living faith. I am blessed to be ordained to conduct God's will.

Send Nanny and Grandad my love. Please don't forget to give Chip a cuddle from me – the dogs out here are sorely neglected. Send my love all around.

Your loving son, David

Oh, how I've come to loathe letter writing. Slightly less than I hate lying to them. But what was I supposed to say? Pain, destruction, violence? I cannot even begin to dignify saturating a letter home with petty grumbles like cardboard appearing more appetising than our rations let alone the constant stiffness in my back thanks to the barrack bed. I wouldn't want a reputation as being five plonks short of a bone.

The smell of formaldehyde permeates. The chemical's airborne sting is almost enough to cover the odour of damp canvas, burnt provisions, and human decay. It is a nauseous stench that I have marginally become accustomed to.

I feel guilty when overwhelmed by such trivial nuisances. Men – two, three, sometimes four years my younger – witness daily what I can only imagine to be in complete contrast to our human nature to preserve our species. Not only are these lads commanded to destroy life, they watch their brethren fall one by one. I cannot ascertain if my Grandfather's romanticised tales of chaplainhood in the First Great War were either highly exaggerated or alarmingly delusional.

I secured my letter by sealing it tidily in its envelope and deposited it at the mess hall postbox. I was at least pleased that my words would not threaten the comfortable lives of quite Milford. I used to miss the endless rows of idyllic terraces and cups overflowing with proper tea. But after seven months in Korea, I have come to realise that even those homey comforts are a façade. Whether it is on display or not, *misery* is an unstoppable plague that penetrates every facet of our existence. If it was not, then that sun would be incapable of shining evermore brightly *here* than in England.

I came to Korea basking in an ignorant blaze of spiritual fire. But war – for me – has been a rude awakening. The pointlessness of all of this anguish and death makes me constantly sick to my stomach. I lose more and more of myself with every passing day. I pantomime in my role as Captain Chaplain to the Forces Fourth Class; a rank reduced to three insignificant little characters: CF4.

I've lost interest in being human. I'm unworthy to bear the badge burned into the flesh above my heart: In This Sign Conquer. I dishonour the crest and the great men who bare it. I'm a disgraceful jack. The patience that once accompanied my faith has worn itself unsubstantially thin.

All available jeeps are engaged, and we're not meant to travel unaccompanied. But it's been a quiet couple of weeks, and the walk will do me good to clear me head. A chipboard sign with black stenciled letters points me due west as I turn my back on the M.A.S.H. unit. I packed

my cargo bag lightly with essentials that the villagers may be needing: communion kit, altar wine, wafers, prayer cards, little crosses, and pamphlets in Korean. A small leather bound KJV Bible being the only exception. That means the Webley Revolver is my occasional unofficial borne weapon.

Tis a glorious day. Not a cloud in the sky threatening rain. I used to imagine that this is what it must look like to be on holiday in summertime Brighton or the Isle of Jersey or even exotic Portugal. But I can't fake pleasure in it any longer.

Everything is green. The majesty of nature is dulled by these selfsame uniforms the colour of sick. Seen one tree, seen 'em all. I walk a worn dirt road that slices through the green like a stripe on a uniform. Even a chirping bird is simply the dampened high pitch of a bomb squealing just before it smashes to the earth.

Religion is as real and damaging as war. Where is God in all of this? I haven't seen Him or heard Him. Where is His mercy, and why doesn't He stop this madness? I cannot move mountains when the mustard seed has been crushed under my own heel. Storing up treasures in Heaven is not nearly as appealing as grasping hold of any earthly joy and not letting go.

In Korean, her name means 'brightness'. Kyon has become my reason for rising every morning. Her family and neighbours do well keeping us apart. Mostly, we steal glances and exchange smiles from across the village square. But every so often, Kyon and I talk; my polite Korean and her broken English isn't much. Her eyes fluttering to her feet and shy smile speak volumes more than ever words could. It's as if she's saying to me, 'I also see you'. I always pluck a wildflower with hopes of getting a chance to hold our limited conversation. The quick brush of her fingertips on mine sends tingles through my skin. Kyon always tucks the stem of the delicate violet blossom in the knot of her *jeogori* shirt.

She has brought light in my life since the moment I first saw her. It was a mere four months ago. I do know God is to be thanked for sustaining my life just for that first glimpse of Kyon. She looked like a white cloud that floated down from the sky in her cotton *hanbok* dress. Kyon's hair was – and is always – parted in the middle with a few rebellious strands freeing themselves from its tightly wound bun; I wonder how long her hair would be if it were completely free. Unlike British women, Kyon doesn't need cosmetics to accentuate her features; her round face is as delicate as a demigod with her long nose, almond shaped eyes, plump lips and flushed cheeks. I constantly fixate upon her image – and each beautiful encounter – in my mind over and over again. She drowns out the ugliness.

I cannot fathom ever going home changed as I am. But I could face returning if Kyon were with me. *Juseyo – jega dangsin ttal-eul gyeolhon. Juseyo – jega dangsin ttal-eul gyeolhon.* I practice over and over in my head, '*Juseyo – jega dangsin ttal-eul gyeolho?*' Today is the day I will pluck up the courage to ask. I pray Kyon's father will say 'yes'.

The birds hum a high pitched note, but their whistle doesn't break for breath. A sudden sour taste in my mouth is quickly followed by the hairs standing up on the back of my neck. I dive into the scrub growing wildly in the ditch. The texture of branches scrapping my skin does not register any discomfort in my heightened state of alarm.

Bombs furiously rain down upon the earth. It's a mindless cleansing of anything in its path. Death does not drive my fear, but knowledge of my own blasphemous thoughts. Besides, no one is immune to survival instincts in an air-raid attack.

With my eyes tightly shut and body in a fetal position, I know there wouldn't be much to look at even if I could. Singed branches and warm pebbles collide into my cargo pack protecting my back from the debris that builds a small cocoon around me. The earth trembles in protest. The high pitched ringing in my ears dulls the whistling and smashing of bombs.

A mere 200 metres down the gravel road is a sleepy village frightfully awoken where my beloved Kyon cowers as I do. I am defenseless to protect her. I want to make a run for it, but exploding debris, gagging thick air and parading bombs would surely put an end to any heroic endeavours inspiring irrational chivalry. Patience is a cosmic joke.

My ears ring so loudly that it takes me a moment longer to realize that the ground has stopped trembling. The air-raid has ceased. I worm my way out of the debris and shakily rise to my feet. The earth may have stopped moving, but my body is still vibrating. I wipe the dust from my eyes as I climb from the ditch back up to the dirt road. The world is coated in a finely soiled mist clouding the warm sun. Trees creak in distress as their branches reluctantly break loose.

It took me more than a minute for my legs to run as quickly as my brain. As the ringing subsides in my head, all I can hear is my quick thick breath and heart pounding to meet the pace of my legs. I repress the stinging feeling in my body; it would slow me down.

My thoughts are streaming a rhythm of *musts*. I *must* get to Kyon. I *must* see her safe. I *must* rescue her off to England. My speed quickens.

The village is in ruins. Flattened. The thick gray smoke veils its full devastation. I stop in my tracks as my breath chokes in my throat. I will not go into shock now; I can't stop moving. One single unfocused thought and my faculties will be lost. I block out the moaning and coughing rising from the steaming rubble. Kyon is the only thing in the world I want. She is what I've come to live for. Narrow paths where there were once wide roads and lonely walls that once held buildings navigate me through the nearly unrecognizable cartography.

Hope swells inside my heart turning the corner into her street. It fell instantly. Her home is devastated. Snapped timber beams scattered the compact earth into mounds of dust. Half of the heavy thatched roof is collapsed into the house. I gravely dread what I will find. Trembling,

I cross the threshold into Kyon's home. Just a half hour ago I imagined being invited in and humbling myself to her father to prove my worthiness. Instead, the gravity of his own roof silenced him. His arms wrapped tightly around his wife as if they were dreaming peacefully. The small still feet of her brother and even tinier fingers of her sister were enough to tell me that they too would never awaken. Tears welled in my eyes. Her grandmother and another brother may be under the rubble somewhere.

The only *must* remaining is to dig them out one by one until I find her.

'Da-p-id'.

A small, airless whisper escaped the darkest corner of the long, one room house. My head was ripped away from my grief. I shakily tiptoed into the half of the house that remained. A thin trail of dark red led to a curtain. I gingerly pushed it aside. Shock gracelessly dropped me to my knees.

"Kyon... oh, dear God, why?" I cupped her beautiful face in my hands; it was white. The bed mat soaked in blood. My vision was clouded with tears while I hesitantly reached for the timber stake that mercilessly impaled itself into her stomach. Her cotton dress was as dense and red as velvet. Calculating the risks, I knew I couldn't get her to the unit fast enough, but if I removed it quickly and applied pressure I might be able to stabilise....

"*Ani,*" Kyon's lips quivered softly, "N-o." Her delicate, shaking hand slowly grasped mine. Kyon places it back on her cheek. Her shallow breaths are labouring. I pressed my lips gently on her Kyon's lips, and my tears dripped onto her face. I moved the salty water across her soft cheeks to cleanse it of dust and dried blood. We stared at one another's eyes knowingly. I looked at her with such helplessness. I felt my life dying with hers. What could I possibly say to her that could be of any comfort in these quickly disappearing seconds?

"*Juseyo – jega dangsin ttal-eul gyeolhon?*"

Kyon's smile brightens her entire face. She sighs quietly. Kyon chest rises as she takes a deep breath. Her eyes close softly as the air presses out of her lungs. Kyon's chest falls and does not rise again. She was gone from me in an instant.

I lost her, and I lost myself. Cradling her lifeless body in my arms, I rock back and forth, sobbing uncontrollably. It hurts unbearably. My skin crawls from the inside out. It feels like tiny explosions in my brain are splotching my sight with light and dark patches. Irrepressible wailing chokes my breath. My head is on fire. I bury my face in her hair. She smells like flowers. A damp smooth petal presses into my cheek. I pulled my face away carefully and brought my hand to her head; from her tangled hair I held a wilting violet wildflower.

My grief hit a wall. Somberly, I gently laid her back onto the stained mat. I arrange Kyon's hands over her still heart, entwining the flower's stem in her delicate fingers. I smooth her hair out around her face. On her forehead I place one last kiss.

I reached for the holster on my belt. My trembling seises as I wrapped my fingers around the cold hard steel. The gun feels unusually heavy in my hand. Kneeling next to Kyon, I looked down at her one last time assuring myself that I'll be with her soon. I lifted my head, placed the barrel to the roof of my mouth and tightly shut my eyes. My finger froze on the trigger.

'No. I won't do this. It's wrong,' I command to myself, 'I am overwhelmed with grief, but this would be a mistake. I won't let you die in vain. I swear, I will bury you and your family properly. I will honour you, my beloved Kyon, and help your village recover from this insanity'.

I retire my revolver to its holster and close my eyes with my face pointed to Heaven. My fury directed at The Lord, 'You could have stopped this. In time perhaps my anger will subside, but until then, God of Heaven, leave me be. I wish you *not* beside me today'.

In a howling gust of wind, the creaking rafters screeched an objection. One loud break, and the roof humbled me. It was so fast. Painless. I didn't feel a thing.

CHAPTER 14

Star Crossed

“Blah blah blah, Bly-n-bye, blah blah blah, Bly-n— shy, fry, my, sigh, tie,” I pushed a loud dramatic sigh from my lips, “I’m bored, and I’m talking to myself. Bored, bored, bored, bored... ford, hoard, *toard*, board, lord, cord, mord— mortar.” Another neglected sigh passes, “Bustling boredom briskly blossoms into blasphemous... *frustration!*” My fists pound and bounce off the mattress. With the exception of being naked and laying sideways on a full-size bed, this is exactly what prison felt like. Well, infrequently naked.

“David told me to stay put. Yet! Yet, when have I ever listened to what a man told me to do? Exactly, and that turned out brilliantly. Bloody, Arthur.”

Both my external and internal dialogues were beginning to turn against me. Being alone too long is never a comfort. It is agonizing. The aching feeling inside my shell was throbbing again. I was quickly beginning to differentiate between being in love and being with David. Being in love isn’t enough to stop my soul from paining. I felt David’s absence. Love is a creation of God. Together we stay sane in the suburb.

I leapt off the bed and was instantly dressed as I strode towards the bedroom door in a pinafore of ninety-percent gray and ten-percent *off*-white. Stepping onto the porch, I expected to feel the air change and the warmth of sunshine on my face. But it was just the suburb in the glow of a dismal ashen sky. It was just as I had left it an indeterminate amount of time ago. Well, at least it was a break from staring at the builder's beige ceiling as it slowly grew popcorn; the aesthetic nightmare shot phantom chills up my nerveless spine.

The sound of sunshine is a melody composed of birds chirping, children playing, lawn mowers buzzing, and a gentle breeze rustling the soft green leaves high above in the tree tops. I missed the sun. I closed my eyes to imagine the warmth on my face, droplets of water on my brow, and an orange glow behind my eyelids. For a moment, it was such a vivid imagining that when my day dream was interrupted, it was a rude awakening. A neighborly, "*Hallo*," was like a finger snap in my face. I opened my eyes to find myself back under the ash filled sky draining the suburb of vibrant color in its perpetual gloom.

I strode towards Minne and Hamlin reclining side-by-side in lounge chairs on their front lawn. The sight of the matching couple in *snazzy* vintage swimwear covered in thin navy blue stripes was definitely worth getting out of bed for. Their thick early-plastic rimmed sunglasses with olive tinted lenses and metallic tanning collars were easy enough to appreciate, but it was a mystery how Minne could justify wearing a swim cap.

"You're in my sun," Minne sighed bleakly.

"But there is no..."

"Darling, work with me," Minne pleaded, "I pretend."

"*Hallo*, Bly," a smiling Hamlin chirped as he stretched his neck to meet my gaze, "You look like a book I read many years ago."

“How can someone look like a book, Hamlin? You sound ridiculous,” Minne’s tongue click suggested playfully sarcasm. It’s nice to see a couple so fond of one another. It makes what David and I have seem more rational in this quite literal hellhole.

“I can’t remember. The title escapes me.”

“Is it, *The Gray Cloth*?” I offered encouragingly.

“Ah, yes, *Das graue Tuch zehn Prozent Weiss*, by,” he smiled to himself reliving some long ago memory, “Scheerbart was a peer of Papa’s. An eccentric man, if I recall rightly.”

“Hamlin, you’re so boring,” Minne interrupted his recollection, “Besides, talk of books leads to other types of conversation. And, you know how I detest cats, Hamlin.”

We fell silent, and I felt awkward hovering over them. I put my empty fists together to open a materializing Grandma’s vintage aluminium frame lawn chair woven with olive and brown striped straps. I plopped down next to Minne. She continued to ‘sun’ herself whilst Hamlin and I watched the young man on the red vintage bike cycle from one flat horizon to the other. My curiosity about the cyclist peeked. “So does that guy live anywhere, or does he just bike around and around?” I asked Hamlin as I twirled my right pointer finger in the air.

“Ah, you mean Ben. Yes, he lives four doors on the right before you enter the village from the horizon to your left. You know, just between Deedra the Jamaican and the Kiwi who always wears tweed; *schesse*, his name escapes me.”

“Aata,” Minne corrected.

I had to confess, “I don’t know either of those souls. In fact, I don’t know all that many suburbanites by name.”

“You would recognize Deedra if you saw her; she is a common fixture at the Prince of Darkness. But it isn’t a wonder you do not know Aata,” Minne attempted to reassure, “He disappeared behind his door long before you arrived.”

“I suppose that is why Ben never stops riding his bike. Perhaps he just keeps peddling because he feels if he ever stopped, he would go into his house and never leave,” Hamlin offered as Minne nodded agreeingly.

“What is stopping the New Zealander from leaving his houses? Is he a prisoner?”

“Of sorts,” Hamlin explained, “He has imprisoned himself when he surrendered his soul to madness. A cloud of darkness has descended upon Aata...”

“Don’t be so dramatic, Hamlin,” Minne clicked her tongue, “Bly, darling, Aata’s gone mad in the absence of You-Know-Who. And instead of assimilating, he became a shut-in.”

“So the other houses – that appear to be empty – they’re full of shut-in souls too?”

“Well, Hamlin estimates that...”

“...Approximately, 5% of the dwellings are unoccupied, 23% are shut-ins, and the remaining seventy-two are...”

“At the pub!” Minne laughed heartily at her joke.

“Well, not literally, Minne.”

We lounged in a contented quiet on an imagined summer’s day and delighted in one another’s company. Minne and Hamlin appeared to have ‘resting in peace’ down to an art. Hamlin extended his hand to affectionately pat Minne’s placed lightly on her armrest. She smiled to herself. It made me miss David all the more in my pathetic puppy-like pining.

“So,” I broke the silence, “It must be easier knowing that you two will always have each other. I mean, unlike some others who have gone mad with loneliness.”

“Oh, it was not *loneliness* that drove the souls mad,” Minne corrected, “It was the absence of *Him* – up there somewhere – who is not *here*.”

“Minne and I are not bound to one another. We cannot prevent the other from going mad. Our accountability towards one another is purely choice. And as deep as our affection and

love may go emotionally, we are still individual souls. Thankfully, and most certainly, we are not soul mates,” Hamlin once again completed Minne’s thought with an almost scripted rhythm.

I began to feel nervous at the prospect of being half of a whole soul: luminous light when we make love, the increasing ache in my soul when we’re apart, the way we can look into the very depths of one another just through the eyes. “What would happen if... a couple, such as yourselves, were soul mates?”

‘Bly, I happen to know a little bit about astrology...”

“Hamlin, you’re being modest. You know everything there is to know about astrology.”

“*Danke, Maus*, you flatter me, but it was just a hobby...”

“Are you going to tell Bly your theory, or are you going to continue boasting?”

“Yes, my little *maus*, you’re right,” Hamlin cleared his throat for dramatic effect, “The planets and stars rotate in a glorious composition that strings together the keeping of time with global navigation. The ancients saw the future in the stars as well as astrological personality categorization....”

“Hamlin.” No doubt Minne was sharing my thought on her husband’s professor-of-whatever-esque ability to vaguely respond to a straightforward question. Ugh, tangents.

“*Ja, ja*,” he pauses to recall his thoughts, “For example, the planets in our solar system will never perfectly align, and they only semi-align millenniums apart. For the same reason, two souls born under a matching sky have a connection. Two babies born on the same night in the same city is very common, but what about two born under a similar sky within the same lifetime? Can you just imagine the significance for those two souls who were born under the same sky many *many* years apart?” Hamlin pauses to subtly survey our surrounds and lowering his voice he leans in closer over his arm rest. “I have developed a theory here that there is a reason why it all rotates the way it does. It prevents soul mates from ever meeting on Earth, let

alone Hell. The significance, the coincidence is too great with all of that miraculous energy building – who knows how long – from one birth to the other.”

Minne took off her sunglasses and looked at my face. “Cats seem to be gravitating towards your bungalow when you and David are secluded inside.”

I looked away to conceal my dread, “Are you implying...?”

Hamlin’s light hearted voice became serious, “We do not imply.”

“We care very much for David; and, in turn, have come to care for you. Be cautious, darling.”

I was touched by their friendship. My soul suddenly felt quite vulnerable; as if it was exposed and no longer had a shell to protect it. “I like what you two have. I can see David and me living contentedly as you do. In fact, I would like to show you just how much we care for you also. We’ll have a dinner party to christen my boring dining room.” They smiled reassured that I understood what I had to do to exist cautiously. “There is just one thing I want to do first. I want to go visit Aata the New Zealander. I need to see it for myself.” Cracking a semi-cynical smile, “I suppose you’re going to tell me not to go.”

Minne propped her sunglasses back on the bridge of her nose, “No, I think it will be good for you.”

“Really?”

Hamlin assured, “*Ja, es ist gut für Sie.*”

* * *

The walk down the unending asphalt road felt quite lonely after leaving the friendly couple. Nevertheless, I knew I had to take this journey alone. Even if David hadn’t run off to who-knows-where, it was still an experience that would have to be my own. It was to be my last

adventure; the last *hurrah* before I would transform into a model suburbanite. Not simply pretend to be one in a disillusioned false hope of escaping Hell.

“Okay, there’s the village,” I murmur to myself, “One-two-three-four-five, the fifth door on my right.” The house looked the same as all the others, I assured myself, “I’ll knock politely. I just want to ask him a couple of questions. Maybe I should materialize a gift basket; no, that would be awkwardly pedantic.”

I stepped lightly across the perfectly manicured lawn so as to not disturb the quiet of Aata’s house. The bent blades of grass under my feet retracted like springy hinges erasing my every step as if it never happened. I heard the sound of a small animal scuttling under the porch beneath my creaking footsteps. I knocked. I waited, and there was no response. I knocked a little louder, and the door silently swayed open. The perfect and unblemished exterior was starkly contrasted by its dank, dark inside.

There wasn’t a stick of furniture. Paint peeled from the walls. Fallen ceiling plaster formed small chalky heaps on the buckled and splintered wood floor. The windows were fogged and filthy. Black mould peppered every surface. The living room looked as if the air ought to be thick and damp with a musty odour and hauntingly creaky floorboards; but it wasn’t. It was dead quiet.

I offered a ‘hello’ into the silence. But my voice made no sound. I doubted if I had even spoken.

My soul felt rock hard; swelling my shell from the inside out. It was behaving like a magnet being pulled along an invisible path. I was drawn to the dining room and crept gingerly across its threshold. A grey silhouette of a man stood at the grimy glass doors. I cautiously drew closer. It was the tweed clothed Kiwi. He did not move. I stepped next to Aata. His forehead

was pressed against the glass. His unblinking eyes were wide open. They watched the still meadow perhaps waiting for something to change.

He was average height and slender build. His neatly pressed collared shirt was meticulously tucked into his belted gray tweed trousers. Both hands were firmly placed in the pockets. The matching suit jacket was draped over his left arm. Aata's face was mature, but his features were youthful. His creamy Arian skin seemed invitingly soft.

"Aata," the word was voiceless. I tried again a little louder, "Aata, what do you need?" Nothing. I shouted, "AATA!" My voice was replaced with a crippling high pitched feedback amplifying outward from the center of my soul. I grasped my middle as my shell keeled over throbbing. As fleeting as an echo, it was gone. Aata must not have heard it or even felt it; he remained a statue.

Aata's face did not convey agony or fear let alone contentment or indifference. It may as well have been a blank mask. It was expressionless. Just as his house and tweed suit bore the impression of perfection, they were veils concealing the decay within. What rot must be collecting inside his soul. Caged animals who are socialized are less likely to go mad than their isolated counterparts. Hell is certainly no place to find salvation, but at least the suburb could offer the damned some amnesty.

I lightly pulled Aata's unresponsive hand out of his pocket and into mine to drag him gently from the window. He was not resistant. He began to follow my lead. Perhaps getting him outside would be enough to break this metaphoric spell. Aata needs a cold pint next to the *figuratively* warm hearth at the Prince of Darkness. Perhaps, whoever said 'hell hath no heroes' was in league with the fury of scorned women.

His grip tightened. Alarmingly tight. I quickly dismissed it as a good sign when he stopped dead in place. Aata wouldn't release me. His grasp tightened as his lips began to snarl

with flared nostrils and narrowing eyes. The tweed jacket silently dropped to the floor. Aata threw me to the wall and pinned me tightly against it with his hand gripping my throat. A horrid, vile sound airlessly screamed from his mouth. When a living body no longer buffers the pain, a naked soul feels it all the more. A violent electric pulse excruciatingly erupted through my shell, engulfing my soul in its ferocity. Fear embraced me.

He drew his face close to mine. It blurred, twitched, flashed, and misshapen. His skin became sickly like it was ravaged with disease.

I could not find my voice. Shock overwhelmed, and I was petrified. My soul was on fire, and its burning was agony. I had to get free. My instincts screamed, "Run, damn it!" With the full force of my arms, Aata's shell made a thud as his back slammed the floor. The shrieking stopped. He lay like a chalk-lined victim with open eyes and a vacant body. Aata's skin returned to normal. His torment retreated within devouring Aata's soul completely. The backdraft was once again contained. It was too late for the tweed clothed Kiwi.

My footsteps stomped loudly towards the front door. It banged in protest as I carelessly shoved it with too much force. In a daze and feeling like a fool, I stumbled onto the front lawn and into the road. Across the street a crotchety old man wearing chequered shorts and a fishing hat shouted expletives in my direction with a noise pollution complaint. A bicycle bell chimed, and I was knocked over before I could register its source.

"I do apologize for my clumsiness, Ma'am," said the young man who I now recognized as a Southerner. Ben helped me up, but never took his eyes off the bike. Once I was stable on my feet and before I could offer my own apologies, he was off. Ben cycled on his red vintage bike, past his house, and headed towards the village without missing a beat.

CHAPTER 15

Highly Suspect

“Well, I hope you considered yourself forewarned, by me, of course,” Hanriette scolded, “I will not say, ‘I told you so.’”

“That’s a very French way of indirectly telling me, ‘You told me so,’” I retorted with slight angst. “Oh,” I felt embarrassed, “That was rude of me. I’m sorry, Hanriette.”

“It was rude. After all, I am Canadian.” She cracked a sweet little smile, and I could not help but to reciprocate. Of all the people I could have bumped into on the walk home, Hanriette was certainly my first choice in that moment. The bright yellow buttercups ornamenting the bold pattern her dress would have to be my sunshine in that moment. After all, I was destined to commence sulking in bed, but a good pint and an even better friend were all the more comforting.

We sat outside, but there were plenty of seating choices both inside and out. The Prince of Darkness was unusually quiet. Suspiciously quiet. Even the plaza was sparse. Not a single soul swam in the fountain or splashed under its spout. I sipped my pint slowly so as to avoid any overwhelming hallucinogenic consequences.

“Aata is lost to us, Bly Elizabeth. But you are not. I am not. David and Minne and Hamlin and so many others are not. Focus on the things that make you happy.” It was a bizarre sort of encouragement coming from a woman imprisoned in Hell’s suburb. But at this point, I’d take anything. “Besides, the grapes are going sour,” Hanriette looked over her shoulders to make certain that no eaves were dropping.

“I don’t think I understand.”

“I’ve seen it before. Many times. There is a soul breaking the one golden rule. First, it starts with more frequent cat sightings. Then thin needlepoint rays of white light piece down through the ash above. Have you seen them?”

“No. I’m confused: how does light even penetrate...?”

“It is so quick; like an eye blink,” Hanriette demonstrated with her own version of exasperated lid twitching. She’s so adorable. “Then the sky darkens and the demons come to snatch her up.” Hanriette clenched her fist to further emphasize the point.

“As horrifying as that sounds, what is the big deal about the golden rule? Satan’s already won our souls. Some of us will even go mad which has to be the icing on the cake. I don’t get it.”

“Hell is no place for God – *torrieu*,” she spat, “We break that one rule, it invites *Him* in. It causes rifts in Hell so powerful that it would threaten the very authority Lord Satan has over his dark kingdom.”

My bulging eyes were glued to Hanriette’s intense face. “Cheese-and-rice, I cannot believe you just said the G-word! You’d better be careful, or you’ll be who they’re...” my voice trailed off while my eyes slowly strayed upward.

“*Silence*,” Hanriette turned slowly in her chair and looked up.

The fountain stopped spouting. My soul began to throb like a stressed heartbeat. All souls at the pub and in the piazza stood like marble sculptures. All eyes intensely watching the

ever darkening ashen sky. It began to swirl and swell into a threatening horizontal vortex. Yellow sparks danced in its ever growing fury of blackening smog. The suburb shadowed into greys, blues, and blacks. It mesmerized. Motionless we watched the ashen sky change. Like captives in a city under siege, we were victims frozen in fear and wonder as to where the bomb would drop.

A glint of shiny red metal spun quickly across my peripheral vision. Ben stamped down hard on the bike's breaks just short of the fountain. He felt my eyes on him, and he stared back in alarm. Just a handful of paces stood between us. I felt an urge to protect him. His eyes were wide like prey anticipating the predators inevitable devouring.

Five smoking black comets spun loose from the sky and hurled themselves at the ground. The brick pavers trembled sending a violent quake through everything. Souls screamed and scattered in fear. I couldn't move; I would not move. I couldn't abandon him. My eyes were locked with Ben's. He was trembling with distress. Rising from the craters of rubble and debris were hideous demons with distorted features, rough scales, claws, and fangs. Salivating in anticipation the gruesome fiends crouched and snarled at Ben like he was a piece of meat. He was surrounded. The ambush was lightning quick. The demons lunged and seized, and in a flash they catapulted into the ashen sky in a great rock with black smoke steaming behind. Ben was gone.

The sky returned to normal and with it the square was restored erasing all traces of the happening. I walked shakily towards the abandoned vintage bike. It lay crumpled and broken. A lonesome wheel spun as if struggling in vain to faithfully finish its master's course. The wheel gradually slowed and then reluctantly stopped.

I had not noticed Hanriette stood next to me until she slipped her hand into mind. "Come, Bly Elizabeth. It is best I take you home." Arm in arm, we walked in mourning silence.

Soon, my house was in sight, and I was feeling guilt in my gloom. I could understand how I felt this way for disturbing Aata, but I couldn't shake the feeling I was responsible for Ben. I reassured myself that a collision and a few polite words hardly warranted fault. Yet, here was Hanriette, and I was the one who set the tone and provoked our dismal conversation. Arm in arm, I felt compelled to reset the mood.

“David would probably say something like, ‘the later events had surmised to be catastrophic,’” my exaggerated British accent awkwardly interrupted the quiet. An attempt at a giggle was more of a mournful smile accompanied by an exhale. Dear God, how I craved David's comfort.

Hanriette's pity grin ever so sweetly confirmed my obvious longing for him. “*Oui*, David is ever so... stoic; in a British way, of course.” She gently patted my shoulder.

The comforts of home were a few footsteps away. My living room curtains were drawn. A yellow glow of a tungsten bulb illuminated the window and bled through the fabric's overstated gold flowers in a sea of deep *deep* green. It was particularly peculiar as I didn't have a lamp or living room curtains. I stopped walking and calmly grasped Hanriette's arm. I brought my finger to my hushed lips; she nodded understandingly.

Hanriette followed my tiptoe around to the side of the porch. There were voices: one I loved, the other I feared. Through a slight parting in the curtain, the Demon Demetri paced irately while an interrogated David sat uneasily with eyes fixed on the floor. The big demon tried to haunch but his long horns still scraped my ceiling; unfortunately, its comedy didn't diminish Demetri's furious and powerful might. Frightfully, we pressed our ears close to the living room window.

Murmurs became intelligible as Demetri's voice boomed angrily, “...manner at which this whole ordeal was presented to us. It was not only handled with great haste, but also with utmost

professionalism. To order a collection involves not one, not two, but three separate departments. Which – as you well know – impinges upon *my* Waiting Room staff, but....”

“I fear I may have made a mistake...,” David’s composed shell shuddered slightly.

“*But*, also a team from the Department of Torture. Both of which required approval from the red-tape fanatics at the Registrar!” Demetri’s voice became deeper and more controlled, “Don’t let it escape you that each department is already stressed enough with an unfathomable load of work.”

“I’m sorry,” the remorse in David’s voice suggested lament beyond simply upsetting the furious demon.

“Sorry! Sorry?” Demetri poached aggressively, “Aloft or aloft, there is no room in Hell for remorseful afterthoughts dripping with apologetic mumblings! What’s done is done,” Demetri turned away from David and inhaled deeply. Nostrils flared and fists clenched behind his back. “If we were not so very desperate to raise our devil recruitment rate...,” he paused and turned back towards David, “I will be frank. You show promise. At the very least, I am confident that you know where you will end up if you continue to test my patience. Don’t encourage me to alter this assessment of you.”

David was quite. He had no response. A yes was nodded. He understood; I wished that I could.

“Furthermore, I am not here to receive *confession*. The purpose for this conversation was meant to be purely procedural,” Demetri’s tone became abruptly formal, “David Fitzgerald Williams, it is my duty to inform you of your current account balance. Your newly opened account has been credited ‘one soul’. Therefore, you have achieved one-sixth impunity. Importantly, it is the responsibility of the account bearer – i.e. yourself – to keep the balance’s tally until it has reached its intended maximum. Thus, an additional five souls – totalling six – will qualify you with....”

Hanriette tugged on my arm and led me away from the window. Demetri's stern voice became a distant hum. I followed her across the street and into her quiet bungalow. My soul ached for David. I was powerless to defend and comfort.

"If his soul has not been harmed by now, Demetri the 3rd has no intention of doing so," Hanriette comforted intuitively, "There was no reason to hover about and upset yourself further."

"Yeah, you're probably right. I just wish I could help him," I did my best to hide my frustration, "I wish I knew what the *hell* they were talking about."

Hanriette gestured to her high-back davenport while she sat in the plush chair next to it. I sat obediently. I was not in the mood for a chat. Resting in peace next to David was what I craved most.

"I am fairly certain you and David will reunite soon. Until then, I can explain to you everything."

Frustrated with my ignorance, I questioned, "You know what they were talking about? And you will tell me *everything*?" A long forgotten emotion fluttered to the surface: hope.

"*Oui*," she nodded. Hanriette's eyebrows arched to communicate a grave posture, but an ill repressed smirk on her lips oozed wicked delight. "I will paint a picture of the entire scene, but be aware... I cannot erase it once it has been unveiled."

CHAPTER 16

Every Bit of Average

Life for the little girl was ordinary. She was not special, her looks were middling, her intelligence proper, and little more heed was paid to Hanriette in comparison to the any other child. The pickets of the white washed fence surrounding her modest home could easily number the population of the small hill town in western Quebec. The three-up, three-down little wooden house was painted salmon and considered a bit ostentatious for the town's Protestant liking.

It was the girl's mother— naturally, hailing from the city — who was responsible for choosing the colour in question as she outshone average in every way. Fortunately, as the reverend's wife, it was excused within no less than seventeen months after his bride's arrival. Some say it was her Sunday best smile every day of the week or her apple nutmeg cake or her willingness to sacrifice a win simply to brighten another's day. But for those in the know or a keen sense of intuition, she demonstrated humility when she birthed an average baby girl for her average husband on stand-by. No sooner had the infant grown into a toddler, the mother succumb to puerperal fever.

Hanriette had no memory of her mother, but instead she entertained sweet imaginings surrounding the bride in the greying photograph framed on the mantel. Her relationship with the reverend was typical, but in her imaginings, she laughed endlessly with Mama. Milking the cow, sweeping the porch, sewing wobbly buttons, and pulling weeds would cease being chores and

transform into joyous servitude if Mama were there to offer praise and encouragement. The little town agreed that although the girl was average, the dazzling smile Hanriette inherited from her mother was a foreshadowing that she could blossom into the beauty that was the belated. But for this very reason, Hanriette daydreamed of Mama and wished away her life's greatest adversary.

Aunt Amer was the reverend's, mother's, half-brother's, father's, daughter. She was also the family's only unattached woman on hand to raise little Hanriette which freed her father to tend at the flock. Despite Aunt Amer's portrayal as intentional, she was not a spinster by choice as her looks were plain, intelligence low, attitude miserable, and presence nil. She was a mean lady, but disguised it reasonably well; thus, she was neither particularly liked nor intrinsically disliked. The little girl was the exception receiving Aunt Amer's suppressed loathing and hypocritical resentments. Sadly, Hanriette alone suffered these misdirected miseries behind closed doors. Hanriette did not share the townsfolk's indifference towards Aunt Amer – she hated her – and not just a little, but very *very* much.

Defiance was punished with hair pulling, untidiness with a slap to the thigh, fussing with starvation, disobedience with solitude in a locked wardrobe, crying with a pinch under the arm, and any combination of two or more were punishable with belt slaps to the back. Hanriette's body hurt, but Aunt Amer's cruel words wounded the little girl's heart with sores that would never heal.

Over time, the salmon paint peeled away from the cladding as Hanriette began to grow. And just as the townspeople supposed, her beauty began to blossom. She was on the edge of girlhood and expecting the change at any day. Life by Aunt Amer's hand had made Hanriette bolder, stronger, and devilishly clever. The aging spinster grew older with brittle bones and hunching spin, but her tongue was still sharp and reflexes too well refined.

Hanriette made a habit of leaving for the schoolhouse early, walking very slowly along lonely hill paths, and was most often the first to arrive. She claimed to be the classroom aide which the schoolmarm did not deny and fortunately was never questioned about her pet's early arrival. One fine spring morning, Hanriette was reaching for the kitchen door knob when a tremendous thud startled the quiet house. Hanriette's instinctual reaction was to cry out *Papa*, but she quickly recalled that he was in the city attending a reverends' revival.

At the bottom of the stairs, the frail old woman was collapsed on her stomach. Twisted legs lay limp on the steps while moans of agony were wailed into the floor. She reached for Hanriette thanking God that her dear little girl had not yet left for school. Hanriette saw her future in a flash as nursemaid to a cripple with a wicked tongue and unflinching hands that were mercifully spared. Amer lay helplessly howling in pain and pleading for help. Hanriette stood over her and looked down at vulnerable Aunt Amer crying and begging for the doctor. Hanriette was still and thoughtful. She neither spoke comforting words nor ran for help. Hanriette lifted her foot and placed it on Aunt Amer's lower spine. With some effort, the old woman's frail bones cracked under the girl's heel. The aged body of the decaying bitter life went limp and quiet.

Hanriette fled running fast and hard. Her haste ensured she was still the first to arrive at the schoolhouse. Her breathing relaxed leaving a slight flush lingering in the cheeks. Soon Hanriette was joined by the schoolmarm and classmates to commence a typical day of learning.

Hanriette's palms sweat as her heartbeat sped unusually fast. Rather than paying much attention copying arithmetic to her slate, she stared out the window and watched the sunny spring day grow gradually grey. The first wave of relief came when Hanriette was collected by a grave faced parishioner bearing sad news. She came to discover that displayed emotions of guilt can easily be misinterpreted as grief. Genuine remorse soon followed.

Despite of all this, the young lady Hanriette blossomed into an exemplary woman. She never again broke God's Sixth Commandment; even spending the remainder of a very long life tirelessly avoided any and all infractions that may threaten the remaining nine. Yet, Hanriette – a mainstay of the parish – manoeuvred surreptitiously in life's 'grey areas' where obstacles beckoning compromise were targeted and readily extinguished so as to clear the path to her heart's desires.

CHAPTER 17

The Hunt

“It began with Judas Iscariot. It was Jesus’ idea, although he did not know it at the time, ‘Have I not chosen you Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!’¹” Hanriette’s tone became grim and serious. I saw a shadow of this contrast to her typical carefree whims at the pub before Ben was taken. A suppressed darkness was rising; ready to overflow. Truly, who was this soul? Words of David’s began to surface and were quickly cut-off.

“Iscariot was overwhelmed with guilt and shame. With the thirty pieces of silver, he took possession of a field bearing a tall dead tree, ready to take his life for betraying of the King of kings. Iscariot was just a small pawn in a great war raging for millennia longer than we will ever fathom. But of course, the pearly gates were wide open for Judas, offering redemption and grace. But Lucifer was waiting for him at the tree in *Akeldama* – the Field of Blood. He coerced Judas, ‘Your name will everlastingly be synonymous with liars, hypocrites, and betrayers. Jesus is the Son of God, and He will become a martyr who will forever be loved and worshiped. But you – they will spit your name when spoken. Heaven waits on the other side of this rope to reward you for your place in history, but it matters not as this world will never see you as the courageous man who set Jesus’ fated crucifixion in motion.’

¹ John 6:70 KJV

“Judas pondered these things in his heart. He became filled with rage. He felt used and betrayed. An eternity with a God who allows the besmirching of Judas’ name and dignity was no paradise. He implored Lucifer, ‘What will you have me do?’

“‘Meet *me* on the other side, and those thirty pieces of silver will pale in comparison to the rewards that will await you. We will build an army of *devils*, and you will be their *general*: the commander of damned souls that will grow my kingdom to rise up against these injustices. After all, what kind of God claims to love you, yet manipulates Judas Iscariot for His own benefit?’”

Stunned, I stared open mouthed at Hanriette. I felt compelled to defend God. I wanted to remind her that our idea of Judas could have been very much altered if he had just waited a few more days.

“Judas climbed the tree, firmly fastened the noose around his neck, and jumped. He accepted Lucifer’s offer and joined him in Hell. Lucifer had his new general plotting days before a bloated body – with guts oozing – was discovered on the hard ground crushed beneath the snapped bough which aided his suicide.”

“Why are you telling me this?” My voice was panicked, “What does it mean to us?”

Hanriette’s thin lips curled up at the corners as she tilted her head slightly, “Bly Elizabeth, is it not obvious?” She glared at my expression waiting for understanding to illuminate my face. “You silly girl! Lord Satan is recruiting. We don’t simply die and burn up! That would be such a waste. The suburb is one of many testing grounds to see which souls have what it takes to fight in General Iscariot’s army.” Hanriette paused and waited. A tongue click and eye roll said enough, but that didn’t stop her from patronizing me further. “It is a spiritual battle. The war for souls... to save them *or* to destroy them. When Lucifer and his supporters liberated themselves from God’s oppressive absolutism, they lunged from Heaven – as refugees

– and began their own world... in the earth's deepest and most forgotten crevices. They called it *Aralu*; it was the first utterance of Hell.

“People are stupid enough to send themselves here either by their own idiotic will or pathetic guilt. Oh, but there are those – those deliciously devious souls – radiating raw, unadulterated wickedness. It's a privilege – you know – being so wholly evil that you come to this place cordially. A rejection from Heaven is an esteemed invitation in Hell. Thankfully, for souls like me, there's this little test; upon passing I will join his magnificent army.

“After all, demons tried to breed with humans to spread the cause, but their vigour diluted with generations of human mating. The Son of Man tore open the curtain separating God from humanity; Lucifer had to think bigger. It's not as if demons can procreate amongst themselves, and only some are even compatible for human impregnation. Have you really considered how bold it is when a creative yet abstract human births a demented thought and enacts it? They can alter the mundane fabric of reality and infuse their own destructive narrative. Why waste such enthusiasm; such initiative? Even in death, these souls may continue to push back on our enemy.”

Sadly, my knowledge of military strategy was limited to what I knew about the sheer quantity of American soldiers tipping the scales to win WWII. Defensively I blurted, “But what is the point for the rest of us? Wouldn't all those other millions of souls burning up just be a waste? Why not quantity over quality?”

“Tisk-tisk,” she patronized, “The greater the loss Heaven suffers, the greater we debilitate their morale.”

“Why, Hanriette, why?” I pleaded, “We have it so cushy in the suburb. I really looked up to you. I really felt like you... like I loved you like a mother-figure.”

“Oh, but love...,” she swooned mockingly, “Love is as trivial as faith. Look at the mess it’s gotten you two in. Love is of God; a useless invention. When you *make* love, you pull God into the depths of Hell. Dreams of humanity are things of the Earth, and man is made in the image of God. You disgust me.”

Horrified, my soul twinged in alarm as David’s words fully echoed inside – *you can’t trust a single soul*. “I should go,” I stood shakily, “David’s meeting with Demetri must be finished by now, and he’ll be waiting for me. Thank you for... whatever....”

“David was the one who requested Benjamin’s removal,” Hanriette slowly rose to her feet. Unconvinced, I turned my back and began walking towards the door. “He did it to protect you.” I stopped dead in place. “He came to me and told me all about your dreams. He sought my advice. How’s that *love* for you?”

I pivoted slowly to face her. The little yellow buttercups in the pattern of her dress withered and frosted. The small woman had grown herself several inches to invasively stare me in the eyes. I looked away; my soul was not hers to search. “Are you trying to tell me that I’m responsible for Ben’s abduction?” Anger bubbled to the surface.

Hanriette gloated having captured my undivided focus. She strolled casually with her arms clasped behind her back and stopped at a mahogany Tutor-Revival curio cabinet. Three crystal figurines ironically posed as pagan idols stood encased behind the glass. Their eerie translucent eyes gazed vacantly. Hanriette opened the cabinet and took one in her hand. “I will not insult you by rhetorically asking if you wish to learn what Demetri the 3rd and David were discussing. I will tell you directly.” Hanriette inched closer and placed the statue in my hands of a rigid, expressionless Minerva. “Six souls. It takes only six. The imperfect number just falling short of seven. But we all fall short of *that* glory.” Hanriette searched my face for a reaction.

Poker was never my forte. “Demetri the 3rd has allowed me – nay gifted me – the privilege of creating these three little mementos of my previous conquests.”

The words felt stuck in my throat, “You’re one-half devil,” I murmured. She ignored me still rambling on and enjoying the sound of her own voice.

“...You assumed the cats were Hell’s spies, did you not? They all do.”

“Let me guess,” I backlashed, “We’ve been encapsulated in a metaphorical matrix built upon abstracted contradictions?”

“So many flowery words that say so very little,” she mocked, “*Pourquoi, ma biche*, haven’t we an eternity to...?”

“Spit it out so that I can walk out of here and never set eyes on you again,” I was curt. She was a wolf teasing the cornered doe before pouncing. “Seriously Hanriette, I have lost all faith in you!”

“Faith... intangible. Hell is no place for faith,” she tisked flatly, almost sadly. “The demon was outlining David’s account status. As it stands, your beloved David is now an unimpressive one-sixth-fraction towards earning full citizenship of Hell. A mere one-sixth devil.”

“You’re policing us,” my lips curled into a disgusted snarl. “You would prefer to damn souls to an eternity of torture rather than exist idly in this *bizarre* Purgatory?” It was more of an accusation than a question.

“*Salope!* I have damned no one! Souls damn themselves,” Hanriette appeared offended whilst basking in an unearned arrogance. “I am neither the first nor the last. True, I am the oldest resident of the suburb, but those before me were in the very same predicament we find ourselves now.”

My shell trembled with fury, “I’m leaving.” I felt all the more foolish as I once again spun in a seemingly choreographed soap-star-esque turn-n-trot.

“Will you really run off to your *galant*?” She mocked as the word belittled us. “David is one-sixth devil. His soul is tainted – corrupted. Darkening.

“It will slowly devour his soul like the sting of poison rippling ecstasy through the bloodstream. Surely,” Henriette beckoned, “the hurt would be far less if I were to expose you both, Bly Elizabeth, than to wait in knowing that your lover may betray you.”

I could say nothing.

“If I am certain of anything, it is this,” Hanriette boasted confidently, “David will be my number four, his Benjamin will become *my* five, and you will be my beloved number six. Now, all I must do is wait. You two will dream or fuck or whisper, the cats will gather, and I will blow the whistle. My impressive strategy will promote me to lieutenant demon upon entry to General Iscariot’s army.”

I realized I was still holding the crystal figurine; a keepsake trophy formed by a sadistic soul. I squeezed it tightly and repressed a distracting impulse to mourn this fallen Minerva.

“Do you like my pretty statue?” she antagonized, “I can’t wait until I have three more.”

With my back still turned to Hanriette, “I can’t tell if you’re sick, bored, or just a self-indulgent.” I placed Minerva gently on the floor, and I started towards the door.

“As the Demon Demetri often recites, ‘*A sofferir tormenti, caldi e geli – simili corpi la Virtù dispone – che, come fa, non vuol ch’a a noi si sveli,*’” Hanriette quoted flawlessly. “Here, Lord Satan is the power in Hell, and he shan’t reveal his methods. Our souls are housed in these feeble shells because *he* wills it so. Thus, you and I are Satan’s figurines in an arena of his making. He shall do with us as he sees fit.”

CHAPTER 18

Run

There was no point in running. I walked. I could feel that wicked bitch's prying eyes on me as the distance grew marginally wider. I assured myself, "This is how Eve felt after she tasted the fruit of knowledge," but, in itself, awareness is a blunt contrast to reassurance. Who else among us feigns friendship to captivate their target in this predator and prey dēcosystem? I waved politely and forced a smile at Hamlin and Minne still sunlessly bathing in their front yard; they really had a knack for dragging things out. By the time my feet crossed the threshold, I knew David and I had just two options: burn in Hell or never *ever* be alone together again. Even PDA was definitely out; just the brush of his fingertips in my palm could ignite an explosive lightshow.

I shut the front door behind me and reluctantly surrendered myself to a sort of depressive numbness. It may become my dearest friend for the duration of eternity. I could bear Hell's torture if it meant David was safe in the suburb. But Hanriette would continue preying upon him; waiting to pounce.

The green and gold curtains and standing brass lamp with the cut-corner shade were lovely gifts. The light thoughtfully switched itself on enveloping the room a genial golden glow like a tender hug. I went to the sofa and I knelt on the cushions placing my hands on its sturdy back and was reassured by the soft cotton fabric. I partially drew open a curtain panel to spy a

shadowy figure framed in David's window. Binoculars accommodated two circles I made with my hands as I brought them to my eyes. He was staring back at me through what looked like military issue binoculars. David raised a hand, and I reciprocated.

David pointed to himself, then me and mouthed, "*Can I come over?*"

"*No.*"

Perhaps it was the lenses or a jaded female perspective, but Dave seemed to make a sort of wounded puppy dog look as the binoculars lowered. Men, even the dead ones, really do only think about one thing. Well, at least part of him was still alive.

The pup whimpered, "*Why?*"

"*Because we're fu... ah!*" My line of sight was filled with fuzzy blue. Game over! The binoculars fell behind the sofa as I lurched back. Thankfully, I hadn't hit KO quite yet. It was just Hamlin's sweater amplified in my line of sight.

David was opening his front door as Hamlin strode up the porch steps. And then I became aware that next door to him another pair of eyes spied me with far less affection through lace curtains. I hastily shut the drapes. I had to think of what to do next. I had to focus. Then it became obvious what the next most logical course of action had to be. I shut my eyes and imagined the comfort of my cotton U of M pajama bottoms and faded gray Alice in Chains t-shirt. Now, I could bounce ideas off of Ben and Jerry with my nose in a pint of Peanut Butter and Jelly resurrected from the flavor graveyard.

In life, some of the most disheartening moments are rather small and seemingly insignificant. Accidentally stepping on a shell and crushing the snoozing snail within. Spilling almost an entire cup of grated parmesan cheese on a very recently mopped kitchen floor. Or being a poor undergraduate who budgeted 58p for a week's worth of groceries to find the bill totaling 59p. Just to name a few. For me, this included the first glimpse of white cardboard

peeking through the last remaining mouthfuls of ice cream. And I was no closer to whatever peace-of-mind or concocted clever scheme that would release my aching soul from this hellish situation.

I found myself waiting. Again. Waiting for something to change. It was futile; there was nothing of substance I could see in front of me that motivated change. Such an exercise seemed all the more pointless than when I first arrived in the suburb. There was nothing to look forward to; no touch, no kiss, no endearments, no sparkling blue eyes. I stared into the melancholy of monochromatic space. Even if timepieces were permitted, could the hypnotic *tick-tock* of a wall clock keep tempo with the passing of time to whisk me from one moment to the next? If sound could not save me, could sight? There is no sun to set or moon to raise that could progress dark shadows across the room. The remaining three senses are also useless; not to mention the now not-so-mysterious sixth. Well, there's always the pub.

Oh, how I longed to sleep. I would have even settled for the sensation of sleepiness. Oh, to dream of my family, sunshine, pens and paper, and I stopped myself there. I could not allow myself to dare think of it. God. The sofa was so soft, 100% cotton upholstery free from any interwoven artificial material and stuffed with duck down. The lamp light dimmed. I thought, perhaps, if I closed my eyes and simply concentrated – meditated upon nothingness – surely dreams could not follow where sleep never started.

Click, click, click. A pair of heels clacked on the back porch steps and caused me alarm. I sprang like a cat and was on my feet in a jiff. My eyes were as big as saucers.

“I startled you,” she smirked, “Who do you think you were expecting?”

“A deranged Hoser swinging a beaver-beater stick.”

“*Pfui*,” Minne tiskied, “Most of those words are strangely *dumm*. Besides, you cordially invited us over for a dinner party.” Minne held no prop like a host gift or bottle of wine. It was so very outside of character. Besides two for dinner is hardly a party.

“Yes,” I floundered, “Yes, I did.” Minne stared at me dubiously with narrowing eyes. Perhaps hailing in German was more appeasing, “*Ja, ich habe!*”

“Well done, *kamerad*.” She gestured a sweeping arm through the dining room, “I wish to stand on the rear veranda with you.”

It felt like one of those scenes nearer the end of a film where the hero is beckoned into the unknown by the villain. The hero must choose between fleeing impending doom or well-mannered obedience when the friend turns foe. I weighed my options quickly: scream like a pansy, literally run in circles, or decline politely. Since my last visit with Hanriette, I found myself rather limited in my abilities to weigh options; however, my list building capabilities were at a record high. Nevertheless, when faced with a no win situation, choose the option your adversary would least expect. I followed Minne onto the back porch to boldly challenge my impending doom.

Minne stood with hands on hips, staring into the meadow. Her eyes scanned the endless horizon. I wondered if she and Hamlin had ever tried to take the journey. She inhaled deeply as if drawing in the sweet bouquet of nature; or at least her memory of it.

“True friendship is a rare commodity in life, and even more so in this death.” I waited nervously for a conversation turning *but*. “Bly, I am so grateful to have you as my friend.”

“But?”

“No but,” with her eyes fixed on the meadow, Minne reached for my hand, I took it and held it lightly. David was wrong, there are souls you can trust; otherwise, how could I even begin to trust him? I felt like a fool.

“Me, too,” I squeezed her hand gently, “and I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” she grinned. Hand in hand we continued to gaze over the still meadow. Its eerie calm mesmerized. Such was an agreeable contentment. My soul felt a little lighter.

A slight rustle in the prairie grass procured a pair of tortoiseshell gems gazing at me from beneath the shadows of tall blonde stalks. It isn’t the cats that the suburbanites fear; it’s the unwanted attention they bring to those who may tempt the golden rule. I stared back, but Minne was unfazed. She was clearly better practiced at being unperceptive.

“One of the benefits of being married as long as we have is the ability to instantly comprehend one another’s thoughts. Not a word need spoken.” Minne was not her usual joking self. The tone was soft, but her words were somber. “You and David should really give it a try some time.

“Besides, not everyone cracks in the suburbs, you know? Some of us are not here to become devils or go mad. Some of us are just here so that Lucifer can validate his godlikeness, to prove to himself – or prove to The One – that he is capable of fostering contentment in his Maker’s absence. Hamlin and I are contented here, but we can see that you and David can’t be.” Minne’s sweet smile was filled with warmth as she turned to look at me. She delivered a peck on my cheek and hastily whispered into my ear, “*Auf Wiedersehen, darling.*”

Minne kicked off her peep toe heels one at a time into the grassy side yard. She trotted down the wooden steps and jogged towards her backyard scooping up one shoe at a time in each extended hand. I watched her jump her back porch steps and disappear into the house. This was one of those ‘goodbyes’ that would sting all the more later. Too much haste.

A brush of soft fur and quivering purr on my legs snapped me to attention. My head darted back and forth to make certain that I was not being watched. I was. The woman next door was dressed in a floral housecoat carrying a full laundry basket to a transfiguring

clothesline. A few curlers popped off her head as she dropped the basket and ran into her bungalow. The slamming door projected a thunderous echo. Crossing my arms I rolled my eyes to the heavens (I presumed) and murmured through clenched lips, “Oh, for the love of all that’s holy.”

The calico cat sprang up onto the deck railing. It meowed at me twice. He curled up his tail pointing the furry tip like a finger towards the boundless prairie horizon. “I don’t speak cat, but I’m guessing that my choices are limited, and – despite my feelings about the meadow – I should just trust you anyways,” I translated matter-of-factly. He leapt down to the green emerald grass and looked back at me with paws poised and arched tail directing our course. The golden grasses began to rustle and swish as the agile feline advanced. An animesque bubble of air ballooned behind him; I knew I had to run inside its current.

I jumped off the deck barefoot and landed on two feet securely laced into my jogging shoes. I met the tail end of the air current with ease, but I was being jostled like a compact car barreling down the highway behind a semi-truck. The tops of the tall grasses swung violently like grasping claws with jagged nails. My pajamas were catching, and I was lagging too far behind. I staggered as gusts of furious crosswinds nipped at my heels. My living life flashed in my mind: fishing with Dad, Mom and Dena crying, busting Arthur, Rachel and Blake playing, Seth’s head exploding, and falling and falling and.... “Snap out of it!” I shouted. Grunting, I pumped my legs harder and pushed my momentum to the brink. My pajamas disintegrated from my figure and sprayed like liquid behind me staining a dirty spray of faded browns and grays. I was sleek in my fitted running attire. I was gaining speed and ran steadier inside the bubble the closer I caught up to the cat. It was like my soul was a muscle pumping numinous adrenaline through the very fabric of my shell. I felt amazing.

CHAPTER 19

The Escape

The cat halted, and I almost ran past him. Him being David. He was reclining in a small clearing of bent stalks petting a gray tabby cat.

“She’s really quite sweet,” he purred, “I’ve forgotten how much I miss animal companionship.”

I felt an urgency to be a killjoy. “Have you noticed the sky is getting darker again?”

“Yes,” David surrendered an unbothered sigh, “It’s all about to go pair shaped.”

“We’ll just have to stick together as long as we can,” I looked up musingly, “But at least we can avoid being another notch in Hanriette’s broomstick.”

He forced a sympathetic laugh. David stood up and looked me over longingly. We moved to embrace and thought better of it. I was so happy to see him.

“Well,” he broke the silence, “I suppose Minne spoke with you in mixed metaphors using exaggerated hand gestures.” David’s imitation was quite canning, and frightfully feminine.

“Not exactly, but I suppose that’s what Hamlin did. And he told you about Hanriette’s intentions as well?”

“Quite,” David smiled timidly; just like when we first met. We stood awkwardly watching the two cats watch us. Their heads bobbed back and forth like engrossed match

spectators following the tennis ball bounce back and forth, back and forth. “I can’t believe that French *chinne* set us up.”

“Canadian.”

“Right...,” David cleared his throat and scratched the back of his neck mechanically, “Yes, well....”

“So,” I started nonchalantly swinging my arms, “You’re a sixth devil, huh?”

David laughed like a pirate with hands on hips, “I almost wish I had a swallow of tea to spray!” My face went blank and for a moment my soul felt disconnect from him. “I’m sorry, that wasn’t funny,” he apologized as he shifted his weight regrettably. “My sense of humor has gone a bit askew since the deposit was made into my account.”

“Yeah, also, what is the deal with these *accounts*, and how can they even exist?”

“I am the account.” David paused to see if I comprehended. I didn’t. “It’s simple, really. A piece of my soul is now one-sixth evil. They’re just expressions... accounts... deposits... deposits made into accounts....”

Ouch. “Oh.” I watched him hesitantly search my face for a reaction. “It’s okay. I understand.” Now it made too much sense. It’s like his pure soul was a wholesome yellow cupcake suffocated in a sickening sugary frosting with a dusting of evil sprinkles seeping through the goo. It made me ache.

“This is silly. In for a penny, in for a pound.” David reached his arms out and shook into existence a plaid picnic blanket to cover the scratchy prairie grass. He said, “Come here,” as he sat down and patted the blanket. We lay on the rough grass watching the sky grow darker. David folded an arm beneath his head and extended the other as a pillow for mine. My calico cat sat on the corner of the blanket and stared at us dubiously; however, the gray tabby cat curled up on David’s belly for a nap.

We lay quietly side by side staring upwards. The ashen sky looked as if it was congealing in spots like drips of gray food coloring slowly spreading in soiled water. I felt much better knowing that we could boldly face our impending doom together. We waited under the ever darkening ashen sky.

“I love you so much, David.”

“I love you, Bly,” he bent his elbow to grasp the hand resting at my shoulder, “It is ironic that I am better with you in death than I ever was in life.”

“You know we’re screwed, right?”

“Pardon?” David turned his head to face me with arched eyebrows.

“It means that,” I thoughtfully paused, “it’s all gone ‘tits up’,” I explained in my unintentionally offensive Cockney.

“Ha!” David laughed inopportunely, again. “I understand... the cap’s on a bit tight – *screeeww’d.*”

I gave him the look perfected by all wives and mothers earthbound or otherwise. Wow. Talk about surrendering all seriousness.

“Oh, I’ve done it again, haven’t I?” He sucked air through his teeth like an Englishman staring regretfully at the bottom of an empty bottle. “Yes, well, our burning in Hell appears to be inevitable.”

“While we’re on the subject,” with a figurative pin ready to burst the metaphorical bubble, “I am grateful for what you did to protect me, but framing Benjamin was wrong.”

David scoffed like a teenage boy busted with a six pack of Leinenkugel, “It’s a bit naive to assume a moral code exists here. He probably had it coming, Ben died and descended into Hell without any help from me, didn’t he?” An exasperated sigh quickly followed, “I can’t believe I just said that. Never mind me – I feel so peculiar. We’re suburbanites because we have

morals. You're right, it was grossly wrong to frame the poor lad. I wish I could go back and change it or make it up to him one way or another. I'm sorry, my love."

"I forgive you...." Of course, forgiveness was easy. Forgetting would be harder. How could I forget? David framed Ben just because he conveniently peddled in circles and may or may not have been in proximity when love-was-in-the-making or perhaps dreams-were-being-dreamt. Ben was a magician's deflection; gee Satan, look what's in my right hand while I flip a coin in the left. Now, all we had to do is stop all the things that were drawing attention to us, and Benjamin would have inherited full blame while burning up. Already it seemed Ben's sacrifice was going to be in vain.

"But, I'll tell you this," he piped up, "I can't go on... like *this*." David tapped a finger on his chest, "I am already feeling detached from my senses. More specifically, my soul. It's like being a bit pissed-up with my inhibitions pulled down around me ankles. And I'm restless, to say the least."

"I can see that," I empathized, "I hurt for you." And I did.

His blue eyes looked at me gravely. "I feel awful that you do."

"Well, at least that stick has been pulled out of your ass." Finally, we both had something to laugh about together. If the place, circumstance, and atmosphere were subtracted, it could have been a lovely little moment cuddled up on a picnic blanket in the great wide open. The grass blades stretched up and beyond our lounging bodies like babies secure in their bassinets. But most securities are false.

The dozing tabby's tail tip flickered from time to time encouraging David to continue scratching behind her fuzzy ears. "It's nice that they can shield us for a little while at least."

"How does it – I mean *they* – work exactly?"

“You mean the cats?” he looked at me from pensively, “I don’t know exactly. They’ve got to be dead like us, otherwise how would they get here?” The contented gray tabby purred approvingly and slightly opened her squinting eyes. David rubbed the back of her ears and encouraged in a baby voice, “You’re a pretty girl, you are. Are you dead, are you? Yes, you are; yes you are, pretty girl.” The gray tabby lifted her head and pawed a fluffy foot on David’s chest.

I wrinkled my eyebrows and lifted my head slightly. “She answered you, David.” I looked over at the crabby calico staring at me sternly and then up again at the darkening ashen atmosphere. It felt like the sky was encroaching like a ravenous wolf tracking bunny prints in fresh snow. “David,” I tapped his side, “Ask her where they’re from.”

David, catching on, cooed, “Pretty girl, are you from Hell? Are you; are you a pretty hellish kitty?” Huh?” Tabby curled her head back into her fluffy body and closed her eyes drowsily. We looked at each other wide eyed.

“That looks like a ‘no,’” I translated.

“Pretty girl,” David encouraged playing with her tail, “are you a ghostly ghost kitty cat from earthly Earth? Aye?” Tabby didn’t move a muscle. There was only one option left, and it seemed impossible. Hope bubbled to the surface of our minds. Hesitantly and almost afraid of the answer, David probed, “Uh, are you from Heaven?”

The tabby cat uncurled her back and downward-dog-stretched, pawing at David’s chest. Sitting up she meowed an approving smile. The calico cat meowed annoyedly a sound reminiscent of a 90’s sitcom-esque *duh*.

The calico cat then meowed a few choruses to which the tabby turned her head and seemed to answer back. The calico stood and arched his back in agitation. Finally, the tabby

stretched and grudgingly sprang from David's chest to join the calico. She casually licked her paw. Another angry hissy meow probed us to unwillingly rise as well.

"He's definitely trying to tell us something," David deduced looking down at them.

"Excellent," I Watson-ed.

Previously, I would have certainly insisted that felines don't speak human, but that was before I witnessed a calico cat sighing annoyedly in our direction. The added eye roll was probably unnecessary. He stood on all four paws and turned around. The calico cat curled the tip of his tail all the way down to its base making an almost perfect fuzzy ring. The tabby cat also turned around, but instead pushed the length of her tail in and out through the calico's circled tail. The point having been received, he sprang into the meadow. The gray tabby cat brushed an affectionate goodbye on David's leg and darted into the tall grasses following after the other.

A gentle breeze was a foreshadowing of the violent gales coming soon. The bubble was bursting, cracking like domed glass, and the gloom of the ashen sky began to intensify. Its dreary mass began to swell and spiral. But when it is most dark, one must switch on the light.

Enlightenment burst from David's sparkling eyes. Inhaling deeply a sweet smile delivered an unalterable reality, "For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.¹"

We were fish flailing on hot dry dirt; a good rain will wash us back into the lake. The net was immaterial. I saw it. Literally, metaphysically, or whatever... faith, love, hope are free of all boundaries. The Truth reigns, "And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from

¹ Romans 8:38-39, King James Version (KJV); King James authorized the Church of England in 1604, the first addition was completed in 1611.

God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.² Amen! Now we just had to make it rain.

A current swept across the meadow. The tall jostling stalks danced in all directions. There wasn't a moment to lose. But like the initial burst of intoxicating chemistry, the body cannot be willed to take it slow. The desire to consume overpowers. Our bodies collided and our clothes melted off of us with rips and pulls. Our shells went hard, and our souls glowed blurring the line between his body and mine.

David's groping hands moved down my back and rolled over my butt. The tall grasses rose and to meet my posture and bounced my fall as David lifted my parted legs. The meadow lifted to entwine a cushion for his knees. He pressed into me. The blades of grass met his fingers as he grasped my wrists to gain leverage. I met his thrusting with a rise and an arch. I spread my legs further and moved my hands to grasp his tight broad shoulders. In and out the grass met his knees and arched my back. We were exposed and wild.

Needle point prisms of light rained down dotting the blackening sky and piercing through the darkness. Several dozen thunderous meteors plummeted from above like steaming coals. They spun and whistled like bombs falling to the earth. All around us they quaked the ground with violent tremors. The craters began to crack; hideous demons were hatching. But it didn't stop us; it didn't even slow us down.

A dome of light illuminated around us in a perfect cylindrical cocoon. The meadow stalks pulsed in waves and gusts around us to the rhythm of our impulsion. Nothing – not even

² Romans 8:38-39, New Living Translation (NLT); first published by an American based publishing house in 1996.

evil – could come near us. The prairie grasses grew and stretched above us as they wove and intertwined an impenetrable sanctuary. Their golden texture diluted into the wash of pure radiant light in our orgasm. The ground fell beneath us, and we were suspended in the center of the sphere.

Bliss of epic magnitude washed over us. Two became one as the quivering pounding of our every member pulsated in a harmony that could not be distinguished one from another. And for a beautiful thoughtless moment, consciousness floated, gravity soared, and ecstasy embraced as we transparently gazed into one another's eyes and deep into the other's soul. We eased into euphoric tranquility.

The meadow disappeared. The light went out. The dome collapsed and the ground swallowed us whole. We were buried somewhere below. And finally, an unadulterated unfeeling, engulfing blackness descended.

CHAPTER 20
Moments Later

“And so we begin our quest – full of mystery and intrigue – stumbling blindly through the darkest, most lonesome void of Hell. Our hero can’t see his hand in front of his face, but it doesn’t matter because he’s holding hers – the woman he loves. Only one thought lingers in their minds: will our journey towards the Waiting Room end in a successful escape... or agonizing torture...?”

“David, are you narrating us?”

“Yeah,” his tone drummed an upbeat, “I’m doing a dramatic voiceover, like in an art nouveau film.”

“It’s bad enough that we’re stumbling around in the dark, but someone might hear you.”

“Well, if we can’t see him, he can’t see us.”

“How do you know if... never mind, are you done rambling on?” I stage whispered, “We’ve got to get out of here.”

A silence that began awkwardly soon became depressing. The cavern certainly paralleled the mood. We blindly tiptoed through the narrow cave with fingers grasping damp edges and feet navigating the rocky uneven floor. Any conjuring trick that could illuminate the cave had not sustained outside of the suburb. Oh, the darkness felt far lonelier once David stopped talking.

“Bly?”

“Yes, David?”

“Do *you* want to narrate for a little while?”

I pensively paused then sighed, “Even though it was super-darker than any night sky our heroes had ever seen, venturing into the unknown was a lot less scary because even Hell could not extinguish their love. They felt hope that they could escape from Hades. After all, the two soul mates met there, fell in love there, and together fled the Suburbs of Hell....”