



The Grateful Damned Chapters 1-20

Michael Blunk

This book is lovingly dedicated to my sister Rhonda.

Introduction

Perhaps it is just me, but I have long suspected readers prefer brief introductory remarks to lengthy, rambling prologues. I understand, and as I hope to score points with book lovers everywhere, let me quickly state this tale is not about the afterlife. True, much of the story takes place in a highly fanciful Hades, the gathering place of the dead, and I certainly believe in the everlasting nature of the human soul, but in no way am I attempting to offer my readers an accurate portrayal of life beyond the grave.

With this said, I am confident you will uncover the motive behind this story in no time at all.

Chapter 1

I found myself shuffling along a broad, well-lit corridor. Around me were hundreds, no, make that thousands of people, a few laughing, some appearing wide-eyed and nubilous, others whispering among themselves, and still others craning their necks toward the many mammoth-sized video screens suspended from the corridor's high ceiling. Loud music, eerie but surprisingly upbeat, and of a genre wholly unfamiliar to me, blared from the overhead loudspeakers. During the occasional breaks in the music, a cultured man's voice announced, "Greetings, new arrivals. You are cordially invited to join us for a free, fun filled as well as informative welcoming seminar at the New Babylon Civic Center located straight ahead." Timed to the rhythm of the music were pulsating bursts of dazzling, near blinding illumination accompanied by a hundred restless, darting beams of laser light. Though unsettling and surreal, the atmosphere was unexpectedly festive.

The numerous overhead screens that hung from the ceiling rafters flashed a series of cryptic messages:

Welcome to Hades!

I'll Be Damned!

Hell—We Love You Just the Way You Are!

Free at Last!

Never Apologize! Never!

Devilishly Good Times Without the Pitchforks!

Congratulations! You're Dead!

Hades—A Place Where the Party Never Ends!

Yes, You Were Right! Damn Right!

Inhibitions? Who Needs Them?

Damn, You're Good!

Dance to the Music of Your DNA!

And to Think You Might Have Missed All This for Heaven!

God Can't Touch You Here!

Live Profanely!

Everyone Here Is Gratefully Dead!

Life Begins When the Heartbeat Ends!

A-Ticket, A-Tasket, You Won't Stay in that Casket!

Unlike the legion of others crowded about me, I had been warned what to expect, yet despite the advantages of having been briefed prior to arrival, my head was swimming in a sea of confusion. So much was happening. Moving forward on unsteady legs, my overwhelmed senses struggled against the rapid-fire bursts of lights set to the frantic beat of music that can only be described as from another world.

I had arrived in this place, this gathering place of the dead, under singular circumstances. Perhaps the woman to my left had been killed when her motorcar had been struck by a tractor trailer. How had the man ahead of me come to this place? Had he lost a protracted battle with cancer? Perhaps his heart had suddenly seized. And what of the person to my right? Old age? A self-inflicted bullet wound to the temple of the head? Among this assembly, whose mortal bodies were being prepared for burial or cremation, I alone had come to this place, not by way of corporeal death, but by translation, and unlike the others, I would be returning to the topside of earth at the end of my journey.

The events leading to this unlikely sojourn into the underworld began taking shape about a month ago inside, of all places, a twenty-four hour diner that catered to insomniacs and late-night revelers with appetites for the baser variety of foodstuffs. I was one of the insomniacs.

With grim curiosity, I noted how the little pool of coffee standing on the tabletop, left behind, no doubt, by a careless patron who had occupied this seat before me, reflected the eatery's discolored ceiling tiles when viewed at just the right angle, and by tapping the table's surface ever so slightly, the mirrored light from the florescent ceiling lamp danced and shimmered, thus adding to my late night amusement. According to the 7-

Up wall clock, it was nearly 3 AM. The Silver Dollar Pancake House was our burg's only all night diner; even so, business appeared rather anemic despite the establishment's lack of competition. A giggly, intoxicated couple huddled in a booth near the door. Parked on a counter stool, a big, brawny fellow garbed in a "Party Naked" tee shirt with the sleeves cut out noisily sipped from a ceramic mug of coffee while aimlessly toying with his phone. And there was me. The waitress, a rather pretty girl in her late twenties, emerged from the kitchen carrying a tray of scrambled eggs, sausage links, waffles, juice, and coffee. Passing my table, she said, "I'll take your order just as soon as I serve the drunk couple their breakfast. Oh, I'll wipe up that puddle of coffee, too. Sorry about the messy table."

Why I was seated inside a disreputable eatery at this hour, I could not say. I mused thinking the late night diner scene was eerily reminiscent of Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks*. Perhaps I was there because it was 3 AM and, stricken with loneliness, I wanted to be in the society of others, but now that I was here, the incessant chattering of the inebriated couple annoyed me and the beefy chap's hairy shoulders and loud slurping grated my sensibilities. I missed Abbie. I had lost her nearly a year ago. Perhaps the worst of the grieving process was behind me, but I would be grappling with loneliness and a troublesome pack of seemingly unanswerable questions for a long time.

Swiping the pool of coffee with a heavily stained cloth rag, the young woman said, "My name is Carly, and I'll be your server. Sorry about the messy table. The poor old soul who sat here before you had shaky hands. Can I start you off with coffee? Cream? Sugar? Both? Neither?"

"Black coffee will be fine," I answered. "No need for a menu."

"No appetite, eh?" she asked. "Are you sure? Maybe a jumbo stack of fluffy buttermilk pancakes swimming in maple syrup would cheer you up. Add a few strips of crisp bacon or a couple of smoky sausage links, and you'd be good as new."

“Just coffee, thank you,” I answered.

With no shortage of persistence, she asked, “How about a made-to-order omelet? Three large, Grade A eggs and whatever you like—diced green peppers, mushrooms, bacon bits, cheddar cheese—as my Aunt Edna used to say, ‘Begin the day by lining your stomach with a hearty breakfast, and this gloomy old world will look a whole lot brighter.’”

“It shows, right?”

Brushing a wisp of strawberry blonde hair away from her eyes, she answered, “I wouldn’t wish to pry, mister, but you look like you lost your best friend. Anyway, I hope whatever bad luck is troubling you goes away, and if there’s anything I can do, just ask.” As she spoke, I perceived a welcomed measure of genuine concern in both her voice and in her countenance.

“My wife’s been gone nearly a year, but just as I think I am finally ready to move on with life, another tidal wave of grief blindsides me and, once again, I am overwhelmed by a new round of pain and feelings of emptiness.”

I immediately regretted dumping such a heap of emotional baggage upon a stranger, but she listened to my doleful rhapsody with a sympathetic ear. “I’m so sorry,” the young woman apologized, “Here you are, wrestling with grief, and I’m pushing pancakes and omelets. You must forgive me, but the owner of this restaurant, Mr. Weatherby, says I’m to try suggestive selling with customers who simply order coffee. According to the boss, it doesn’t pay to keep the doors open all night unless customers order from the menu, so I’m to try what he calls ‘suggestive selling’ to boost profits. Sit tight and I’ll bring your coffee.”

According to the FAA's accident report, carburetor ice had caused the airplane's six-cylinder Franklin engine to sputter and die. It was the day after our wedding; my bride and I were on our way to a fly-in when the accident occurred. What was I thinking, I wondered, when suggesting we honeymoon at an antique airshow in Oshkosh? Why not a proper honeymoon? How often had she mentioned a longing to see Paris? Why not Paris? Oshkosh? Really? At the first sign of mechanical trouble, I applied the carburetor heat control, but as the linkage had broken, the formation of menacing ice crystals spelled the engine's doom.

"Don't worry, Abbie," I assured with all the confidence I could muster, "I've practiced engine-out procedures dozens of times. Everything will be fine. This sturdy old bird will glide about nine feet for every foot of altitude we lose, and that pasture up ahead looks like just the place to set her down."

After setting the transponder to 7700 and making a quick Mayday call detailing our location, I advised Abbie to tighten her shoulder harness as I aimed the nose of the aircraft toward the welcoming expanse of pastureland. As the propeller windmilled futilely in the slipstream, the absence of the piston engine's usual roar cast an eerie spell inside the plane's spartan cockpit. Attempting to hide her anxiety, Abbie asked, "We'll be okay, won't we?"

Returning with a smile, a chipped ceramic mug, and a small carafe of coffee, the young server said, "I brewed a fresh pot of java just for you."

"Thanks! Speaking of this employer of yours, is this man Weatherby a tough boss? A tyrant?"

With a demure little sigh, she whispered, "I'm lucky to have this job, such as it is. You see, mister..."

"My friends call me Woody."

“You see, Woody, I got myself into a spot of trouble a while back and, well, please don’t hold this against me, but I did seventeen months for being really, really stupid and believing my worthless ex-boyfriend’s pack of lies. As a condition of my release, I must remain gainfully employed or I’m in violation. Mr. Weatherby knows this, and he says he’s going to cut me loose and telephone my parole officer if late night sales don’t pick up.”

“A despot with a mercenary heart, right?”

“It’s my own fault,” she said. “If you’ll excuse me, I’d better make my rounds, but I’ll be back to warm up your coffee in a few.”

“Not so fast,” said I. “Please grab your pad and a pen, for I’m suddenly feeling ravenous. Are you ready? I’ll have three, no, make that four eggs over easy, hash brown potatoes, a stack of buckwheat pancakes with butter and real maple syrup—none of that Mrs. Butterworth, thank you, toast, whole wheat with marmalade, three or four sausage links, another three or four strips of bacon, a bowl of oatmeal with real cream and sweetened with brown sugar, a tall glass of orange juice, and keep the coffee coming.”

“What? No grits?” she asked.

“I thought grits were only served in the south.”

“You want cheese in your grits?”

“Cheddar.”

“You’re a prince,” she said. “I suppose my job is secure for at least another day.”

“I’m no prince—just an insomniac with a hefty appetite.”

Two nights later, I found myself back at the Silver Dollar Pancake House. To be sure, I had not come for the all-night diner’s rubbery sausage links or the greasy-spoon atmosphere that reeked of smoke and old cooking oil; rather, I had hoped to resume my previous conversation with the pretty young server named Carly. It is true that I had found her pleasing to the eye, for I have long harbored a particular weakness for strawberry blondes, but it was not physical attraction—at least, I do not think it was physical attraction—that had caused me to desire her company. I had met someone who was hurting as much as me and, perhaps, this mutual state of unhappiness was drawing me to her. She had shown genuine concern two nights previous, and, in my present state, kindness was the balm I most needed.

On this night, business was brisk and most of the tables were occupied by impatient diners demanding their pancakes, eggs, and coffee. Carly, the only server on duty, looked haggard and shopworn as she bounced from table to table attempting to placate querulous patrons demanding to know why the kitchen was slow in fulfilling their orders. “How long does it take to whip up a western omelet?” snapped a rather garrulous woman whose facial cosmetics appeared to have been applied during a drinking binge. “I don’t give a damn how backed up your cook is! Tell him I want my western omelet now!”

I had been seated in my booth a full twenty minutes before Carly appeared before me with an order pad. “I am so sorry about the pokey service, sir,” she apologized, “but we’ve been slammed with orders, and the cook is a new hire, and, say, I remember you from a couple of nights ago. It’s Woody, right?”

“You’ve a good memory,” I answered.

“How could I forget? You ordered the mega-breakfast, and, oh, thank you ever so much for the super generous tip. No one has ever slipped me a one hundred dollar bill. At

first, I worried that it might be counterfeit, after all, this isn't the kind of place where servers strike it rich, but the bank teller assured me it was genuine and believe me, your generosity could not have come at a more opportune time. Thank you, again!"

"Business appears good—too good, perhaps. Where did all these people come from?" I asked.

"It has been a madhouse," she answered wistfully. "Billy T's Tennessee Outlaws were performing at Bud's and when the bar closed at 2, their drunken country music fans brought their appetites here."

"Hey, waitress!" shouted a patron. "How about warming up my coffee!"

"Be right back," she said. "Don't go away."

After tending to the highly vocal demands of a dozen or so inebriated diners, Carly finally returned to my table with another apology. "I am so, so sorry I've kept you waiting." Hastily setting a cup of black coffee before me, she asked, "Ready for another of those mammoth, belly-busting breakfasts? Eggs, bacon, sausage, pancakes, fried potatoes...the works?"

"Would your Mr. Weatherby object if I just had coffee?"

"Are you kidding? With tonight's receipts as good as they are," she answered, "he'll have no cause to complain. Besides, I'm certain our new cook can use a break in the action, but if you change your mind about eating, I'll be back to take your order."

What I most craved was normalcy—a wife, children, holidays spent with family, and a sense of belonging. I never knew my mother and I was raised by a resident tutor hired by my father, an influential man who lived several hundred miles away. In Abbie, I had hoped to become as one in flesh, bring children into the world, and build a life based on

love, unity, and mutual respect. My dreams were modest. Perhaps ambition should be made of sterner stuff, but all I had ever wanted was a wife, kids, and a simple, unpretentious life.

Besides cake, balloons, and gifts, my boyhood birthday celebrations included a yearly video conference with my father's attorney, Lydia Hamilton-Farnsworth. During these video conferences, she encouraged me to refer to her as Aunt Lydia, which I unceremoniously refused to do, for my father, who was a stickler for formality, insisted I address him as Mr. McCormick. As I was neither permitted to call him Dad nor Father, I was certain he would frown upon me greeting Lydia Hamilton-Farnsworth as Aunt Lydia. For the record, these annual birthday teleconferences were intended to keep me current as to any changes in my father's last will and testament.

After settling in front of the computer screen, Ms. Hamilton-Farnsworth would say, "Happy birthday, Woody. My, how you've grown since I last saw you a year ago. How are your studies? Have you made any new friends? How are you and Dr. Felton getting along? Yes, you are shooting up like a weed."

Considering that I was seated rather than standing during these yearly video conferences, I wondered how "Aunt Lydia" could have possibly determined how much I had grown. As to her condescending inquiries about my school studies, my handful of friends, and my relationship with Dr. Felton, she never gave me an opportunity to answer. As a child, I was keenly aware of the gratuitous insincerity of most adults, but I did not mind, for the sooner the teleconference ended, the sooner I could tuck into my cake and ice cream.

"Very well, then. Let's get down to business, birthday boy. Upon your father's death, you will receive an annual income equivalent to three times the yearly salary of the average college educated worker living in California," she would explain. "If the typical graduate earns, say, \$50,000 annually, you will receive—how much? Can you do the math? I am certain you are fully capable of calculating the sum of three times \$50,000.

Your father tells me you are a very bright young fellow. As a safeguard against inflation, your quarterly payments will be adjusted according to the annual cost of living index. I am sure your Dr. Felton will explain this to you later. Do you understand what your Aunt Lydia has told you thus far, Woody?"

After noting the nod of my head, she would continue, "Add this to whatever you earn as a gainfully employed adult, and you are guaranteed a comfortable income for the remainder of your life. Your father does not approve of an ostentatious lifestyle, but he would not have you living in want. Has your Aunt Lydia explained this to your satisfaction?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Referring to a printed list before her, my father's attorney went on to explain the remaining terms and conditions of his will. "Let's skip the legal jargon. To receive this income from your father's estate, you must first complete a four-year degree program from an accredited college or university. You want to go to college, don't you, Woody?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Of course, you do," she agreed. "Your father, who has little faith in American education, believes most post-secondary institutions are fundamentally unsound; therefore, he has prepared a list of seventeen approved schools from which you may choose. Enrollment in any college or university deemed unacceptable will result in a complete and total forfeiture of your inheritance. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Excellent. By the by, the full cost of your education will be paid by your father. What a fortunate young fellow you are."

“Yes, ma’am.”

“There are a few other conditions tied to your inheritance. First, if you remain in California, you must never reside in either greater Los Angeles or the San Francisco metropolitan area. If you choose to relocate east, you are not to make your home in New York, Boston, or in either city’s outlying suburbs. Finally, if you would choose to take residence in the Midwest, you are strictly prohibited from residing in either Chicago or Minneapolis. Your father believes the inhabitants of these aforesaid mentioned cities are fundamentally unsound and would not have you contaminated by association. If you were to make your home in any of these cities, the payments from your father’s estate will promptly end. Do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Los Angeles and San Francisco are filthy places,” she added.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“New York and Boston are equally uninhabitable.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Chicago and Minneapolis are loathsome places—disagreeable people and disagreeable weather.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“That’s right. Let’s move on. Once you reach adulthood, you are prohibited from engaging in any career related to the entertainment industry. This includes television, motion pictures, gaming, and the recording industry. Your father believes entertainers are fundamentally unsound and would not have you contaminated by association.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Working in the entertainment field will cause all payments from your father’s estate to cease. You understand, of course.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Payments from your father’s estate will come to an immediate end if you marry or cohabitate with anyone engaged in the entertainment industry. As I said, your father is convinced people involved in the entertainment industry are fundamentally unsound. You would not want to marry an actress or a pop singer, would you, Woody?”

“Yes, ma’am...I mean, no, ma’am.”

“As to career options, your father, who is essentially a lenient man, wants to demonstrate a measure of flexibility as to your career choices, yet there are notable terms and conditions relating to employment by which you must agree. In an effort to prevent you from making a career decision that is fundamentally unsound, he is insisting that you engage in one of eleven possible career choices. I have a comprehensive addendum to your father’s will that details the vocational do’s and don’ts by which you are to abide. Do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“We are nearing the end of our conversation, so please be patient for another moment or two. Say, did Dr. Felton bake his famously delicious chocolate cherry cake for your birthday?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Dr. Felton baked my favorite chocolate cherry cake every birthday.

“Very well, then. All that remains are the instructions regarding your father’s Republic RC-3 Seabee.” The attorney was referring to my father’s single engine amphibious aircraft. Built shortly after World War II, the Seabee is an ungainly looking light plane capable of operating from land or water. Most light aircraft are sleek and graceful, but the Seabee is the ugly duckling of private aviation. Despite its homeliness, my father loved his Seabee dearly and took to the sky as often as his hectic schedule permitted. Because of a heart murmur discovered around his fiftieth year, my father was unable to pass the mandatory flight physical and, as such, saw his license revoked. Not to be undone by the flight surgeon’s verdict, he continued flying his beloved Seabee within the law by hiring a pilot to occupy the right seat. My father handled all the cockpit duties; his copilot was simply onboard should the unthinkable occur.

“Upon your father’s death, you will have three months in which to earn your private pilot license. You will then fly the Seabee a minimum of one hundred hours per year. The costs of storage, maintenance, and operational expenses will be covered by a separate fund from your father’s estate. In other words, the fuel, hangar rental, and upkeep will cost you nothing, but the airplane must be kept in its current meticulous condition, that is, the airframe and powerplant are to remain fundamentally sound. The plane may not be sold during your lifetime. And, again, you must log no less than one hundred hours annually. Failure to abide by any of these terms and conditions will result in the suspension of your benefits.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Imagine owning your own airplane. What a lucky boy you are.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I was a lucky boy.

Sometime around 4 AM, the diner began to empty. I had hoped to have a word with Carly, but after the customers filed out, she was left with the arduous tasks of clearing tables, wiping spills, and sweeping trash, debris, and clutter from the checkerboard tile

floor. From time to time, another patron would stroll in, so it was nearly daybreak when, at long last, Carly was free.

“What a night,” she exclaimed, “My feet hurt, my back aches, my head is throbbing, and before I crawl between the sheets, I’ve an appointment with my parole officer. Say, my shift ends in fifteen minutes. Can I get you anything else before I go? Pancakes? An omelet? More coffee?”

“This is a bit awkward,” I hesitated, “but I was hoping to have a few words with you.” Sensing my approach had caught her off guard, I continued, “My motives are pure—I’m not a predator and you have no reason to be afraid of me—I simply need to be in the company of someone who, like me, has endured loss.”

Fixing her inscrutable eyes on me, she took a long pause while studying my face with an almost unbearable intensity before whispering, “I understand, Woody. I’ll meet you outside the diner as soon as my shift is over.”

Chapter 2

The lettering on the storefront’s plate glass window read as follows:

A Sanctuary for Women

Affirmation

Transformation

Empowerment

Healing

Counseling

Abortion Referral Services

Free Contraceptives Available

Queer Friendly

Toxic Masculinity Not Allowed Beyond These Doors

Rev. Nadine W. Crenshaw, M.Div.

Proudly Funded by
St. Basilides Episcopal Church
Marcion Methodist Church
The League of Presbyterian Feminists
The Interfaith Council for Equity and Restorative Justice of California

“This must be the place,” said I to myself. Located about two blocks south of the halfway house where Carly was staying, it was my new friend from the Silver Dollar Pancake House who, in a roundabout way, suggested I pay a call to the storefront mission’s chaplain for spiritual guidance.

As it happened, Carly had agreed to join me in conversation over breakfast before her scheduled visit with the county probation officer. Feeling the acute pangs of loneliness, I was appreciative of her company. Like me, she had experienced terrible loss. Her life had been shattered into a thousand broken pieces. Because of a marked lack of discernment coupled with misguided trust in an unworthy man she had once loved, all of which she blamed solely on herself, the young woman had suffered the forfeiture of her liberty, her dignity, and her reputation. As far as I could determine, her largely dysfunctional family was either unwilling or incapable of assisting her, so here she was, desperately attempting to rise from the ashes while slinging pancakes and sausages at an all-night diner.

In Carly, I had met someone whose wounds were as deep and terrible as my own. As to familial support, rather than being dysfunctional as was Carly’s family, my own people were simply not there. My father had intentionally isolated me from the small handful of aunts, uncles, and cousins who shared a common bloodline. Other than what scant little my father had told me, my mother was an enigma shrouded in a misty haze of legend and a few grainy photographs. Likewise, I knew little about my grandparents beyond an occasional anecdote. Dr. Felton, a reserved, studious man known for his dignified,

scholarly demeanor, was, perhaps, closer to me than anyone else, that is, until Abbie came into my life. For once, I belonged to someone and this someone belonged to me. Life took on new meaning. With Abbie, I rediscovered lost pleasures in what I had come to consider mundane and commonplace. I found renewed joy in the laughter of a small child, the radiant glory of a morning sky, and the pulsating flashes of soft light as nocturnal swarms of fireflies signaled incandescent professions of love to their mates. With Abbie, food tasted better. Sleep was more refreshing. Even the more unruly of my high school students seemed less intolerable and better behaved. Life with Abbie was good. And then she was gone.

As we lingered over breakfast, I showed Carly my wounds and she showed me her wounds. I spoke. She spoke. I listened. She listened. I cried. She cried. I shared in her grief. She shared in my grief. We even experienced a moment or two of laughter and for the first time since Abbie's death, I did not feel so terribly alone. Perhaps she did not feel so terribly alone, too.

I instinctively trusted Carly. She was a good listener. And, equally important, she was there. "I simply cannot make sense of Abbie's death," I explained as my breakfast companion helped herself to another slice of toast. "Thousands of people die every day, but why should anyone have to die the day after their wedding? Could there be some hidden purpose in all this—a justifiable reason behind Abbie's death that I cannot comprehend, or is this transitory life nothing more than a random, meaningless, not-so-funny cosmic farce? As I see it, the universe is a cold, cruel, and uncaring place. Am I wrong?"

"I never went to college," Carly answered, "so maybe I'm not as clever as you, but I don't think the universe is capable of being either good or bad. The universe is just a lot of space with stars and planets and a few comets, and I don't think stars and planets are capable of being, like what you said, cold, cruel, and uncaring. Anyway, that's my thinking."

“Well then, what if there is a God somewhere out there? And what if this God, for reasons known only by him, decreed that my Abbie had to die? If this were the case, I wonder if he would explain Abbie’s death if I prayed for an explanation.”

Carly shrugged her shoulders. “You’re asking the wrong person, Woody. I can’t help you with this. I’m not a religious person, though I’m not anti-religious, either. Anyway, I suppose you could try praying for an answer. If there is a God, he might be willing to tell you what you want to know. I mean, what do you have to lose by trying?”

Still wrangling with my thoughts, I asked, “What if there is a God who is so preoccupied with running the universe, he doesn’t have the time or the inclination to answer prayers or to rescue people trapped in their desperate situations? What if this God is too indifferent or too busy for the likes of you and me?”

“I’ve never given much thought for or against the existence of God, and I suppose God, if he happens to exist, has never given much thought about me, but if you’re looking for spiritual answers, why ask me? What does a lowly waitress with a felony conviction know about religious matters? You need the advice of an expert, so why not take your spiritual questions to a priest or a chaplain?”

“You may be right,” I answered, “but I don’t know anyone in the clergy.”

Popping a bite of omelet into her mouth, Carly triumphantly announced, “Well, I do. There is this Reverend Nadine who stops by the halfway house every week or so. Frankly, I’m not so terribly impressed, but some of the women in the halfway house positively swear by her. Who can say? Perhaps the Reverend Nadine will have some words of wisdom for you.”

This is how I came to be at the storefront mission, but now that I was here, I was having second thoughts about baring my soul to a stranger. Maybe this was not such a good idea. Perhaps it would be better to turn around and walk away. But, then again, I had

come this far, and as Carly had reasoned, “You may as well give it a go. After all, what do you have to lose?” Taking a deep breath, I passed through the double doors and was immediately met by a stoutish, grayish, fiftyish woman seated behind a cluttered desk. Garbed in a white clerical collar and silver cross lapel pin, she greeted me with a reserved, “May I help you?”

“You’ll have to pardon me,” I stammered, “but this is all rather new to me and, to be frank, I’m not even sure why I’m here.”

She nodded. “No fear. In my professional capacity, I encounter a lot of squeamish people—particularly insecure men intimidated by strong, confident, self-assured queer women who wield authority. Please have a seat. Everyone calls me Reverend Nadine. How about a cup of organic green tea? My wife Ella whipped up a batch of sesame crisps. Sesame crisps go delightfully well with green tea. May I tempt you?”

“Thank you, no,” I answered. Noting a hint of a drawl as she spoke, I ventured to ask, “By chance, are you from the south?”

“My speech betrays me,” she answered. “I was born in Nashville, educated in Louisville, and pastored in Knoxville and Birmingham before realizing my approach to ministry was more suited for the west coast. Are you sure you wouldn’t like some green tea and sesame crisps?”

“I had a sizable breakfast.”

“As you wish,” she said. “How did you hear about me? What brings you here?”

“I have a friend who currently resides at the halfway house. As I am not familiar with anyone in the clergy, she suggested I speak with you.” This was not exactly in keeping with the truth; Carly had given me this Reverend Nadine’s contact information, but as far

as offering any kind of glowing endorsement, Carly had described her as “a braying jackass.”

“Among my duties, I serve as the halfway house’s chaplain.”

Looking about, I confessed, “I had assumed a reverend’s study would appear, well, not at all like this.” It was true. Rather than shelves stocked with thick, somber-looking volumes of various theological works and the solemn religious decorum I had expected, the walls were plastered with posters featuring the quotes and likenesses of Karl Marx, Mao Tso Tung, Che Chavez, Margaret Sanger, Greta Thunberg, John Shelby Spong, and Fidel Castro. A rainbow Pride flag hung from the ceiling between a Black Lives Matter banner and a Palestinian flag. Of particular interest was a poster that read, “Why Do the Nations Rage? Social Injustice, That’s Why, Stupid!”

“Why do the nations rage?” I asked. “What is the meaning behind this poster?”

With a humorless laugh, she said, “The poster you mention makes reference to a rhetorical question posed by David in the second psalm. Unless you are an enlightened student of post-modern humanism or liberation theology, you probably wouldn’t understand the humor behind the response, so please don’t beg me for an explanation. To understand, you must first understand. Okay, here we are, nice and cozy, so tell me about yourself and why you are here.”

“My name is Sherwood McCormick. I am a high school English teacher. About a year ago, my wife and I were involved in a light plane accident. I walked away from the crash with only superficial injuries, but she died shortly after impact.”

“Were you piloting the plane?”

“Yes. It was my personal aircraft. The accident occurred the day after our wedding. My bride and I were on our way to an airshow in Oshkosh when the plane’s single engine failed.”

“How dreadful! I’ve never cared much for light aircraft.”

“Once the engine quit, I told Abbie not to worry, for the terrain was relatively flat and three or four pastures suitable for an emergency landing were within easy gliding distance. Unfortunately, I lost control when the aircraft’s landing gear snagged a low-hanging utility line I had failed to see. The sudden impact rendered me momentarily unconscious, and when I came to, I discovered poor Abbie was already dead.”

“Excuse me for asking,” interrupted Reverend Nadine, “but I am wondering how a high school English teacher can afford an airplane. Surely the costs of purchasing and maintaining an aircraft are prohibitive on a teacher’s income.”

Frankly, I did not consider this matter any of her business, but thinking, perhaps, there might be a logical reason behind her inquiry, I offered an answer. “The airplane was left to me by my father. The title was conveyed to me after his death.”

“Even so,” she protested, “insurance, maintenance, fuel, and storage would take a sizable hunk from a teacher’s earnings. How did you manage? I simply cannot wrap my head around a schoolteacher owning an aircraft.”

Attempting to hide my annoyance with the chaplain’s invasive questioning, I simply answered, “My late father was not without ample means.”

“I can only imagine the adverse impact light planes have on the environment. Your airplane burned a lot of fuel, right?”

“Not really,” I answered. “My plane was powered by a relatively small six-cylinder, air-cooled engine. Say, could we speak of something other than aviation fuel? I came to discuss another issue.”

Casting an unfriendly eye in my direction, she answered, “Very well, then, what is it that you wish to ask me?”

“I’ve never been a religious man,” I explained, “but Abbie’s death has forced me to reconsider matters of life and death in a new light.”

“What would you like to know?”

“To begin with,” I said, “where is Abbie?”

Giving me a look as if I were a not-so-bright child, the chaplain curtly replied, “‘Where is she?’ you ask. What kind of question is that? Two minutes ago, you said your wife was killed in a plane crash. Where is she? She’s dead, of course, and presumably in an urn or beneath six feet of compacted soil.”

“No, no,” I said. “I am keenly aware her body is dead, but where is Abbie? Where is her soul or her spirit or whatever it is you call the inner person?”

“Oh, that? Hmm...” Attempting to look and sound, well, pastoral, she thoughtfully stroked her chin and said, “‘Where is Abbie?’ you ask. Abbie lives in your heart and in your memory. She lives in each cherished thought of your brief time together. Abbie lives in the song of a meadow lark. Abbie lives in the scent of a wild rose. Abbie lives in you and in those who knew and loved her.”

Frustrated by what I considered the glibness of her response, I insisted, “You don’t understand. I’m asking about the afterlife—heaven and hell—life beyond the grave. That’s what I want to know. Where is Abbie? Is she in heaven? Or, God forbid, might

she be somewhere else? For my own peace of mind, I want honest answers, and the last thing I need are greeting card platitudes.”

“There is no reason to be sarcastic,” the chaplain answered curtly. “Where is Abbie? Is her spirit somewhere out there in the great beyond? Where is she? Well, I’m sure I don’t know. As to the age-old questions surrounding the great mysteries of life after death, one can only speculate. There is no definitive answer.”

“But you’re a member of the clergy,” I protested. “Surely, your theological training covers life after death matters. What does the Bible say about this?”

“‘What does the Bible say?’ you ask. Aren’t you being a trifle naïve?”

“Naïve? I don’t understand...”

“No, I suppose you don’t understand,” she dryly responded. “To begin with, the Bible is largely a mythological, militaristic, nationalistic, anti-science, homophobic, male-dominated work steeped in superstition, racism, capitalism, Zionism, and misogyny. That’s Hermeneutics 101—and you can thank me for summing up three years of exhaustive seminary education in a nutshell. Even so, I am not saying the Bible is totally void of merit—particularly in the study of ancient literature and history, but let’s not go digging for meaningful answers among this confusing heap of outmoded, two thousand year old, patriarchal thinking.”

“I’ll admit I know very little about the Christian faith, but I assumed believers esteemed the Bible as God’s word. To hear a member of the clergy casting doubt upon the credibility of the scriptures is, well, somewhat unsettling.”

With a knowing smile, she answered, “There are some rightwing fundamentalists who insist the Bible is divinely inspired by God, but in these days of enlightenment, no one takes these reactionaries too seriously.”

“Again, I find your explanations rather surprising. May I ask if you believe in God?”

“That depends,” she answered. “What do you mean by God? If you are speaking of an all-knowing, all-powerful, omni-present male deity accompanied by a Jewish son with nail prints in his feet and hands and a divine dove who wings his way hither and yonder, the answer, of course, is a resounding no. God is certainly not a manifestation of two men and a bird. If, however, you define God as a divine idea, then my answer would be a qualified yes.”

“You do not believe in the personage of God? You don’t consider him a divine being with volition, emotions, and sentience?”

Setting down her cup of green tea, she icily complained, “Why do you refer to God as a ‘him’? I would think a gender-neutral pronoun would be more appropriate, unless, of course, you wish to perpetuate the societal toxins of male dominance. Surely, you would not seek to bind one half of the world’s population by the patriarchal chains and fetters forged over six thousand years of male dominance. I will assume better of you. Think twice before referring to God as a ‘he.’”

“Okay, forget about pronouns. If God is, as you say, a divine idea rather than a sentient being with feelings and emotions, to whom do you direct your prayers?”

Helping herself to another sesame crisp, she shook her head saying, “You assume I pray which, of course, I do not. I meditate. I contemplate. I deliberate. All that I desire is within me. All that I want is already mine. I am fully capable of meeting my own needs. God is not a cosmic Santa Claus to whom we humbly bring our wish lists. As the Apostle Paul said, ‘When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child,’ but there comes a time when we are to put away childish thinking. A prayer is no more meaningful than a letter to Santa Claus, and I gave up believing in Santa a long time ago.”

“I don’t know what to make of this,” I confessed. “I thought religious people were people of prayer.”

Giving me another of her incredulous, boy-are-you-stupid looks, she said, “Use your brain, man. Prayer is like speaking into a phone when no one is at the other end. Why would any enlightened individual whine and grovel before a make-believe God when we have the divine spark within us?”

“What do you mean by divine spark?” I asked.

“I am just as much a manifestation of God as Jesus Christ—and if the opaque scales ever drop from your eyes, you’ll discover you, too, are as much a manifestation of God as Jesus Christ.”

“Then you do believe in Jesus Christ?” I asked.

“Not in a strict orthodox sense,” she explained. “I believe Jesus was but one of many divine avatars of enlightenment—a lone messenger among many cosmic messengers of mystical wisdom and universal guidance—unfortunately, her misogynic disciples felt compelled to reinvent Jesus, so to speak, to make her more palatable to the prevailing male-dominated culture. The ancient world was simply not ready for a female messiah.”

Startled by this, I asked, “So you are saying Jesus was, in fact, a woman? On what basis to you make this claim?”

With a mocking laugh, she asked, “Are you intimidated by a female messiah? Be honest. Does a feminine Jesus cause you difficulties? Based on my many years of experience as a chaplain, I have noted the objections raised by men, particularly Christian men, are most often rooted in masculine insecurity.”

“As I am neither insecure nor a Christian,” I answered, “the sex of Jesus makes no difference to me, but I would like to know the basis of your beliefs. Where is your evidence? Where is your proof? How did you arrive at this opinion?”

“As you are not a trained theologian, let’s just say I have my reasons for believing Jesus was a woman. Consider the Sermon on the Mount. No man could have uttered these teachings. The precepts found in the Sermon on the Mount are undoubtedly and undeniably based on ancient feminine wisdom. Ah, yes, I can see by the troubled look on your face that these myth-shattering explanations are rocking your patriarchal world. Come now, can you rightfully say these revelations aren’t threatening your dearly held, preconceived, misogynic notions?”

In my search for any scrap of proficuous knowledge from this frustratingly hostile interview, I asked, “What do you say about heaven and hell?”

“Like any thinking person, I would say we create our own heaven or hell on earth.”

“You do not believe in life beyond the grave?”

“That is not what I said.” After a brief pause, she continued, “I am not totally opposed to the concept of reincarnation. My wife is Buddhist. Recalling memories of a past life, she was once a majestic cedar in ancient Lebanon. What becomes of us after death? Such mysteries are for us to ponder, but I have no use for concrete religious dogma with its ready-made, take it or leave it, right or wrong answers. My truth may be my truth alone, but it is my truth all the same.”

As I could make no sense of this, I pressed the matter further. “Would you mind telling me what you believe?”

“‘What do I believe?’ you ask. Yours is a reasonable question, I suppose, so mine will be an equally reasonable response. What do I believe? I believe love is love. I believe

in science. I believe in tolerance. I believe in diversity, equity, fairness, social justice, activism, and inclusiveness. I believe we must save our planet by an immediate halting of the climate-wrecking production, dependence, and use of fossil fuels. I believe in total reproductive freedom. I believe abortion is healthcare. I believe in the disruption of the nuclear family. I believe in abolishing borders. I believe our criminal justice system reeks with systematic racism and must be entirely dismantled. At heart, I am an anarchist. I believe measured violence is the only language fanatical, right wing fascists understand and respond to. I believe in the inherent evils of capitalism. I believe Zionism is just another word for racism. As a chaplain for the oppressed and marginalized and downtrodden people of color, my battle hymn is John Lennon's *Imagine* and *The Communist Manifesto* is my Holy Bible. You asked what I believe. This is what I believe."

Rising from my seat, I said, "Thank you for your candor. This conversation has been most, well, unexpected, but I am still left wondering about Abbie. Where is she? Where is my wife?"

"'Where is Abbie?' you ask. Let me encourage you to bravely and fearlessly ponder life's thorniest mysteries while knowing some questions may not have pat answers." With a measured pause, Reverend Nadine cleared her throat and continued, "Where is Abbie? Where is Abbie? Perhaps Abbie is everywhere. Perhaps Abbie is nowhere. Perhaps Abbie is everywhere and nowhere simultaneously. The real question is where will the quest for understanding lead you? Though you may never arrive at your desired destination, the journey is nonetheless yours to travel. Travel hopefully."

By now, I was ripe with annoyance from what I perceived to be nothing but muddle-minded doublespeak. "Obviously, you've never heard of the Law of Non-Contradiction," I complained. "How could Abbie be everywhere and nowhere?" Heading toward the door, I said, "In good faith, I came to you with honest questions, but I have concluded you have no real answers for me. Good day."

My rebuke must have struck a nerve, for her eyes grew wide as saucers as she snapped, “No real answers,’ you say? Did I hear you correctly? Mister, I have answers, oh, I have plenty of answers, but I am wondering if you are capable of withstanding my brand of stark honesty. Can you bear hearing the unmitigated truth? If so, please sit down, and I will say what needs to be said.”

Returning to my seat, I said, “You have my attention. Say what you will.”

“First, you reek with white privilege. Your father left you a pile of money, you own an airplane, and you teach English—the vile language of racism, sexism, and colonialism. Your manner of dress screams masculine white privilege.” With the volume of her voice steadily rising, she continued, “You’re accustomed to having everything your own way. You’ve never been forced to live in a housing project. You’ve never foraged for your next meal from the inside of a smelly dumpster. You’ve never been humiliated by a fascist pig cop frisking your precious white male body. You’ve enjoyed a posh, cushy, privileged existence since birth and when, for the first time in your storybook life, something goes wrong, and I’m speaking of your wife’s death, you go about sniveling and complaining as though you are entitled to answers. Have you heard enough, or shall I go on?”

“You have my attention. Please continue.”

“Your airplane was a white heterosexual male privilege status symbol. People of color are forced to huddle on crowded buses and subway cars, but you would know nothing of this. Your white heterosexual male privilege airplane and its carbon footprint did more than kill your wife. Your white heterosexual male privilege airplane was murdering the good earth and all its inhabitants. Can you bear the truth? Maybe this untimely accident did the rest of us who cherish this reeling planet a great favor. Would you like to hear more?”

“You have the floor.”

“Where is Abbie?’ you whine. I don’t know where your precious Abbie is, but wherever she is, she’s far better off than if she were still living with an entitled white heterosexual male like you. Where is Abbie? She’s liberated, dammit. If you had not killed her with your sloppy piloting skills, you would have eventually buried her beneath a mound of cruel white heterosexual male subjugation and dominance.”

“Are you finished?” I asked.

Her eyes ablaze with contempt, she continued in her feverish pitch, “Stop feeling sorry for yourself. This incessant boo-hoo-hooing over your wife’s death must come to an immediate end. She’s gone. Too bad. That’s life. Deal with it. If you want to spend the rest of your days grieving over a situation that cannot be undone, that’s your business, but maybe it’s time to stop licking your wounds while inflicting your misery on everyone else and move on.” Reaching into a goldfish bowl containing individually packaged condoms, she said, “Take a few of these, find some insipid little weak-willed woman who enjoys being dominated by men, and blow some steam.”

Refusing the condoms, I said, “No, thanks. I’ll be leaving. Good day.”

“Must you leave? I suppose our session has come to an end, but before you go, this ministry depends, in part, on the goodwill and generosity of those who rely upon our indispensable services,” she said in a notably softer tone. “Many of our clients are indigent. They depend upon us and the wide range of life enhancing services we provide, unfortunately, many of those we serve are unable to assist us in meeting our budgetary and operating expenses.” Handing me an offering envelope, she said, “Please take a moment to ask yourself what you can do to ensure that the underserved living in this community can continue relying, without fear or dread of interruption, upon the multi-faceted services we provide. As a 501c3 nonprofit organization recognized by the federal government, your gift of any size to A Sanctuary for Women is tax-deductible.”

Chapter 3

Nearly a week had passed since breakfasting with Carly. As it happened, my former guardian and tutor, Dr. Felton, who had recently moved to Sacramento, was recovering from double hernia surgery. While he convalesced, I made myself useful preparing his meals and attending to light housekeeping duties. It was good seeing my trusted friend and mentor again. In many ways, Dr. Felton was more of a father than my real father, and I suppose I will always be grateful to him.

I slid into a corner booth at the Silver Dollar Pancake House. As only two other patrons were seated in the diner, I had hopes of conversing with Carly without too many interruptions. Setting a cup of black coffee before me, she greeted me with a cheery, “Hi, stranger. How were things in Sacramento?”

“Dr. Felton is on the mend and doing well,” I answered. “He was not impressed by my culinary skills, but my old friend was glad to have the company. How have you been?”

“I’m fine. Nothing new to report.” Brushing an unruly whisp of reddish hair from her eyes, she asked, “Are you hungry? How about an omelet?”

“Only coffee for me, thank you. I couldn’t sleep, so I thought I would pop in and say hello. You’re a good listener. In truth, you’re the best listener I know.”

“I have my moments. Say, how was your encounter with Rev. Nadine?”

I answered, “She was just as you described her.”

“Huh?”

“Your Rev. Nadine has the mien of a braying jackass.”

Carly giggled. “Is that what I said? Maybe I did. So, a couple of nights ago, she led a devotional at the halfway house and the management insisted all the residents attend. It was one of the longest hours of my life.”

“What topic did she choose for her discourse?” I asked.

“Classical music. Did you know Mozart was a racist?”

“This is news to me.”

“According to Rev. Nadine, Mozart was a white supremacist. She had a lot of bad to say about classical music and European colonialism, and after giving Mozart a sound trashing, she went on to condemn Israel as ‘an evil bastion of apartheid that enslaves the Palestinian people.’ Urging us to boycott Israel, as if anyone among us would even know how to or why we should boycott Israel, she then reminded our little group that tolerance is, how did she say this?—the ‘queen mother of virtue.’ I took notes in case you’d like a transcript. By the end of her talk, Rev. Nadine had worked herself into a lather. She even let loose with a couple of choice profanities. Who would have thought Christianity was such an angry religion?”

After a moment of consideration, I asked, “Do you think all members of the Christian clergy are as angry as Rev. Nadine? Maybe she’s the exception rather than the rule.”

Topping off my cup of coffee, Carly answered, “I couldn’t say. She’s the only reverend I know, and I wish I didn’t know her, and I wish even more that the poor ladies at the halfway house weren’t forced to sit through her ranting. I think we already suffer enough from the lumpy mattresses and bad plumbing. I’ve had to shower in icy cold water twice this week.”

“Perhaps this Rev. Nadine is not a proper representation of Christianity.”

“I’d like to forget her,” said Carly, obviously wishing to change the topic of our conversation. “Do you know what I think, Woody?”

“What do you think?”

“Since seeking the advice of a chaplain proved to be a bust, I think you ought to consider consulting a psychic for spiritual answers. What if a psychic could put you in contact with Abbie?”

“A psychic? Are you suggesting Tarot cards and seances and crystal balls?”

With a toss of her head, she answered, “Why not?”

“Honestly, Carly, there is no way I can see myself consulting anyone named Madam Zora.”

Pressing the point, she continued, “Granted, the majority of these psychics are probably fakes—maybe 99% of them are frauds and phonies, but what if there is that one psychic out of a hundred who happens to be legit? Think about it, Woody. Isn’t it just possible that a few of these fortune tellers may have some kind of mystical gift that allows them to communicate with the dead?”

“No, no, no,” I insisted. “Can you imagine what would happen if my students were to discover I had sought out the services of a crystal ball gazer? I’d lose all credibility with my kids. And there would be no end to the teasing I would face from my teaching colleagues.”

“Who cares what they think, Woody? I wouldn’t be surprised if half of the teachers you work with check their daily horoscopes.”

“Maybe so, but I live and work in this town and I don’t want my friends and neighbors to think I buy into this hocus pocus necromancy nonsense.”

“No one here will be the wiser,” she reasoned.

“What if a colleague happens to spy my car parked in front of a local psychic’s home?”

“You’re not going to find a legit psychic reading tea leaves in this sleepy little village, but there’s LA and San Francisco to consider. Do you know what I think? You should ask a big city police department to recommend a psychic who routinely helps them solve crimes. Think about it. Some of these mystics have been instrumental in busting tough cases wide open, and if you meet with one of these psychics based out of LA or Frisco, who around here will be any the wiser?”

“I don’t know, Carly. This all sounds so flaky.”

“Flaky or not,” she insisted, “what if you were able to communicate with Abbie through a psychic? Wouldn’t you feel better knowing her spirit is somewhere out there in the great beyond? And don’t forget about the peace of mind that would be yours from knowing that, even in death, Abbie is okay.”

“When I regained consciousness after the impact of the crash, Abbie was already gone,” I explained. “I never had a chance to say goodbye. There is so much I would like to tell her. If only I could speak with her one final time...”

Carly nodded. “What if a psychic could help you find closure?”

“What if, indeed,” I reluctantly admitted. “Carly, I am thinking maybe, just maybe, your flaky idea isn’t so, well, flaky after all. I may never know peace until I know she’s resting peacefully. If I could only be assured that Abbie is in a state of eternal bliss, I’m certain I would be ready to move on with life.”

“Now you’re talking.” Just then, a group of five or six entered the diner followed by an elderly couple. “Oops! Looks like I’m about to get busy,” said Carly. “It’s the 2 AM rush.”

“So it seems,” I answered as I rose from my seat. Placing a bill in her hand to cover the coffee and a gratuity, I asked, “How about breakfast at the end of your shift?”

“Okay, I think I’d like that, but instead of meeting me back here, will you pick me up at the halfway house?” she asked. “I’d like to freshen up and change out of this hokey uniform before we have breakfast. Are you okay with this?”

“Sure. Does 9 AM work for you?”

“That’s fine, Woody. See you then, and thanks bunches for the gratuity. You really are a prince.”

Arriving home a short time later, I made another attempt at falling asleep. Until Abbie’s death, I had never suffered from insomnia; since her tragic passing, I had spent many restless nights tossing and turning while hoping, for once, the promised joy for which I desperately longed would come in the morning. It did not. My sleep’s troubling elusiveness was further exacerbated by a growing frustration over the apparent meaninglessness of this dreary existence. What is life? For what purpose do we exist? What does all this mean? Why had I survived the crash that had snuffed out Abbie’s life? Why did I live, and she die? I would have gladly gone to the grave with her, or in her place; instead, I was the one left behind and this seemingly unexplainable dilemma plagued my thoughts. Joining Abbie in death, I believed, would have been preferable to the agony of living without her.

As I stared at the whirling ceiling fan which, to my dismay, reminded me of an airplane propeller, I gave more thought to Carly’s suggestion that I seek the services of a bonafide medium. Admittedly, the idea seemed ludicrously outlandish, but what if there

was the one-in-ten thousand psychic practitioner who actually had the rare gift of breaking through the otherwise impenetrable barrier of death by placing me in direct contact with Abbie? Improbable? Of course. Impossible? Maybe not.

On the rare chance that such a necromancer existed, what would I say to Abbie? First, I would like to know if she is happy in her altered state. If I knew with absolute certainty that she was at peace in death, I would be at peace, too. What else would I say to her? I would tell Abbie again and again and again how much I love her and how empty my life is without her. And if such a reunion between the living and the dead were possible, what might Abbie say to me? I would hope she had already forgiven me for the plane crash. A more experienced pilot might have avoided the deadly powerline that caused our aircraft to careen out of control. As the pilot in command, I bear the brunt of the blame for Abbie's demise. Maybe she would sooth my troubled soul by telling me she has no regrets about our marriage. Maybe she would say our short time together was well worth the exacting price we both paid.

I thought on this until the alarm sounded at 7 AM.

As I walked to my car, I spied a long, ugly gouge in the paint stretching from the front fender to the rear quarter panel. "My new car," I moaned. Surveying the damage, I felt a fountain of anger rising from within. This was the senseless handiwork of a vandal armed, no doubt, with either a screwdriver or an awl. At that moment, a young man, a bit short in stature, with stringy black hair and an oily expression seemed to come out of nowhere. He wore a Lynyrd Skynyrd tee-shirt and grease-stained jeans that had seen better days. With a smirk, he eyed my disfigured automobile and said, "Now isn't that a damn shame? A fellow works hard, saves his pennies, buys a choice looking ride, and then some clown with a screwdriver comes along and does his mischief. What is this world coming to, I ask you?"

Instinctively, I knew the stranger with the phony concern was responsible for the vandalism. Why he had damaged my car, I could not say. “I don’t suppose you know who did this?” I asked.

“I wish I could help you,” he answered, “but I was busy watching a mother robin building her nest while the joker with the screwdriver did his dirty on your pretty little car.” After a brief pause, he continued, “Say, I think I know you. Aren’t you the fellow whose been chatting up my bird?”

Struggling to keep a firm grip on the reins of my anger, I said, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“My bird, Carly. Don’t be coy, man. I was standing outside the diner looking on while you were making time with my girl. Not that I fault you—she’s a choice little tidbit.” With the disgusting grin plastered across his weasel-like face, the unwelcomed stranger whispered, “Psst! Just between a couple of gentlemen, if you can get her into the sack, she has this funny little squeal...”

“I don’t know who you are,” I demanded, “and I’ve had enough of your big mouth.”

“Whoa! Sorry to offend you, Professor,” came his mocking reply. “No reason to come out swinging. Carly is my girl, but if you fancy her, I’m sure we can work something out.”

In my life, I have never wanted to strike anyone as much as the glib-tongued antagonist who stood before me. “You can go to hell,” said I.

“No doubt, I will,” he answered. “I’m not exactly a model citizen, don’t you know, but the devil will have to catch me first.”

“May I assume you’re the lowlife responsible for Carly’s arrest and conviction?”

“How was I to know the automotive parts hidden in the trunk of her car were stolen? Funny thing is, I had purchased those parts in good faith, but the vendor, unbeknownst to me at the time of our little business arrangement, had a reputation for shady dealings. And to think I had asked beforehand if he belonged to the Better Business Bureau. Because I am such a trusting soul, unscrupulous people are forever taking advantage of my unassuming nature.”

“Is there a point to your story?” I demanded.

“Was I rambling? Sorry. Anyway, the story gets even funnier. After the pig cops busted Carly and me, she was convicted of transporting stolen property and, as I’m sure she’s already told you, pulled a seventeen month jolt in the women’s correctional facility. What about me? A mere slap on the wrist. Isn’t that a hoot? While Carly was eating prison chow and punching out license plates, yours truly walked away from the mishap with a suspended sentence. Don’t you just love our criminal justice system?”

Further angered by his psychopathic behavior, I demanded, “Why did you let Carly take the fall for your crime?”

Stroking his chin as if in deep thought, he answered, “Couldn’t be helped. You see, Carly was represented by a public defender while my sainted mother mortgaged her home so that I could have proper legal counsel. As they say, you get what you pay for, and take it from me, Professor, never scrimp to save a buck when it comes to legal representation.”

“What did a sweet girl like Carly see in the likes of you?”

“I’d be all too happy to show you, Professor, but there are local ordinances to consider, and I don’t care to have an indecent exposure charge added to my already lengthy rap sheet.”

I thought I would explode with anger. “You are as contemptible a worm as I’ve ever met.” Clinching my fists, I challenged, “Why don’t you step closer and take a swing at me? Go ahead. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than seeing you out cold on my driveway.”

“You don’t look like a fighter, Professor,” he calmly replied, “though maybe you are. Anyway, the reason I’ve survived as long as I have is because I don’t fight fair.”

Further enticing him to draw first blood by taking a swing at me, I taunted him saying, “I know your kind. You’re like a rat who comes out of his hole when the lights are out.”

Nodding in agreement, he said, “Honor is hardly among my more notable virtues. I will not deny being an underhanded sleazebag of the worst sort, but as I was not blessed with an abundance in build, stature, or muscle, I have no choice but to depend upon my cunning to level the playing field. I strike back at my enemies when they’re not looking.”

“Have you been making a nuisance of yourself with Carly?” I asked.

“I may have slipped into the diner for a word or two with her,” he said, “though I cannot say she was overjoyed in seeing me after nearly two years. Whoever said absence makes the heart grow fonder was an ignorant bounder.”

“I want you to leave that girl alone. If I hear of you inflicting your filthy self on Carly...”

“What are you planning to do, Professor?” he laughed. “Are you going to keep me after class? Are you threatening me with an F on my report card? You seem to forget that I’m not one of your young scholars, Professor, and it’s going to take a bigger man than you to make me behave.”

“Step in a little closer,” I challenged, “and give me your best shot. I’ll show you how this English teacher handles a classroom clown.”

“Not today, Professor,” he answered. “You might take me in a fair fight, but the odds favor me when the fight is dirty. If we exchange blows, it will be on my terms.”

“You are a disgusting little coward.”

“You are right,” he scoffed. “I am a coward. Maybe I’ll unleash my anger on Carly rather than you. Would I strike a woman? You may add chivalry to the long list of virtues I seem to lack. Say, did she tell you about the time I punched her in the face? That little crook in the bridge of her nose is my doing.”

Only once in my life have I ever wanted to kill another human, and this was the time. A white-hot hatred welled deep in my heart. I wanted to squash him as I would have squashed a verminous little cockroach. Fixing my gaze on his mocking countenance, I strongly considered lunging toward him when, suddenly, I realized his taunts were not to just to make me angry, but to make me act. After a long pause, I finally asked, “What do you want?”

“What do I want?” he asked. “World peace. And end to hunger. A ban on fossil fuel.”

Once again, I asked, “What do you want?”

“Maybe I should first ask what it is that *you* want,” he replied. “Would you like me to disappear from Carly’s life? Would you prefer that I vanish? With yours truly out of the picture, our little strawberry blonde cutie would be all yours.”

“How much do you want?” I asked.

“I’m into my bookie for a couple of hundred,” he said. “I may be a lowlife who strikes women, but I pay my gambling debts.”

“What else?”

“I have a cousin living in Portland who has offered to cut me in on this sweet little financial opportunity, but I haven’t the funds to cover my fare.”

“Would \$500 satisfy your bookie while meeting your traveling expenses?”

“Come on, Professor. You reek with the prosperity of a Republican. Since I’m a humble blue-collar who is into wealth redistribution and taxing the rich, let’s make it an even thousand. Do this and I’ll forever be a minor footnote in Carly’s life.”

“I consider a thousand to be an exorbitant sum for such a petty pilferer as yourself, but I would be willing to go as high as, say, \$750. Do we have a deal?”

With a careless shrugging of his shoulders, he said, “As long as I’m around, Carly will never have an easy moment, and, for that matter, as long as I stay close, your pretty little buggy faces the risks of more paint damage and slashed tires. Aren’t those Michelins? I am told they offer unparalleled traction on slippery roads—assuming they are inflated and unencumbered by punctures in the sidewalls, of course.”

Still hoping he might take a swing at me, I snarled, “For a wee little rat, you talk mighty big.”

“All my life, I’ve been called bad things, and after a while, a fellow grows accustomed to verbal insults.” Looking me straight into the eye, he said, “I need one thousand dollars to vacate this burg, or I’ll hang around and continue making myself a recurring nuisance to all involved.”

Knowing he held a better hand, I had no choice but to fold. “For a thousand dollars, you’ll leave town once and for all? Is this a promise?”

“This old town is no good for me. This may surprise you, but I can’t go anywhere without the pig cops peeping over my shoulder.”

“For a thousand dollars, you’ll leave and never bother Carly again?”

“Fame and fortune await in Portland.”

“I don’t carry that much cash on me, but if you’ll meet me back here at noon, we’ll settle this matter.”

“Fork over the green salad of fiscal solvency, and by 1 PM, I’ll be making my way along the old Oregon Trail.”

As I drove to the halfway house, I debated whether to tell Carly about my run-in with her former boyfriend. On one hand, he was likely an embarrassing chapter from her regrettable past—a past she would just as soon forget. What bright, intelligent woman would want it known that she had once been romantically entangled with such a twisted little weasel of a man? On the other hand, she might welcome the news that her lowlife nemesis had pledged to leave town never to return.

I spied Carly as she stood waiting for me at the curb in front of the halfway house. Wearing jeans and a casual summer top rather than her frumpy work uniform, it took me a moment to recognize her. “I didn’t want you going inside and subjecting yourself to the taunts and the jeers of the residents. Some of these women don’t know how to behave around men and—oh, Woody—look at that scratch! What happened to your beautiful car?”

“Some punk keyed my car,” I answered. “I’ll telephone my insurance agent this afternoon.” As we drove away, I asked, “How was your shift after I left the diner?”

Her face darkened. “Fine,” she answered in a voice that indicated otherwise. “Just another dreary night at the Silver Dollar Pancake House.”

Sensing she was troubled, I decided to bring up the matter of her former boyfriend.

“Carly, did you have an unwanted visitor after I left the diner?”

Her face flushed crimson. After a protracted pause, she said, “Why would you ask such a question, Woody?”

“I asked because I had a visitor, too—a weaselly little lowlife of a brute who appears to derive great satisfaction from making you miserable.”

Carly burst into tears. “His name is Jake and he popped into the diner just a moment or so after you left. I hadn’t seen Jake in two years and, Woody, I could have gladly gone two hundred more years without seeing him again. Let me guess. Jake took a screwdriver to your beautiful car, right? Oh, God, I am so, so sorry about this.”

“Forget about the car,” I said. “A car is nothing but stamped sheet metal and molded plastic. Are you afraid of this Jake?” Carly did not answer, so I continued, “I believe he is a threat to your well-being and now that I’ve tangled with him, I’m in his crosshairs, too, but I don’t want you worrying about him.”

“But I am worried,” she admitted. “You don’t know what Jake is capable of doing.”

“I think I do know what he’s capable of doing, but as I said, you are not to worry.”

“How’s that?” she asked while dabbing her moistened eyes with tissue.

“Like most thugs, Jake has his price.” I explained. “I’ve negotiated his disappearance for a thousand dollars. Once he has the money, he has promised to leave for Portland.”

“But, Woody,” Carly protested, “I don’t have a thousand dollars. I’m not even sure I could scrape together a measly fifty dollars. Between my fine and court costs along with rent at the halfway house, I’m, well, broke. What can I do? I don’t have a thousand to buy off Jake.”

“I do, and this Jake the Snake and I have scheduled our business transaction at noon. I think he’ll split town for a thousand dollars. Don’t you?”

Carly nodded her head. “I think so, too. Woody, it may take me ten years to repay you, but you’ll get every penny back. I promise.”

“Forget it,” I laughed. “I want this detestable little cockroach out of town almost as much as you. If the people of Portland think they have it bad now, just wait until this one man crime wave shows up.”

After a moment or so of silence, Carly gave me a faint smile. “Your Abbie married a good man.”

“Let’s grab breakfast. I’m hungry.”

After returning Carly to the halfway house, I withdrew a sufficient sum of cash to cover the payoff after which I promptly aimed my disfigured automobile for home. Arriving just moments before the noon hour, there was Jake, nervously pacing back and forth, wearing a slightly agitated expression. Near him rested two small suitcases. I considered the pair of suitcases a good omen.

“You’ve kept me waiting,” he snapped.

“We agreed to meet at noon, and it is just now twelve.”

“If I don’t have the cash in my bookie’s hands by a quarter past, he’s threatened to break my kneecaps. That’s him, watching us from across the street.” Jake was not bluffing. A bearded man with an intimidating physique looked on from across the way.

“Do you have my money?”

“I do. Are you ready to leave town?”

Looking over his shoulder at the burly man, Jake said, “What do you think? C’mon, Professor, let’s wrap up business so that I can get this gorilla off my back and blow this town for good.”

Slowly and deliberately, I counted ten \$100 bills. “Before handing you this stack of cash, I want you to promise me you’ll never bother Carly again. No visits. No phone calls. No text messages. No emails. Nothing. Nyet. Nada. Do we have an understanding?”

“Agreed. Whatever you say. Now hurry it up, man!” Looking back at the granite-faced bookie, Jake anxiously said, “I’ve seen him maim more than one pony patsy who couldn’t pay the freight. I value my continued good health more than the sexual gratification that comes from some little redheaded slut, so fork over the cash and the title deed to the girl is all yours.”

Greatly desiring to add to his distress, I threatened, “I’ve a good mind to walk away from this deal and let the bookie have a go at you.”

“Dammit, a deal is a deal,” he cried.

“Honor may not be among your virtues,” said I, “but I am committed to being a man of my word. As you say, a deal is a deal.”

As Jake counted the cash, I produced two more \$100 bills from my wallet. “What’s that?” he asked.

“A bonus.”

“A bonus? For doing what?”

“Jake, if you will grant me the privilege of taking one swing at your uglier-than-sin face, I’ll repay the favor with these two bills.” As he fixed his sight on the cash, I continued, “Muhammad Ali I am not. In fact, I’ve never struck anyone in my life, but I’d gladly part with \$200 for one quick jab to your ugly puss. Think about it. \$200 will buy a lot of beer and weed. Do we have a deal?”

With a smirk, Jake answered, “I’ll make you a better deal, Professor.” Pulling a cheap flip phone from his rear pocket, he explained, “One night, I gave Carly a surprisingly potent little cocktail that greatly lowered her inhibitions. Over the course of the evening, she willingly submitted to a variety of provocative and, may I add, compromising poses using an assortment of interesting and imaginative props—all of which are handily stored in the phone’s memory. I’ve strongly considered posting the entire photoshoot on social media, but I would be willing to sell the exclusive rights to you for, say, \$200. Do we have a deal?”

Jake accepted the money, and I took the phone. As he walked away, I heard him say, “If you’re the fool I think you are, you’ll destroy the phone without ever eyeballing the pics.”

Chapter 4

Once I determined to consult a psychic who, I hoped, would place me in contact with my late wife Abbie, the next step, that is, locating a legitimate spiritualist who possessed the gift of necromancy, became my focus. I began this mystical quest by immersing myself in research studies both favoring and refuting the supernatural abilities of psychic practitioners. As is often the case involving controversial issues, there appeared to be volumes of credible evidence supporting both sides of the debate. Upon reading an article detailing how a spiritualist had helped law enforcement officials solve an enigmatic crime, I would run across another piece, equally convincing, repudiating the notion that mediums have proven beneficial in crime solving. Obviously, my interests in spiritualists had nothing to do with criminology, but more than one psychic boasted of having brought a dangerous killer to justice through contact with the murderer's victim. Communicating with the dead, assuming this was conceivable, was the gift or talent or forte that interested me. If speaking with one who had passed on to the other side was within the realm of possibility, I vowed to find the celebrated psychic who had the singular ability.

As my students were enjoying the summer holiday, my open schedule offered me the freedom to move about. In my unencumbered, vagile state, I traveled to San Francisco, Phoenix, and Albuquerque searching for the one supernaturally gifted psychic capable of bridging that great yawning chasm separating my wife and me.

Understandably, law enforcement agencies are generally tightlipped in discussing the assistance of, and even more so, in the recommending of clairvoyants. During a strictly "off the record" meeting over coffee with a San Francisco PD detective, I was given the name of one Duvall Karr, a local psychic who was said to have located the skeletal remains of a missing diamond merchant who had been viciously robbed and killed by a gang of armed assailants five years earlier. According to the detective, Mr. Karr led the police to a shallow grave behind an abandoned warehouse where the diamond merchant's bones lay. So amazing were the circumstances surrounding this gruesome discovery, even the most hardboiled skeptics of psychic phenomena were helpless in discrediting Mr. Karr's contribution to the SFPD.

Relying upon the assistance of the aforesaid mentioned homicide detective, I was granted a brief interview with the normally reclusive Duvall Karr, a furtive, highly excitable little man in his late fifties who made his home in a cramped apartment situated above a liquor store in one of the city's seedier neighborhoods. Ushering me into his drab little living quarters, the noted psychic spoke in a low murmur punctuated by multiple pauses. "You—you must not stay long. This—this is a bad, very bad neighbor—neighborhood. If you wait around until—until night—nightfall, this neighborhood is dangerous after—after dark. What—what do you want from me?"

"Thank you for agreeing to this meeting. I promise to be respectful of your time." Looking about, I noted dozens of photographs, cut from the pages of old wildlife magazines that were taped to the apartment's tattered wallpaper, featuring birds of all varieties. "You are interested in ornithology," I commented.

Glancing around the room as if looking for something, my host answered, "We can—we can learn many lessons—we can learn many lessons from our feathered friends."

This may be true, but at the time, I was unable to recall a single life lesson I had learned from birds, so I decided to forego any further chitchat and get down to the business at hand. "I am to understand you possess some amazing psychic powers, Mr. Karr."

Wiping the sweat from his forehead, for it was a warm day and Mr. Karr's apartment was not airconditioned, he stammered, "Amazing—amazing psychic powers? What amazing psychic—psychic powers? After dark, this neighborhood—I don't have any amazing—amazing. Who—who told you I had?"

Hastily rising from my seat, I blurted, "What is this? The detective who arranged our meeting assured me you had uncannily located the missing body of a jeweler who had been ruthlessly gunned down by robbers. Because of your discovery, the four killers

were arrested, tried, convicted, and sent to prison. Was I misled? Is this not in keeping with the facts?"

"Oh, that? Yes. Yes. Sit down—sit down and I will. Would—would you like to hear—hear what happened?" he replied while lighting the stump of a cigar. "The diamond—the diamond merchant's body was—was—his body was buried—I will tell you what happened."

"Please do," I answered as I took my seat.

"I am not a—I am not a psychic," he began.

"But you located the diamond merchant's corpse by supernatural means, correct?"

Thoughtfully exhaling a billowy cloud of acrid smoke, he shook his head saying, "No. No supernatural. Mr. Tibbets—told me the whereabouts of the—Mr. Tibbets told me the whereabouts of the body. Mr. Tibbets told me—and I told the—told the police where the body was buried."

Stumped by this revelation, I asked, "Why do the police credit you with the discovery of the merchant's body? Why not give the credit to this Mr. Tibbets?"

Taking another slow draw from the cigar, he replied, "I—I told the police about—Mr. Tibbets told me where the body—where the body was buried. Grisly business, murder, that is. Mr. Tibbets told me. Mr. Tibbets—I reported this to the police. Mr. Tibbets told me, and I told. This neighborhood isn't safe after—after dark."

"How did Mr. Tibbets know where the body was buried?" I asked. "And instead of telling you the whereabouts of the missing body, why didn't he go straight to the police?"

“A flock of—a flock of pigeons perched—pigeons perched atop the warehouse witnessed the robbers—witnessed the robbers burying the dead man’s body. From the roof—from the roof, the pigeons saw everything. The pigeons—the pigeons saw the robbers digging the grave. After—after the—then the pigeons reported all this to—to Mr. Tibbets. Mr. Tibbets—Mr. Tibbets then told me. Mr. Tibbets told me where the body—and I told—I told the police everything that Mr. Tibbets. That’s what—that’s what happened. The pigeons told Mr. Tibbets. Mr. Tibbets told me. Mr. Tibbets told me and—and I told. The police dug up the dead man. Grisly business.”

“I appreciate your hospitality, Mr. Karr,” said I while stepping toward the door. “Yours is a most remarkable story.” Remarkable? More like ridiculous, preposterous, and a ludicrous waste of my time. With plane fare, local travel expenses, and the cost of hotel lodgings, this sojourn to San Francisco had set me back a substantial sum. And for what? A five minute conversation with a delusional little man who has a friend who talks to pigeons. As I prepared to say good-bye, a hefty orange cat who looked as though he had never skipped a meal ambled into the room. Giving me a look of unmitigated contempt as cats are often known to do, I commented, “You have a sizable kitty, sir. He’s a rather robust fellow.”

“Oh, him?” answered Mr. Duvall Karr. “That’s—that’s Mr. Tibbets. He told me—he told me where the body—murder is grisly business. They—the robbers killed—they buried him—the pigeons saw everything. They told Mr. Tibbets. Grisly business. Mr. Tibbets—he told me everything.”

“That’s Mr. Tibbets?”

Turning his disdainful attention to Duvall Karr, the large orange kitty let loose with a couple of cantankerous meows. “Did you—did you hear what he—did you hear what Mr. Tibbets just now said? Mr. Tibbets—Mr. Tibbets wants his—he wants his dinner. Good-bye.”

Alana Bogart was available for consultation at a rate of \$750 per forty-five minute session, and according to the glowing testimonials posted on her website, she had successfully reunited hundreds of mourners with their dearly departed loved ones. Of interest, too, was her claim of having regular contact with such historical figures and celebrities including Mary Todd Lincoln, Helen Keller, Henry Ford, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Humphry Bogart (of whom she said to be distantly related), Marilyn Monroe, and John Lennon. After securing an appointment with Alana Bogart's congenial secretary, Skyla Templeton, I booked a nonstop flight to Phoenix.

As was Ms. Bogart's policy, clients were to first meet with her personal secretary for a preliminary screening. Settling into the famed psychic's tastefully decorated consultation room, Skyla beamed with great satisfaction as she explained, "You could not have come at a better time, Mr. McCormick. Hmm...according to the questionnaire, I see you prefer being called by your nickname, Woody. As I was saying, Woody, you could not have come at a better time. Alana's publisher is sending her on an eight-week book signing tour through Europe. She'll be leaving for London next Thursday, and I've been asked to travel with her. I'm sure London has greatly changed since the last time I was there."

"Oh? When were you last in London?" I asked.

"Simply ages ago. You see, in a past life, I once had an affair with King Henry VIII. Everyone naturally assumes that he was a bristling tyrant, but King Henry had a tender side that few people knew. He could be a perfect gentleman if he were so inclined, but let's get back to business. Tell me about yourself."

"As men often identify themselves by their vocations," I began, "I am a high school English teacher."

"A high school English teacher?" With a waggish smile, she said, "I'd better not dangle any participles, or you might give me a bad grade. Do you enjoy teaching, Woody?"

“I love good books and I love good students,” said I, “but finding good books is more easily accomplished than finding good students.”

“As you love good books, I’ll see that you get a signed copy of Alana Bogart’s latest best-seller, *Crypt Talk: Lending an Ear to the Dead*. Tell me about your childhood, Woody.”

Sipping the well-made cappuccino thoughtfully provided by my host, I continued the interview by saying, “I think I am about as normal as anyone despite my, well, my abnormal childhood. I grew up under unusual circumstances. I can scarcely remember my mother and my father handed over his parental responsibilities to a highly regarded live-in tutor. My father wasn’t comfortable in the company of children and his business demanded most of his time, so I was brought up by a brilliant academic named Dr. Felton.”

“How interesting,” she replied. “Please tell me more about your father. What line of work was he in?”

“Oddly enough, my father was highly influential in the entertainment industry.”

“You used the phrase ‘oddly enough.’ Why?”

“My father loathed nearly everyone in show business. He described most actors as ‘trained monkeys’ and he belittled the current crop of recording artists as ‘tone deaf nincompoops.’ He anathematized television and movies, and he swore gaming had ruined America’s youth. He had nothing kind to say about Hollywood, yet he was esteemed among the elite in his profession. It was said my father could launch or squelch a major entertainment project with a single phone call. And if you will permit another ‘oddly enough,’ my father ran his show business empire from a dingy little office somewhere in the low rent district of east LA.”

Visibly moved by my disclosure, Skyla exclaimed, “How utterly, utterly fascinating. Because of your father’s influence and connections, I’ll bet you met a lot of famous stars. Care to name a few?”

“You don’t understand,” said I. “My father detested these people. He would not have me in the company of anyone engaged in the entertainment industry. At my father’s insistence, Dr. Felton and I made our home in a small town that few have heard of located some two hundred or so miles from LA. If anything, my father did his best to shield me from the influences of Hollywood. During an occasional phone call or visit, he would swear, ‘If it means pledging my soul to Beelzebub, you will grow up to be a normal person. No son of mine will ever be tainted by the damnable influence of this reprehensible, ego-driven trade.’”

Skyla shifted uneasily in her chair. “Before joining the firm as Alana’s private secretary, I worked as a model and actress. You may remember me from the Nature’s Wonder Shampoo commercials. Anyway, I’ve been on camera, and I think I’m normal. Your father certainly was an opinionated person.”

“That he was,” I agreed.

“By chance, do you recall seeing me on television?”

Though I could not rightfully claim to be acquainted with her shampoo commercials, I told her otherwise, and this seemed to please her. Looking back, I should have told her the truth.

My curiosity piqued, I asked, “Is this preliminary interview for the purpose of acquainting Ms. Bogart with my case? Are you gathering relevant background information that may prove useful? If so, I was wondering why you’re not taking notes, or is our conversation being recorded?”

Apparently amused by my questioning, Skyla tossed her head and smiled saying, “Oh, it’s nothing like that. Be assured this conversation is strictly between you and me. Alana’s policy is to avoid making any deductions or conclusions until after meeting the client. She’s good, Woody. She’s good. Within two minutes, she will know you better than you know yourself. It is as if she can read people like a book. Like I said, Alana is good.”

Though not yet convinced, I said, “That’s fascinating, but if Alana isn’t privy to this preliminary interview, why the probing into my family and background? I don’t see the point.”

“Good question,” she quickly answered. “My role is to screen out the disbelieving skeptics who hope to expose my boss as a fraud—as if Alana has anything to hide. Being a well-known public figure who makes hundreds of appearances on television and conferences, she makes a good target for mockers and deniers who would like nothing better than to discredit her amazing supernatural powers.”

“Is that so?” I asked.

“Look at it this way, Woody, because of the many scheduling demands from hurting people who desperately need the comfort and wisdom she offers, Alana Bogart simply hasn’t the time to waste on these dirty disbelievers.”

“So, you’re the gatekeeper?”

With a broad smile, she said, “Yes, I’m the gatekeeper, and to get to Alana, these deniers must first get past me.”

“In your opinion,” I asked, “do you think most psychics are charlatans?”

“Anyone can claim to possess psychic powers,” she answered, “but Alana’s track record is nothing less than impressive.”

“I understand what you’re saying, but what about these fortune tellers and spiritualists who’ll read your palm or contact a deceased loved one from their kitchen table?”

“These low budget mediums who work for chump change are, at best, only marginally gifted,” Skyla suggested, “but is this such a bad thing?”

“A bad thing? Of course, it’s a bad thing,” I protested. “Whether it be for twenty bucks or several hundred dollars, deceiving people isn’t right.”

“Do you think so?” asked Skyla. “Don’t misunderstand me, Woody, for Alana is authentic—she has the gift and can support this claim with hundreds of success stories and satisfied customers, but not everyone can afford the costs and, well, these wannabe psychics tend to offer a lot of hope to a lot of hurting people for a very few dollars.”

Pressing the point, I asked, “Are you saying it is okay for a phony medium to conjure up a make-believe conversation with a deceased loved one simply to make a bereaved customer who clips coupons and eats tuna casserole instead of lobster feel better?”

“Consider the dilemma from another point of view,” she insisted. “If a lie makes someone happy or if a lie brings comfort to someone struggling with grief and loss, what’s the harm?” she asked.

“What’s the harm? A lie is a lie,” said I. “Can good come from deceiving others?”

“A lie that makes people happy or helps them to feel good is no longer a lie—it is unrealized truth.”

“Unrealized truth?” I exclaimed. “That’s doublespeak. I am not looking for a lie to make me feel better. If Ms. Bogart is unable to contact my late wife, I want to know.”

With a reassuring smile, Skyla said, “Don’t worry, Woody. At \$750 per forty-five minute session, you’re entitled to the services of one of the world’s most gifted mediums, but remember, not everyone’s bank account can bear the cost of the genuine, and if a twenty dollar lie can dry a tear or provide a bereaved individual with a measure of peace, then a lie can be a pretty good thing.”

“Are you saying the widespread deception among many, if not most psychics is justified?” I objected.

“Justified? Psychic deception should be *encouraged* if it makes people feel better.”

“I’m not convinced. Explain your reasoning,” I insisted.

“The average person who knows little about jewelry cannot tell a synthetic diamond created in a laboratory from a real diamond formed over thousands of years from within the bowels of the earth, right? So, if a phony chunk of manmade crystal looks good on the ring finger and makes the owner happy, who cares?”

For the next hour, Skyla and I looked back upon my childhood, friends, college years, the death of my father, favorite foods, hobbies, teaching, and, of course, Abbie. “How did the two of you get together?” she asked.

“I first met Abbie at the Starbucks on Willis Avenue.”

“Starbucks?” she giggled. “A coffee shop doesn’t sound very romantic.”

“I didn’t go there for romance,” I said. “I went there for coffee and a quiet place to work. You see, I made an almost daily habit of preparing my classroom lesson plans at

Starbucks and, as it happened, Abbie had just taken a job as a barista-in-training, and I never knew anyone in a green apron could appear to be so beautiful.”

She smiled and asked, “Was it love at first sight?”

“Maybe,” I answered. “This much is certain—I could scarcely take my eyes from her.”

“Aw, how sweet. So, what happened?”

“What happened? At first, mainly small talk. I told her about my life as a high school English teacher and she told me about her online studies in fashion design at UCLA. After graduation, she hoped to go into business for herself.”

“She must have been a wonderfully creative person.”

“She allowed me to see some of her sketches, and though I know little about fashion, it was obvious that she was not lacking in imagination. I learned that Abbie had previously worked for a clothing boutique located on Central, but the little shop was struggling to stay afloat, so when the owner was forced to cut her hours, Abbie sought more stable employment with Starbucks. Ultimately, the boutique’s loss was Starbuck’s gain and, more significantly, my gain.”

“When did you know you were really in love with Abbie?” Skyla asked.

“When I saw the little red heart she had drawn on the cup of the iced cappuccino I had ordered, I knew beyond doubt this was the one and only girl for me.”

On and on we talked. Twice during the interview, I found myself asking, “I have told you a lot about myself and Abbie. And you say you aren’t planning to share any of these details with Ms. Bogart? Are you sure?”

“Oh, Woody,” she laughed. “You have a lot to learn about Alana. What could I possibly tell her that she will not have already discerned on her own within moments of meeting you? Don’t be such a doubter. She has the gift, Woody. She has the gift.”

Her enthusiasm bolstered my spirits. I began to believe that maybe, just maybe, Alana Bogart had a supernatural ability that would allow her to bring Abbie to me.

Back in my hotel room, I began rehearsing what I might say to Abbie. Skyla had scheduled my private consultation with Alana Bogart two days hence at 1 PM. I was told to arrive an hour early for “prep.” According to Skyla’s instructions, I was to abstain from eating twenty-four hours prior to the interview; I could, however, take in small amounts of clear liquids. When I asked about coffee, for I am a slave to my morning coffee, Skyla gave me an approving nod as long as I avoided cream and sugar. This was not a problem, for I prefer my coffee black. As to the dietary restrictions imposed by the famed psychic, it seemed as though I was preparing for a colonoscopy rather than a seance, but considering Alana Bogart’s reputation as one of America’s leading spiritualists, I bowed to her greater knowledge and experience. What is the foregoing of three meals, I considered, when compared to the immeasurable joy of hearing from my wife? Meats for the belly and the belly for meats—I would fast forty days and nights for a single utterance from the love of my life.

However, as the hour drew nearer, I began wondering if Alana Bogart might be nothing more than a high dollar huckster. I had reason to doubt. By her personal secretary’s own admission, fakes, frauds, and phonies abound in the shadowy world of spiritism. Trickery and deceit, considered deeds of avarice according to any thinking person’s standards, are frequently hailed as shining acts of altruism as long as the duped and the gullible walk away happy. Who cares if the duped and the gullible walk away a few dollars poorer?

What if there is no gift? I nearly made myself insane with worry thinking Alana Bogart might, in truth, be a well-healed snake oil peddler with an entourage of publicists,

lawyers, secretaries, and accountants. What if the wall separating the living from the dead is impenetrable? What if communicating with those who have gone on before us is a stark impossibility. Maybe the only gift Alana Bogart possessed was the ability to bilk unsuspecting customers exorbitant sums of money for an aching heart of empty hope in the form of a hocus pocus dog and pony show.

In the end, my worries were for naught. On the morning of the interview, Skyla Templeton phoned to say the date of the European book signing tour had been fast-forwarded. "I am so terribly, terribly sorry, Woody," she apologized, "but Alana and I were caught off guard by an unforeseen scheduling glitch, and thanks to the latest demands of Alana's publisher, I have no choice but to cancel today's 1 PM interview. Our flight to London leaves in a couple of hours, but you are not to worry, for the \$750 consultation fee that was billed to your credit card, minus the cost of a signed copy of Alana's newest book, will be refunded in four to six weeks. If you would like to reschedule your interview when Alana and I return to the states, shoot me an email. It was really grand meeting you, Woody. I wish you a whole lot of luck."

West of Albuquerque is the Laguna Pueblo territory, a federally recognized Native American reservation with a population of about 8,000 that lies near the Rio San Jose and is easily accessible by automobile via the iconic Route 66. Perhaps as an afterthought, Skyla Templeton had sent a last minute text from the airport suggesting I travel to New Mexico to meet a highly regarded medium known as Mother Maria LaRosa Goldring. While Skyla did not have a phone number for Mother Maria, she assured me that I would find her at Our Lady of the Most Blessed Sacrament Church situated near the casino; Mother Maria seldom missed the 4 PM mass.

I expected to meet a plump, grayish, mysterious, sixtyish woman wearing a billowy white blouse, a festively decorated floor-length skirt, large hoop ear rings, several strings of beads, and a colorful bandana wrapped around her head, so I was taken aback when Father Rojas, who had just concluded the afternoon mass, pointed to a young woman, probably in her early twenties, dressed in denim shorts and a yellow tank

top, standing before several rows of votive candles. "That's your Mother Maria," the old priest unceremoniously answered before turning away.

"Father Rojas said you are Mother Maria," I whispered reverently. "I would be grateful if you could spare a few moments of your time."

Intently gazing at me through a pair of large dark eyes, she solemnly answered as if having slipped into a trance, "You have known deep, deep sorrow. Your life has been marred by tragedy. Someone you dearly and passionately love was unexpectedly taken from you, and your days are spent in grief, but you do not grieve alone, for the precious one you suddenly lost also grieves for you. She desperately longs to hear from you just as you long to hear from her. I can hear her faint cries. She is speaking, but I cannot quite make out her words through this veil of tears. She is troubled. Yes, she is burdened by an unrelenting sorrow. You share in this sorrow. You and she are bound by both love and grief. Again, she cries out. If only she would speak louder. What is this? I hear her pleading, 'Come to me, my most dear one, come to me, for I cannot rest until...I cannot rest until...I cannot rest until...'"

As her voice trailed off, I cried, "She cannot rest until what?"

"The spell is broken," Mother Maria explained, "but do not lose heart. I sense she will return."

As we stepped into the near blinding radiance of the New Mexican sun, the young woman asked, "Who are you and who is this loved one who is reaching out to you through me?"

"My name is Woody McCormick, and your name was given to me by Skyla Templeton, Alana Bogart's personal secretary. May I assume you are familiar with them?"

“Alana Bogart called on me a couple of years ago,” she casually answered. “Our meeting was brief, but cordial. She’s based out of Phoenix, right?”

“That’s correct,” I said. “Do you consider her credible?”

Mother Maria nodded. “Credible? I’m convinced she has the gift, but she’s one of those celebrity mystics, and I’m not entirely comfortable with all that glitz and glamour. By the way, I heard she charges her clients outrageous fees—something like \$500 per session. Is this true?”

“Her pricing has increased. I was billed \$750 for a forty-five minute session, but we never had a chance to meet, for our interview was suddenly cancelled when she was called away on business,” I explained.

Mother Maria shook her head, “I could never charge anyone such exorbitant sums for a gift that was freely bestowed upon me by God, but, then again, I don’t have a posh office in the high-rent district, and I don’t have a hefty payroll to meet.” Pointing to an old blue and white Ford F-150, she said, “I make my home in a trailer down the road. Hop in and we’ll pick up this conversation at my place.”

As we bounced and rattled along the highway trailed by swirls of gritty dust, I ventured to comment, “I expected someone much older and, well, someone a bit more mystical. You don’t look like a Mother Maria. I would have pegged you as a grad student or a young professional.”

“I hear this all the time,” she laughed, “but there is a logical explanation. I am the fourth incarnation of the original Mother Maria LaRosa Goldring. The last Mother Maria passed away six years ago at the age of ninety-nine. At her death, God chose me, a budding seventeen-year-old spiritualist, to take up her mantle and continue the great work. But you are right about one thing.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“I am a graduate student working toward my doctoral degree in paranormal psychology,” she explained. “In many ways, I am a typical young woman—I have an active social life and my tastes and interests are pretty much what you would expect from others who share my age and educational background, but I have the gift of speaking with the dead, and God would not have me hiding my gift beneath a basket.”

She parked the pickup truck alongside a shabby, weather-beaten house trailer. “Be it ever so humble...” she laughed. “Apartments are noisy and, besides, the previous Mother Maria lived here. When she passed on, she left behind a lot of positive energy, so this is where I choose to live. Please come inside.”

Though spartanly furnished, the interior of her modest home was tidy and comfortable. “Are you hungry?” she asked. “I can offer you spicy black bean paste with the most delicious, papery thin tortillas you’ve ever tasted. My aunt makes them fresh each day.”

“If I could trouble you for a glass of iced water,” said I. “Before leaving the church, you mentioned a faint voice of someone attempting to be heard. May we speak of this?”

“The voice was nearly inaudible,” she explained, “but I am certain this was the voice of a woman and I further sense she will return again.”

Suddenly filled with anxiety, I asked, “Was she in distress? Has any harm come to her? Is she okay?”

Handing me a tumbler of iced water, the young mystic answered, “I can only say she was desperately trying to be heard. The gulf between us is wide, but you may be assured we’ve not heard the last of her. She will be back, but as to when, I do not know.”

“Her name is Abbie,” I said. “She was killed nearly a year ago when our small plane went down. The accident happened the day after our wedding.”

As I reminisced of my wife, a tear trickled down Mother Maria’s cheek, and so, for the next hour, I recounted the details of our first date and the courtship that followed. I told her of Abbie’s love of animals, her creative interests, and the quirkiest facets of her personality that set her apart from all others. I concluded these recollections by saying, “When I regained consciousness, Abbie was gone. I never had a chance to say good-bye. My one desire is to know that, even in death, she is happy—or at peace. I want assurance that Abbie is okay, and that she is fully aware that I love her, and I miss her and when I die, I hope to join her.”

After baring my soul through this ruthless discourse, I was deeply moved seeing the young medium dabbing tears from her bleary eyes. This was no act. Her compassion was genuine. She cared about Abbie, and she cared about me. I began weeping. She wept, too. Her muffled sobs were for a visitor she scarcely knew and for the sacred memory of one whom she had never met. Mother Maria, sharing in the agony of my loss, wrapped a comforting arm around my shoulders. Never have I experienced such tenderness from a stranger.

After several minutes of hushed mourning, Mother Maria dried her face and spoke softly, “Rather than calling for a ride, I want you to take my Ford pickup and check in at the Clermont Hotel across from the casino. In the meantime, I will try summoning Abbie. I will phone you the moment contact is made.”

“You will reach Abbie?” I asked.

“Woody, there are no guarantees, and I will never feed you empty promises, but if your Abbie is willing to work with me, there is hope.”

“What is meant by Abbie being willing to work with you?” I nervously asked.

“Just as contacting the dead is new to you, contacting the living is new to her. I am certain she is eager to hear from us, but she may not understand how to make herself known and understood. Abbie has a role to play in this, too, and unless she understands the process, we may be at an impasse.”

“Is there anything you can do to ensure that Abbie is able to establish contact with us?” I anxiously asked.

With a smile, she said, “I wouldn’t be the fourth incarnation of Mother Maria LaRosa Goldring if I wasn’t good at this. Enjoy dinner at the casino and try getting a good night’s sleep. I’ll phone you when I sense her presence. I promise.”

Standing by the trailer door, I thought it would be wise to discuss money before leaving. “We’ve not talked about your fee,” I said. “Once this is over, how much will I owe you? Please do not think I am a mercenary by bringing up the matter of costs, for if you are able to connect me with Abbie, I will gladly pay whatever you demand.”

“I am no celebrity psychic,” she answered. “I do not have a set fee schedule. If you wish to bless me with a donation, be assured whatever you decide to give will be most appreciated. As to the size of your offering, the amount you give, be it great or small or nothing at all, is strictly between you and God. Now stop worrying about these minor details. Have dinner at the casino, watch a little TV or read a good book, go to bed early, and let us see what tomorrow brings.”

Chapter 5

“Were you asleep?” the voice on the other end of the line asked. It was half past 1 AM and, despite the lateness of the hour, my intermittent bouts of slumber had been fitful. Feeling confused and groggy, I reached for my phone, but at the sound of Mother Maria’s voice, the muddled confusion vanished, and my mental alertness was restored.

“Get here right away, Woody,” she instructed. “I am feeling Abbie’s presence, and she wants to hear from you.”

“Abbie is attempting to make contact?” I hopefully asked. “Do you really think it’s her?”

With a sense of urgency in her voice, she cried, “Woody, there is no time to explain. You have my pickup truck, so grab the keys, and please don’t delay. I cannot say how long Abbie’s spirit will remain.”

Racing along the desert highway at a breakneck pace, my busy mind replayed the telephone conversation from a few hours earlier with my respected friend and mentor, Dr. Felton, who was mending from surgery. From the beginning, Dr. Felton had expressed serious reservations about reaching Abbie through necromancy, yet he was much too gracious to belittle me over our differences of opinion. “The problem with the paranormal,” he explained, “is the entire realm of psychic phenomenon is a vast playground for the superstitious, the mentally unsound, the vulnerable, the trusting, the gullible, and the glib-talking swindlers who make merchandise of their victims. Besides possible financial loss, you risk emotional setbacks triggered by disappointment on top of more disappointment.”

“I won’t deny the risks, Dr. Felton,” said I, “but can you be certain it is empirically impossible for the living to communicate with the dead?”

“To begin with,” he answered, “communicating with the dead assumes the immortality of the human spirit. What happens to the spirit when the heart no longer beats or when all brain functions end? Do the dead continue existing in a disembodied state, or is the life force snuffed out much like the flame of a candle that is exposed to the wind? These are deep waters, Sherwood, and many great minds believe the spirit dies along with the body.”

“And other great minds hold to the immortality of the human soul,” I objected. “Are you willing to categorically state beyond doubt there is no life after death?”

“No, Sherwood,” he admitted. “I cannot say with absolute certainty there is no afterlife, but I consider a belief in eternal life a product of wishful thinking.”

“Perhaps, but does wishing something were true necessarily negate its truthfulness?” I asked.

“No, Sherwood, but how many millions of people’s wishes of cashing a winning lottery ticket will never be fulfilled?” he responded. “Not all dreams come true.”

“Yes, but maybe the almost universal longing to live eternally was implanted in us by whatever creative force brought the universe into existence,” I suggested. “We desire to live on and on because we do, in fact, live on and on. Would you say this is a possibility?”

“Possible? Yes. Probable? Not according to my thinking, Sherwood. At the risk of offending you, may I suggest you are in a highly vulnerable state that makes you particularly susceptible to vain promises and deception. May I speak frankly, and with impunity?” he asked.

“Please do, Dr. Felton. I owe much to you, and as you have always been there for me, whatever you say will not offend me.”

“Very well, then,” he said. “Nearly a year has passed since Abbie’s death. Grief is a necessary byproduct of loss, but I fear you have pitched your tent in the shadowlands too long. Isn’t it time to pull the stakes and move on with your life? Until you accept the undeniable fact that Abbie is gone, you will continue wasting away until there is nothing left of your life but despair.”

“Maybe I should let go,” I said, “but I feel cheated. I was knocked unconscious when the plane struck the ground, and when I came to, Abbie was already gone. There are so many questions and so many regrets. We never had a chance to say our goodbyes. Is it too much to hope that a medium can arrange for Abbie and me to give each other a proper farewell?”

“Would you then be satisfied?” Dr. Felton asked.

“Yes,” I agreed. “All I want are a few answers. Where is Abbie, and is she alright? Does she hold me at fault for the accident? Has she forgiven me? With answers, there would be closure, and with closure, I believe I would be ready to move on with my life.”

“I truly hope so, Sherwood, otherwise, two lives will have been lost in that plane crash.”

“Thank you for your concern,” I said. “Maybe this story will conclude with a happy ending.”

“I harbor a dim view of occultic practitioners,” said Dr. Felton respectfully, “but I hope this Mother Maria can bridge the great abyss that divides you and Abbie. I need not warn you to be wise as a serpent. There are thousands of clever ruses bunko artists rely upon for bilking their unsuspecting victims. As you are a man of means, please be mindful of any chicanery intended to separate you from your money, Sherwood.”

“I’ll keep a tight grip on my wallet,” I promised.

Dr. Felton added, “As you are in a highly vulnerable state, keep a tight grip on your emotional well-being along with your wallet.”

“I’ll guard my feelings.”

The conversation ended with Dr. Felton saying, "Do not be undone by disappointment, but if, perchance, you find yourself speaking with Abbie through this medium, please send her my love."

I found the young psychic sitting on the deck of her trailer. Wearing an expression of weariness, I noted a heap of bloodied tissues in a wastepaper basket next to the lounge chair where she sat. "What's this?" I asked.

"I am dizzy from nosebleeds, so you had better drive," she said. "Please help me to the truck."

"Shall I take you to the hospital?" I anxiously asked.

"No, I'll be okay," she feebly answered, "but we must get to town right away. It's Abbie. She's ready to meet with us."

As we raced toward the small village of Paraje, Mother Maria explained how she often experienced severe nosebleeds when summoning the dead. "Once you left for the hotel, I devoted myself to focusing on Abbie. After entering a trance, I began calling out to her spirit. She's out there, Woody, and she wants to be heard, but there are other forces I do not fully understand that are attempting to draw her away."

"What can you tell me about these interfering forces?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Whether they are evil forces or simply mischievous little spirit trolls, I couldn't say, but just as there are people who say communicating with the dead is wrong, there are ethereal beings on the other side who, with equal conviction, strictly oppose contact with the living such as you and me. Anyway, I began concentrating on Abbie with all my strength, and that's when the nosebleeds began. I am weak from the loss of blood, Woody, but I mustn't rest until we've established a firm contact. Right

now, only a thread of consciousness exists between Abbie and me, and this thread is easily broken. If I lose Abbie now, God forbid, I may never reach her again.”

Dodging a snake crawling across the narrow stretch of highway, I asked, “Why would Abbie want to meet us in Paraje? Why not make contact at your trailer?”

Mother Maria answered, “I don’t know, Woody. I’m assuming there is something in Paraje she wants us to see.”

With a population of less than a thousand, Paraje is the proverbial wide spot on the highway. Given the lateness of the hour, the main road running through the village was deserted. It appeared as if Mother Maria and I were the only two people up and about. Pointing to a single story concrete block building that may have once housed a hardware store or welding shop, Mother Maria said, “Park the truck here. I sense Abbie’s spirit hovering nearby.”

A handprinted sign affixed to the building’s front entry read:

For Sale or Rent

2000 Square Feet

Phone 555-0220 Ask for Pete

“I’m phoning the owner,” Mother Maria said.

“At this hour?” I asked. “You risk making this Pete an angry fellow.”

“I know what I’m doing,” she snapped.

A few minutes later, a slight, middle-aged Native American man in jeans, a blue work shirt, and snakeskin boots pulled his Chevy truck alongside Mother Maria’s old blue and white F-150. After a brief conversation that I did not overhear, he produced a set of keys, gave them to Mother Maria, returned to his truck, and sped away. Mother Maria

unlocked the front door, stepped inside the building, flipped on the lights, and motioned for me to join her.

There was little to see. The walls were constructed of unpainted concrete blocks. The floor was poured concrete. A few rusty metal shelves stood against the walls. The lighting came from overhead florescent bulbs. Aside from the metal shelving, an old wooden desk and a couple of barstools were the building's only other furnishings. There was a clammy coolness in the air. As Mother Maria had rested herself on one of the barstools, I decided to do likewise and wait to see what might follow.

After several minutes, Mother Maria whispered, "I sense Abbie is here. I want you to be very, very still and remain quiet until I say otherwise. Failure to do exactly as I say may result in a breaking of the spell. She's here, Woody. She's here, but she's in an agitated state. This experience is just as frightening to her as it is to you. Do you understand?"

My heart raced with excitement. Over the next several minutes, I witnessed the young medium entering into what I perceived was a trance. I remained still. In a scarcely audible voice, I heard her cry, "Abbie, Abbie, Abbie..." The sporadic barking of a dog from across the way added to the solemnity of the occasion. "Come nearer, Abbie. Come nearer so that I may hear you. Please, come nearer. Do not be afraid. We wish you no harm, Abbie. We wish you no harm..."

Several more minutes passed. Mother Maria began to weep. I could see her lips working feverishly, but other than her choking sobs, I heard nothing. After several more minutes, she opened her eyes. Looking toward me, she said in a reverent voice, "Your wife is here, Woody. She is pleased by your presence. What would you have me say to her?"

"Is this you, Abbie? Are you really here?" Tears streamed down my face. "I love you so much, Abbie. Can you hear me" Though I had rehearsed again and again what I would

say if such a blessed encounter were to take place, I inexplicably found myself stumbling over words and wondering what I ought to say. After an awkward pause, I cried, "Please speak to me, Abbie."

Mother Maria said, "Woody, your wife's voice is extremely faint, so it is important that you keep your emotions in check. Any sudden outbursts from you may frighten her."

"Okay, I'll maintain my composure."

"Please do," Mother Maria replied. "If you are finding this encounter emotionally taxing, be assured that your late wife is experiencing similar feelings. Now hold your peace. Say nothing. Abbie is speaking. Yes, Abbie is speaking. I hear her saying, 'I love you, Woody, I love you very much, and though I miss you and am grieved by the separation of death and laden with sorrow, I am not altogether unhappy.'"

"Abbie, please tell me what is wrong. Are you suffering? Are you in any pain?" I cried.

After a protracted pause, the medium said, "Some of what she is saying, I do not understand. Abbie exists in a state unlike our own, and not all she wishes to communicate is easily translatable or expressible. She is free of pain, of course, for she is in a noncorporeal state, but I sense she is experiencing much uneasiness. Be still, and I will try determining what is troubling your wife."

Excruciatingly long minutes passed before the medium began speaking again. "Abbie is saying, 'I do not hold you responsible for my death. The accident was unforeseeable, and you did your best to bring the plane down safely. I forgive you, Woody, I totally forgive you, and now you must forgive yourself.'"

Feeling as though my heart was ready to break, I cried, "Abbie, I wish I had been the one to die in the plane crash. I would have died a thousand deaths if it meant you would have been spared."

“Abbie is saying, ‘You mustn’t think like that, as there is a reason for everything that happens.’”

Straining to keep the runaway farrago of emotions at bay, I asked, “Mother Maria senses you are troubled, Abbie. Is this so? Are you uneasy? If you are anxious, what can I do that will give you peace? Please tell me. I will do anything you ask.”

After several more fretful minutes, the young medium broke into tears. “Your wife is truly a beautiful person,” she cried. “She has such a generous, loving, giving spirit. Oh, Woody, in life and in death, Abbie is a truly wonderful person. I now understand why you were drawn to her.”

“Yes, of course, but what is she saying?” I begged.

“Not everything she is saying is translatable,” Mother Maria explained, “but I am sensing the source of Abbie’s frustrations is that her premature death prevented her from fulfilling a lifelong dream of making the world a better place. She grieves for those, particularly young people of color, whose opportunities are limited because of educational and income inequalities. She is acutely aware of the ravages of social injustice and, as a means of atoning for this nation’s systemic racism as well as her own white privilege, Abbie had dreamed of providing meaningful career training for disadvantaged youth of color once she had established herself successfully in the fashion industry. Sadly, Abbie never lived long enough to realize this dream, and now she grieves.”

Although I did not recall Abbie explicitly expressing a desire to help young minorities launch careers as fashion designers, I would have never questioned the magnanimity of her heart, nor her interests in the well-being of those less fortunate. “Abbie,” I asked, “would you want me to establish a scholarship fund in your name? Say the word and it will be done.”

“A scholarship fund in Abbie’s name,” cried Mother Maria. “What a beautiful notion. Can you hear us, Abbie? Would you like your husband to create an Abbie McCormick Scholarship for Fashion Design? Would this give you the peace you long for? Please speak to us, Abbie.”

More minutes passed. “I hear you, Abbie. I hear you.” Turning her attention to me, Mother Maria said, “Abbie brought you to Paraje and to this empty building for a purpose. I hear your wife saying, ‘My beloved husband, there are many deserving Native American children in this county who face perpetual economic hardships because of an absence of job training. This building is to become a vocational training center where Native American kids can tap into their inner creativity and learn valuable skills that will allow them to soar to the heights of their fullest potential. I want you to name the school *The Abbie McCormick Center for Creative Development*. Lease this building. Establish a trust fund for teacher salaries and equipment. Cover all the school’s expenses so that deserving Native American children can attend classes free of charge. Do this for me, Woody, and the barriers preventing me from entering into a state of eternal bliss will be removed. Honor my wishes, beloved husband, and I will experience the full measure of never-ending joy that presently eludes me.’”

Two days later, I arrived in Los Angeles to meet with Lydia Hamilton-Farnsworth, the attorney who had dutifully represented my father throughout his business career and who now handled my legal affairs. As I explained the bizarre events leading up to my decision to establish a vocational training center for Native American children in my late wife’s honor, I expected no small measure of pushback from my prudent minded attorney, but what I got was a tsunami of vehement objections. Slamming a tightly clinched fist against the desktop, she wailed, “No! No! No! This has fraud written all over it, and I will not be a willing accomplice who permits a tarot card reading flimflam artist to swindle my dearest client’s son out of a fortune.”

Shaken, though wishing to appear nonplused, I calmly replied, "I appreciate your concern and I know you only have my best interests at heart, but this is my money to spend as I see fit. As my attorney, I am asking you to put the necessary legal paperwork into motion so that my wife's memory is honored by the establishment of this school."

Drawing a deep breath, she answered, "Woody, you are being guided by emotions rather than common sense. Other than the dubious word of a medium you scarcely know, what proof do you have that it was Abbie's spirit who was speaking through her? How can you be certain? Surely, you understand how an unscrupulous psychic might play on your grief for the sake of lining her own pockets."

"I won't deny it all sounds sketchy, but I was there when Abbie spoke through Mother Maria, and I sensed her presence. She was there."

"You wanted her there," Lydia patiently explained. "In a heightened state of anticipation, of course, you are going to experience strong emotions, but fuzzy feelings and hardcore facts are not synonymous. Feelings can be deceptive, and deception often comes with a hefty price tag."

I knew there was truth in Lydia's warning, but, deep down, I wanted to believe Abbie had come to join me inside that empty building, so I resumed my challenge. "You are a brilliant attorney, but what do you know about the afterlife? Can you be certain Abbie's spirit was not present? Aren't you assuming the annihilation of the soul at death when, in fact, many great thinkers believe the human spirit lives on?"

Rolling her eyes, Lydia said, "You may be a fantastic high school English teacher, but you'd make a lousy attorney. First, I know no less about the afterlife than you. If we were in a court of law, I would turn your question back on you. What do *you* know about the afterlife, Woody?"

“Well, I believe it is entirely possible that the human spirit lives on after death,” I answered. “Don’t you?”

“We are not debating the afterlife. We are talking about the very real possibility that an unscrupulous medium is setting you up for a sting.”

Hoping to find a chink in Lydia’s legal armor, I said, “You have automatically assumed Mother Maria is dishonest, yet you’ve never met her.”

“And you have automatically assumed Mother Maria is honest, yet you scarcely know her. Woody, how much money is needed to launch this school?”

“Based on Mother Maria’s estimate, a quarter of a million is needed,” I answered. “Maybe a bit more.”

Throwing up her hands in disbelief, she cried, “Your cost estimate is based upon a psychic’s calculations? And you’re willing to hand over a fortune on her word alone? How did she determine the amount of money that would be needed? Has she ever launched a school? Is her cost estimate based on experience, or did she arrive at this handsome sum by gazing into her crystal ball? Oh, come now, Woody, this is sounding more ridiculous by the minute.”

She was right. This scheme was sounding more ridiculous by the minute, but I was not yet ready to wave the white flag of defeat. “Mother Maria has agreed to act as the school’s temporary director, and she swore to refuse any offer of financial compensation. How can she be dishonest if she works for free?”

With a burst of sardonic laughter, Lydia cried, “But you’re handing the checkbook over to her, right? She’ll take charge of the school’s finances carte blanche, of course. How unspeakably magnanimous of her. Seldom have I heard of such altruistic selflessness. Are you sure your psychic saint’s name isn’t Mother Teresa?”

“You needn’t be cruel,” I said.

“Woody, why not pin a sign on your shirt saying ‘Pigeon?’ Do this, and the world’s professional swindlers will rise and call your name blessed.”

I knew Lydia was correct. I had shelved all discernment and common sense on the flimsiest of grounds, yet I was not quite ready to loosen my grip on this scheme. On the one in ten thousand chance that Mother Maria was acting truthfully, and Abbie’s spirit had indeed joined us in Paraje, I asked, “Is there anything I can do that might settle this matter once and for all?”

“Are you ready to yank the ‘Pigeon’ placard from your shirt?” she asked.

“Name it,” I answered.

Lydia smiled like the Cheshire cat. “Offer to fly your psychic to LA. She can conduct a séance in my conference room. I will be on hand as an observer. Once she claims to have established contact with Abbie, ask her a series of questions that only Abbie could answer. Make this Mother Maria prove beyond reasonable doubt that she is communicating with Abbie. If, by the rarest of chances, your Mother Maria isn’t a phony, I will handle the legal work free of charge and you’ll have your school, but if this psychic is just another scammer, and I’m willing to bet the farm she’s pure bunko, Lydia Hamilton-Farnsworth, Attorney-At-Law is going to make things mighty uncomfortable for her—and I know how to do it, too.”

“Okay,” I agreed, “but what if Mother Maria objects? What if she refuses to travel to LA?”

“If Mother Maria is legitimate,” Lydia said, “she has nothing to hide. A lot of money is at stake, and if she refuses to cooperate, you can be certain she fears being exposed as a fraud. Frankly, I think the prize is sufficiently large to lure her here.”

“I will phone Mother Maria this afternoon.”

Giving me a look of uncompromising sternness, Lydia said, “Woody, I want you to stick with our plan. Let’s play this by the book. Agree?”

“You have my word.”

“If you waver by giving into this charlatan behind my back, I swear I will have you declared incompetent and see that you are snugly fitted for a strait jacket and hauled to a faraway asylum. Do we have an understanding?”

“Yes, of course,” I relented, “but if my line of questioning proves beyond reasonable doubt that Abbie is speaking through Mother Maria, then we will proceed according to my late wife’s wishes, and I will expect you to cooperate.”

Chapter 6

After returning from Los Angeles, three or four days passed before I felt like venturing from my home. Following this most recent letdown, I was steeped in disappointment and wondered if life would ever again make sense. On one hand, I understood that death is as much a part of the human experience as birth and, too, the drawback of loving others is the risk of losing them. Revisiting an old bromide, is it better to have loved and lost than to have never loved at all? Did the joy and pleasure I gained from knowing Abbie outweigh the grief and emptiness I experienced after her passing? To this, I could not say. Over time, the wound would scab over and heal, and only a scar

would remain; as for now, the wound was fresh, and a sense of acute loss was my constant companion.

I often felt ashamed by the manner in which I was handling grief. The first anniversary of Abbie's death was only days away. After a year, one is expected to rise from the ruins, brush off the dust, and rejoin the living. After a year, it is agreed that the time has come to pack away the sackcloth, sweep the ashes back into the bin, and give life another chance. Why, then, had my aching soul stubbornly pitched its tent in the shadow of Abbie's granite marker? In a matter of weeks, the summer holidays would come to a close and students would flock back to school, but I could not see myself ready for a return to the classroom.

Abbie would tell me, if she were able to do so, that the time had come for me to step out of the gloom and into the sunlight. She would not want me in a perpetual state of mourning. My friend and mentor, Dr. Felton, warned that if I did not move on, two lives would have been lost when our Seabee went down. So why, then, was I unable to climb from this pit? Would this pit become my grave?

As I wrestled with my thoughts, I came to the conclusion that what I really wanted was assurance that, even in death, Abbie was alright. If there is a heaven, Abbie would surely be there, for she was a beautiful person, but how can I be certain there is a heaven, I reasoned, and if heaven is real, did the gatekeeper have the wherewithal to welcome her in? What if heaven is more than a fanciful myth, but her spirit had been turned away on some technicality? The unthinkable notion that Abbie might have been consigned to a place of torment because of some minor infraction of the rules sickened me to the quick. If, on the other hand, the materialists are correct and lurking beyond the grave is nothing but never-ending oblivion throughout the eternal ages to come, then Abbie would not suffer, for she would no longer exist in any state. But how can anyone know with certainty what happens at death?

What if there is a God, and what if this God is capricious and takes pleasure in damning people for indiscriminate reasons, I wondered. Suppose God is like a cruel little boy who delights in pulling the wings from butterflies? Perhaps what we consider good, God considers evil, and what we see as evil, God says is good. If such topsy-turvydom rules the universe, creatures such as Abbie might spend eternity in a terrible lake of fire while despots such as Hitler and Stalin received heroes' welcomes at the pearly gates of bliss.

Looking back, I realize my shambolic thinking had taken me down a path of confusion and dread. I had reached for the hands of blind guides who knew no more than me, yet emboldened by false confidence or spurious motives, they marched fearlessly toward what they did not know with their chains of dumbfounded fools in tow. All I truly longed for was truth.

Yes, I grieved for Abbie. Yes, I missed her sorely. Yes, the love of my life had been taken from me, and, no, I did not expect her to return, at least, not in the corporeal sense, but what troubled me—what robbed me of sleep and disturbed all hope of regaining my tranquility—was not knowing the state of being Abbie was in. Is she happy, I wondered. Is she at peace? Does she suffer? Or is she the flame of a candle that flickered and is no more? Is Abbie aware? Does she remember? Can she still love? Does she have feelings? Is she troubled by regret? Is she in a state of torment? Or is she, how shall I say this—nothing but a collection of selected memories that will dim and, over time, fade into the abyss of forgottenness?

“God,” I prayed, “can you hear me? Are you out there? If you happen to be listening, I want you to understand that I’m angry because you treat me as though I don’t exist. And, God, if you happen not to exist, then I am angry with you for not existing, for a loving God really ought to exist. Amen.”

Sometime around 3 AM, I slid into my usual booth at the Silver Dollar Pancake House. Carly, who was wrangling a mop across the black and white tile floor, looked up and smiled, "It's been a while, stranger. I'll be with you in a moment. Coffee?"

"Take your time," I answered.

Moments later, Carly approached with a carafe of coffee and a disposable cup. "Sorry about the paper cup, but all the ceramic mugs are in the dishwasher. Do you remember the chubby fellow who sits at the counter most nights drinking coffee?"

"The big, beefy guy who makes those wretched slurping sounds?"

"That's him," said Carly. "Well, just before you came in, he threw up all over the floor—ugh! I think he had been drinking. Anyway, he empties his gut and then asks if I will go out with him. When I said no, he dropped a quarter on the counter and walked out. Can you believe that?"

"This explains the mop and bucket and the smell of bleach," I said. "Do you have a moment?"

"Sure." Taking a seat next to me, she said, "It seems like forever since I've seen you."

"A couple of weeks, at least."

Leaning toward me, Carly whispered, "Can we skip the small talk? I've been dying to know if you hooked up with a psychic, and if so, what happened?"

"I'll never go that route again. In San Francisco, I met a sad old man who converses with his cat, and his cat carries on conversations with pigeons."

"You aren't kidding, are you?" she asked.

“His name is Duvall Karr,” I answered. “According to a local police detective, this psychic is credited with breaking a five-year-old murder case wide open, but all I saw was a delusional little man who might fare better if he were prescribed the right meds.”

“Hold that thought,” said Carly. “Let me make my rounds. I’ll be back for the rest of the story.”

After Carly topped off the handful of patrons’ coffee cups, I continued, “Next, I went to Phoenix to meet with a celebrity psychic, Alana Bogart, who claims to have communicated with hundreds of dead people. Her hourly rate is more than many people earn in a week, but she’s ranked among the top mediums in the nation. I was told she routinely advises two U.S. senators.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard this Alana Bogart is rich and very well-connected,” Carly said somewhat impatiently, “but let’s get to the down and dirty. What happened when you met her?”

“I never had the chance to meet her,” I explained. “Her publisher hurried her off to London for a promotional tour, so I never advanced beyond an introductory meeting with her personal secretary, but this is where the story takes an unusual turn.”

“How’s that?” Carly eagerly asked.

“After cancelling my meeting with Alana Bogart, Skyla Templeton, Ms. Bogart’s private secretary, referred me to a medium known as Mother Maria who lives on an Indian reservation in New Mexico.”

“Okay, so what’s unusual about a referral with another psychic?” Carly asked. “If duty called Alana Bogart to London, why not a recommendation? This sounds like professional courtesy to me.”

“That’s what I also assumed—everything above board and on the level, but now I am reasonably certain that Skyla Templeton, or maybe Alana Bogart herself, had set me up with this Mother Maria as part of an elaborate scheme to swindle me out of a goodly sum of money.”

Carly’s eyes grew wide with interest. “A con game? Do you really think so, Woody? Please don’t keep me in suspense.”

“During my time with Skyla Templeton, she grilled me about my courtship with Abbie. The interview was intense, and over the course of our conversation, she pried all manner of detail from me. I would have been suspicious, but Skyla Templeton never took notes, and she further assured me that Alana Bogart had no interest in the details of our conversation. This was merely a screening process to ensure my credibility as a client. Apparently, there are critics and deniers crawling out of the woodwork who schedule spurious visits for the sole purpose of discrediting the celebrated psychic.”

Brushing a whisp of flyaway hair from her pale blue eyes, Carly said, “Hmm...sounds kind of fishy to me, but do keep going.”

“I cannot deny the questionability of the situation, Carly, but believe me, I was willing to do whatever I was told if it meant an encounter with Abbie.”

“I understand,” she said, “but will you fast forward to the end. I want to know what happened before you’re interrupted by a herd of hungry customers who may come charging into this greasy spoon at any moment.”

I could not help but smile. “Okay, I won’t keep you in suspense. It appears Skyla Templeton secretly recorded our conversation and shared the contents with Mother Maria without my permission.”

“How did you find out?”

“Mother Maria had me thoroughly convinced she had established contact with Abbie during a trance that occurred inside an empty building. It was rather spooky, I don’t mind saying, but I took the bait and swallowed the hook.”

“Okay, then what?”

“According to Mother Maria, the fulfilling of Abbie’s final wish involved a lot of money. I was to fork over an appreciable sum of cash to Mother Maria who, in turn, promised to oversee the establishment of a training center for underprivileged kids.”

“Sounds like a scam,” Carly said, “but, then again, what if this really was Abbie’s final wish?”

“Although I wasn’t thinking with a clear head, my lawyer wasn’t so gullible. At her insistence, we arranged for a second séance in her downtown Los Angeles law office. The plan was for me to pose a series of questions that could only be answered by Abbie. It took some coaxing, but Mother Maria finally agreed to come. I knew with certainty that Mother Maria had been colluding with Skyla Templeton when the spirit of Abbie supposedly said she and I had met at a coffee shop on Willis Avenue.”

“But isn’t that where you two met?” Carly asked. “I seem to recall you mentioning that Abbie worked as a barista for Starbucks, and they have a location on Willis Avenue. I’ve been there.”

“Yes, and I had erroneously told Skyla Templeton that we had met at Starbucks on Willis Avenue, but later, I remembered the Willis Avenue store had been temporarily closed for remodeling. I met Abbie when she was employed at the Starbucks on Alhambra Street. Abbie would have never confused the location of the shop where she worked, so I knew

Mother Maria had obtained my inadvertently false recollection through Skylia Templeton.”

“Thereby proving Mother Maria was a fraud,” remarked Carly. “What happened next?”

“My attorney, who sat in as an observer, recorded the séance as a Los Angeles police detective looked on. I don’t know if the DA will elect to pursue bunko charges, but I strongly suspect Mother Maria will lay low and keep her nose clean for a long time to come.”

“Have you given up on psychics?” Carly asked.

Shaking my head, I answered, “What do you think? I came within inches of being bilked out of a quarter of a million dollars and, even worse, I would have gone to my grave trusting in a lie. For a time, I truly believed Mother Maria had made contact with Abbie and that she was at peace in death.”

“Poor Woody,” exclaimed Carly. “Mother Maria really yanked the rug from under you.”

“That she did,” I gloomily answered. “It was a crushing blow to discover I had been played as a fool.”

“Okay, both your Rev. Nadine and Mother Maria proved to be a bust, so what’s next, Woody?”

“I tried praying.”

“Really? Do you think God was listening?”

“I’ll let you know,” I answered.

“You don’t appear optimistic,” she said.

“Should I be?”

Carly smiled. “It’s hard to live without hope. Never lose heart, Woody.” As she spoke, a small black gentleman, probably in his late seventies or early eighties, toddled into the diner. He bore a sanguine expression and his clothing, though clean and pressed, appeared a couple of sizes too large for his compact frame. “Duty calls,” Carly said. “Let me seat this customer, and then I’ll be back to top off your cup of coffee.”

Slipping Carly a twenty, I said, “Don’t bother. I’m going to try grabbing a couple of hours’ sleep. Say, would you like me to swing by at the end of your shift? We could have breakfast.”

“Sounds good,” she answered, “but may we first stop by the halfway house? I’d like changing into my civvies. You know how much I dislike appearing in public wearing this hokey uniform.”

“I’ll see you at seven.”

As I crossed the street, I realized the front right tire of my car was flat. Surveying the disabled vehicle while muttering a few choice oaths, it became obvious the deflated tire had been punctured with either a knife or a screwdriver. And then, out of the shadows, stepped Jake.

I was furious. “Did you slash my tire? Of course, you did, you little cockroach. This is just the kind of lowlife stunt you’d pull.”

“Once again, my good name is sullied by a false accusation,” he sneered. “Lucky for you, the vandal behind this bit of mischief didn’t have time to slash the other three tires.”

"What are you doing here?" I demanded. "I paid you a good round sum to leave town."

"Yes, that was the plan," Jake replied with one of his devilish grins, "but the little money-making wheeze my cousin devised didn't pan out, so here I am, poorer than a church mouse, but happy being back where I belong."

"You belong in the lower bowels of hell," I snapped.

"So I've been told," agreed Jake, "but before I waltz with Lucifer, I've promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep."

Taunting my opponent in hope that he would deliver the first blow, I clinched my fists and threatened, "I've half a mind to wipe that smug expression from your weaselly face. What do you say about that?"

"You don't look like a fighter, Professor, though you might land a lucky punch and take yours truly down for the count, but I prefer besting my opponents through the cunning use of tried and true tactics favored by society's less than desirable members." With a broad, toothy smile, Jake added, "I never, ever fight fair. I fight dirty, and it is my marked lack of scruples that keeps me alive and well."

"Has it occurred to you that I may also know the art of fighting dirty?"

Jake laughed scornfully. "You? Listen, Professor, you may have book sense, but I have street smarts, and I figure you as a man who is up to his earlobes in ethics. You would never think of lurking in a dark doorway and jumping me from behind, for this would violate your sense of fair play, but I am not plagued by high-handed principles and your misguided sense of right and wrong. I prefer skulking in dark passageways, and I am all in favor of jumping my opponents from behind. I'm a pragmatist, Professor, a hardcore pragmatist who justifies the means, be they ever so unspeakably foul and loathsome, so that the end results suit my needs."

Though sensing Jake was immune to my barrage of insults and taunts, I continued my efforts in hope of striking a nerve. “When you die, even the maggots will turn away from your rotting flesh.”

“There may be truth in what you say,” Jake mused, “and then again, the day may come when I empty my bladder on your grave, but I am weary of trading barbs.”

“Go ahead, punk,” I challenged. “Take a swing at me. Give it a try. Maybe I have a glass jaw. Maybe you’ll knock me down with a single blow. After all, what would a high school English teacher know about street brawling?”

Jake answered my challenge with mocking laughter. “The day will come when we tangle, but this is not the day. Now, please step aside. I am going into the diner and ordering a hearty breakfast, the full Monty, and that pretty little strawberry blonde tart we both fancy is going to serve me with a smile, and if you try stopping me, I will summon the pig cops and have you arrested for intimidation and harassment.”

In my desperation to spare Carly the anguish and humiliation of Jake’s harrowing presence, for the first and only time in my life, I delivered a murderous ultimatum in the form of a death threat. “If you insist on making a damnable nuisance of yourself, I will see you dead. I swear I will kill you myself.”

Jake roared with laughter. “You might take a swing at me, and I believe you may be close to throwing the first punch right now, but you haven’t it in you to do anyone in, even a contemptible worm like me.”

“To keep Carly from any harm you might inflict, I would put you down like a rabid dog.” Poking a forefinger in his chest, I said, “Go ahead and push me, fellow! Try me and I’ll personally deliver your worthless soul to the devil himself.”

For a brief moment, I witnessed a perceptible trace of dread in my enemy's face, but my strategic advantage was short-lived, for whatever fear he may have harbored quickly vanished when an iron-fisted hand gripped my shoulder. Flashing another of his contemptible smiles, Jake said, "Permit me to make the introductions. Professor, the big hairy ape who has your shoulder in a vice lock is my good friend Sweet Pea. Sweet Pea is an unlicensed chiropractor who learned his trade along the mean streets of Chicago. No, he is not a Palmer graduate, but he's been known to twist bigger men than you into slipknots. At my word, Sweet Pea will give you a very intense, very thorough spinal adjustment—at no charge, of course—but let's not mention the six months of physical therapy you will require if I decide to give Sweet Pea the green light."

The searing shoulder pain from his tightfisted grip made my eyes water, and the futile attempts at breaking free only added to the misery. Looking to Jake for direction, who appeared pleased by his advantage over me, my ironfisted tormentor asked, "What do you want me to do with him?"

Stroking his chin in mock consternation, Jake muttered, "What to do? What to do? There's a side of me that wants to see our professor piled in a disjointed heap in the alley behind this diner, but there's another side that would take great pleasure seeing him humiliated before Carly."

"Tell your trained ape to free me," I said, "and we'll settle these differences between ourselves."

Shaking his head, Jake answered, "I warned you that fair play is not my forte, so let me explain what we're going to do. Sweet Pea is going to take you inside and you're going to tell Carly the little fling that has been going on between the two of you has officially ended. As you have finally conceded that Carly is my girl, she is, from here on, strictly off-limits, and you have vowed never again to see her. By the way, Professor, if you refuse to follow the script I have written to the letter, Sweet Pea will lead you to yonder back alley and twist you into a human pretzel."

Chapter 7

Disconcertedly sandwiched between the big thug and the little thug as our trio stepped into the Silver Dollar Pancake House, I heard Jake warn, “Unless you want me to unleash the wrath of Sweet Pea, you’d better do exactly as I say. Carly is my girl, and you are going to tell her that it’s all over between the two of you.”

“Fool! Carly is a friend and nothing more—I’m still very much in love with my wife.”

“You’re the fool, Professor, and if a little birdie tells me you’ve been hanging out in this hash hut chatting up my little chickadee, my bodyguard is going to present your head on a platter.”

“I won’t back down to you or to your hired muscle,” I said. “You can tell your baboon to work me over, and he’s big enough to do the job, but in the end, you’re going to pay for this.”

Seeing Jake and Sweet Pea forcibly escorting me into the diner, Carly slammed down a tray of dirty dishes and cried, “I know what you’re up to, Jake, and if you and your goon don’t leave this very moment, I’ll call the police.”

“Lots of luck getting the pig cops here before my bodyguard yanks the professor’s right arm from the socket,” Jake said. “After the mayor’s latest defund the police budget cut, a political move that’s earned my endorsement, you’ll have two black eyes, and your back to school sweetheart will be writhing with pain before an available pig cop shows up to fill out a report. In the meantime, my bodyguard and I will slither back under our rock until things cool down.”

“Leave Woody alone,” Carly begged. “What’s he done to you?”

“I don’t like him drinking water from my well,” Jake snapped. “You’re my girl, and you’ll remain my girl until I say you’re no longer my girl. Do we have an understanding, or is a show of force necessary to secure your compliance?”

Struggling against Sweet Pea’s excruciatingly painful shoulder grip, I demanded, “Leave the girl alone. Do to me what you want, but don’t lay a finger on Carly.”

“Now isn’t this a touching scene,” Jake exclaimed. “All that’s missing is the popcorn.”

At that moment, the wee little man wearing the ill-fitting clothes rose from his table, fixed a cold, unwavering eye on Jake, and with clinched fists, bounded steadily toward us with fearless determination. God help that courageous old man, I thought. I appreciate his grit, but if he values his life, he’d better not involve himself in Jake’s dirty business. Fearing for the older gentleman’s safety, I said, “You’d better stay out of this, sir. These are bad men, and they will hurt you.”

But then, the inexplicable occurred. Jake’s eyes grew wide as saucers and Sweet Pea, to my relief, immediately released his tight-fisted grip from my throbbing shoulder. Jake threw up his hands. “Whoa! Be cool, mister. No harm intended. We’re just a couple of jolly jokers having a bit of fun.”

Sweet Pea’s face blanched with fear. “I wouldn’t have yanked the professor’s arm from the socket,” he cried. “Like Jake said, we’re just a couple of fellows pranking the professor and his girlfriend, isn’t that right Jake? Pay no mind to us, mister.”

Jake anxiously blurted, “Now if you’ll excuse us, we were just leaving.”

I could scarcely believe my eyes. This tiny little man who was surely approaching his eightieth birthday grabbed Jake and Sweet Pea by their collars and led them out the door. To my amazement, the two malefactors went limp and neither resisted. Carly and

I, stunned and gapemouthed by the proceedings, simply stared at one another in disbelief. “Did you see that,” Carly stuttered, “or am I hallucinating?”

“I’d better go out and help that little guy,” I said.

“No offense, Woody, but I don’t think he needs your help. From the looks of things, I’d say he has these two brutes under control.”

Carly and I stepped to the diner’s front door and surveyed the street in both directions; we saw nothing, but we heard a doleful cry from the alley running behind the diner. Other than the brief mournful outburst, which we were certain had come from Jake, it appeared to be just another quiet night, and all seemed well. “Should we telephone the police?” I asked.

Carly shook her head. “I don’t think he needs help from the police, either.”

The half dozen or so diners who had witnessed this outrage briefly joined us at the door before returning to their tables. “That’s what I call a great floor show,” laughed one of the patrons. “I wonder what he does as an encore?”

Another diner remarked, “Those two roughnecks are in for a well-deserved beating.”

“I can’t make any sense of this,” Carly said. “Can you?”

“I’m just as befuddled as you,” said I. “That little guy won’t weigh much more than a hundred pounds. Is he even five feet tall?”

“Maybe he had a gun,” Carly speculated. “Did you notice if he was armed?”

“I don’t think so.”

“If my boss, Mr. Weatherby, gets word that my ex-boyfriend came in making a scene in front of the customers, I’m likely to get the boot. He’ll blame me for Jake’s nonsense.”

“I wouldn’t worry about any negative fallout,” I said in hope of easing her concerns. “It appears as though the Silver Dollar patrons thoroughly enjoyed seeing our David besting the two lowlife Goliaths.”

“I hope you’re right,” Carly answered. “While I’m grateful neither of us was hurt, I cannot afford to lose this job. If Mr. Weatherby cans me over this episode, I’ll be in violation of my parole. I could go back to prison.”

As she spoke, our unlikely hero was welcomed by an enthusiastic round of applause from the small band of late night patrons as he stepped back into the diner. Carly and I raced to greet him. “Are you alright, sir?” she asked.

“If you hadn’t intervened,” I said, “I’d probably be on a stretcher bound for the hospital emergency room, and only heaven knows what those thugs would have done to Carly. We are grateful.”

Hugging our demure benefactor, she said, “Yes, we’re grateful, but we don’t even know your name, sir.”

Answering in a raspy voice, he said, “Mr. Gabby will do for now.”

“No offense, Mr. Gabby,” said I, “but how were you able to subdue two men whose combined bulk is four times your own weight? And I’m guessing you are, what, maybe eighty years old? I cannot make sense of this, sir.”

Ignoring my comments, Mr. Gabby looked to Carly and asked, “Are you two meeting for breakfast at the close of your shift?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I will join you. Neither of you objects, right?”

In unison, we answered, “Certainly not.”

Turning to me, Mr. Gabby said, “Go home and get some rest, and be back here at seven—and don’t worry about the flat tire. I have already taken care of the problem.”

Stunned, I asked, “How did you manage to change the slashed tire? The spare tire is locked in the trunk.”

Once again ignoring my comments, he produced a white handkerchief from his trouser pocket. “This is for you.”

Nestled inside the folded handkerchief were two bloodied teeth. I instinctively knew the teeth had formerly belonged to Jake and Sweet Pea. “A little token from tonight’s adventure,” he mused. “It is doubtful either of you will ever again see these two hooligans, but if you do, they won’t make any trouble. You have my word.”

Once again, Carly gave Mr. Gabby an affectionate hug. “You’re the best. May I kiss you, sir?”

Glancing about the diner, he said, “It’s time to make your rounds. I see a lot of empty coffee cups. Attend to your duties and the three of us will reunite at the end of your shift. Goodnight.”

“I hope no one objects to having breakfast at my home. There’s a mushroom and cheddar strata in the oven, fresh fruit in the fridge, and I’ll brew a pot of strong coffee.”

Looking about, Carly said, "You have a nice place, Woody."

As Mr. Gabby, Carly, and I settled into the dining nook, curiosity compelled me to comment, "I'm still wondering how you managed Jake and his trained baboon, Sweet Pea."

"I did what had to be done," he said, "but we've more important matters to discuss."

"Would you mind telling us who you are?" Carly asked. "You're unlike anyone I've ever met—and that's intended as a compliment."

"And it is received as a compliment," he warmly replied, "but for the time, it is best you remain unaware of the nature of the one whom you are entertaining."

There was something vaguely familiar about his cryptic choice of words, but as to where I had read or heard them before, I could not recall. I went on the say, "You have done Carly and me a great service. How might we repay you?"

"Other than desiring your close attention," he said, "you've nothing I need or want."

"In that case, you have my appreciation along with my undivided attention," I said.

Carly added, "Mine, too."

"Very well, I will begin with you, Woody. You've been searching for answers, unfortunately, your search has taken you to places you ought not have gone." I was struck by an eerie feeling this aged stranger knew more about me than would have been humanly possible, but I held my peace and allowed him to elaborate. 'Rather than taking your questions to God, who is the fountain of all truth, you sought the advice of an apostate and an occultist. For a man with your educational advantages, one would

think you would have acted with more prudence. What did you expect to learn from a heretic and a necromancer?"

Taken aback, I protested, "Rev. Nadine is a Christian chaplain and Mother Maria said her ability to speak with the dead was a gift from God. I realize now that neither is credible, but how was I to know? They were a part of my search for God."

"Hush, man," he said. "You've not been searching for God. You've been searching for your late wife."

I bolted from my seat. "How do you know all this? Who are you, sir?"

"Please sit down," he said. "You have not been searching for God, but He has been searching for you." Turning to Carly, whose face was filled with wonder, he continued in a far gentler tone, "God is searching for you, too. Do not think He is blind to your suffering."

Turning back to me, Mr. Gabby's dark eyes narrowed, and he spoke in a voice that sounded more like a growl. I was shaken when he said, "You've acted foolishly on more than one front. What were you thinking, man? Besides consorting with enemies of God, you've ignored the needs of one of the best friends you could have."

"Are you speaking of Carly?" I asked.

"Yes, I am speaking of Carly. She is one of the few true friends who have made themselves available to you, but what have you done for her?"

Carly interjected, "You have it all wrong, Mr. Gabby. Woody has been very good to me. Once, he gave me a hundred dollar gratuity, and anytime he stops by the diner, he's good for a kind word and a generous tip."

“He’s right, Carly,” I shamefully admitted. “You’ve been a better friend to me than I’ve been to you.”

Mr. Gabby said, “You were ready to hand over hundreds of thousands of dollars to that vile medium, but you’ve ignored the needs of a genuine friend. Your conduct has been shameful.”

“Now that you have brought my actions into the spotlight, I truly regret what I have done, but how do you know all this?” I begged. “Everything you say is true. Who are you, Mr. Gabby?”

“Do not concern yourself with my identity. Concern yourself with undoing the grievous decisions you’ve made. Repentance involves more than sorrow—genuine repentance demands a change in direction.”

Red-faced and contrite, I admitted, “I was ready to fork over a quarter of a million big ones to a phony psychic while my friend Carly is living in a rundown halfway house and scraping by on chump change. What would you have me do to make this right?”

Turning his attention to Carly, Mr. Gabby asked, “You’ve a desire to help children with Down Syndrome. Am I correct?”

Carly’s mouth dropped. “How do you know this?”

“Woody, I want you to set up a trust fund that will allow Carly to earn a college degree. You have the means of paying for her tuition as well as her living expenses. She’s to leave the halfway house and her job at the diner. You’ll cover her needs, yet you are never to lord your generosity over her. In other words, you will support this girl for the next four years, but you will not own her, nor will you ever begrudge your financial assistance. You are to give freely, and she is not to feel obligated. Carly is not to be in your debt. Is this understood?”

“Of course,” I hastily agreed. “You’re going to college, Carly. The money that I very nearly wasted on a phony medium will go to you—and I’m happy to help.”

Taking Mr. Gabby by the arm, Carly cried, “I can’t let Woody do that.”

“God won’t allow Woody *not* to do that,” he said. “Besides, I think your friend, now that he is being set in the right direction, is eager to demonstrate his appreciation and loyalty to you in more tangible ways.”

“What he says is true, Carly,” I exclaimed. “I want to help. You’ve been the shoulder I can always cry on and, well, thank you.”

“Carly,” said Mr. Gabby, “I want you at the Cornerstone Community Church this Sunday. You’ll be warmly welcomed, and the pastor is one of the few clergymen in this area who doesn’t water down the Gospel of Jesus Christ with worldly nonsense. Worship service begins at 10 AM. You’ll be there, right?”

Carly nodded.

Mr. Gabby continued, “As to leaving your job and enrolling in school, you’ll meet no resistance from your parole officer. These arrangements are in my hands.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“You have the capacity to earn excellent grades,” he added. “Devote yourself to study and proving yourself academically. Be a wise steward and make the most of your opportunities. In your spare time, offer your services to the church as a volunteer. As you freely receive, freely give.”

Carly lowered her eyes and answered, “I will do all that you say, sir.”

Mr. Gabby smiled. "I know that you will do as I say, and remember that it is God, not Woody, who is the source of your blessings. Be obligated only to your Maker."

Appearing deep in thought, Carly whispered to no one in particular, "Today, I have learned God is real and He loves me. This is a good day."

Looking at me, he said in a less friendly manner, "Again, this young lady is under no obligation to you. You have no claim over her. She is not your property. For that matter, she is not, as one might dare to say, a *kept woman*. Is this salient point understood? There is no misunderstanding concerning this arrangement, right?"

Shifting uncomfortably in my chair, for I sensed Mr. Gabby did not think so highly of me, I answered, "There is no misunderstanding. I pledge to never hold whatever financial assistance I provide over Carly's head. She is under no obligation to me. You have my word, sir. Both of you have my word."

At this, Carly leaned near and squeezed my hand. I heard a whispered, "Thank you."

After serving the strata, fruit, and coffee to my guests, I hastily excused myself, darted to my study, found a largely ignored Bible hidden beneath a stack of books, and flipped to the concordance. A moment or two later, I turned to the New Testament book of Hebrews. I could scarcely believe my eyes. Returning to the company of my guests with a forefinger marking the appropriate Bible passage, I read a single verse, Hebrews 13:2, "'Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.' I think I know who you are, Mr. Gabby."

"What are you saying, Woody?" Carly asked.

"Mr. Gabby is an angel."

Laying a gentle hand on Mr. Gabby's wrist, she said, "Of course, he's an angel."

"I'm not speaking figuratively, Carly. Don't you understand? Mr. Gabby is an angelic messenger. He's from heaven. How else would he know these intimate details of our lives?" Filled with numinous awe, I immediately fell to my knees.

Mr. Gabby was not pleased by my sudden act of obeisance. His eyes flamed with fire and speaking in a voice that might have split the sky, he ordered me up. "Get off your knees, man, and worship God alone."

I was shaken, but Carly appeared to take this startling revelation in stride. With a demure little smile, Carly sweetly asked, "Is it true, Mr. Gabby? Are you an angel sent by God?"

Returning her smile, he answered, "I am, like you, a created being. I am not an object of worship."

"But it's okay for me to like you, isn't it?"

"Yes, and I like you, too. Moreover, today, you have learned that Almighty God loves you and He has plans for you—plans to prosper you and give you hope. Do you believe this, daughter?"

A tear trickled down Carly's flushed cheek. "I believe."

Mr. Gabby continued, "This Sunday, the pastor will tell you what you must do. Listen to him. Do as he instructs. He is a good man—and good men occupying the pulpit are becoming increasingly rare."

Carly nodded.

“Until you leave the halfway house, do not contaminate yourself with Rev. Nadine’s foul teachings,” Mr. Gabby explained. “Her words are like venom and her breath smells of smoke and brimstone. As the Lord Jesus lives, He will rebuke her according to her deeds.”

“Being a messenger of God,” I asked, “what words do you have for me?”

“As for you,” Mr. Gabby answered, “I’m sending you to Hades.”

At that moment, I felt as though a bolt of lightning had struck my head. “What? You are sending me to Hades? I know I’ve done wrong,” I cried, “but has God no mercy for me?”

With a sad shake of his head, Mr. Gabby lamented, “If you understood the Bible as well as you understand Steinbeck or Poe, you would realize I am not speaking of the Lake of Fire. That terrible place of eternal torment is yet to come. I am speaking of the place sometimes known as hell or Sheol or, if you will, the netherworld where unredeemed souls are temporarily consigned until the day of their ultimate destruction.”

“I don’t care what it’s called,” I begged. “I’m not ready to die.”

“You’ll not die,” he promised, “at least, not in the immediate future. This sojourn to the gathering place of the unregenerated lost is a temporary one. You will be traveling on what might be called a visa, and once the purpose of your visit is realized, you will return to the topside of the earth.”

“And what is the purpose of this visit?” I asked.

In a firm, steady voice, Mr. Gabby said, “For nearly a year, you’ve demanded answers to your questions surrounding Abbie’s death. There is no wrong in posing questions or seeking answers, but you should have approached the Lord God with your concerns.

Had you come to Him, He would not have turned a deaf ear. Instead, you sought answers from these damnable workers of iniquity. You acted foolishly. Consorting with the devil's servants too often leads to eternal ruin. You were playing a dangerous game, young man."

"I was wrong," said I. "Will you forgive me?"

"Seek forgiveness from the One who, alone, has the authority to forgive sin. I am speaking of our Lord Jesus Christ. His death on a cruel Roman cross paid the penalty for your sin, and His bodily resurrection guarantees that you, too, can live eternally with Him."

"I believe," I said. "I believe."

"I believe, too," Carly declared.

"You are being granted the rare opportunity of journeying to Hades to see firsthand what becomes of the unrepentant," he explained. "Do you understand the deeper meaning in this?"

I anxiously asked, "Am I correct in thinking my late wife Abbie is in hell?"

"Do you think God has treated her unjustly?" he asked.

"I-I don't quite know how to answer that question, but Abbie was a good person. She should have been ushered straight to Heaven."

"What if I told you Abbie was in the underworld by her own volition?"

Struggling to marshal my thoughts, I pressed Mr. Gabby with, "Are you saying Abbie is happy where she is? Abbie is happy in hell?"

“I will say she is not unhappy.”

“What? Are you saying my wife is happy in the company of horned devils with pitchforks? She delights in the wailing souls sizzling on red-hot grates? How can I believe you, sir?”

Shaking his head, Mr. Gabby lamented, “Many of the medieval artists’ depictions of Hades sorely lack in theological accuracy. To be sure, the underworld is a wretched place to be avoided, but its inhabitants appear not to mind.”

Trembling with fear, I asked, “Is Abbie suffering? Is she beyond hope? Can anything be done?”

“The day after tomorrow will be the one year anniversary of Abbie’s death,” he answered. “You and I will attend to any last minute business before beginning your journey into the netherworld. Once you arrive, you can launch a search for Abbie. Look for her. Seek her out. Be with her. Hear what she has to say. Go with your questions and return with answers. The journey will be arduous, but aren’t answers what you want?”

“Is there any hope of Abbie returning with me?” I hesitantly asked.

I was shaken when Mr. Gabby aimed my inquiry back at me. “Young man, what makes you think Abbie would want to come back with you?”

“She loves me,” I explained. “Anyway, if you agree to make a way, I will go to the underworld and find my Abbie.”

Carly grabbed Mr. Gabby’s hand and asked, “Is he coming back?”

He reassured her saying, “He’s coming back, and he’ll be a better man for the experience. In the meantime, you are not to worry.”

I then asked, “How long will I be gone?”

“You will be there until you find the answers to those questions that have plagued you these last twelve months,” he said.

“Please,” begged Carly, “now that we know who you are, tell us how you mopped the sidewalk with Jake and Sweet Pea.”

With a wry smile, he answered, “Before you is a frail octogenarian—scarcely an imposing figure, but this is an illusion. What the diners saw was a tall, well-built young man capable of taking care of those two ruffians. That, too, was an illusion. On the other hand, the two toughs named Jake and Sweet Pea saw me just as demons see me—and the sight of me as I truly am causes devils and thugs to tremble.”

Chapter 8

And so, as I said, I found myself shuffling along a broad, downward sloping corridor that would lead me to the underworld home of the damned. Around me were thousands of people, wide-eyed and pensive, craning their necks toward the mammoth-sized video screens suspended from the corridor’s high ceiling. Loud music of a genre not at all familiar to me blasted from the overhead loudspeakers. During the occasional breaks in the music, a dignified voice announced, “Greetings, new arrivals. You are cordially invited to join us for a free, fun filled as well as informative welcoming seminar at the Greater Babylonian Civic Center located straight ahead.” Timed to the rhythm of the music were pulsating bursts of dazzling light accompanied by a hundred darting laser beams. The surreal atmosphere was, at the same time, festive.

The array of overhead screens that hung from the ceiling rafters flashed a series of infernally cryptic messages:

Damned Proud

Celebrate Death

Create Your Own Reality

Feelings Trump Facts

Absolute Truth Is Absolutely Racist

No God—No Worries

Logic Is for Losers

Trust Your Feelings

You Are the Most Important Person There Is

Who Says You Can't Do That?

Two Plus Two Equals Whatever You Like

Sex Knows No Boundaries

Keep Your Truth Off My Soul

Blessed Are the Damned

Truth Is a Disease

Join the Proud Crowd

Hell Is for Winners

Imagine There Is No Heaven

Unlike the surging crowd surrounding me, I had been previously warned what to expect, yet despite the advantages of having been advised beforehand by Mr. Gabby, my head was spinning with confusion—a confusion brought about by sensory overload. Moving forward on rubbery legs, my perceptions struggled against the rapid-fire bursts of light timed to the frantic beat of music that might be described as blasphemous.

I had arrived at this repository of the unredeemed under circumstances singular to those about me. Among this massive assembly, all who had perished moments earlier, I alone had come to this place, not by way of bodily death, but by translation.

There was something about the teeming throng around me that seemed—how shall I say this?—disturbingly odd—grotesque might be a more appropriate modifier. Ghastly odors, frightfully unpleasant, and raspy, machine-like noises seemed to follow the crowd. A pretty, dark-haired woman to my right smelled of putrefying decay. Before me, a tall, broad-shouldered man with an abundance of bushy blonde hair clicked with each step as if he were some sort of primitive mechanical contrivance. Behind me proceeded a garrulous young woman, apparently overwrought by the strange world she had just entered, whose excited, nonstop speech sounded strangely like the honking of a goose. Most unsettling was a woman who seemed to be getting along just fine despite a continual flow of yellowish fluid oozing from her ears.

An usher directed me to Section M 4 where I found a seat and waited for the orientation address to begin. To my relief, the wait was a brief one.

“Testing! Testing! Can you folk out there hear me?” Strategically adjusting his wireless headset, the speaker, resplendently garbed in formal attire, flashed a broad, toothy smile as throngs of new arrivals filed into the expansive auditorium. Looking toward the sound booth, the master of ceremonies said, “I’m getting some squeal from the floor monitors, Morey.” After a brief pause, he raised his hand and said, “Okay, that’s a little better, but there’s a hum in the overhead lighting. Be a good chap and attend to this.” Multitudes continued shuffling into the great hall.

“Welcome! Welcome! Can you good people seated in the rear hear me? Morey, our friends in the back of the auditorium are signaling they can’t hear me. How about it? Can you folk hear me now? Is that better? Better? Okay, good! Very well, I think we’re okay, Morey. Let’s get this dog-and-pony show on the road.

“Welcome to the New Babylonian Civic Center. I’m your host, Harlow Reisen, and it is a pleasure having you with us. As I survey this vast audience, I see more than a few looks of shock, surprise, confusion, and bewilderment. ‘Where the hell am I?’ you are doubtlessly wondering. Very well then, don’t panic and don’t be alarmed, but the truth

is, you *are* in hell. That's right. This is it, the bad place, but before you begin wailing and gnashing your teeth, let me assure you that hell is the place to be—a place where you can be you without fear of ridicule, restraint, and judgment—a place where everyone is truly accepted—a place where no fetish is considered too bizarre, no desire is forbidden, and no behavior deemed off limits. Rather than bemoaning your fate, congratulate yourself. You died and went to hell.

“Moments ago, you breathed your last, your heart ceased beating, your brain shut down, and you were declared dead. As we speak, loved ones are weeping over your still, lifeless corpse while the undertakers are preparing their cost estimates. For some, your pitiful remains will be pumped with formaldehyde and laid in a satin-lined casket in your choice of four colors—fluted handles extra. For others, your gray ashes will be swept from an oven and stored in a decorative urn that will look good on any hearth. It doesn't matter what becomes of your remains, of course, for you are here and we are mighty pleased you've come to join us.

“As I continue seeing a lot of bewildered faces, let me try anticipating your questions and concerns. First, you were made to believe that hell is a place where red devils run spits through their victims before slow roasting them over an open fire. Let me ease your mind—there is no devilish barbeque in the works—you aren't to be the main dish on Satan's banquet table. Hell, or Hades, or even Sheol, if you prefer, is a gathering place of disembodied souls, and for those of us who have been here for a while, we say hell is a fantastic place—the only place to be.

“But what about heaven? Skeptics insist that heaven is a fanciful pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by fairytale that encourages timid little people to live timid little lives. This may be true, but according to our top researchers, the belief in the existence of an alternate, or secondary, repository for disembodied souls is not at all unreasonable. This would explain why such luminaries as the Apostle Paul, Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Mother Theresa never made it here. And there seems to be millions of lesser known people, commonly referred to as saints, who never passed through our gates. If

they aren't here, where are they? Heaven is a reasonable theory, but if heaven exists, it is a place inferior to hell. This only stands to reason as far fewer souls abide there than here, so heaven cannot be as great or as vast as hell. Our researchers tell us, too, that the bylaws of heaven restrict the personal freedoms and privileges enjoyed by the damned. Hell is a place where you can be you. Heaven is a place where the few who make it are transformed into the likeness of the One who redeemed them. Rather than being themselves, they become like Him. Sounds dull. I prefer being me. Wouldn't you rather be you? Of course, you do.

"You have heard hell is a place for bad people. It is true, we have our share of dead tyrants—Caesar Nero, Tamerlane, Genghis Kahn, Hitler, Stalin, and Mao Tse Tung to mention just a few, but hell has a way of mellowing these old despots into rather respectable, if not occasionally eccentric, people. If you were to meet, say, Al Capone at the fish market, you'd find him a tolerably reserved fellow. It may amuse you to know that Heinrich Himmler, who engineered Hitler's extermination camps, now runs a quaint little German bakery somewhere in the garment district. Granted, he offers free coffee only to Arian customers, but I am told his *Bethmännchen* are to die for.

"We'll get back to the subject of hell in a moment, but let's change directions and talk about you. By now, you've probably accepted the fact that you are dead, that is, the physical body you formerly occupied has been rendered lifeless. This news may come as a shock to those of you who died in your sleep or were suddenly killed in an accident. You are not to worry. If the loved ones weeping over your stone cold corpse could see you now, they would dry their tears and eagerly await the blessed day when they will join you here."

Looking about me, the formerly stoic assembly was beginning to appear at ease. The emcee, who knew just what to say, was winning over his audience.

"Down here in the underworld, we dwell in a different kind of body—a body that appears impervious to all manner of catastrophes. Nothing can hurt us, and no one can harm

us. Would you like proof?" To bolster his point, the emcee drew a Vickers-Welby 50.80 handgun from behind the lectern and fired shot after shot directly into the crowd. Pandemonium broke loose with many ducking for cover while others raced toward exits, but after the stunned crowd realized no one had been harmed, the shrieks and cries turned to laughter and applause. "This was no parlor trick. My pistol was loaded with real bullets, not blanks, and the good news is bullets can no longer hurt you. Knives can no longer hurt you. Bombs can no longer hurt you. You needn't fear anything or anyone, for being dead means being invincible. Granted, that peculiar brand of superstition known as Christianity warned of a second death at the end of the age, but our researchers tell us this is only a myth devised to force independent thinkers like us into compliance. There is no second death.

"Look about you. What do you see? Have you noticed everyone around you appears to be in their mid-twenties? Where are the old codgers from the nursing homes, you may be wondering. Where are the seventy, eighty, and ninety-year-olds with their canes and walkers and leaky colostomy bags? Surely, many of you had reached and even surpassed the proverbial three score and ten year milestone before coming here, so why is everyone young and brimming with vitality? Add eternal youth to the long list of hell's many fringe benefits."

At this, an outburst of enthusiastic applause and cheering nearly shook the rafters. Responding to the crowd's hearty approval, the emcee continued, "No more stooped shoulders. No more wrinkled faces. No need for pacemakers and insulin shots. There's no want for hospital beds. You are young—blissfully and eternally young. Hell has no need for nursing homes, but we've plenty of golf courses and tennis courts, so embrace the new active you. As we say, life begins when the heartbeat ends.

"But the damned have another saying, and that is, nobody is perfect, and no body is perfect. This is a play on words, of course, but though we dwell in bodies that are impervious to harm, each of us has some sort of quirky physical flaw. In other words, our young, beautiful, energetic, bullet-proof bodies are not, well, 100% perfect."

Pointing to a member of the audience, the emcee said, “You, the stunning Asian lady in the third row. Yes, you. You’ve flawless skin and hair of black silk, but you’ll need to keep a razor on your person, for that mustache will not go away on its own. And you, the towering, broad-shouldered gentleman with ebony skin and ivory teeth seated next to the pretty Asian lady. I’m talking to you. Even from here, I can see that you perspire profusely. Your clothing is damp and there is a puddle of perspiration at your feet. No matter where you go, my magnificently built friend, the stench of stale sweat will follow you. But what are unwanted facial hair and disagreeable body odors other than minor imperfections in otherwise impeccable bodies? Each of us has some inherent flaw. Me? I have a problem with flatulence that can be, well, patently offensive, particularly during love making or dinner parties. Once again, nobody is perfect, and no body is perfect, so learn to accept the peculiar flaws in yourself and in others.”

As cameras panned the cheering audience, the giant overhead screens revealed closeups of a perfect Roman nose spoiled by a gnarled wart growing on its tip, a delicately blushed cheek marred by an unsightly skin lesion, and eyeballs the color of old meerschaum. The emcee had spoken correctly; no one in this place could rightfully be described as flawlessly handsome or beautiful. Everyone’s otherwise perfection was sullied by some kind of malady or blemish. The woman seated to my right looked like a goddess carved from marble, yet she drooled uncontrollably from both corners of her mouth. The man to my left, a sturdily built fellow with keen eyes and thick, flowing hair, had a jaw that clicked noisily each time he opened or closed his mouth. I saw adorably petite women with five o’clock shadows and towering, muscular men with dull eyes and imbecilic expressions.

“A frequent question among newcomers involves children. ‘Where are the boys and girls?’ many ask. Infants who die, either before or after birth, and children who succumb to accidents or illness do not come to this place. Ancient tradition suggests that the wee ones who die are ushered by angels to the gates of heaven, and this may be true. All we know with certainty is the little ones are not among us, but who really cares? Think about it—children demand an inordinate amount of attention, and they can be terribly

annoying. Late night feedings, dirty diapers, potty training—who needs that? Now, if you lost a young son or daughter during your earthly existence, do not bother searching for your child here—but so what? Is a missing child such a bad thing? Kids have a way of cramping a perfectly wonderful hedonistic lifestyle. Right? By the way, for the sexually active among us, the netherworld’s exclusionary policy regarding children comes as welcomed news, for since we first opened our doors to the damned, no child has ever been conceived in hell.” In an attempt at making a witticism, the emcee added, “Condoms and Bibles are two commodities you’ll never find in the underworld.” A smattering of laughter followed.

“Now that you are here, what are you to do with yourself? The answer to this question is entirely up to you. If you are easily bored and find gainful employment an agreeable means of passing the time, by all means get a job and go to work. On the other hand, are you intrigued by the prospect of a never-ending retirement? Grab your golf clubs. Binge on your favorite TV programs. Play Bingo. Stretch out on the sofa and stare at the ceiling. Join a book club. Find others with similar interests. Travel. Did you know the city of the damned is made up of hundreds of sprawling boroughs and populated by billions of people? Explore the netherworld. Go and see the sights. Meet interesting people. Have sex with them. Seize all that hell has to offer. Remember, there’s never a dull moment when rubbing elbows with the dead.

“That’s all well and good,’ you are saying, ‘but where will I live and how will I pay my rent? How will I afford food?’ Let me now address these concerns.” Holding a flat, dull metal disc for all to see, the emcee said, “You were each issued one of these as you passed through the gates, so I want everyone to reach into their pocket or purse and show me the coin you received.” After a moment or so, thousands of hands clutching metal tokens shot into the air. “This is a Tetzal, sometimes called a dabber or a klinker, and it is the only recognized currency in the underworld. Now you may be wondering what a Tetzal is worth—what’s its value? And you may be wondering, too, why you were issued only one Tetzal. Are you curious?” Looking about the great hall, I noted

nearly everyone bore a puzzled expression. I, however, had been instructed as to the diabolical attributes of the Tetzels by Mr. Gabby before coming to this place.

“It’s time for a lesson in underworld economics,” Mr. Gabby explained. “You’ll need money to cover expenses. Take this.” I extended an open hand. The coin, officially known as a Tetzels, was about the size of an American silver dollar, maybe a bit larger, dull as unpolished steel, and struck from a metal as lightweight as aluminum. The austere looking coin bore neither an image nor a likeness; rather, one side was stamped with a superscription that I did not understand and the reverse, curiously enough, was smooth and flat and without markings. “Is this it?” I asked.

“The Tetzels is the underworld’s sole currency,” he answered. “Tuck this into your pocket.”

“Just one?” I asked. “One Tetzels is all that I will need?”

“No one carries more than a single Tetzels,” Mr. Gabby explained.

“What is the Tetzels’s worth? What can one buy with a single Tetzels?”

“A beer. Dinner. A pair of boots. A prostitute. A house. An automobile. A skyscraper. Whatever is for sale can be purchased for a Tetzels. By the way, the Tetzels is also known as a JT, a klinker, a dabber, or a piper. The slang varies according to whatever borough you happen to be visiting.”

“I don’t understand. Are you saying a toothbrush costs no more or no less than a five-bedroom home with an indoor swimming pool? How can this be?”

“You must understand the underworld’s economy,” he explained. “A Tetzels is worth everything and it is worth nothing. No matter what you want, if it is for sale, one coin is all that is needed, and once that coin is spent, another coin, as if by a conjurer’s sleight-

of-hand trick, magically appears in your pocket or purse. No one is without means. No one needs to beg or borrow. Those who want money have money, and yet, everyone is destitute.”

“How can anyone be destitute when a single coin has unlimited purchasing power? According to your instructions, having a Tetzal is like money on a loop.”

“Not quite. The quality of underworld goods and services,” he patiently explained, “is nominal at best. Nothing is as it should be. Everything is third rate. A seven-course dinner at the underworld’s finest restaurant does not fully satisfy. A new automobile may be purchased for a single Tetzal, but the transmission is likely to lock up as you drive away from the dealership. As I said, the quality of products made in hell is not very good. Nothing works as it should. Nothing really satisfies.”

“Pardon my saying, but this anything-for-a-Tetzal sounds like a lot of nonsensical rot,” I complained. “Are these underworld dwellers incapable of recognizing their economy for the farce that it is?”

“As I said, nothing in the underworld is of much quality, and this includes the thinking, such as it is, of the damned. You may be certain that logic is a rare commodity down there.”

“Is that so?”

“I believe most of the damned would consider even the minutest trace of logic an unwelcome liability—something to be avoided at all costs—like a skin rash. Perhaps quiescent thinking serves them better. In their chosen diabolical state, how would rational thought benefit them?”

I felt uneasy. Assuming I tracked down my wife, would she have the wherewithal to renounce that infernal place? Or would she insist on staying? My host must have read

my thoughts, for he added, “Perhaps your wife’s thinking has not yet been thoroughly corrupted by the muddle-mindedness of hell. There is cause to hope she may listen to reason. And then again, maybe not. Hell is a place where confusion reigns. I would say the damned thrive on confusion. It is their preferred state of mind. And why not? Have you failed to notice most earth dwellers also appear to embrace confusion? They are repulsed by logic. Truth is a byword. You see this in their choices—in the lives they live and in the decisions they make. And when they die, they insist upon bringing their confusion down to that place.”

“Do you think so?” I asked.

“Without confusion, there would be no hell,” he said. “Without confusion, the underworld would be vacant. No reasonable person would choose to go there, and no unreasonable person would think of going anywhere but hell.”

My anxiety grew. “Am I embarking on a fool’s journey? Is this mission a lost cause?”

“This is not for me to say,” he answered, “but assuming I said yes, would this prevent you from making an attempt?”

“I suppose not. Even if there is less than a one-in-a-million chance of rescuing Abbie, I am going after her.”

“Then go.”

The emcee continued his discourse on underworld economics with the crowd’s full attention. “Whatever you want, if it is for sale, can be had for a single Tetzels, and when you spend your Tetzels, another Tetzels will magically appear in its place.” As there was murmuring and confusion among the newcomers, the emcee sought to assure them saying, “Forget about making heads or tails out of this. What I am telling you doesn’t make sense, but that’s how things work in hell. Remember, this is Utopia, and no true

utopian society can exist if its citizens are economically deprived. These coins are like boomerangs—you can spend them, but they keep coming back. Bankruptcy is an impossibility in our world.”

Giving the crowd ample time to digest his words, he continued saying, “Do you know what this means? This means you and everyone around you are rich! And do you know what being rich means? Being rich says you can go where you want, and you can do what you want, and you can be what you want. Think of the possibilities—you can buy whatever you want, whenever you want, and however much of it you want. You can save your money, or you can spend your money—it’s all the same down here. Be a piker, be a miser, or be a mercenary—be a spendthrift or be a hoarder—as I said, it’s all the same down here.”

The emcee, all smiles, paused as the mesmerized audience, delighted by this declaration of newfound prosperity, began a rhythmical chanting of “More! More! More!”

“You want more?” he cried. “Okay, here it is—hell owes you, my friends, hell owes you plenty and you are entitled to every benefit and every blessing the underworld has to offer. Let this sink in—every single one of you is, without exception, the most important person there is and deserving of whatever you wish, and so I stand here challenging you to never, ever accept less than what hell owes you. Take it. Take what’s yours, and remember that it is better to rule in hell than serve in heaven.”

At this, the standing crowd was ready to raise the roof with a deafening roar of frenzied cheering and clapping. All this was becoming crystal clear. The emcee had appealed to the peoples’ basest instincts, and, in turn, they were responding to his every gratuitous word with unrestrained enthusiasm. A woman seated to my right leaned toward me and whispered, “Isn’t hell wonderful?”

Having heard my fill of infernal nonsense, I elected to slip out of the auditorium while the emcee continued his endless babbling about the joys and blessings of eternal

damnation; moreover, I wanted to get a jump on procuring the necessary services of an experienced underworld guide. According to Mr. Gabby's precise instructions, a guide would recommend suitable living quarters, assist me in securing basic goods and services, and show me how to get about using the netherworld's ample, though not so reliable, public transportation system. Having spent my life in a sleepy little village a world away from sprawling Los Angeles, acclimating to the rigors of this behemoth underworld metropolis would be a daunting challenge.

Exiting the cavernous auditorium, I began wandering down one of the many broad corridors clueless as to where this would lead me. To my relief, a young man dressed in a gray tee-shirt, baseball cap, and faded jeans approached me with a friendly "Need a guide, mister?"

"Well, yes," I exclaimed. "I suppose my look of utter confusion gives me away."

"Just a little," he answered with an easy smile. "Newbies have that look of being turned around and unsure where they are."

"That's me alright, and I am looking for someone trustworthy and reliable to show me how to get about, but where's your official yellow guide button?" Mr. Gabby had told me professional guides were identifiable by their officially licensed guide buttons.

Extending a hand, he said, "The name is Edmond Wessel. I don't wear a guide button because I refuse to join their guild, but if you are looking for a street smart advisor who can traverse the underworld with the best of them, I'm for hire."

"What do you charge for your guide services, Mr. Wessel?"

"The same as everyone else—a Tetzal. What's your name?"

Handing him my Tetzels, I answered, "The name is Sherwood McCormick, but my friends call me Woody."

"Nice to meet you, Woody. And you can call me Eddie." As he spoke, his left ear fell from the side of his head and plopped near my right shoe. Reaching down to the floor, he sheepishly explained, "You know what they say. Nobody is perfect, and no body is perfect. My body has two ears that won't stay in place." He reattached the wayward ear and continued, "Let's begin by finding you a place to call home. I just got word of a vacancy over on Nietzsche Parkway near the garment district that's convenient to everything. Once you've settled in, I can help you find a job, meet a girl, score some dope, or whatever else you might want."

"I suppose finding a place to live is where we ought to begin, Eddie. And could you recommend a private investigator? I came here looking for someone very dear to me. Maybe a PI can help me track her down."

With an encouraging nod of the head, Eddie assured me saying, "I know a dozen investigators with noses like bloodhounds."

Relieved, I said, "Thanks, Eddie. Looks like I've made my first friend down here."

Resting a hand on my shoulder, he answered, "Leave your worries with me. I'll stick with you like a brother until you're able to find your way around this big old town. Say, before we take off to look at that vacant flat, let me step around the corner to buy a packet of gum. I'm giving up smoking and peppermint gum helps with the cravings. Hang tight and your new friend Eddie will be right back."

I waited. And waited. And waited. Then I began looking up and down the labyrinth of corridors for a news stand or gift shop that might sell peppermint chewing gum. After some searching, I discovered a coffee bar open for business, but neither the cashier nor

the barista had seen my AWOL guide. Flushed with anger, I figured myself a victim of a swindle and wondered what to do next.

Chapter 9

Annoyed at having allowed myself to be taken in by a petty, scheming, fifth-rate con artist, I vowed to act more prudently. “Let this be a lesson,” I muttered to myself. “This is hell, and I ought not be surprised when the damned behave like the damned.” Just then, I spied a young, smartly dressed woman sipping coffee while casually toying with her tablet. Of considerable interest was the official yellow guide button pinned to her tailored blazer. Taking this as a good omen, I eagerly approached her and asked, “Please pardon me, but I need a guide. Are you available?”

“We do not say the word *please* in the underworld,” she said, though not so unkindly, “and, yes, I am available for hire. My name is McGill, Lilith McGill, but everyone knows me as Nancy.” As there was no indication of a nearby smoldering cigarette, I was startled by the small whiffs of bluish-white smoke curling from the lovely blonde woman’s nostrils. Contrary to having heard where there’s smoke, there’s fire, here were tiny puffs of smoke sans evidence of flame or combustion. Nancy McGill must have sensed the confusion brought about by her smoking nostrils, for she said, “Nobody is perfect, and no body is perfect. I exhale smoke. Now, if you are finished gawking at my beak, let’s talk business.”

Gathering my wits, I answered, “Of course. My name is Sherwood McCormick, but I answer to my nickname Woody. Moments ago, I hired a guide named Edmond Wessel, but he disappeared immediately after I forked over my Tetzal.”

“You hired Eddie the Weasel? Oh, brother! You’ve been had!” As she laughed, quick bursts of smoke shot from her nostrils. “He saw pigeon written all over you!”

Her levity coupled with an unnecessary shot of scorn only added to my embarrassment—and annoyance. “Maybe I was too trusting, but I’ve only just arrived down here, and besides, who’s to say you’re not just another swindler cut from the same cloth? For all I know, you may be this Edmond Wessel’s partner in crime.”

“Calm down. Calm down. Don’t go tearing up the pea patch,” she said almost apologetically while motioning me to take a seat. “I am no friend of Eddie the Weasel, and you can trust me because I won’t ask for my fee unless you are thoroughly satisfied with the quality of my services. Like all officially licensed underworld guides, I come with a guarantee. If you aren’t happy, I don’t get paid.”

Feeling a bit better about the situation, I said, “You’re hired. I am here on a temporary visa. When my laissez-passer expires, I’ll be going back to the upperworld, but while I’m here, I hope to find my wife who died by accident a year ago.”

Nancy examined my official travel documents with considerable interest. “I’ve heard of the living visiting these parts, but you’re the first I’ve met.”

“Will you help me secure temporary lodgings? I’ll need a place to bunk down while I’m here, and can you recommend a competent private investigator to track down my late wife?”

“I lease an entire floor of suites at the Belshazzar Plaza,” my guide explained. “My clients are guests there during their transition. You’ll find the accommodations at the Belshazzar among the finest in New Babylon. After you settle in, one of my assistants will drop by and arrange to outfit you with a new wardrobe, equip you with a phone, and show you the ins and outs of our public transportation system.”

“A suite? A new wardrobe? A phone? Most impressive. This is what I call full-service, but how much will I end up owing you?”

“The underworld guild sets our fee at one Tetzels,” she answered. “You won’t be billed for my services until you’ve completely transitioned.”

Struggling to make sense of hell’s topsy-turvydom economy, I hesitatingly asked, “The one Tetzels covers *everything*?”

Giving me a boy-are-you-dumb look, she responded with, “Why wouldn’t it?”

“And you’ll refer me to a private investigator?”

Ms. McGill nodded affirmatively. “I maintain a working relationship with top-ranked private investigators who specialize in tracking down acquaintances, loved ones, historical figures, celebrities, and even enemies. I know more than a few reputable PIs who have proven track records, but you must remember the underworld is just that—a world teeming with billions of people. Wide is the way that leads here, and with our population steadily increasing, the odds of finding your wife are considerably slim.”

“Slim, or nonexistent?” I asked.

With a casual shrug of her shoulders, Ms. McGill explained, “Though we have the latest technological advances at our disposal, the majority of hell’s population has yet to be documented, and with complex informational systems crashing and expansive data banks being occasionally lost—and let’s not forget these clever hackers who delight in hijacking personal records, well, your wife may be that proverbial needle in a haystack. And remember, too, that many new arrivals waste no time changing their names and identities. By severing all ties with the past, they can begin their lives down here as someone different.”

“If they change their identities, how will their friends and loved ones track them down?” I asked.

With a mocking laugh, Ms. McGill said, “Not everyone down here wants to be reunited with those they knew up there. As for me, I was born Irma Platt and, believe me, I wasted not a moment upon my arrival giving that gawd-help-us name the old heave-ho. Who names their kid Irma? Besides, I didn’t want my crazy mother tracking me down, so while my ashes were being scooped into a shiny brass urn, I decided to break free from the past and become a brand new me.”

“Are you saying it is not uncommon for people to adopt new identities down here?” I asked.

“It happens all the time,” she admitted. “If, for reasons you may not understand, your wife decided to become someone else, the likelihood of locating her is pretty much nil.”

Considering the odds, such as they were, I gloomily concluded, “Perhaps I’m on a fool’s errand, but if I give up now, I will spend the rest of my days wondering what might have been. I’d rather try and fail than not try at all.”

“There are far more in our world than in your world,” she said. “The dead outnumber the living many times over.”

“I’ve given thought to that,” said I.

“Have you? Well, think about this,” my guide exclaimed. “You could search the far corners of hell for the next 10,000 years and never come face to face with your wife—and even if you happened to meet her, and that’s a frightfully big if, would you recognize her?”

“Would I recognize her? I certainly remember what Abbie looks like,” I said with a touch of indignity.

“But what does she look like *now*? I was a pot-bellied pensioner, barely five feet tall, with bifocals, ill-fitting dentures, gray hair, and a touch of arthritis in my hips when I suddenly died from a brain aneurism. In your world, I was an under-appreciated nobody, but down here, I’m drop-dead gorgeous by anyone’s standards, even if I blow smoke rings from my nose. That fool vicar who lived next door was forever warning me about this place, but being sent to hell is the best thing that ever happened. Stick around for a while, and you may decide not to go back. That’s enough talk for now—let’s get you checked into your suite at the Belshazzar Plaza. One of my assistants will call upon you later.”

We stepped out of the civic center into the night. Despite the lateness of the hour, the sidewalks were shoulder to shoulder with pedestrians while passenger cars, bicycles, scooters, and delivery vans crowded the streets. Taking in the hurried hustle and bustle all about me, I casually commented, “The city never sleeps.”

“The damned do not sleep,” my guide answered. “Our underworld bodies do not require the usual eight hours of repose that once demanded a third of our existence.”

“Of course,” I answered. Mr. Gabby had mentioned this during our briefing. I also recalled it is always night in hell. There is no sun—only perpetual shadow and gloom. I feared the lack of sunlight would, over time, cause me no small measure of grief, for I tend to thrive best beneath blue skies.

“I hope you don’t mind walking to the Belshazzar,” said Ms. McGill. “According to the latest travel advisory, the cabbies voted to strike moments ago and a watermain break has shut down the subway in this area.”

Wishing to see something of the great metropolis, I answered, “Not a problem. Say, why are the cabbies on strike? More money?”

My guide gave me another of her incredulous stares. “Why would they strike for more money?” she asked. “I once met Hermann Goering behind the wheel of a cab.”

“What? *The* Hermann Goering? Commander-in-chief of Hitler’s Luftwaffe?” Being a World War II history buff, I begged to hear more.

“He was driving a cab in the financial district,” she explained. “A lot of these old scoundrels are cabbies. King Henry VIII drives a cab, don’t you know. He christened his cab *The Queen Ann Boleyn*. Pretty beastly choice of a name, I’d say. Anyway, the routines of these infamous tyrants turned hacks are pretty much the same. After the fare slides into the cab, these old blisters turn around and say, ‘I’ll bet you never dreamed the great so-and-so would be chauffeuring you about the metropolis today, but here I am, at your service! Go ahead! Ask me anything! Ask me anything you wish!’”

I shuddered at this revelation. Goering was a monster of the worst kind, and had I been present at the Nuremberg Trials, I would have begged for the honor of fitting the hangman’s noose around his worthless neck, but as a student of World War II ariel tactics, I might have set aside my personal contempt for an hour or so to quiz the evil Reichsmarschall on matters of historical significance. I asked my guide, “What did you and Goering discuss?”

“He’s a rather plump, portly fellow,” she said. “I shouldn’t wonder. He had two boxes of assorted donuts in the front seat of his cab. Goering is a slave to sweets of all kinds.”

I wanted to hear more about Goering than his donut addiction. “What did he say?”

“What did *who* say?” she asked, her attention momentarily diverted by a street musician playing a tenor sax.

“Goering! What did Hermann Goering say when you stepped into his cab? Did he speak on anything pertaining to his role in the war?”

“Oh, him? He gave me a toothy smile and announced, ‘Hermann Goering at your service. Where to, fräulein?’”

“During the cab ride, did Hermann Goering express any regrets about his war crimes?”

“Regrets? Hell knows no regrets, but the pompous old ass and I chatted a bit. I mentioned that my Aunt Mimi lived in London during the war. When I was just a schoolgirl, she told me stories about the massive bombing campaign launched by the German Luftwaffe in 1940. Aunt Mimi had friends living in the Docklands area who were killed in the bomb blasts. Of course, the war came to an end before I was born, but we were told by our teachers that Goering was the mastermind behind the Nazi blitzkrieg that reduced much of London to rubble. The old Nazi appeared pleased and commended our English schools for recognizing and appreciating his ‘unparalleled contributions in the waging of the great war.’”

“What else did he say?” I eagerly asked.

“What else did *who* say?” my guide absent-mindedly responded. Her attention had been roped in by a clever window display featuring two animated frogs garbed in full evening dress.

“Did Goering say anything else?” I asked.

“He wanted to know if I was a Jew. ‘I see you have blonde hair, fräulein, but may I ask if you are a Jew?’” After a pause, she shook her head, stared into the unknown distance, and whispered, “Whenever we attempted intimacy, his nose commenced bleeding. He bled all over my brand-new silk nightie. Ugh! I could never abide engaging in sex with a man who suffers from nosebleeds.”

Stunned by her confession, I blurted, "You attempted intimacy with Hermann Goering? How could you?"

"The reason cab drivers strike is to prove they can," she fussed. "Why would they strike for higher wages? No offense, but you appear prone to speaking rot. Anyway, I recall Hermann Goering preferred hot cocoa spiked with peppermint schnapps with his donuts. Talk about a slave to sweets."

"Ms. McGill, I am having difficulty following you. You were speaking of Hermann Goering's nosebleed issues."

Giving me a contemptuous look, she exclaimed, "What are you babbling about? I was speaking of my former beau Roger. Roger and I grew up in Liverpool, but not in the same century, mind you. As I was saying, whenever Roger and I attempted intimacy, his nose bled. Nothing spoils the mood like a bloody nose."

"What else can you tell me about Goering?" I asked, not wishing to hear more of this Roger. "Did Goering reveal who slipped him the cyanide tablet before the hangman visited his cell?"

"During the cab ride, I happened to mention a weeklong trip to Berlin shortly before my death. Hearing that I had once visited his beloved *das Vaterland*, the pompous old Hun perked up and insisted on knowing about the parks, universities, and libraries named in his honor."

"But there are no monuments to him," I fumed. "His name is a byword! What arrogance!"

"I seem to recall his preference for glazed raspberry jelly donuts," she said. "Jelly donuts and spiked hot cocoa."

I said nothing.

Moments later, my guide asked, “Do you suffer from nosebleeds?”

“What? Me? Nosebleeds?”

“Does the prospect of sexual intimacy turn your conk into a fountain flowing with red corpuscles? Oh, don’t bother answering. It is not as if I find you attractive. You are certainly not my type—besides, I say engaging in intimate relationships with clients is wholly unprofessional. I’ll ask you not to speak of this again.”

“As you wish.”

“Really! Cabbies strike to prove they can strike. Would there be any other reason for a cab driver to strike? You ask such foolish questions.”

Alone in my suite, I suddenly felt the weight of the world, or underworld, bearing down on my shoulders. Never have I experienced such suffocating melancholy. Despite appearing to be a sprawling, thriving, ever-growing metropolis that dwarfs any great city on the topside of the earth, hell is a dark, dreary, dreadful, dismal place—a world of nonsense, confusion, folly, and illusion. Until recently, I had never been what one might call a deeply religious man, but right away, I sensed the underworld is, how shall I phrase this?—a place utterly forsaken by our Creator. The damned fancy themselves free from the shackles and fetters of God’s commandments—proud, determined rebels who dared to assert their independence by shaking their puny clinched fists at their Maker, but in their hostile rebellion, they became condemned prisoners of the greatest tyrant of all, that is, their own vile, base, shameful, degrading passions. By special privilege, I had come to this loathsome place to see, first-hand, these frothing, howling, wild-eyed children of wrath forever trapped inside dank, stifling dungeons of their own makings. Even so, as wretched a place as hell is—and hell is surely a place far worse than any nightmarish scenario conceived by human imagination, the worst is yet to

come. For now, the damned are living in a fool's paradise and seemingly liking it. Most of these lost souls truly believe they have, at long last, discovered paradise (hell has a way of garbling the thinking of its occupants), so they go merrily about their meaningless ways wholly oblivious to that which is to follow, that is, the second death—an unspeakably terrifying contingency beyond human comprehension. These are the ones who, by their own volition, freely exchanged their eternal souls for mere trinkets and baubles that cannot satisfy.

A nap would have been therapeutic—a welcomed distraction from the loneliness and worry that plagued my soul, but sleep, that great escape into the realm of oblivion—the dreamy, drowsy stupor that knits the raveled sleeve of care—is an unknown pleasure in the vast realm of Sheol. In the underworld, beds are strictly for sexual encounters; they serve no other purpose.

Thanks to the foresight and efficiency of my underworld guide, the accommodations provided for my comfort and enjoyment were among the finest hell had to offer. The bellhop assured me the replacement jets for the jacuzzi were on backorder. For entertainment, my suite was thoughtfully equipped with a panoramic curved-screen 3D television coupled with deluxe quadraphonic sound; unfortunately, the hotel's communications system was temporarily down. When I called for room service, I was told the hotel's kitchen staff was on strike. The front desk suggested a variety of restaurants within easy walking distance, but my sense of melancholy was only exceeded by the life-draining feelings of lethargy. Overcome by weariness, I had no desire to wander about. Also, as I was not yet accustomed to the underworld's perpetual night, the absence of sunlight and blue skies only added to my feelings of apprehension and uneasiness.

I momentarily stepped onto the balcony, but quickly turned back and slammed the glass door shut, for the cityscape observed from the 212th floor set my head spinning. I nearly blacked out with vertigo. Being a pilot, I am no stranger to high altitudes, but the view of the vast metropolis from this spiring height, which I can only describe as dizzying, filled

me with unspeakable dread. Cognizant of the underworld's propensity to shoddy design and workmanship, I could not help wondering about the structural integrity of this 256 floor skyscraper. Might this half-mile high tower of glass and steel, designed and built by muddled minds and hands, suddenly come tumbling down like a house of cards? In this world where everything is breaking down and nothing works properly, my fears were not without reasonable cause.

For a moment, I considered abandoning my search and rescue plans, but as I pondered the decision to return home, there was a sharp rapping at the door. The visitor, I assumed, was the assistant Ms. McGill had promised who would equip me with a phone, a new wardrobe, and instructions pertaining to the use of the netherworld's public transportation network. Frankly, I was glad for the company. Standing at the threshold was a young, petite blonde woman garbed in a 1970s sequined halter top and much too revealing white denim shorts. "Hey, good-looking! You must be Woody, right? Oh, you're a cutie! A sweetheart! You'll certainly do! Nancy told me all about you. Well, how about it, big fellow? Are you going to invite me in?"

Before I could say a word, the small young woman pushed her way into my room, wrapped her arms around my neck, and planted a rather forceful kiss on my lips. Whether more stunned by her forwardness or her frightfully noxious breath, which smelled like a hair-clogged drain, I could not say, but I pulled away from my demure aggressor and cried, "Who are you and what do you think you're doing?"

"Nancy sent me." Looking about the room with obvious approval, my eager young visitor commented, "Just look at this place. Very posh. Wow! Is that a jacuzzi? Oh, I love the double bed. Say, what should we do first, handsome?" Wrapping her arms around my waist, she cooed, "Name your pleasure. I'm putty in your hands."

As she nestled her head against my chest, I pleaded, "Okay, Nancy McGill sent you, but aren't you here to help me with a phone and transportation?"

Walking me to the edge of the bed, she said, “Exotica Wonder at your service, sir! I’m just what the doctor ordered for those gnawing pangs of loneliness, heartache, and unfulfilled desire. I like you, Woody. I think you’re ever so cute.” She playfully jabbed me in the ribs and asked, “Ready for a good time?”

“Are you a...?”

Giving me another tight squeeze around the waist, she continued, “Nancy said you are mourning the loss of your wife, you poor lost boy, so she hired me to chase away those blues. I’m what you might call an amenity, and if it’s gratification you want, it’s gratification you get. It’s all a part of Nancy McGill’s professional guide services.”

“Really, there’s no need for all this,” I protested.

With another playful jab to my rib cage, she answered, “I’ve already been bought and paid for, so there’s no reason for my big strong man to fret over the cost. Besides, you’re ever so adorable. I might just keep you for myself.”

Dodging another annoying poke with her forefinger, I asked, “Is your name *really* Exotica Wonder?”

“Back in Iowa, my headstone reads Jane Hornback, but I feel more like an Exotica Wonder than a Jane Hornback,” she explained. “The new name is good from a professional standpoint, too. What man wouldn’t prefer a night of steamy passion with an Exotica Wonder to a game of dominos with Plain Jane Hornback? Jane Hornback isn’t a name that gets the masculine juices flowing. Ooooooh, I think you’re cute.”

“I’m certain Nancy McGill meant well,” I said, “but I cannot accept your professional services.”

“Of course, you can,” she answered gleefully. “I’m part of the welcoming package. When you hire Nancy McGill as your underworld guide, you get the best—and the best includes a luxury suite, the latest phone, a stylish wardrobe, transportation, and, best of all, me. Let’s have a bottle of champagne sent up while we peel down to our birthday suits and soak in the jacuzzi.”

Annoyed by her aggressiveness, I pointed to the door and snapped, “Regardless, I am not interested in your services. Now you really must leave at once.”

Visibly stunned by my rejection, glistening tears welled in her eyes which, by the way, were striking in that her right eye was green and her left eye blue. “It’s my breath, isn’t it? You’re put off by my halitosis. I suppose my breath is stinky rotten, Woody, but I’ve tried mints and gum, and I am forever gargling with mouthwash, but the dead fish smell in the back of my throat won’t go away.”

“My reluctance has nothing to do with your breath, Jane...”

“Exotica! Jane is such a frumpy name,” she exclaimed.

“I don’t think I could call anyone Exotica while maintaining a straight face.”

Offering a toothy smile, she suggested, “Okay, let’s compromise. Call me Exie. Exie is short for Exotica. I like being referred to as Exie, but I shudder when people call me Jane. I hope you understand.”

“What’s the fuss? Jane is a perfectly lovely name.” Lowering my guard, I continued, “When I was a schoolboy, I had a crush on a pretty little girl named Jane. Come to think of it, Jane from Culver Elementary School was the first of many girls to break my heart, but if you prefer being called Exie, I’m okay with that.”

“Thanks, Woody,” she said, “but why did Jane from Culver Elementary School give you the brush off?”

“That was a long time ago,” I laughed. “As it happened, I approached Jane on the playground and asked if I might walk her home from school. I also promised her half of a chocolate cupcake.”

Exie smiled and asked, “What happened?”

“Unfortunately, Jane stomped on my nine-year-old heart by saying, ‘Go away, Woody. I don’t like boys with squeaky voices, and you have a squeaky voice.’ That evening, I hardly touched my dinner, and I crawled off to bed without being told to do so.”

“Poor Woody,” she said. “Had I been the Jane at Culver Elementary School, I would have been honored having you walk me home.”

“Had you been the Jane at Culver Elementary School, I would have given you both halves of my chocolate cupcake—and I would have carried your books, too.”

“Oh, how sweet.” Stroking my face with her hand, she said, “Isn’t it amazing how we connected with each other right from the start? What I’m saying is here we are, practically strangers, yet we’re carrying on like we’ve known each other for a lifetime. I think this is a good sign, don’t you, Woody? Don’t send me away. I am already sensing a bond between us. How about it?”

“Exie, I’m certain you and Ms. McGill mean well, but I wouldn’t feel right if you stayed. I hope you understand.”

Exie dabbed her moistened eyes with a tissue. “Woody, there is no denying that my breath is, well, dreadful, but if you look me over, you’ll see that I’m a solid ten in every

other department. Besides, I like being with you—and that’s the truth. If you let me stay awhile, I’ll try not breathing in your face.”

“It’s not your breath,” I answered. “You’re a pleasant young woman and now that we’ve gotten to know each other, I find you perfectly charming, but I belong to Abbie.” Over the next several minutes, I told Exie about the strikingly beautiful woman who had been taken from me much too soon.

“Abbie is a lucky lady. I always wanted a man to love me the way you love your wife,” she sighed.

“Were you married?” I asked.

“Roland was the unhappiest man I ever knew,” Exie explained. “He never laughed. He never joked. He never smiled. We belonged to a bizarre religious cult that insisted anything fun was a sin, so life with Roland was pretty drab.”

“Did you have children?” I asked.

Exie shook her head. “The organization warned the end of the world was rapidly approaching, so faithful members were encouraged not to have families. Of course, I thought it was all a lot of nonsense, but Roland never doubted the organization’s teachings. What a fool. By the way, did you and Abbie plan to have any children?”

“As she died immediately after the wedding,” I explained, “we never had the opportunity, but had she lived, we would have filled our house with kids. The more the merrier, as they say.”

“I’m sorry you lost your wife, Woody.”

“How did you come to be here?” I asked.

“I was struck by an automobile,” she answered. “I might have lived, but our religion prohibited blood transfusions. My husband would not allow the doctors to give me plasma, so here I am. On the bright side, I’m free from Roland.”

I was shocked. “Your husband refused treatment that would have saved you? What kind of wretch willingly allows his wife to die?”

“The organization promised paradise on earth as my reward,” she said, “but instead of paradise, I ended up here. The underworld isn’t so bad, I suppose, and most everyone I know really likes it here, but there are times when I wish I was somewhere else.” After a contemplative moment, Exie stepped near me and whispered, “Your wife’s not here, Woody, but I am. A real woman in the flesh is better than a memory.”

Gently stroking her hair, I said, “Her memory is what brought me to this place.”

“I don’t understand you,” she pondered, “but there’s something very sweet about the way you cling to her memory. And you’re sure my breath has nothing to do with it?”

“We all know that nobody is perfect, and no body is perfect. I can think of a hundred things far worse than a slight unpleasantness of the breath.”

“Like puffs of smoke shooting from the nostrils?” she teased. “They don’t call my boss Nancy the Dragon Lady for nothing.”

“So I’ve heard. When you see Nancy, tell her I am grateful, and I’m grateful to you, too, but I came here for the sole purpose of finding my wife. I hope you understand.”

Looking earnestly into my eyes, she said, “I’m not certain I fully understand, but I promise you I’ll give a lot of thought to all that you’ve told me. Say, are we still friends?”

“I’d be honored,” I answered. “Perhaps our paths will cross again.”

“Hold your breath, mister! I’m going to kiss you goodnight! Are you ready?” The kiss was more of a friendly peck and her breath was, well, not quite so offensive the second time around. “You really are a sweet guy. I’ll show myself to the door.”

“Goodnight, Exie. Now that I’ve met you, I realize you’re a blossoming rose in a barren desert.” And I meant what I said.

Chapter 10

As the door closed behind Exie, the pangs of aloneness and isolation once again swept over me like a tidal wave. For the brief time we had been together, I had not felt so utterly forlorn. Admittedly, the two of us had got off to a rocky start because of a misunderstanding fostered by her employer and my underworld guide, Nancy McGill, but once the boundaries of acceptable behavior had been determined, Exie’s company had proved most pleasant. The young woman impressed me as one having a good heart and an upbeat spirit. Why, then, had I sent her away? Afterall, nothing inappropriate between us happened, and nothing inappropriate would have necessarily had to happen. Exie and I could have sat on the sofa and swapped stories. This could have been an innocuous opportunity for two restless, lonely people to become acquainted with one another.

Wearied by the unwelcome solitude, I stretched across the bed and allowed my mind to wander.

As was my custom, I arrived at the coffee shop shortly after the dismissal bell rang. By 3 PM, I was ready to bolt out of the classroom on the heels of my students, but with assignments to grade and lesson plans to prepare, I typically wrapped up my workday over a cappuccino at a nearby coffee shop. As an almost daily customer, I was well-

acquainted with the shop's team of baristas, but on this day, I spied a new person behind the counter. I will not say it was love at first sight, but I surely found the tall, willowy young woman in the obligatory green apron a welcomed distraction.

Darlene, the afternoon shift manager, made a habit of briefly stopping by my table while I worked. Besides brewing the best dry cappuccino in the county, Darlene was a would-be matchmaker who insisted I was never meant to be a bachelor. Twice, she had introduced me to eligible female acquaintances with, admittedly, marginal results. On this day, Darlene momentarily abandoned the counter, slid into a seat across from me, and whispered, "I suppose you've noticed the new girl, right? Her name is Abbie and, like you, she's single, and unless you need glasses, she's quite a looker. What do you think of her?"

I nodded. "Yes, she's a pretty girl—there's no doubt about that—but what makes you think your new barista would be interested in a rather unremarkable high school English teacher?"

"If you knew she would say yes," Darlene continued, "would you invite her to join you for dinner?"

"What are you up to?" I suspiciously asked.

"Abbie is perfect for you," Darlene answered, "and you're perfect for her."

Referring to her pair of failed attempts at matchmaking, I responded, "Isn't that what you said about Nita and Katie?"

Rolling her mischievous brown eyes, Darlene said, "Forget about Nita and Katie. As I said, Abbie is perfect for you, and you're the right man for her. Listen, bachelorhood doesn't suit you, my friend, and being new to the area, Abbie knows hardly anyone.

Anyway, I told her that you are a true gentleman—the kind of man a young woman can trust—and today must be your lucky day, for she said she'd really like to meet you."

Not wishing to reveal my eagerness, I attempted a casual sort of jocular response. "C'mon. Don't toy with me, Darlene. Am I supposed to believe the new girl suddenly turned to you and said, 'I'd like to meet the fellow sitting at the table by the door. Will you please introduce us?'"

"You're close," Darlene answered. "After you walked in, I said, 'Do you see the tolerably good-looking schoolteacher sitting alone at Table 1? His name is Sherwood McCormick, he answers to the nickname Woody, and I've known him for a couple of years. He's single, a decent sort of fellow who wouldn't hurt a fly, and he's available for the asking. Give me the green light, Abbie, and I'll see that you don't dine alone this evening.'"

"You said that?" I asked. "And she agreed? She wants to have dinner with me?"

Darlene patted my wrist and exclaimed, "That's what I said. Listen closely, Woody. I'm going on record right now by stating Abbie is the woman fate has intended you to marry. Now put away your laptop and books and walk over to the counter and say hello to the girl."

At the wedding reception, Darlene called me aside and whispered, "I blew it with Nita and Katie, but didn't I tell you Abbie was the one? Didn't I? Like they say, third time's charm. Okay, I did my part, Woody, but now it's up to you to make your new bride happy."

I bolted out of bed. Why had I turned Exie away? Instead of wallowing miserably in the stifling gloom of isolation, I could have enjoyed her congenial companionship without fear or risk of violating my marriage vows. After all, I am a gentleman. I know how to behave. I'm no frothing Neanderthal. Had I been a little less judgmental and a little

more hospitable, Exie and I might have shared in light-hearted conversation over a quiet dinner or strolled about the crowded city sidewalks peering into shop windows or craning our necks as we gazed upon the soaring New Babylonian skyscrapers. Best of all, I would not have felt so utterly alone, and she would have been in the company of a man who recognized her as a compeer rather than a plaything.

Realizing anything was better than moping about my lonely hotel suite, I raced out the door, rode the elevator to the lobby, and began quizzing the bellhops on duty as to their notice of a petite blonde woman in shorts and a glittery top. One bellhop, who would have been a remarkably handsome young man had it not been for the great globs of wiry hair sprouting from his ears, said, "I seem to recall someone fitting that description."

"Which way was she headed?" I anxiously inquired.

Stroking his chin with one hand while extending an open palm with the other, the bellhop pondered, "Let me think...let me think...hmmm..." After I strategically placed a Tetzels in his hand, the young man's memory suddenly improved. "Ah, yes! If you hurry, I think you'll find her waiting at the bus stop."

"Which way is the bus stop? Quickly, man!"

"Hmmm...which way to the bus stop? Let me think...let me think..." Recognizing a second not-so-subtle hint when I see one, I slipped another Tetzels into the mercenary's greedy palm. "Take a left. The bus stop is only a block from the hotel's main entrance, but you'd better move!"

I raced toward the bus stop, but to my grim disappointment, Exie was not there. I frantically looked about in every direction. Where had she gone? Perhaps she had already boarded a bus and was on her way to who knows where, or the bellhop, who was two Tetzels richer, had simply lied about seeing her. I quizzed a handful of passer-

byers if they had seen the young woman, but no one admitted to having any knowledge of her whereabouts.

Feeling even more discouraged than before, I wondered what to do next. As far as the eye could see, restaurants, bars, clubs, and coffee shops lined both sides of the busy thoroughfare. Assuming she had not boarded a bus, she might have been in any one of the dozens of business establishments situated in either direction. Most likely, however, she had climbed aboard a bus and was, at that moment, miles from where I gloomily stood. Why had I been so eager to send Exie away?

To my surprise, I felt a friendly jab in the small of my back, and when I turned around, there was Exie. Beside her stood a well-proportioned, darkhaired man whose face was marred by a disgusting pool of gooey white matter that had accumulated below his left eye. With a broad smile, she exclaimed, "I said to Oscar, 'Say, that looks like my new friend Woody from the Belshazzar Plaza,' and, sure enough, here you are! What are you up to?"

"Looking for you," I answered, "but it appears you found me first."

With bright, shining eyes, she cried, "You were looking for me? How sweet!"

"I'm lonely, and I want your company," I explained. "I should have never sent you away. Have dinner with me. Talk with me. Stay with me. I'm not looking for anything kinky—all I want is a friend."

Exie wrapped her arms around my waist and purred, "Oh, how sweet you are, and I like you, too, but Oscar and I are on our way to rent a room. What can I do, Woody? He's already paid my going rate."

"That's right, buddy. You'll just have to wait your turn," snarled the man with the eye matter gathered on his cheek.

Drawing myself up to full height, I said, "Go wait in the back of the line, pal, for she's already been paid to be with me. Isn't that right, Exie?"

"Hmmm...Woody's right, Oscar. He's a new arrival, and Nancy the Dragon Lady hired me to keep him company." Digging into her purse, Exie produced a Tetzels. "As I'm already under contract, I owe you a refund. Take this dabber. Maybe another time. Goodbye."

"I don't like the way you do business," the man named Oscar complained.

"If you have a beef," I said, "take it up with me. Now why don't you make yourself scarce, Oscar."

As he walked away, I heard him mutter, "I'll find a hooker whose breath doesn't smell like a sewer."

With another of her playful jabs to my ribcage, Exie said, "I'm happy to see you again, Woody, but what about your wife? And what about the vows you made? I hope all that talk about marital fidelity and honoring your wife's memory was more than just ten pounds of hot air, for I really believed you."

"Nothing has changed," I explained, "I meant every word I said. I simply want your company—nothing more."

"Just my company?" she asked rather hopefully. "No, uh, benefits?"

"Exie, I don't need a toy or a one night stand, but I am desperate for a friend. What else can I say? I'm lonely and I'm homesick and this perpetual night is draining the lifeblood out of me. I don't like this place, but maybe having a friend will make hell more tolerable. How about it? Will you stay close to me for a while?"

“Of course,” she squealed. “I’d like to have a male friend who doesn’t have his hands all over me. Say, Woody, you’re the first sincere fellow I’ve met since arriving here. Okay, let’s begin by having dinner. I’m starved.”

“Where to?” I asked with all eagerness. “Name the place. There must be a dozen restaurants within easy walking distance.”

Leading me by the hand, she said, “There’s a food cart vendor over on Sink Street that serves the spiciest sausages you’ve ever tasted. I like mine smothered in roasted ghost peppers. Are you game?”

“I don’t know about the ghost peppers, but I like grilled onions and plenty of spicy dark mustard.”

As we strolled down the busy thoroughfare, Exie and I encountered an excitable, pneumatic, wide-eyed woman with a shrill voice handing out printed notices to the pedestrians passing her way. “Come join your comrades from the *I’m Really Awfully Glad I’m a Beta Society* as we show our hatred and contempt for pornographic art. Donate a Tetzels to the cause and you’ll have your choice of a dozen eggs or a can of florescent spray paint. It’s fun with a purpose, so plan to meet your friends at the entrance of Riverdale Englewood Park. If you hurry, you may be chosen to hurl the first egg.”

Looking to Exie, I asked, “What’s this all about?”

“I think a mob is gathering at a park to topple a statue of *The Thinker*. I’ve heard of this, but toppling statues never seemed like anything that would interest me—eggs and spray paint can be messy, but if you’re curious, ask her for a flyer.”

Wanting to know more, I approached the woman distributing the notices. “Say, I’m new to these parts and am curious about this event you’re promoting.” As I spoke, my eyes zeroed in on what looked like a small caliber bullet hole through the middle of her forehead. Despite the powder burns surrounding the slug’s entry point, there was no blood or cranial matter spurting from the wound; nonetheless, the ghastliness of a bullet hole drilled through the woman’s head caused me to cry, “Oh, no! How did this happen? Did someone shoot you? Are you okay?”

Obviously agitated by my unsettled reaction, she snapped, “Of course, I’m okay, but what business is this to you? Haven’t you ever seen a bullet wound to the head?”

“Come to think of it, no, I’ve never seen anyone with a bullet wound to the head or anywhere else,” I answered, “but it appears as if you’re okay. How did this happen?”

Annoyed by my questioning, she snapped, “As you think you’re entitled to an explanation, I intentionally shot myself during my previous life when my lover deserted me for someone else. Okay, so I don’t handle rejection so well. Any other prying questions, Mr. Snoopy Nose?”

“It was not my intention to upset you,” I feebly explained. “I was merely concerned about your well-being. No harm was intended.”

Her large glaring eyes, as wide as saucers, softened a bit. Her strident voice softened slightly, too. “As you said, you are new to these parts and ignorant of our ways, but I am weary of every newcomer I meet asking about the hole in my forehead.”

“If it were not considered bad form to apologize, I would say that I am sorry for my indiscretion.”

“And if it were not considered bad form, I would accept your apology.” With a hint of civility in her tone, she asked, “Would you like to know about the grand event ready to take place in the park?”

“I am curious.”

“Sponsored by the *I’m Really Awfully Glad I’m a Beta Society*, we begin the festivities by defacing *The Thinker*.”

“The iconic statue by Auguste Rodin?” I asked.

“More like Auguste Rodent,” the pneumatic activist laughed. “For a Tetzal, you’ll have your choice a florescent spray paint or a dozen eggs.”

“May I assume the paint and the eggs are for the defacing of the statue?”

“You’ve vandalized statues before?”

Not wishing to conceal my disdain, I answered, “Where I’m from, statue defacing is a favored pastime among the indignant, self-righteous, priggish, morose-leaning Beta-minus element of western society, but do continue.”

“Say, I hope you’re not an Alpha,” she said while giving me a suspicious eye. “You have that superior Alpha air about you.”

“You are not the first to levy this accusation,” I admitted, “but tell me more about the statue toppling.”

Giving me a contemptuous eye, she said, “Let me guess. You’re an Alpha-plus, am I correct?”

“It’s really not my fault. At an early age, I was taught to think independently and critically. My mentors drilled in me the importance of weighing relevant evidence, rejecting nonsense, tuning out empty rhetoric, and following truth wherever it leads regardless of whatever climate of opinion happens to be in vogue—I’m simply fulfilling my destiny as an Alpha-plus.”

Heaving a long sigh, she said, “I suppose you cannot help being what you are, but knowing what I now know about you, I cannot see a card carrying Alpha-plus hurling eggs or spraying florescent paint at *The Thinker*. Wouldn’t this go against your beliefs?”

“Yes, I suppose defacing statues would be out of character for anyone who abhors behavior that is long on show but short on substance. Even so, I enjoy hearing other points of view.”

Contorting her face in incredulous disbelief, she explained, “Other points of view? Seriously? You must be one of those nutty free speech advocates. As for me, I prefer shouting down my opponents—insults and name-calling are the preferred stock-in-trade of we Beta-minuses, and best of all, our frenzied primal screaming requires absolutely no thinking and no logic.”

“So I am told.”

“Anyway, listening to both sides of an argument only confuses the issue—or haven’t you heard?”

“Very well, then,” I said. “Once we arrive at the park and fork over a dabber, Exie and I can choose between a dozen eggs or a can of spray paint, right?”

Beaming with pneumatic enthusiasm, the lady with the bullet hole explained, “That’s right, and after two or three champions of social justice work the mob into a state of

uncontrollable frenzy, we really let *The Thinker* have it with egg yolks and florescent orange paint!”

“Eggs and paint and fiery rhetoric—that’s quite a deadly arsenal,” said I. “Your group really knows how to make an inanimate hunk of metal pay for its sins.”

“Oh, there’s more,” she proudly exclaimed. “Besides eggs and paint, some participants choose to urinate on or hurl feces at the bronze monstrosity. Eggs, paint, urine, or feces—we’re really a very diverse, inclusive, tolerant lot.”

She beamed with pleasure when I commented, “Most democratic.”

“But the best is yet to come,” she continued, “for once the statue has been shamed, twelve lucky participants chosen at random are provided with ropes. As the crowd shouts, ‘Down, down, down,’ those given the ropes pull and tug until *The Thinker* topples to the ground.”

“That’s quite a grand finale,” I said.

“Of course, after the mob disburses, the organizers stay behind to scrub the statue clean and hoist it back to its granite base, otherwise, the bringing down of *The Thinker* would be a one-time event, and that would spell the end of our fun.”

“With eggs, paint, and bodily waste flying everywhere, I can’t think of a jollier way of enjoying a night on the town.”

The hole in the head lady gave me another suspicious eye and demanded, “That sounds like Alpha-plus mockery. Are you making fun of me? I may be a Beta-minus, but I know sarcasm when I hear it.”

With a shrug of the shoulders, I confessed, “Okay, I will not deny the element of mockery, but how else would you expect me to react to a gathering of preprogrammed zealots who behave as though they can bring about meaningful changes by defacing statues? I’m an Alpha-plus, and like all Alpha-pluses, we prefer substance over show.”

At this, she threw up her hands and cried, “Do you know what I think? I think you think you know everything just because you know how to think for yourself. Regardless of what you are thinking, this happens to be what I think, and I think it would be just like a know-it-all Alpha-plus who thinks he knows everything to put me down in front of his pretty little girlfriend with the foul breath. Anyway, that’s what I think—and I really don’t care what you think about what I think, because how I think is my own business, and what you happen to think is not going to change what I think, how I think, or even if I choose not to think, so think about that, mister.”

Finding the activist’s ranting more than a little amusing, Exie did her best muffling a responsive giggle. I admired her restraint.

After a long, philosophical pause, the Beta-minus activist made her final appeal. “Listen, take this flyer to Riverdale Englewood Park, and check out the action for yourself. Maybe you’ll discover joining an angry, shoving, screaming, violent, destructive, out-of-control mob armed with paint and feces can be a very liberating experience.”

Turning to Exie, I asked, “How about it? Would you like to watch a mob steeped in indignant self-righteousness turn its wrath on a non-sentient image cast in bronze?”

Exie shook her head. “Angry mobs bore me. I’m casting my vote for spicy sausages smothered with ghost peppers. Pelting a statue with eggs is not my idea of a good time. Besides, with all the commotion and nasty things flying through the air, we’re bound to soil our clothing, and I’m ever so fond of this cute little top.”

“I can recommend a good drycleaner,” said the hole in the head lady.

Exie grabbed my hand and said, “Come along, Woody. We must be going.”

As we continued our journey, I ventured to say, “Tell me more about yourself, Exie.”

“What do you want to know?” she asked.

“For starters,” I said, “what did you do before you died and came to this place?”

“There’s not much to tell,” she said. “I spent my life in Davenport—and it was a boring life at that. My parents were strict religious fanatics, so I was tethered to a short leash. Our family did not celebrate Christmas or holidays like normal families. When I was eleven, I lied about my whereabouts and attended a classmate’s birthday party. Attending birthday parties was strictly forbidden by our religion, so when my father discovered I had celebrated a friend’s birthday, he grabbed a wooden paddle, threw me over his knee, and set my bottom on fire. I couldn’t sit for three days.”

“What? You were punished for attending a friend’s birthday party?”

Exie shrugged her shoulders. “According to our beliefs, Jehovah was offended by birthday cakes and party decorations. Pretty bizarre stuff, huh?”

“I’ll say.”

As we crossed a busy thoroughfare, Exie continued, “Growing up in a home with fanatical parents is miserable. They never laughed. We never had fun. Our family life was centered around boring meetings, passing out magazines door to door, and avoiding any conduct that would displease Jehovah—and from my childhood perspective, Jehovah had a fist full of lightning bolts and couldn’t wait for opportunities to hurl them in the direction of those who made him mad.”

Draping a sympathetic arm across Exie's shoulders, I said, "You must have been a very unhappy little girl."

"I envied kids who grew up in normal homes. Anyway, when I was nineteen, I married an older man who shared our religious beliefs. Talk about a mistake. Looking back, I realize I married Roland because I wanted to break free from my overbearing parents, but my husband proved just as domineering. More than once, I considered suicide as a way out. I gave a lot of thought to killing myself, but in the end, someone did it for me. A college kid who had been drinking ran me down as I was crossing a street. With a blood transfusion, I might have survived, but my husband said no, so I died."

As we dodged a trio of speeding cyclists racing down the sidewalk, I asked, "Did I hear you right? Your husband would not allow the physicians to administer a blood transfusion?"

"I might have survived had I been given plasma, but according to our religion, Jehovah could never forgive those who had the blood of others coursing through their veins."

I was stunned. "Your husband refused to intervene on your behalf? He needlessly allowed you to die?"

"That's what I'm saying, Woody," answered Exie as a lone tear trickled down her cheek. "Not that my earthly life was so grand and glorious, but is it fair that I died before reaching my thirtieth birthday? I never had a chance to live. What's more, I hate this terrible place, Woody. I really do. Most everyone I know thinks hell is a wonderful world where everyone does exactly as they please, but I'm not at all happy down here."

"Maybe you don't belong here," I ventured to say.

Exie nodded. "I don't feel like I belong here, but as Jehovah sent me to this awful place, what can I do? All I've ever wanted was to be happy. May I share a secret with you, Woody?"

"Please do," I answered.

In a hushed voice, she confessed, "Because I was angry with Jehovah for sending me to hell, I decided to get my revenge by going to work as a prostitute. I don't know if you'll be able to make any sense of this, but I wanted to be as bad a person as I could possibly be to make up for the dreary life I was forced to lead up there, but I've since discovered being bad isn't nearly as fun as I had hoped it would be. May I share something else with you, Woody? I wish with all my heart that Jehovah had loved me. Had he loved me, I might have loved him back. I wouldn't have married that awful Roland, and I would have surely made something of my life. Best of all, I would not have ended up in this dreary place."

"When did you arrive down here?" I asked.

"Let me think," she said. "I was born in 1993, and I was killed shortly after the birthday I wasn't allowed to celebrate in 2022."

"Not a very long life," I commented.

"Had my life counted for something," she said wistfully, "I might not have minded an early grave, but living a life that has no meaning or purpose is a fate far worse than death, and that's the absolute truth, Woody."

My attention suddenly drawn to a huge electronic billboard, I turned to my companion and asked, "What's that all about?" The curious billboard pictured a large hand holding up four fingers and featured a caption reading: "If you see less than five fingers, consult a mental healthcare professional." A sub-caption read: "Be Alive...See Five!"

Appearing slightly annoyed, Exie said, “Never mind that.”

My interest piqued, I answered, “I will not ‘never mind that.’ I see four fingers. Say, Exie, what’s this all about?”

“I’m not really certain I can explain,” she hesitantly began, “but here in the underworld, there seems to be this belief that truth is just another word for bigotry and facts are subversive.”

“That’s pure nonsense,” I answered.

“Not according to hell’s way of thinking,” said Exie. “Anyway, let’s not spoil our fun by worrying about a silly billboard. We’ll turn right at Monroe. Are you hungry? My favorite street vendor’s food truck is parked only a few blocks from here.”

Unwilling to drop the matter, I insisted, “The hand on the billboard is holding up four fingers—not five.”

Visibly exasperated by my continued inquiry, Exie attempted an explanation. “If you must know, it is commonly believed that anyone who only sees four fingers is a slave to logic. On the other hand, those who see five fingers are said to be liberated from the...how do they explain it?—‘Liberated from the chokehold of mere fact and reason.’ I’m no psychologist, Woody, and all this talk about the number of fingers is way over my head, but anyone who only sees four fingers is labeled a mental misfit and needs professional help. I like you, Woody, but might we talk about something else?”

“In a moment,” I said. “Be honest with me, Exie. Look at the billboard and tell me how many fingers there are.”

With a hint of defiance in both her voice and countenance, she answered, “I see five fingers, of course.”

Pressing the point, I insisted, “Let’s not deceive one another. Exie, I see four fingers, and I strongly suspect you also see four fingers.”

“I see five fingers, Woody, now may we change the subject?” she begged.

Placing my hands on Exie’s shoulders, I said, “I have no use for the underworld’s untenable arguments against logic and reason.” Steering her toward the electronic display, I said, “Listen closely. I see four fingers—one, two, three four, and now I’ll ask you again. How many fingers do you see?”

With tears moistening her flushed cheeks, Exie said, “Why are you mistreating me, Woody? I thought we were friends.”

“How many fingers do you see, Exie?”

She sobbed, “I should have stayed with Oscar and sent you back to the hotel.”

“Listen! You don’t belong down here anymore than me. Furthermore, you see four fingers just as I do.”

Exie buried herself against me and wept. “I want to see five fingers. I really do, but whenever I see these advertisements—and these wretched billboards are everywhere—I only see four fingers. Isn’t it enough to say there are five fingers? Isn’t it enough to *pretend* there are five fingers? I’m not crazy, am I? I want to believe there are five fingers, and that should count for something.”

Attempting to offer my new friend a measure of assurance, I explained, “The fact that you see four fingers proves you are anything but crazy. The crazies are those who have bought into this diabolically correct nonsense.”

“But everyone else sees five fingers,” she protested. “What makes you think the two of us are right while billions of others are totally wrong? Don’t you understand? We are the minority, Woody, and a teeny, tiny minority at that.”

“Why should you and I care what the majority believes?” I asked. “This filthy hellhole is peopled with connoisseurs of mindless propaganda and empty rhetoric. Take a good look around you—these people have insatiable appetites for all that is unsound and absurd. They don’t bother to think—they merely regurgitate the moronic gruel forced down their throats.”

“But Woody...”

“Please listen to me. This is a world of obnubilated-thinking imbeciles who eagerly embrace any delusion that comes along, but apparently you, unlike most of the others, never checked your brain in at the gate. Exie, I do believe there is a spark of reason in you, and that should give you hope.”

Chapter 11

Shortly after returning to the hotel, I was briefly visited by a Mr. Budi Tirrand, a fastidious, highly excitable, excessively verbose representative in the employ of my guide, Ms. Nancy McGill. This Budi Tirrand, an absolute slave to the loathsome habit of repeating oneself again and again, wasted no time expressing his extreme annoyance with me. “May I ask where you have been, sir? I called upon you earlier, but to no avail, for you had left the hotel without our office having been given notice of your departure. Why you elected to leave the hotel after being instructed that a duly

authorized agent of Ms. McGill, who happens to be me, would be by to equip you with a phone and other essentials shows a careless disregard for my valuable time as well as the accepted protocol established to ensure your orderly transition to life in the underworld.”

“It was not my intention for you to have made a wasted trip,” I explained, “but in my defense, I was not specifically instructed as to when I should expect you.”

“Ah, but you were told of my imminent arrival, am I correct? You will not deny this contingency was previously discussed by Ms. McGill herself? What? What? I would be very much interested in hearing an explanation as to the reason or reasons behind your conspicuous absence from this hotel at the time of my calling, sir.”

By now, Mr. Budi Tirrand, a darkish sort of fellow with an oversized moustache, was not the only provoked individual in the room. “You’ve made your point. If you want an apology, I apologize. Now let’s drop the matter, okay?”

Giving me an austere look punctuated by one raised eyebrow, he stiffly replied, “We do not apologize in the underworld.”

“Fine! I retract my apology. Listen, Nancy McGill works for me, and you work for Nancy McGill. Furthermore, I will not be spoken to in such a surly tone by one of her associates, is this understood?”

Unphased by my rebuke, his ranting continued. “Yes, but you were not here when I called on you. I stopped by to see you earlier, but you were not to be found. Because you had left the premises without affording our firm the courtesy of prior notice, my previous visit to this hotel was in vain. Surely, you will not deny this. What?”

Exasperated by my fussy nemesis' nonstop grilling, I heatedly replied, "Okay, I left the hotel. That's right. I was tired of staring at these four walls. Is this a crime? And if you must know, I was with another of Ms. McGill's assistants, Ms. Wonder."

Throwing up his hands in frustration, he cried, "Exotica Wonder? She's a whore. Why would you leave the hotel with a whore when a bed for your intimate pleasures is in this very suite?"

Filled with defiance, I looked him squarely in the eyes and said, "You'll learn to govern your tongue in my presence. I'd better not hear you referring to her disrespectfully. Exie is my friend, do you understand?"

"Exotica Wonder has a lot of friends," he jeered. "Making friends is her business, and my business is helping newcomers transition to their new life among the damned, but how can I do my job if newcomers do not stay put? What? What? If you will allow me to do my job, I will equip you with a phone, forward your measurements and fashion preferences to Ms. McGill's personal tailor, and take you out on the town to teach you the use of our public transportation system. According to the client's personal needs, our firm also provides professional assistance in securing gainful employment, and for those desirous of more than one night stands, a matchmaking service is at our clients' disposal. We are a full service agency, unmatched by our competitors, but to take advantage of all we offer, one must be available to receive them."

After explaining that I was here on a temporary visa, we eventually agreed (after another vigorous debate, of course) that a new wardrobe was wholly unnecessary and a waste of time and effort. "As you are from California," he reluctantly agreed, "I suppose anything more than sandals and tee shirts would be superfluous. Why trouble Ms. McGill's tailor when you would be suitably attired after a visit to a thrift store?" Additionally, I was confident that I could manage the public transportation on my own. This suggestion, too, was initially met with resistance; Mr. Tirrand emphatically questioned my ability to navigate the metropolis without his guiding hand, but after

another heated exchange, he eventually bowed to my wishes. I was, of course, eager to have my guide service's complimentary phone for keeping in touch with the contacts I made. What I would learn later is that phone service, like all netherworld utilities, is sketchy. Hell is a place where nothing works as it should.

As a parting shot, he let loose with a final tirade. "Do not go wandering about the city without first notifying Ms. Nancy McGill. As we speak, she is working to secure an interview with a private investigator. As you may be called to meet her and an investigator at a moment's notice, do as I instruct and remain in ready contact. I need not remind you that your little adventure out on the town with your, uh, Ms. Wonder was a blow to my scheduling. Your thoughtless indiscretion prevented me from fulfilling another vitally important obligation."

"Are you quite finished?" I fumed. "We keep covering the same ground over again."

"Not quite. Sir, your time may be your own, but allow me to remind you that I have an important job to do and monumental obligations demanding my attention, but your cavalier disregard of protocol prevented me from properly executing other duties. What you considered a harmless lark on the town caused me no small amount of grief."

"Okay, okay," I agreed. "You've made your point *ad nauseum*."

With his wiry mustache fairly bristling, he added, "I simply wanted you to understand the situation in which you had placed me."

"I'm certain you've places to go and other people to meet, so let me show you to the door." Before he could utter another querulous word, I ushered Mr. Budi Tirrand out of my room and, believe me, his departure came not one moment too soon, for I had other plans to pursue.

After scrutinizing the address, the bellhop gave me a questioning look. "This can't be right. Are you certain this is correct?"

"This is the address I was given," said I.

"Unless I'm mistaken," he doubtfully replied, "this is somewhere in Lomar."

"Lomar?"

"Lower Marduk. Lower Marduk is very nearly in the next borough, and, besides, no one in their right mind goes wandering about in that neighborhood."

"I don't understand. Is Lower Marduk some sort of run-down slum?"

"Lomar is worse than a slum," the bellhop answered.

"How's that?"

"Take my word," he pleaded. "You don't want to go anywhere near Lomar."

"Assuming I had urgent business in Lower Marduk," said I insistently, "what is the quickest means of getting there?"

After a hesitant pause, the bellhop explained, "Most cabbies won't go into that area, but I would think you could get a cab ride as far as Soto."

"Soto?"

"Sodom Township. From Soto, you could walk to Lomar and not wear out a pair of shoes."

“Aren’t the cabbies on strike?” I asked.

“They’re back on the streets.” Extending an open palm in hope of gaining a Tetzal, he asked, “Shall I summon a cab?”

Moments later, I slid into the rear seat of a taxi and, fully prepared for a proper dressing down by the driver, hesitantly asked, “How close can you get me to Lower Marduk?”

With an air of nonchalance, the taxi driver replied, “There’s no place in this burg I won’t venture. If that’s where you want to go, I’ll take you to Lower Marduk.”

As we pulled away from the curb, I chanced to strike up a friendly conversation. “The name’s McCormick. Sherwood McCormick. I’m new to the underworld.”

Adjusting the vehicle’s rear view mirror, he responded to my spritely introduction with an undecipherable grunt that I assumed was intended to say, “Give me a break, fellow. I don’t like fares who try talking my ear off. Keep quiet and let me drive my cab in peace.”

Undaunted, I pressed the matter by asking, “As I’m new to Sheol, I’m wondering why a hotel bellhop warned me against traveling into Lower Marduk.”

After a moment or so of silence, the driver, figuring I would continue pressing him until I received an answer, responded to my question with a question of his own. “Are you given to superstition?”

“Superstitious? Me? Of course not,” said I.

“Neither am I, that’s why I agreed to take you to Lower Marduk.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Lower Marduk is steeped in myth and legend,” the driver explained while artfully dodging a careless pedestrian.

“What kind of myths and legends?” I dared to ask.

Knowing the cabman was already wearied by my inquiries, I was surprised to hear him say, “It’s all nonsense, of course, but there are plenty of fools who’ll swear Lomar is teeming with towering gods, said to be twenty feet tall, wearing blindingly white robes and brandishing flaming swords.”

“All this sounds pretty fantastic,” I said.

“I’m not easily spooked. Say, you don’t buy into such nonsense, do you mister?” he asked.

“Maybe I do. Until a few days ago, I didn’t believe hell existed, so who’s to say twenty foot giants aren’t real? By the way, have you ever ventured into Lower Marduk?”

“Never had a reason to,” came his curt reply. “Been driving this buggy a long time, and you’re the first fare who’s asked to go there.” After a moment, he added, “I don’t take to rumors and tall tales. I don’t buy into myths and make-believe. And I don’t believe in twenty foot gods with swords of fire.”

We drove along in silence for, perhaps, two hours or longer. Time in the netherworld moves at a pace unlike the upper world, so time measurement is not easily determined, but it seemed as though I had been a passenger in this cab for what was becoming an uncomfortably long time. Too, I could not help noting the worsening changes in the urban landscape as we traveled away from the civic center. We were now winding our way through an area of New Babylon that no longer dwarfed the upper world’s great metropolises. Rather than majestic skyscrapers, bustling sidewalks, bumper to bumper

traffic, and dazzling electronic billboards, we had entered an area of rundown buildings, featureless warehouses, shuttered factories, and scrapyards by the score. Streetlights were few as were motor vehicles and pedestrians. I will readily admit the gloominess of our surroundings filled me with an uneasy dread, and though I cannot say with certainty, I sensed the driver, a hardboiled man who claimed a fear of nothing, found the squalid scenery equally unnerving.

The driver pulled into a gasoline station, Soto Petro Service, explaining, "My buggy's thirsty. Now's the time to stretch your legs while I fill her up." As he spoke, a lanky attendant garbed in a dark green uniform reminiscent of a 1950s gas pump jockey approached the cabman shaking his head saying, "Can't help you, pal. Our tanks are dry as Aunt Minnie's fruit cake, and no one knows when we'll see another gasoline delivery truck." When the cabman asked if there were other filling stations in the area, the attendant said, "We're the one and only in Soto. We don't get a lot of traffic through these parts."

"Can I buy gas in Lomar?" my driver inquired.

"I'm going to pretend you didn't ask me that," the attendant replied. "Why would anyone go poking around in Lomar?"

The driver pointed to me and said, "You'll have to ask him. I'm just the cabbie."

The attendant gave me a quizzical glance before returning his attention to the cabman. "If your fool passenger is determined to stick his nose in Lomar, let him walk, but if I were you, I'd turn around and head over to Horus. You can fill your gas tank there, and Mom's Diner's blue plate special comes with a complementary slice of mock apple pie—and it's good."

My driver approached me saying, "It looks like this is the end of the line. I'll be lucky if I get my buggy to Horus before her tank runs dry, so you have a choice. You can

continue to Lomar on foot, or you can ride back to civilization with me. Either way, I'm out of here."

Tossing him a Tetzal, I said, "Point me in the direction of Lower Marduk."

Tucking the coin into his pocket, he slid back into the driver's seat and said, "Stay on this road. If you walk long enough, you'll get there."

I will not deny a feeling of apprehension as I trudged along the deserted highway. The scarcity of functioning streetlamps kept me enveloped in near total darkness. More than once, I stumbled over some unseen hazard blocking my path. I generally enjoy a good, brisk walk, but this was not such an occasion. From time to time, I would walk past an abandoned apartment house or a crumbling old storefront where businesses such as Soto Hardware, Soto Five and Dime, and Sodom Township Dry Goods once thrived.

For some time, I sensed as though I was being followed, but as it appeared no one else was about, I chalked up this feeling of disquieting eeriness as being nothing more than a case of raw nerves.

As there are no stars or other celestial bodies in the netherworld's night sky, I was stunned by the sight of a glowing orb well into the distance. Initially, I reasoned my eyes were playing tricks on me, as often happens during prolonged exposure to continual darkness, but as I proceeded along the way, the glowing orb appeared to grow brighter.

No, I had not been mistaken. Something or someone was following me. Turning about, I shouted, "Who's out there? What do you want?" My call was answered with silence, so I continued my journey, but at a quicker pace. Somehow, I knew I was not alone in the darkness, and I wondered for what intent I was being tracked.

Moments later, I turned around to see the shadowy figure of a man darting into the doorway of what might have once been a small grocery store. Believing that facing

one's fears is generally preferable to running from them, I shouted in a somewhat shaky voice, "I know you're there, so come out and show yourself." No answer. "I know that I'm being followed, so whoever you are, come out and face me."

In a voice shakier than my own, my hidden pursuer answered, "I mean you no harm, sir."

"If you mean me no harm," I returned, "step out of the shadows and show me who you are."

Emerging from his hiding place, my clandestine pursuer answered, "I'm on my way to Lower Marduk and, well, I don't mind saying this place is spooky and, uh, you see, I didn't want to travel alone. I hope I didn't upset you. If you're heading to Lower Marduk, maybe we could walk together."

Sensing he meant me no ill will, I said, "Having a traveling companion would be good. My name is McCormick. Woody McCormick. And you are...?"

With a slight bow, he introduced himself saying, "Hans Müller, but everyone calls me Zottel." My new friend's wild, unruly hair looked as though it had never seen a comb. "You and I will go to Lower Marduk together."

As we made our way, I learned a good deal about Zottel's past life. An infantryman in the German army, Zottel had been mortally wounded during the Ludendorff offensive that took place in northern France in 1918. The youngest of four children, his father had worked as a bureaucrat in Munich and his mother, a gifted woman of incredible beauty, had taught violin and piano. Zottel and his seventeen-year-old fiancé Adele, who, by the way, had been one of his mother's most promising music pupils, had planned to marry at the end of the war. As is often the case, Zottel was just another casualty drawn into a bitterly fought conflict he had neither created nor understood.

After sharing his story, my new friend was surprised to learn World War I had ended well over a hundred years ago. “I had no idea more than a century has passed. One tends to lose track of time in this place.”

Curious, I asked, “Why are you on your way to Lower Marduk?”

Running a hand through his thick, bushy hair, he cautiously answered, “You may doubt my sanity—and perhaps with good reason—but I am miserable living in this place. Others swear this is paradise, but hell does not suit me. I want out of here. I want to leave this wretched place. So, now that you have heard my confession, do you think I’ve lost my reason, friend?”

“You are hardly a madman,” I assured him. “Hell is no paradise, but please tell me more.”

Encouraged by my favorable response, he readily continued, “As improbable as this may sound, I have heard there is a way of escape in Lower Marduk. How this can be, I do not know, but if there is a gateway that opens into another world, I am prepared to leave at once. And now, my new friend, what takes you to Lower Marduk?”

“Before arriving here, I was told on good authority that Heaven operates a consulate in Lower Marduk, and if I encountered a problem during my quest, help would be available.”

“Oho! Then I am not on a mission of folly,” he cried. “Say, do you see a couple walking ahead of us? Might they be going our way?”

Zottel and I were not alone. Besides a couple, perhaps fifty or so yards before us, I spied a trio on the other side of the highway traveling on foot, presumably on their way to Lower Marduk, too. Behind us, perhaps another fifty yards to our rear, several walkers were steadily proceeding in our direction. Here and there, small clusters of

people, all on foot, were marching toward the same destination. Zottel and I were far from traveling alone, and as we progressed, the glowing orb that hung in the distant sky appeared closer and brighter. Under his breath, I heard my friend whisper, "I am not without hope."

As if appearing out of nowhere, the sky was suddenly filled with several military helicopters (later, Zottel said he had counted twelve such craft), each with floodlights nervously darting and crisscrossing in every direction. The lead aircraft, equipped with a high powered public address system, blared a series of warning messages: "Danger! You are entering a forbidden zone! Repeat! You are entering a forbidden zone! For your safety, you must turn around immediately! Advance no farther! Repeat! Advance no farther! Turn back now! Entry into Lower Marduk is strictly prohibited!"

Zottel and I, and, indeed, all those around us, stopped as if frozen in our tracks.

Startled, I asked, "What should we do?"

"What should we do?" he exclaimed. "We continue, of course." Raising his voice so the other travelers could hear, he stretched forth a defiant fist and cried, "Onward and forward, my friends! Now is not the time to retreat!" At this, everyone resumed their pace. Seeing our delegation advancing toward the forbidden zone, the helicopters menacingly swooped over our heads while spraying the area with machine gun fire. Momentarily forgetting that bullets are ineffective in the underworld, we all scattered for cover—all, that is, except Zottel, who would not be undone by the opposition's intimidation tactics. Following his lead, the rest of us emerged from our hiding places and pressed forward.

Next, the helicopters began scattering the area with smoke bomb cannisters. The thick, billowy smoke, though physically harmless, proved to be a blinding white barrier that prevented us from seeing in any direction. Once again, warnings were issued from the lead helicopter's public address system. "Further attempts at crossing into the

forbidden area will not be tolerated! You have been warned! Once the smoke dissipates, you are to reverse your course and return to from wherever you came! This will be your final warning! Repeat! This will be your final warning!”

Long moments passed until, finally, the smoke began to clear, and we were no longer blinded. As the helicopters hovered above our heads, those on foot gathered around Zottel asking, “What can we do?”

“Never lose faith, my friends!” he cried. As he spoke, a fiery sword, tumbling end over end as it soared through the inky black sky, found its mark by striking the lead helicopter’s rotary blades. The machine, instantly incapacitated, slammed into the ground and burst into flames. The impact of the burning aircraft quite literally shook the ground. Seconds later, another flaming sword hurtling through the air sent another machine spinning to the ground. A second horrific explosion followed. I stood, awed and speechless, as a towering creature in dazzling white took aim with a flaming sword and, for a third time, a doomed helicopter violently plummeted to the ground. Engulfed by flames, the hapless crew raced from the burning aircraft. By now, the remaining nine helicopters, fearing the certain woeful fate that awaited them, hurriedly scattered for safety and, to our collective relief, disappeared from sight. The battle was over. The threat had been eliminated. A great, roaring cheer arose from among us. Our mighty angelic protector, who majestically stood three times taller than any mortal I’d seen before or since, beckoned us to follow. We could proceed to our destination without impediment, and so we did.

Our band of sojourners, which I had originally estimated to be about a dozen or so, had swelled into a crowd numbering into the hundreds—perhaps thousands. From where they had come, I could not say, but once the threat posed by the ariel warships had ended, throngs of people, joyous and jubilant, stepped boldly from the shadows and gathered to march as one toward the glowing sphere suspended in the still, dark sky.

Chapter 12

We stood, *en masse*, below a dazzling, stunningly beautiful, gravity-defying crystal sphere hovering from a height I could not readily determine. With the pitch black sky as a backdrop, the radiant orb glistened and sparkled in the manner of a rare and precious jewel. The huddled crowd, numbering in the hundreds or even thousands, gazed silently, and in a state of hushed awe I can only describe as reverential.

Inside the transpicuous sphere stood a high wall with twelve gates; there were three gates on the northern wall, three gates on the eastern wall, three gates on the southern wall, and three gates on the western wall. At each gate stood a mighty angel, fierce and dreadful, and yet glorious to behold. I cannot speak for the others, but at the sight of these majestic sentinels, I stood fearful and trembling, but I also sensed a measure of comfort knowing they would do me no harm. Indeed, I esteemed them as protectors who would come to our rescue if, by chance, some malevolent force attempted to disburse our group.

My equally bedazzled friend Zottel leaned toward me and whispered, “What do you make of this? Might this be a floating city encapsulated in crystal?”

“I believe this is the heavenly outpost I was told of before entering the underworld,” said I. “See how it shines!”

“After more than one hundred years of living in the shadows,” said Zottel, “my eyes are ready to sing praises to the light above. Have you ever seen a more beautiful sight?”

“No, my friend. I’ve never seen anything so breathtakingly magnificent, and yet, this may be only a foretaste of something more wonderous and awe-inspiring to come.”

“What do you mean by this?” asked Zottel.

“I’m not sure,” I admitted. “The words sort of tumbled out of my mouth.”

As we stood, motionless, reverent, and overwhelmed by the glorious sight above, a thundering voice cried, “Come up here!” In a moment lasting no longer than a twinkling of an eye, we were whisked—perhaps snatched, translated, or raptured are better words—from the ground and instantaneously carried up, up, up into the great floating orb.

Surely, this was some fantastic, unexplainable, logic-defying illusion, for though I had been caught up into the interior of the hovering crystal globe with its four towering walls, I found myself standing by a gently flowing river meandering through lush, verdant meadowlands dotted with a variety of luscious fruit-bearing trees. Above were billowy, cotton wool clouds and an inviting cobalt blue sky. The singing of a meadowlark filled the air. “How can this be?” I asked myself. I appeared to be standing in some great outdoor expanse, yet there could be no doubt I was inside the sparkling crystal sphere that hung from the inky blackness of the underworld’s perpetual night sky. “Even in hell,” I mused, “there is an oasis.” This utterance, I was later to learn, was not in keeping with the strictest truth. The oasis, as I had called it, was not situated in hell. Quite to the contrary, the great crystal orb with its majestic walls, green fields, and vividly blue sky *overlooked* the far reaches of hell below.

Though I wondered about the whereabouts of Zottel and the others, I did not fear for them. Instinctively, I knew they were safe and free from peril, but as for me, the strangeness of my surroundings and the bizarre circumstances that had brought me here weighed heavily on my soul. I had far too many questions and not a single answer.

From out of the still, I heard a deep, booming voice say, “You appear troubled.”

Though unable to determine the source of the voice, I answered, “I’ll not mince words, sir. I’m deeply troubled.”

“And why are you deeply troubled?”

“Sir, I hear your magnificent voice, but I do not see you, and I’d very much like to face the noble person with whom I am speaking. Will you make yourself known, please?”

“If you wish to see me, turn around,” he ordered, and when I did, I was stunned beyond words to discover that what I had presumed to be a colossal tree was, in fact, another of the mighty angels dressed in a radiantly white, shining robe. A sword measuring twice my height hung from a jeweled sheath that was attached to an equally ornate belt wrapped around his waist. You need not doubt whether I was intimidated by his presence, for I will not deny that I was taken aback by his towering height and menacing sword. Stricken by fear, I fell at his feet as though dead.

“Stand up at once,” he shouted. “Prostrate yourself before God alone.”

I struggled back to my feet. “I am deeply sorry, sir, but I feel unworthy in your presence.”

“I am, like you, a created being. Do not cower, but stand firm like a man.” After a moment, he gave me a kindly look and said, “My name is El Malei Rachamim, and I have stood in the glorious presence of Almighty God.”

“You, sir, are the one I have longed to meet. I came to this place with hopes of securing an audience with you. Your name was given to me by...”

“As I am aware of who you are and how you came to be here, and knowing time is too valuable to squander, let’s consider more pressing matters,” he interrupted. “Moments earlier, I asked why you appear troubled.”

“I am troubled. Recently, I met a young woman who was sent here before her thirtieth birthday. During her all too brief life on earth, she was raised by harsh, unbending parents whose only loyalties were to a bizarre religious cult. As a child, she grew up in a stifling atmosphere and later, in an attempt at freeing herself from their grip, married a man who, as it happened, was just as strict and unyielding as her fanatical parents. Through no fault of her own, she was struck down by an impaired motorist. She might have survived the accident, unfortunately, the young woman was denied a life-saving medical procedure—a cruel, tragic decision based upon her husband’s twisted religious beliefs.”

“Very well. I understand the circumstances surrounding the young woman’s life and death, so what is your question?”

“This is a bit awkward,” I nervously continued, “but I cannot help but wonder about the fairness of God.”

“Explain yourself,” El Malei Rachamim demanded.

“As I see it, through no fault of her own, she was ushered into the world by parents who raised her to believe in a false religion. She was brainwashed by her mother and father along with their local congregation’s leaders from an early age. How would she know her parents had brought her up to believe in lies? And then, at the age of nineteen, she married an older, domineering man who further perpetuated the acceptance of these false religious beliefs. Sir, unfit parents coupled with a tyrannical husband is what I would call double jeopardy. And then, before she had a chance to stretch her wings and fly, her young life was snuffed out by a reckless teenager who had no business operating a motor vehicle.”

“Again, I am cognizant of these circumstances, but how does this prove the Holy One is unjust?”

“Why was she sent to hell? As I see it, she was dropped down into this place because of her unfortunate upbringing. She is not an evil person. If anything, she is a victim of lies and deception forced upon her by imbecilic parents and a religious zealot of a husband. For no reason other than being blinded to God’s truths, and this was the handiwork of her parents and the fool she had married, she died and was subsequently sent to hell. I say this respectfully, but I’m struggling to see the justice in her case, sir.”

Giving me a piercing look, the great heavenly warrior demanded, “Do you think the young woman was delivered here because of her ignorance?”

“Isn’t that why she’s here? Wasn’t she doomed to hell for belonging to a religious cult? She didn’t know any better, sir. I’m certain of this.”

“Your understanding in this matter is sorely lacking,” he said. “She was sent to hell for being an unrepentant sinner.”

Stunned, I protested, “But who isn’t a sinner? Even as a novice in the Christian faith, I’m aware that King David was guilty of adultery and murder. And in modern times, if one were to thoroughly scrutinize the lives of, say, Billy Graham or Mother Teresa, I’m certain these heroes of the Christian faith would have a few embarrassing sins to their credit—or discredit. Everyone I know, including and especially me, is a sinner.”

“Yes, but those who are forgiven do not have their sins counted against them. Have you not heard that when sinners place their hope in Christ Jesus as Savior, they are no longer condemned? The redeemed in Christ are free from blemish in the eyes of their Holy Father. Friend, if you were not so biblically illiterate, you would understand these basic doctrinal truths.”

Embarrassed by his starkly honest rebuke, I attempted to justify my ignorance based on my status as a recent convert to the Christian faith. Regrouping my thoughts, I said,

“Thankfully, I was made aware of the Gospel message through Mr. Gabby, but who was there to share the message of salvation with my friend before she died?”

Giving me a stern eye, El Malei Rachamim asked, “Do you believe you are more merciful than our Sovereign God? Before answering, let me warn you to speak truthfully, for I will know if you are lying.”

I was momentarily stumped. God, in His wisdom, had sent Exie to hell, but had her fate been in my hands, I would have spared her from this dreadful place. This would indicate that my level of mercy exceeds the mercy of God. On the other hand, how might a mere created being of an inferior essence presume to be more righteous than its eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent Creator? As a critical thinker, I recognize this as a breach of logic. A creature cannot be wiser, more loving, more compassionate, or superior in any way to the One who made it. What could I say in my defense?

Lowering my eyes to the ground, I said, “Her name is Jane Hornback. She goes by another name, Exotica Wonder, and I don’t think she should be in hell.”

“As she is here, and you do not think she belongs here, are you saying the Holy One made an error in judgment?”

My head was spinning. “Yes—no—I don’t know—I’m confused. God is wiser than me, and if He were prone to making mistakes, He wouldn’t be God, but I can’t help thinking Exie, I mean Jane, is an unfortunate victim of a series of highly regrettable circumstances.”

“Meaning had Jane been born to godly parents and been allowed to live out the full measure of her life, she would have possibly escaped hell?”

“Yes, this is what I mean, sir.”

“Let’s be very clear about this. Are you implying that had Jane been exposed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, she might have accepted His gift of salvation through faith, thus assuring her of everlasting life?”

“Yes, I think you’ve summed up my thoughts on the matter.”

In a firm, measured tone, he continued, “But you were not granted temporary passage into Sheol to intervene on behalf of Jane Hornback. You were invited here for the sole purpose of seeking out your late wife, Abbie.”

“This is true, sir, but having met Jane, I care about her.”

“I see,” he said. “And you believe our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, has no feelings or regards for this Jane Hornback?”

“Sir, does He care for her? Does He love her? I certainly do.”

“Is that so? And as you are fretful over the well-being and happiness of Jane Hornback,” the mighty angel pressed, “does this make you more loving and merciful than the Lord Jesus Christ?”

“No,” I reluctantly admitted, “but deep down, I cannot help but think Jane ought not be here.”

“If you are able to locate your wife, what do you hope to accomplish?”

“I had thought, perhaps, I could bring her back to earth with me. Her death was largely my fault. Sir, I should have been the one who was killed when our plane struck a powerline. Please understand that I’m responsible for Abbie being here, so I harbored

this secret hope that maybe, just maybe, I could rescue Abbie from the netherworld and bring her home with me.”

“Abbie is here because she is a sinner,” he flatly replied.

Shaken, I responded, “Yes, I understand, but had I not suggested we begin our honeymoon in the cockpit of an antique airplane, she would have been spared the tragedy of a premature death and, more importantly, she would not have been sent down here. Knowing Abbie as I do, I do not believe she belongs in hell. She’s much too good for hell, sir.”

“I will ask you again. Are you more just than God? Are you more caring than our Creator?” As I shuddered with dread, he demanded, “Who appointed you as the standard of universal righteousness? Well, speak up, wee little man. Do you have a greater capacity for love than the One who made us?”

“I—I don’t know how to answer.”

With blazing eyes, he snorted, “Ha! If you cannot justify your own feeble thinking, ought you to pass judgment on the ways of the Almighty One? Answer me if you can.”

Shamed by my ignorance, I lowered my gaze and whispered, “I cannot answer you, sir.”

El Malei Rachamim retorted, “No, you cannot answer me, for you think as the world thinks rather than as the Sovereign One thinks. There is much foolishness in you, for you have yet to take on the mind of Christ.”

I humbly admitted, “I know so little, sir.”

“At last, a point on which we may agree. You know so little. Now, again, tell me why you came here?”

“As I was saying, sir, I came to the underworld in hopes of seeing my wife.”

“And, again, what do you hope to gain from such a reunion with your late wife? Speak forthrightly, and do not waste words.”

“Abbie died the day after our wedding. When our plane struck the ground, I was rendered momentarily unconscious, and when I came to, poor Abbie was already gone. I never had a chance to say good-bye, and as I’m chiefly responsible for the accident, I would like to ask for her forgiveness.”

“Your purpose for being here, then, is to seek your wife’s absolution? And nothing more?”

“No, sir. As I mentioned earlier, I had hoped there might be a way of bringing her back to the upperworld, but I realize now this will not happen.”

Noting a softening in his tone, he shook his head and replied, “Assuming you find her, Abbie cannot return with you.”

“But now that I am here, and I see this God-forsaken place for what it is, and knowing the worse for its billions of inhabitants is yet to come, that is, the second death in the Lake of Fire, I am hoping to, somehow, find a way of sparing her from this final outpouring of God’s wrath.”

“Who do you think you are, you who are made of dust?” he cried. “Are you her rescuer? Are you her deliverer? Are you the Messiah? Are you the Savior?”

“No, sir.”

“Wee little man, hear me good. You are powerless in helping your wife Abbie. You can do nothing for her.”

“Even so, what if Abbie, like my friend Jane Hornback, never heard the Gospel? Should Abbie and Jane be punished for their ignorance?”

“Again, are you saying God is unjust?”

“Growing up, I never heard the Gospel message,” I struggled to explain. “My father was a highly moral man, but he had no use for religion, and I was raised by a tutor who, by his own admission, is an agnostic. I had never heard the plan of salvation through Jesus Christ until a fortuitous meeting with an angelic messenger, Mr. Gabby, a few days ago.”

“I am not ignorant of these circumstances,” said he. “Make your point.”

“Very well, sir, but supposing I had died in that plane crash before having heard the Gospel. Wouldn't I, too, stand condemned and be consigned to this wretched place? What if I had been killed while unaware of God's plan of salvation? What if I had died in my ignorance, sir?”

“There are no 'what ifs' in God's kingdom,” he answered.

“But let's assume I had been killed along with Abbie. I would have been sent here, too, right?”

“As I said, there are no 'what ifs' in God's kingdom.”

“Exie, uh, Jane Hornback said she was miserable living in this place. I am to understand Jane has never heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Since birth, she was spoon-fed lies and half-truths by people who intentionally kept her in darkness.

Steeped in ignorance, she was killed at a young age and sent here. Had Jane been afforded the same spiritual advantages as me and legions of other redeemed believers, she might have been spared the miseries of hell.”

“So, we again return to this point. You maintain God unjustly sent her to this place. Is my assessment of your beliefs correct? ”

Unable to sidestep his iron-clad arguments, I found myself frustrated to the point of swearing, but one does not hurl profanities while conversing with a mighty, sword-bearing, twenty-foot angel. Realizing what was good for me, I kept my wagging tongue in check. I took another approach. “Sir, Jane is unlike the others I have met.”

“How is this?” he asked.

“During my short time in Sheol, I’ve sensed the people I’ve encountered are happy being here. As strange as this sounds, the damned seem to heartily approve of this place—it is as if they have no regrets being here—on the contrary, I am convinced they would be miserable if they were anywhere else.”

“The lost believe they have achieved paradise,” he said. “You speak truth in saying the damned would be unhappy elsewhere.”

“But this is not so with Jane,” I pleaded. “She openly disdains this place. She would leave if she could. Her abhorrence of the underworld sets her apart from the others I have met.”

“This is not entirely true,” he answered. “Zottel, your recent traveling companion, is of the same mind. He, too, has expressed a strong aversion to hell.”

“I forgot about Zottel, sir. Yes, as we journeyed on foot, he admitted to his misery from living in the underworld. Are there other underworld residents who would flee from this loathsome place if, perchance, escape was possible?”

“Yes.”

“The others that joined us here,” I continued, “are they also refugees?”

“Yes.”

“May I ask, sir, if there is any hope for these unhappy people?”

“There is hope.”

Encouraged, I dared to ask, “Sir, is there a way of escaping hell?”

“Yes.”

“But doesn’t the Bible teach judgment follows death?”

“Yes.”

“Then how can these people who, as you said, died in their sins, escape the coming wrath of God?”

El Malei Rachamim pointedly asked, “Are you aware that the Lord Jesus Christ, after His death on that cruel Roman cross, preached to the captives below?”

“Sir, I am a recent convert to the Christian faith and, as you correctly pointed out earlier in our conversation, I am biblically illiterate. I know almost nothing of the scriptures, and I say this to my shame.”

“Those, such as your friend Jane Hornback, who never heard the Gospel on earth may hear the Gospel as preached by the true and living Savior when He ascended below immediately following His death and prior to His bodily resurrection.”

“But even I know the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ occurred over two thousand years ago. His descension into hell was a one-time event. How can this ancient occurrence help Jane and Zottel and the others who, at this very moment, long to escape the miseries of hell?”

“Unlike you, the Holy One of God is not bound by the strict confines of time and space. All times are the same to Him. His sovereign will cannot be frustrated by the mere boundaries of time and distance. Those who will be saved will be saved.”

“There is hope?” I cried.

“There is hope,” El Malei Rachamim assured. I was relieved to see him, at long last, smile as he spoke.

“Sir, what of those who heard and rejected the Gospel during their earthly lives? Will they have a second chance at salvation after death?”

His face immediately darkened. “I’ll warn you against uttering such devilish notions, man of dust. There is no second chance for those who willingly rejected the free gift of salvation during their earthly existence. Do not speak as the heretics and false teachers.”

“I am deeply sorry, sir.”

“Remember, salvation is of the Lord. Those who will be saved will be saved. Those who will be lost will be lost.”

“This is a difficult teaching, sir, but it would explain why some souls are quite at home in the netherworld while others seem strangely out of place.”

El Malei Rachamim continued, “Those who reject the Gospel of Christ should rejoice there is a hell—and, indeed, they do rejoice.”

“But how can this be?” I begged. “Hell is endless confusion. Hell is perpetual darkness.” Struggling to marshal my thoughts, I blurted, “Hell is a...hell is a God-forsaken place.”

Nodding his great head, he pointed out, “The fact that hell is, as you said, a God-forsaken place explains hell’s irresistible appeal to the damned.”

“Please help me understand, sir.”

“Imagine the men and women who spend the sum total of their lives avoiding all contact with God. They despise Him. They scoff at His Son. They resist the prompting of the Holy Spirit of God. They mock God’s word. They are offended by the cross. They reject His grace. They give no thought to eternity. They trust in themselves, and their rebellious hearts drive them to defy their Maker at every turn. They are haters of God. They do all they can to avoid any contact or interaction with Him. And so, at death, why would these unrepentant sinners harbor any desire to live eternally with Him in Heaven when, throughout their earthly lives, they couldn’t bear His company? Heaven, the City of God, would be a place of unspeakable misery for those who are avowed enemies of our Creator. On the other hand, hell, a place forsaken by God, is paradise to those who wish to be left alone.”

“Are you saying that hell is God’s gift to the damned?” I asked.

“Hell is not a gift,” my angelic mentor explained, “but the legions of fools who call it home would not be happy anywhere else.”

“And you are saying there is hope for people like Exie and Zottel who, unlike the majority, desire to dwell forever in the presence of their Creator?”

“With God, all things are possible. His sheep hear His voice—even in the underworld.”

“Am I correct in thinking those who prefer the miseries of hell are here by their own volition?”

“Ah, here is a truth for you to remember. Those who reject fellowship with the Lord Jesus are connoisseurs of confusion, misery, and deception. They want less, not more, from life. They willingly settle for too little. They prefer stones to bread and serpents to eggs. They are pleased with trinkets over treasures. Rather than adoption into God’s family, they wish to remain dirty-faced orphans who grovel about in the filth and mire of a cursed planet. And, when they finally breathe their last, they willingly and eagerly embrace this forlorn pit as paradise. It is the noetic effect of sin that hopelessly muddles their thinking. No one in their right mind would come here, and no one in their wrong mind would wish to be anywhere else.”

“Are you saying the damned would be miserable in heaven, sir?”

“Yes, son, the damned would be miserable in heaven.”

“These are difficult doctrines, sir.”

“Yes, these are difficult teachings, but remember, the damned will always find truth unpalatable. Swine have no regard for pearls—only mire and husks. Dogs lap their vomit as if it were a succulent dish matchlessly prepared by the king’s most revered chef. Hell is a choice—a bad choice, but it is a choice they freely make.”

“Am I to understand, then, the damned choose something other than eternal bliss?”

“One of your writers, C.S. Lewis, properly said the doors of hell are locked from within.”

“But those who submit themselves to the Son of God will not be turned away from paradise?” I asked.

“Joy is for the asking,” assured my teacher in a gentle voice. “If you approach your Heavenly Father for a loaf of bread, He will not serve you stones. If you hunger, go to Him, and be satisfied. If you thirst, come to Him, and be refreshed. If you wish your life to have genuine meaning and purpose, align your will with His perfect will. These simple truths, if followed, will have a profound impact on your earthly life, and in the endless ages to come.”

“I am now convinced the Lord God is more merciful than me. May I never again doubt the goodness and righteousness of my Savior.”

With a wry smile and a lilt in his voice, El Malei Rachamim mused, “You likely will, at some future time and in some dire situation, fall into doubt and question the goodness and righteousness of Almighty God, but as you are safe and secure in His eternal care, He will bring you to your senses even when you stray.”

After several minutes in which neither of us spoke, I interrupted the silence by admitting, “I am not anxious to leave this place, sir. I have missed sunlight and blue skies.”

With a gentle nod of his head, he said, “When you return to the night, find comfort in knowing that joy comes in the morning.”

Chapter 13

“*Fzzz...popple...Where are you?*” demanded my guide, Ms. Nancy McGill. Despite the dicey phone connection, I had no doubt about her being upset with me. “I’ve been all over damnation searching for you.”

“At this moment, I’m trudging through Lower Marduk, but when I reach Soto, I’ll telephone for a taxi.”

“And why *tzzzz pop* you in Lower Marduk?” demanded the voice from the other end of the line.

“I had urgent business needing my attention,” said I. “Anyway, the matter has been satisfactorily resolved, and I hope to be back soon. Have you located a private investigator?”

As our connection continued to deteriorate, what followed was a garbled, static-filled, only partially understandable tirade berating me and my decision to leave the hotel.

“*Glumphaz maza snazzah* visit with a private investigator, but when I came to *mulukez grappat gloken* you weren’t there! *Sazztle pleka nanatah* totally unreliable! I work hard arranging a meeting with one of the *schmazz grackle peeth* but where are you? *Vlasken kwah klastweve*, do you understand?”

“I didn’t quite understand all that you said,” I answered, “but I’ll waste no time getting back to the hotel, and we’ll resume our conversation then.”

“Is that so? And *fleekah tooz* with the cabbies back on strike? *Gloznoz!*”

“Are you saying I won’t be able to get a taxi?”

“*Teckenzizz!*”

Assuming *techenzizz* meant yes about another cabbie strike, I wondered how I might manage a speedy return to the hotel. I had, of course, assumed I could summon a cab once I reached Sodom Township, but it appeared their work stoppage would necessitate an alternate solution to my transportation problem. “Does the subway run to Soto?” I inquired.

“*Fizzzzzzzz crackle rackle...fhazzz...*” Our connection was gone. I attempted reestablishing contact with my underworld guide, but telephone service, like everything else in hell, is spotty at best. From what I had gathered, my guide had arranged for me to meet with a private investigator; however, when she called upon me at the Belshazzar Arms, she grimly discovered her wandering client was not to be found.

There was nothing to do but walk and keep walking. I had no other options. Making my way through the darkness of Lower Marduk was taxing, for the inadequate street lighting, preponderance of potholes in the road, and the scattered garbage and assorted debris proved daunting obstacles that continually hindered my pace. On a positive note, I was not nearly so spooked by the shadowy dreariness surrounding me, for I knew whatever things might go bump in the night could not harm me.

As I made my way, I thought of Exie, and how she might escape hell and the second death. As God is abundantly merciful, no one who truly desires happiness need remain in this dreadful place; joy is anyone’s for the asking. Unfortunately, most of hell’s residents prefer something other, and something less, than genuine happiness. They are rebels who, to quote Milton, would rather rule in hell than serve in heaven. What fuels this rebellion? Pride? I believe pride is the sin of all sins, but for what justifiable reason should anyone be proud? Indeed, pride is the sin of fools. How is it that mere creatures fashioned from dust dare to stand proudly and defiantly before their Creator with clinched fists screaming, “Leave us alone! Go away! We will do as we please, and we will have none of Your interference!” Why do the damned rage, and plot blueprints of vanity?

Rebels who resisted the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ throughout their earthly lives receive, in the end, exactly that which they desire, that is, a dark, colorless, joyless, Godforsaken dominion that welcomes all manner of deviant behavior while fostering every damnable lie reeking of smoke and brimstone. Hell is a kingdom where good is bad, bad is good, truth is suspect, confusion is praised, nonsense is esteemed, feelings trump facts, imbecility runs rampant, tolerance is reserved for the intolerable, applause is given to vulgarians, the basest expressions hang in galleries, mindless noise blasts through loudspeakers, mediocrity garners awards, vanity is considered a virtue, empty slogans are served from silver platters, bloated pride goes unhindered, and the only wrongs are that which are right and true and just. Anyone with a sufficiency of backbone and courage to question the ways of the damned is charged with bigotry, misogyny, intolerance, fascism, and narrow-mindedness. For those able to discern truth from deception, name-calling, shouting down, and shaming appear to be hell's best defenses against logic, reason, and unalterable facts.

After what seemed hours of groping my way through the darkness of Lower Marduk, I finally crossed into Sodom Township. Soto is a bleak, dilapidated, rundown ghetto, but unlike the abandoned ghost town of Lomar, there are a few lost souls who call this home, and a handful of rickety shops, taverns, and eateries are open for business. With aching feet and a throat parched by thirst, I made my way toward a splintery shack of tar paper and gray wooden planks. A crudely painted sign precariously affixed to the roof announced I was about to enter the Banty Rooster Café—Soto's Finest.

"Are you here for the debate?" asked the waitress.

"Debate? No, but I'd like something cold to drink. How about a tall, unsweetened iced tea?"

"Iced tea?" the waitress laughed. "Mister, this is a tavern. I can fetch you a cold beer, but we've no iced tea."

“May I assume root beer or ginger ale are out of the question?” When she addressed my request with an indignant pause of silence, I ventured to ask, “How about a glass of iced water?”

“Be right back with your water.”

As she placed a tumbler of tepid water with a single ice cube before me, I commented, “Earlier, you mentioned a debate.”

Beaming with delight, the waitress eagerly explained, “We have a couple of celebrities living right here in Sodom Township—the Rev. Albin Pointer and Gov. Luster Klagg. They’re real famous people—I’m sure you’ve heard of them.”

“Didn’t the governor go by the name Big Jack Klagg?” I asked.

“That’s him,” she said with a nod and a smile.

“And wasn’t Rev. Albin Pointer a rather prominent black activist?”

“The one and only,” she proudly answered.

Wiping a previous patron’s lipstick from the rim of my water glass, I said, “This Gov. Klagg was a real firebrand in the 1960s. And he’s scheduled to debate Rev. Pointer? I’m surprised either would appear under the same roof with the other.”

I had been introduced to both highly charged characters in my American history classroom studies. Gov. Luster “Big Jack” Klagg had gained national attention when he recruited Klansmen to halt black students who were attempting to enroll in South Jackson State College. Unless my memory had failed me, the fiery confrontation was not resolved until President John Kennedy sent National Guardsmen to restore order on

campus. Today, Gov. Klagg's story is only a minor footnote in the nation's history, but in the turbulent 1960s, he was a major figure in American politics.

Rev. Albin Pointer was an equally interesting, and equally notorious, historical name from the past. Unlike Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who preached a message of nonviolence, Rev. Pointer's brazen motto, "Make whitey pay with blood and property," placed him at odds with other civil rights advocates of his day. Even so, he had a sizable following who remained steadfastly faithful even after his blatant misuse of donor funds came to light. Amazingly, his reputation as a champion of equal rights managed to survive an embarrassing scandal involving his matching pair of luxury Rolls Royce motorcars purchased with funds that had been earmarked for minority college scholarships. When he, at the age of eighty-one, passed away, the city of Chicago gave him a glorious sendoff with the pomp and praise generally reserved for mobsters, union bosses, felonious politicians, and other beloved luminaries.

Knowing what I did of these two men, I was hardly surprised to discover the scoundrels had been consigned to hell following their deaths, but I found it rather remarkable that Gov. Klagg and Rev. Pointer had made moderately successful careers debating the other in the netherworld. According to the waitress who had brought me the dirty glass of water, Gov. Klagg and Rev. Pointer traveled together on a broad circuit that took them through the boroughs bordering New Babylon, but to the delight of the locals, Klagg and Pointer made the humble community of Sodom Township their homebase.

I was torn. The responsible side of me said I ought to hurry back to the hotel for a meeting with my guide who had arranged an audience with a private investigator who would help me track down Abbie. With this said, the curious side of me wanted to stick around and witness what promised to be an incendiary clash between a bonafide 1960s reactionary and radical. In my defense, I am a history buff. Before me was a singular opportunity to observe two historical figures who, in their own ways, helped shape America. When the waitress stopped by to top off my water glass, I asked, "What time does the big event begin?"

“Soon,” she answered. “Notice how the joint is beginning to fill with people?” She was right. By this time, every table in the Banty Rooster Café was occupied while other patrons, unable to secure a seat, lined themselves against the walls. “You don’t want to miss the show, mister. The reverend and the governor argue real good.”

Again, she was right. I did not want to miss the show. The first to enter the café was Gov. Luster “Big Jack” Klagg. His arrival was met with an immediate round of lusty applause, though I heard a few scattered boos and catcalls. The governor looked nothing like the archived newspaper photos I remembered; gone were his red face, sagging jowls, pot belly, stubby legs, and greasy, slicked-back hair. As I had previously explained, hell’s residents are issued infernal bodies upon arrival which are youthful and resilient, though disturbingly flawed as I have often pointed out in this narrative. As he circulated among a group of admirers shaking hands and slapping backs, I could scarcely believe my eyes. Gov. Klagg’s new body was tall, wispy, and curiously pale. His sickeningly pallid skin reminded me of the white underbelly of a catfish, and his hair and eyes matched his bleached skin. The man simply had no color about him. As they say in the netherworld, nobody is perfect, and no body is perfect. With everyone in hell flawed one way or another, I concluded Gov. Jack Klagg’s physical malady was likely an absence of pigmentation.

As the ashen skinned politician made his rounds, I was stunned by the realization his admiring fans were, almost without exception, black. How could this be? Why would black patrons fawn over a “Dixiecrat” governor who had made a long running political career built upon a platform of overt bigotry, segregation, and discrimination? Before me was the infamous southern governor who had recruited members of the Ku Klux Klan to drive black students from an all-white college campus. How many late night lynchings had this old devil orchestrated? How many black churches had been firebombed at his insistence? An avowed enemy of anyone with even a trace of African blood, before me stood a champion of white supremacy surrounded by a host of adoring black admirers. I could make absolutely no sense of this.

“Another iced water?” asked the waitress.

As I plunked down a Tetzal, I pondered aloud, “Why are these black folk fussing over Gov. Klagg as if he were a hero?”

“The governor has yet to arrive, sweetheart,” she answered, “but he’ll be along shortly.”

“Then who,” I asked, “is the white guy making his rounds among the black crowd? Isn’t he the governor?”

“I know you’ve only been drinking water,” laughed the waitress, “otherwise, I’d swear you were tanked. That’s not Gov. Klagg—that’s Rev. Albin Pointer.”

“What? How can a frail little whiter than white fellow with platinum hair be a black activist?”

“I suppose it does seem kind of odd to a newcomer like you,” she reflected, “but you know what they say—nobody’s perfect and no body is perfect. Rev. Albin Pointer’s body happens to be the wrong color, but he’s still the same street fighter on the inside.”

“It must be rather unnerving for a man who swore the Caucasian race would be annihilated at Armageddon to see a pasty white face staring back from the bathroom mirror.”

“Hmmm...never thought of it that way,” she said.

“Do you know what would make this unlikely scenario absolutely perfect?” I mused.

“What if Gov. Klagg were black? Wouldn’t that be priceless?”

“I’ve got news for you, sweetheart,” exclaimed the waitress gleefully. “Gov. Klagg’s skin is as black as the night.”

“There is justice,” I laughed triumphantly.

With a solemn nod, the waitress said, “Yep, he’s black as a tar barrel—there’s no denying that fact—but he’s still a card carrying Klansman.”

“No!” I cried. “This is priceless.”

“Some of his opponents make light of his color by calling him ‘Black Jack,’ and he doesn’t much care for that,” she explained. “But others poke fun at Rev. Albin Pointer by nicknaming him ‘Albino’ Pointer. Sweetheart, nothing makes him madder than hearing people refer to him as Rev. Albino. Them are fighting words.”

“So, what we have,” I said, “is a debate between a white guy who hates white people and a black guy who hates black people. Am I missing something here?”

“Hmmm...I suppose you could look at it that way,” she answered. “From time to time, Gov. Klagg erects a burning cross in Rev. Pointer’s front lawn, and it’s no secret that Rev. Pointer routinely sleeps with the governor’s wife, but I kind of think the one would be lost without each other. In a weird sort of way, Gov. Klagg and Rev. Pointer give each other a purpose for being.”

“And people willingly pay to see their dog and pony show?” I asked.

“The reverend and the governor deliver quite a performance—you can count on that,” she boasted. “There’s never a dull moment when they’re ripping and tearing into each other—and when the audience gets good and riled, mister, there’s absolutely no saying what might happen next. Say, where are you going? You can’t leave now, sweetheart. The show ought to begin real soon.”

Scrambling from my seat, I blurted, “Whoa! I just remembered I’ve urgent business back in the city. Can’t be helped.”

With a broad, understanding smile, she waved goodbye. “It’s a shame you can’t stick around, sweetheart, but make sure and stop by the next time you’re in Soto.”

Disgusted with myself and everything else in hell, I walked away considering how close I had come to falling for such a ridiculous farce. Enemies? Klagg and Pointer needed each other. Klagg and Pointer depended upon the other. Neither could exist without the other. As a politician, Klagg had harvested votes by sowing seeds of hatred, distrust, and fear while Pointer had financed his penchant for luxury automobiles as well as fostering the widespread media attention he desperately craved with fiery rhetoric and empty promises. Neither man had any real substance; on the contrary, both Klagg and Pointer were nothing but flat, two-dimensional caricatures who, even in death, were clinging tenaciously to the putrefying identities they had created on the topside of earth. Upon being dumped into the bowels of hell, both men resurrected their former ways of living and, to their delight, found no shortage of other ignorant souls eager to see this pair of phonies back in the ring and taking punches at the other. For a moment, I recalled Goya’s darkly satirical painting, *Fight with Cudgels*, in which two fierce combatants, blind to the grim reality that both were perishing in a pit of quicksand, continued brutally bludgeoning the other with their crudely fashioned weapons.

Klagg and Pointer be damned. They were reaping the harvest they had sown—and liking it. If it were possible to remove these two villains from their preferred diabolical states, they would be lost and miserable. To be sure, Klagg and Pointer were precisely where they wanted to be. But what about me? To my self-mortification, I had nearly tarried in Soto to join in the ignorant mob’s jolly good fun instead of attending to the meaningful business of finding my wife Abbie. I had come dangerously close to playing the role of a fool. With a quickened pace intended to distance me from the insanity

about to commence at the Banty Rooster Café, I vowed to remember hell has many subtle ways of gaining strongholds in those who fail to scrutinize their thinking.

My wearied feet found welcomed relief when, by good fortune, I hitched a ride in the vicinal township of Hunters Green that would take me to the heart of the great metropolis. The accommodating chauffeur, Clovis Bohr, a seasoned truck driver employed by the Hunters Green Ice Company, offered me a seat in the spartan cab of his delivery van. A man of average appearance, but with a cleanly shaven head, my host motioned for me to climb aboard while explaining, “The boss sort of frowns upon truckers picking up passengers, but it’s a long, monotonous haul to the city, and a friendly sort of chinwag helps to pass the time.”

“I’m grateful for the ride,” said I. “By the way, why would businesses in the city have ice delivered all the way from Hunters Green? I would think ice could be purchased from local sources.”

“You’ve asked a good question,” said Clovis Bohr, “a right good question.”

After a few awkward moments of waiting for an answer that never came, I said, “Yes, I suppose it is a good question. Do you have any theories as to why downtown businesses would have ice brought in from such a great distance?”

Apparently wishing to speak on another topic, he said, “I grew up in Pittsburgh. Do you know what I did for a living? The answer may surprise you. Care to guess how I earned my keep back in the days when I lived in Pittsburgh?”

“I don’t tend to do well at guessing games,” I confessed. “What did you do for a living back in Pittsburgh?”

With a hearty chuckle and a smile to match, he said, “I was a delivery driver for the Monongahela Ice Company. Can you believe it? Up there, I hauled ice. Down here, I

haul ice, but not for the same employer, of course. This is one of those strange and interesting stories you'll want to share with your friends, and it's the gospel truth."

Not knowing what else to say, I commented, "You must enjoy working in the ice trade."

With a quick adjustment of the rearview mirror, he continued his reminiscence. "Back in Pittsburgh, my ice wagon was pulled by a horse. We didn't have motorized vehicles in those days. Ice was delivered all over the city by horse-drawn vans. Do you know what my horse's name was?"

"No, tell me."

"Everyone had an icebox in those days," he continued. "I'd deliver blocks of ice to the people living in the north side of Pittsburgh from sunup to sundown. Folks didn't have modern Frigidaires back then. Just iceboxes. I met the wife while delivering ice."

"Tell me about your wife."

"I was a brawny sort of lad back then," he nostalgically explained, "Yep, I was a tolerably handsome chap with plenty of muscle. Strong as an ox, I was. Friend, the life of an iceman was mighty hard, so my arms and legs were like hardened steel—lugging great blocks of ice and trudging up and down steps all day long. Up and down. Up and down. Back then, elevators were only found in office buildings. Sometimes, a maid or the lady of the house would fetch me a slice of pie or a glass of lemonade when I delivered the ice."

"I'm certain you appreciated their thoughtfulness," said I.

"I have another story you'll want to tell your friends."

"You don't say."

Taking a deep breath, Clovis Bohr began, "I was hired by the Monongahela Ice Company on July 23, 1885. This happened to be the very day Ulysses S. Grant died. Can you believe it? I became an ice delivery man on the same day that our nation lost one of its great leaders. You might rightfully say that July 23, 1885, was quite a day for both Ulysses S. Grant and me." After a long pause, he reflected, "This is one of those slice of life stories that you can share with your friends."

Not knowing quite what to say, I simply answered, "That's pretty amazing. Imagine you being hired as an ice delivery man on the very day that Ulysses S. Grant died."

Ensuring the full impact of his story had not eluded me, Clovis Bohr added, "Ulysses S. Grant was a Civil War general and a U.S. president."

"Yes, I recall reading about that."

"I can top that story with a better story," he said. "On the tenth anniversary of my employment, the Monongahela Ice Company presented me with a shiny ten-dollar gold piece and a pair of steel tongs engraved with my initials. I used those engraved tongs to lug blocks of ice for the next ten years, but here's where the story gets mighty interesting. Are you ready? On my twentieth anniversary, the boss gave me a shiny twenty-dollar gold piece and a second set of monogrammed ice tongs." After a thoughtful pause, he added, "You might think I've stretched the truth, but every word I've said is gospel. I'm not a man given to exaggeration."

"When I pass along your amazing anecdotes, I'll mention these fascinating incidents from the life of an iceman came from a most reliable source."

"The old horse that pulled the ice wagon through the neighborhoods of north Pittsburgh knew the route as well as me," he said. "He was a real smart horse. A real smart horse. Have you heard of horse sense? Well, this horse had more sense than many of

the people I knew way back in those days. You'll never guess the name of the horse that pulled my ice wagon. Try your hand by taking a guess."

"No, I don't think I could guess the name of your horse."

"That's too bad," he said, "because, at the moment, the horse's name escapes me, too. Hmm...I think his name began with either an E or a W. Maybe a G. I don't think the horse's name began with an M, N, or O. In fact, I'm pretty sure we can rule out horse names beginning with M, N, and O."

"This does narrow the field," said I. Just then, I noticed Clovis Bohr's shaven head had sprouted about an inch or more of sandy hair in the short time since we had met. "You have hair," I exclaimed. "A few moments ago, you were bald."

"Nobody's perfect," he said, "and no body is perfect. By the time we reach downtown, I'll have hair down to my waist."

"I've never known hair to grow so quickly," said I.

With a deep sigh, he explained, "All this hair is a nuisance. When I was an iceman back in Pittsburgh, I didn't have hardly any hair at all, and now I have more hair than I know what to do with. It's all I can do to keep it from growing all the way to the ground."

Sensing he would prefer speaking of something other than his overly fertile scalp, I said, "All in all, it sounds as though you enjoyed delivering ice for the Monongahela Ice Company."

To my surprise, he answered, "I can't say that I did. It was a miserable way of making a living, friend. I'd go as far as saying delivering ice in Pittsburgh for the Monongahela Ice Company was a burdensome, thankless job—and you can quote me on this."

“But what about those fond memories of the highly intelligent horse who pulled your ice wagon?” I asked.

With a snort, he said, “That old nag crushed my right foot with one of its great hooves. I went to my grave with a limp because of that horse.”

“Well, what about the kindly maids and housewives who treated you to pie and lemonade?”

“An occasional slice of rhubarb pie or a cold drink is mighty poor compensation for years of hefting great blocks of ice up and down stairways.”

“What about the gold pieces and the ice tongs bearing your initials? Surely, these mementos from your employer meant something to you, did they not?”

With a shrug of his shoulders, he remarked, “Those two gold pieces and the monogramed tongs cost me my life.”

“How’s that?” I asked.

Shifting to a lower gear as our heavily laden truck approached a steep incline, the driver explained, “You see, one afternoon, while delivering a fifty-pound block of ice to a third floor apartment on Fleet Street, I lost my balance, thanks to that game foot, and tumbled down the stairway. I broke my neck in the fall. I died right at the bottom of the stairway with a chunk of ice melting at my side.”

“How horrible!”

“The doctor who filled out my death certificate described the injury as a ‘hangman’s fracture,’ only there wasn’t no rope and there wasn’t no hangman. Just a mighty steep stairway.”

Considering all this," I ventured, "why did you go to work for the Hunters Green Ice Company? I'd think you would have had enough of the ice trade during your earthly life."

"That's an interesting question," he commented. "A right interesting question. Friend, are your ears ready to hear another amazing story taken from the life of a professional iceman that you'll want to pass on to all your friends and close acquaintances? Well, hold on, for what I am about to tell you is pure, undefiled gospel. Are you ready for a whopper of a tale that will make your head spin?"

"You have my total attention."

With a pleased expression, he said, "When you share this yarn with your friends, they are going to be startled and amazed. Very well, here we go. Today marks my 1,707th delivery as a driver for the Hunters Green Ice Company. Yes, I have driven this same route all the way from Hunters Green to downtown New Babylon *exactly* 1,707 times."

Unable to grasp the significance of this, I could only say, "You've certainly driven this route many times."

"You're missing the point," he insisted. "Today marks my 1,707th delivery. I am only 200 deliveries shy of reaching my 1,907th delivery. Well, don't you get it? 1,907 deliveries?"

"I'm sorry, but I..."

"I broke my neck and died in the year 1907," he interjected. "In another 200 runs, I will have made exactly 1,907 deliveries from Hunters Green to downtown New Babylon. 1,907 deliveries made by a driver who died in the year 1907 AD, Now, isn't that a curious coincidence? It makes one think, does it not?"

“I don’t quite know what to say,” said I. “I’m speechless. You impress me as a man with no shortage of fascinating recollections.”

“Your friends will be startled and amazed by this—and everything I’ve told you is gospel. Clovis Bohr is not one who takes liberties with the truth.”

Mr. Clovis Bohr’s sandy colored hair now dangled loosely around his shirt collar.

Chapter 14

I would tell you about a strangely curious incident that occurred on the outskirts of Hemlock Crossing as Clovis Bohr and I were winding our way to the sprawling metropolis, but as my editor believes this recollection would prove an unwelcomed distraction serving only as a hindrance to the flow of this narrative, let me simply say we arrived at our destination just as my wearied ears could no longer endure another banal, hopelessly pointless anecdote taken from the life of an ice delivery man. Speaking of pointless, the entire trip from Hunters Green to the city proved to be much ado about nothing, for unbeknownst to the rambling man behind the steering wheel, the truck’s refrigeration unit malfunctioned somewhere along the way. This meant the ten ton load of ice shipped from the manufacturing plant was slowly reduced to a watery trail streaming over miles and miles of netherworld pavement. On the plus side, Clovis Bohr’s ice truck deposited me directly, and conveniently, I might add, in front of the hotel’s main entrance.

Upon my return from Lower Marduk, something of a pothole erupted between my underworld guide, Nancy McGill, and me. Because my absence had inadvertently disrupted her efforts and planning, Ms. McGill had worked herself into a dither and was keen to tell me all about it when, at last, we reconnected in the lobby of the Belteshazzar Arms. With a tone and countenance marked with tension, she let her frustrations fly. “According to your request, I go out of my way scheduling a meeting

with one of the underworld's most successful detectives, Admiranda Foxx, to help locate your late wife, but when Ms. Foxx agrees to an interview, my unreliable client is nowhere to be found. Do you realize how this makes me look? I am a professional—one of the top rated guides in New Babylon—but when it appears I have no control over my customers, my business reputation suffers. I came very close to dropping you as a client.”

“It was not my intention to cause you grief,” I explained, “but I had urgent business in Lower Marduk.”

Not to be placated, she cried, “Couldn't your so-called urgent business have waited? I spent a lot of effort and influence arranging a consultation with one of hell's most celebrated investigators, but thanks to you, Mr. AWOL, I'm left looking like a blithering idiot.”

Not knowing what else to say, I humbly mumbled, “I'm terribly sorry.”

Volumes of smoke billowed from her nostrils. “We do not apologize in hell,” she wailed. “Stop doing that!”

In my frustration, I automatically responded, “I'm truly sorry for apologizing.” This, of course, only stoked her already white-hot anger as evidenced by the two explosive blasts that shot from her nostrils. Immediately realizing I had made yet another nearly inexcusable *faux pas*, I attempted recovering from my regrettable verbal fumbling by asking, “What can I do to make this right? Tell me, and I will do as you say.”

“Listen carefully and don't interrupt. I've assigned Exotica Wonder the task of keeping a watchful eye on you, and I'm insisting that you not leave this hotel unless she accompanies you,” came her blistering reply. “Maybe, just maybe, I can secure a second appointment with Admiranda Foxx. She owes me a favor, so if I'm able to cash

in my chips, I want you to be where I can reach you at a moment's notice—and Exotica will see to that.”

This was good news, for I already considered Exie to be a friend. More importantly, I had high hopes that Exie would open her mind and wise up to the follies of hell. During our stroll through the city, she impressed me as being one who harbors a measure of resistance to the infernal nonsense that typifies the muddle-minded thinking of the damned. If I read her correctly, Exie was far from being a lost cause and, perhaps like my friend Zottel, her discontentment with the unmitigated meaninglessness of underworld existence would give her cause to flee from the second death—a dreadful fate that surely awaits all who esteem God's grace as no more than a worthless bauble. I am speaking the truth in saying I could hardly bear the thought of Exie spending eternity as devil fodder. Of course, her ultimate destiny depended on whether she preferred lasting joy to anything and everything that hell might offer. If my friend was of a mind to choose less than God's best, she would remain in a dreaded diabolical state forever. On the other hand, if Exie determined to lay down her arms and wave the white flag of surrender, God would lavish her with every good gift befitting a daughter of Jesus Christ. As I was coming to understand, those who will be saved will be saved, and as nothing is impossible for God, I vowed to avoid feelings of despair.

To my delight, Exie arrived at the hotel only moments after Ms. Nancy McGill's surly departure. Playful and giggly, she poked me in the ribs and teased, “We meet again, but because you've been a bad, bad boy, I'm in charge and you have to do everything I say.”

“Nancy McGill is convinced I need a babysitter,” said I. “That's okay, because I like your company.”

“And I like your company, too, Woody.” Flashing a playful smile, she asked, “What would you like to do?”

“What would I like to do? I thought you were in charge.”

“That’s right,” she answered, giving me another jab to the ribcage. “Do you know how to ride a bicycle?”

“Sure, I know how to ride a bike.”

“Follow me!” Grabbing my hand and nearly yanking my shoulder from its socket, Exie and I raced out of the hotel where, just around the corner, stood an open shed filled with bicycles. A banner hanging from the roof read, “See New Babylon by Bicycle. Purchase or Rental.”

After we selected our bicycles, the attendant, a dark, grim-faced man chomping on the stump of a cigar asked, “Purchase or rental?”

“How much is the rental fee?” I asked.

Giving me a look as though I were someone he would have preferred having never met, the attendant flatly answered, “Two bikes. Two dabbers.”

Curious, I then asked, “If we elected to purchase the bicycles, how much would we owe you?”

Again, in the same annoyed intonation, he answered, “Two bikes. Two dabbers.”

“Are you saying we can purchase two bicycles for no more than the cost of renting them?”

He simply answered, “Two bikes. Two dabbers.”

“Why,” I quizzically asked, “would anyone pay a Tetzal to rent a bike when it can be purchased for the same price?”

“Come on, Woody,” Exie begged. “Let’s go riding.”

“We will,” I promised, “but I’d like to understand why it costs no more to purchase than to rent a bicycle. This pricing scheme makes no sense.”

Exie gave the attendant a knowing expression and explained, “He’s new and doesn’t understand our ways.”

The attendant, feeling as though I had already taken too much of his time, snapped, “I haven’t all night, mister. Do you want to buy a bicycle, or do you want to rent a bicycle? The choice is yours, so make up your mind or keep walking.”

As I complained that his pricing policy was nonsensical, Exie produced a Tetzal from her purse and laid it on the counter. “Be quiet and give the man a dabber, Woody.” Turning to the attendant, she said, “We’ll each rent a bicycle.”

“But we could buy them for the same...”

“Hush, Woody. Give the man a dabber and let’s go.” As we wheeled away on our pair of rented bicycles, Exie said, “I like you, Woody. I really do, but must you question everything?”

“Yes,” I answered. “I tend to question anything that runs contrary to the principles of sound logic, and a business that rents or sells an identical product for the same price gives me cause to wonder.”

“That’s the problem with you,” she said, though not unkindly. “Can’t you learn to accept things for what they are without making such a fuss? Does everything have to make sense?”

For a while, we rode along with neither of us saying a word, but as the matter continued to trouble me, I broke the silence by insisting, “A business that rents or sells the same item for the same price...”

Exie squealed, “Oh, Woody! Look! My bicycle’s front tire has gone flat!” We coasted to a stop and surveyed the problem. “What should we do, Woody? We’re about a mile from the bike shack.”

“Wait right here, Exie,” I suggested. “I’ll push your bike back to the shop and return with a replacement.”

With a hint of a smile, she objected, “No, you don’t, mister. My orders are to stick to you like glue. Nancy McGill does not want you out of my sight.”

“There’s no reason for both of us to trudge all the way back to the bike shop,” said I. “This will only take a moment...”

“You’re not going anywhere without me,” she answered. “We’ll return the bike together.”

As we retraced our path, I sought to steer our conversation toward a more meaningful direction. “During my journey to Lower Marduk, I made a new friend named Zottel who had grown dissatisfied with diabolical living, so he made a decision to leave the underworld. What do you think of this?”

Admittedly, the tone and content of Exie’s response, which was a long time in coming, were not what I had wished to hear. “Why would anyone want to leave this place? Anything that anyone could possibly wish for is here for the asking.”

“Do you really believe that?” I asked. “During our last outing, I was given to believe that you were not entirely happy down here.”

With a measure of defiance in her voice, she snapped, “Where did you get such a ridiculous notion? I love it here, Woody.”

“Do you?” I asked.

Taking in a deep breath, she began, “Yes, I do. Hell allows me to do whatever I please, and there’s no rule saying I must explain myself to you or anyone else. Don’t you get it? Down here, I answer to no one but me. Furthermore, I can be whatever I want without anyone’s permission or approval. Back on earth, I was forced to be what my parents and my husband expected me to be, but hell allows me to be my own person—and I’m perfectly happy being who I am.”

“Suppose I said that you’re too intelligent for hell?”

Visibly annoyed, she argued, “I am fond of you, Woody, but as a newcomer to the underworld, there’s a lot you don’t understand about us. Leave it alone, okay?”

“Who are you trying to kid?” I asked. “Hell is a mammoth asylum for people who have either lost their ability to think, or find it too inconvenient to engage in meaningful thought. You fall into the latter category. The vast majority of the damned will never change, but there are a few who, like you, need not remain in this bottomless pit of confusion, imbecility, and nonsense.”

“You think you know everything,” she retorted, “but you don’t.”

Holding up four fingers, I asked, “How many fingers do you see, Exie? Count them aloud.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“How many fingers?”

Attempting to conceal her frustration, Exie counted, “One, two, three, four, five. I see five fingers, proving I’m perfectly normal, so what’s the problem?”

“Friends do not lie to one another,” said I. “How many fingers to you see?”

“I’m starting not to like you, Woody,” she exclaimed as her face flushed with annoyance.

Taking her hand, I gently answered, “That’s okay, for you are my friend and nothing will keep me from caring about you, and I only want what’s best for you.” Staring into her wide, shining eyes, I thought I saw a spark of reason. Sensing there was yet cause for hope, I continued, “I’ve pushed you enough for now, so let’s declare a truce, but I am not going to give up on you.”

Wrapping an arm around my waist, she answered, “I know you mean well, Woody. Let’s not argue.”

Returning to the shop with both bicycles in tow, we were greeted by a sign that read, “Closed—check back later.” With a philosophical shrug, Exie suggested, “Maybe we should find something else to do.” I agreed, so we propped both bicycles along the side wall of the shop and made our way down the street. Exie and I had only taken a dozen or so steps when, to our mutual surprise, we spied a crawling announcement on the Abprallenton-Mayfair Theater’s electronic marquee: “For a limited time, Eldon Fish, the Top Hat Killer, reads selected passages from his bestselling autobiography, *13 Is My Lucky Number*. The show begins in 09 minutes. A few good seats still available.”

Grabbing me by the hand, Exie squealed, “I want to see the Top Hat Killer. Let’s go inside.”

After plunking down two Tetzels at the box office window, Exie and I were dutifully ushered to our seats by a solemn looking theater employee garbed in a red felt uniform embellished with ornate gold braiding. The plush auditorium, though a bit cramped by modern theater standards, had a certain elegance reminiscent of a bygone era.

In the event the name Eldon Fish is unfamiliar, he was a notorious serial killer who was convicted and sentenced to death for the murder of thirteen unsuspecting women whom he had married under various aliases. Eldon Fish was dubbed the *Top Hat Killer* because of his fanatical devotion to formal attire. By special permission of the prison officials who carried out his death sentence in the winter of 1919, Eldon Fish paid the ultimate price for his grisly murders while meticulously outfitted in spats, a silk shirt, and a black tuxedo tailored to his demanding specifications.

Exie leaned close to my ear and whispered, “Before I died, my cousin Adaline and I slipped away from our domineering husbands to see a movie based on the life of Eldon Fish. I had nightmares for a week.”

“By chance, was the film titled *Anatomy of a Well-Dressed Killer?*”

“That’s it,” she said. “Have you seen it?”

“No, but my father financed the film and pocketed a tidy \$6 million for his efforts.”

As the overhead lights dimmed, the stage curtain parted while a hush fell over the crowd. Behind the curtain stood a tall, meticulously attired man with a brooding, aquiline face. Bearing a grimly sinister countenance as he surveyed his audience, the splendidly dressed speaker announced, “I am Eldon Fish.” As his booming voice reverberated throughout the auditorium, the enthralled crowd rose to its feet and

showered him with a long, deafening round of applause. Befitting the persona of a truly villainous character, his pale thin lips curled into a mocking smile as he motioned for the crowd to be seated.

Again, he thundered, "I am Eldon Fish, and I will be reading selected passages from my bestselling autobiography, *13 Is My Lucky Number*." His words were followed by a second round of enthusiastic applause. Right away, I determined Eldon Fish owned this crowd. For a reason or reasons that remained a mystery to me, the audience looked upon him as a hero worthy of adoration. Exie squeezed my hand and whispered, "It's him, Woody! It's really him."

Opening a thick volume that chronicled his loathsome career, Eldon Fish read, "On the day after Christmas, 1919, members of the prison's execution detail removed me from my cell and escorted me to the death chamber where I was strapped into the prison's electric chair. An electrode was attached to my left leg. After dampening my shaved head with a sponge that had soaked in a saline solution, a second electrode was affixed. Next, Warden Walt Grinder read the death warrant signed earlier by the governor. This judicial formality was followed by 2,000 surging volts of electrical current coursing through my body. This lasted for about thirty seconds. What followed was a second jolt of 700 volts lasting about a minute. The death chamber reeked with the stench of my burning flesh as the attending physician pronounced me dead." As a means of injecting more drama into his woeful narrative, the speaker removed his black top hat to reveal a mass of blistered skin where the electrode had done its work. As the audience gasped in disbelief from the grotesque sight, I felt a queasiness in my stomach. The speaker, pleased by his audience's startled reaction, smiled wryly as he quipped, "The warden referred to my execution as a Fish fry. Rather clever of him, wouldn't you say?"

Clearing his throat, the speaker continued, "Her name was Gladys. Gladys Vittatoe. I met dear Gladys at a charity luncheon while living in Kingsport in the year 1897. Her husband, the late Henry Vittatoe, a holder of a dozen or more U.S. patents, died leaving

his bereaved widow an enviable fortune. Being, if you will, a seeker of fortunes always on the prowl for gullible but well-too-do women of means and availability, I set my sights on poor Henry Vittatoe's lonely widow. Owing to my pleasing good looks and stately, old world charm, I had little difficulty coaxing Gladys Vittatoe to the altar. Without notice or fanfare, Gladys and I were pronounced husband and wife before a magistrate within three months of our introduction. Immediately after our simple wedding ceremony, my bride and I boarded a luxury ocean liner for an around the world cruise. As a boy, I had long dreamed of circling the globe and seeing something more than my hometown of Brooklyn, and with Gladys' vast fortune at my ready disposal, this dream of sumptuous wanderlust was, at long last, to be realized. I cannot begin to tell you of our many thrilling adventures as we sailed around the world, visiting exotic ports, and enjoying the opulent pleasures of living exclusively reserved for those of means.

"Feeling refreshed and rejuvenated upon our return to Bridgeport, I then directed my attention to a number of novel business enterprises, each a potential goldmine in scope and opportunity, unfortunately, these innovative schemes, through no fault of my own, fell upon desperate times and, alas, a sizable portion of my wife's holdings was lost in speculation. Gladys might have been more understanding about these dismal financial setbacks had her sister, a querulous old maid with a penchant for poking her hooked nose into the affairs of others, not convinced her to restrict my access to the balance of her wealth. This, of course, was an insufferable blow to my long range financial plans. My fertile mind was forever concocting new schemes for creating instant wealth, but owing to the interference of this wicked older sister, a loathsome battleax with steel gray eyes and an icy heart, I found myself financially castrated and my grandiose plans scuttled.

"As if I had not already suffered more humiliation than any ten men combined, Gladys began to change, and these changes were not for the better. Besides becoming mean about money, she commenced making unrealistic demands on me. I exaggerate not, fair readers, when I say Gladys showed more kindness to her miniature poodle, a vulgar little pipsqueak who barked incessantly, than to me, a true cosmopolitan steeped in

sophistication and charm. Furthermore, Gladys became preoccupied with food—particularly candies and pastries, behaved gluttonously at the dinner table and, to my dismay, took to waddling about in the manner of a sow after being slopped. Here I was, a fine specimen of manhood deserving of so much more, saddled to a whiney, overly suspicious, mean-spirited, hard-hearted, overweight, donut worshipping, foul-tempered, penny-pinching daughter of the devil himself. Realizing there was but one way out of this dreadful dilemma, I began making plans to murder my wife.”

After a long discourse on the virtues of ground glass and arsenic as effective ingredients for neutralizing unwanted spouses, I figured I had heard more than enough from this disreputable old vulture, but the rest of the audience, including my companion Exie, appeared to hang on to his every word. Had the decision been left to me, we would have slipped out of the theater early on, but Exie would not hear of it. On the contrary, when I quietly suggested we leave the theater in search of a more edifying brand of amusement, my insistent friend shushed me soundly and then ordered me to remain fast in my seat.

After a much too brief intermission, the audience settled back as he continued reading choice selections of oily passages from his highly disturbing autobiography. Feeling fidgety and wishing I were somewhere other than this stuffy bijou, my spirits plummeted knowing we had only reached wife number three in this seemingly endless thirteen-wife narrative. Turning my attention to Exie, I could scarcely believe her enthusiasm. For reasons I did not understand, she, along with everyone else in this assembly of theater goers, appeared wholly captivated by the gruesome meanderings of this brutal old serial wife-slayer.

“After eluding the suspicions of Manchester’s bumbling law enforcement officials,” he continued in his thunderous voice, “I settled in Sacramento under the name Horatio T. Fosdick. It was here I met dear, dear Iris Ditmore, an available widow whose late husband, one Clyde Foster Ditmore, owned the controlling interest in a highly profitable South African gold mining concern. Admittedly, dear Iris was, shall we say, a bit on the

hefty side. Alas, she could have stood to shed more than a few pounds, and a rather prominent mole on her chin only added to her homeliness, but she was rich and was oft heard lamenting, 'What good is all my money when I've no one special to share it with?' I, of course, was only too pleased to rescue dear frumpy Iris from her gilded boredom.

"Being the unattractive creature that she was, I considered ways of plotting her untimely death, but in the meantime, I concocted a plan that would temporarily free me of her tiresome society while affording me an extended stay in the celebrated City of Love. Yes, Paris is lovely year round, but she is at her splendid best in the spring, and wishing to distance myself from the weariness of Iris and Sacramento, I left for the continent under the pretense of sailing to Johannesburg where I would personally inspect the company ledgers, tour our working goldmines, and, in general, determine that Iris' financial interests were safe, secure, and properly managed.

"Though sorely grieved at the thought of a protracted separation from her devilishly charming husband, dear Iris was delighted by my willingness to take an active role in the overseeing of her business affairs. Boarding a steamer bound for Europe, from where I was to connect with another ship for South Africa—a mere pretense, of course, I declared, '*Ad altiora tendo*, my sweet!' Alas, dear Iris' homeliness was only matched by her simplicity. The poor, unsuspecting, orangutang-faced creature never suspected her gentlemanly husband was already familiar with a half dozen or more lovely mademoiselles who, upon setting foot on French soil, would eagerly attend to his every base, carnal desire. Oh, such a devilish rascal was I."

Placing my mouth near Exie's ear, I whispered, "I cannot tolerate another word of nonsense from this self-aggrandizing old demon. Let's get out of here."

"Hush, Woody," she answered.

"I will not be hushed! Furthermore, you are not to treat me as an unruly child."

“Oh, do be quiet, Woody! I want to hear what Eldon Fish is saying.”

Filled with indignation, I said, “You can stick around and wallow in this sordid old villain’s arsenic-laden chicanery until hell freezes over, but I am getting out of here.”

Weakening my resolve with a pair of pleading eyes, she begged, “I don’t often say please, Woody, but may we please stick around a tad longer? *Please?* Say yes, and I’ll be your devoted friend forever.”

“How you can bear listening to this pompous old windbag is beyond me, but...”

Planting a quick kiss on my lips, she squealed, “You’re the best, Woody!”

During the next thirty or so minutes, Eldon Fish fondly recounted his many assorted sexual triumphs while living the life of a carefree reveler in Paris. I considered these tales of debauchery unfit for human ears, but the audience, mesmerized by his thin veneer of sophisticated elegance and charm, clapped and cheered as every dark secret from this villain’s past came to light.

Striking a dramatic pose by placing the back of his right hand to his forehead, Eldon Fish lamented, “Alas, fair readers, all good things must come to an end, and so, with great misgivings, I boarded a ship for home with enough amorous memories to last a lifetime.

“After arriving in New York, I called upon a sweet, gentle lady, Mavis Wheelwright, a recently widowed damsel of impeccable breeding, for a delightful *rencontre* of frolic and passion, before boarding the Continental Express back to Sacramento and, of course, my wearisome wife Iris.” After a brief pause intended to heighten the audience’s curiosity, he teased, “As a hint of things to come, this lovely Mavis Wheelwright I just mentioned would one day become my fourth wife.”

After describing how he murdered Iris by mixing a deadly portion of ground glass in her breakfast porridge, our host called for a second brief intermission. As we stretched our stiffened limbs, Exie wrapped her arms around my waist and cooed, “I know you’re hating every minute of this, Woody, but for the record, I think you’re a super swell guy for giving in to my wishes. My husband never gave me any slack, but you’re not at all like him.”

“Far be it from me,” said I, “to rain on your parade, but I find the way you and everyone else in this theater bows and scrapes to this vulgar old poisoner as if he were a hero is beyond my understanding. Girl, if I could go back in time to the year 1919, I would have pulled the switch on this old devil myself.”

Giving me one of her signature jabs to the ribcage, she laughed, “Oh, Woody! You go on like Eldon Fish was some sort of monster.”

“Isn’t he?”

“As I see it, Eldon Fish is one of the greatest criminal minds the world has ever known, and he’s ever so charming, too. He has the cunning and daring of a hundred ordinary criminals and, in his own way, he’s an artistic genius.”

“If you’ll pardon the correction, Van Gogh was an artist. Gauguin was an artist. Dali was an artist. Rembrandt was an artist. Eldon Fish is nothing more than a tuxedo stuffed with psychopathic degradation. The undeserving object of your hero worship may be a lot of things, but he’s certainly no artist—save a con artist, perhaps.”

With a playful poke to my belly, she teased, “Everyone is entitled to an opinion, but since you are such a sweet, understanding, caring, one-in-a-million kind of guy, you’ll continue suffering through Eldon Fish because you know this makes me happy. Woody McCormick, I have you wrapped around my pinky finger.” She was right, for as troubling as it was hearing Eldon Fish bragging about his crimes, I could not remain upset with

Exie. Giving me a wistful look, she said, “Had we met in the upperworld, you and I might have made a happy couple. I could see myself growing old with a guy like you.”

In his deep, hollow voice, Eldon Fish continued reading from his loathsome autobiography. “Mavis Wheelwright was, hands down, the favorite of my thirteen wives. Widowed at an early age, she was still in the flower of her youth when we were joined in holy matrimony. Oh, such a lovely bride! Mavis Wheelwright had the beauty of a dew covered rose and the sparkling brilliance of a precious blue carbuncle.

“Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,
Who is already sick and pale with grief
That thou, her maid, art far more fair than she.
Be not her maid since she is envious.
Her vestal livery is but sick and green,
And none but fools do wear it. Cast it off.
It is my lady. O, it is my love!

“Such a love! Such a love! Was there ever such a woman as Mavis Wheelwright? Alas, as she lay still in her casket, an unfortunate victim of lead poisoning, I, her grieving husband, broke down in the manner of a small child and wept bitterly. My love was gone. My love was no more.” Dabbing a moistened eye with a handkerchief, he continued, “Had there been another way of separating her from her fortune, I would have gladly spared the darling lady’s life. Yes, fair readers, I am not ashamed to admit that I dearly and passionately loved this Mavis Wheelwright, but what other recourse was there? My hands were tied. Gone, gone, gone was the love of my life, but what was I to do? Mavis Wheelwright had to die, but how I suffered from the loss. If anyone was to be pitied, it was I.”

Just then, something very red, very round, and very juicy struck the speaker’s waistcoat with a loud, wet splat. Someone had pelted Eldon Fish with a tomato. As he stood,

stunned and gapemouthed, a second tomato found its mark. The third tomato sent Eldon Fish's top hat flying, while the fourth smacked him squarely in the face.

"You said you loved me," wailed the voice of an anguished woman from the third row. "You swore you loved me, you fiend, and yet you deliberately sent me to an early grave. How could you have treated me so?"

Obviously disoriented by the unexpected attack, Eldon Fish wiped the remnants of a tomato from his face. "Melba? Melba Hockenberry? Is that you, my dear?"

"Yes, it's me," she cried, "and I'll wager you never thought I would find you." With one tomato remaining in her arsenal, she took steady aim and fired; her forceful throw sent the beleaguered Eldon Fish staggering. "How dare you say you love me and then fill me with rat poison."

"Oh, Melba! Look what you've done to me. My beautiful, beautiful clothing is ruined." With this, the disheveled scaramouch turned to his left and shuffled off the stage. A moment or so later, a thin, nasally voice from the theater's public address system announced the cancellation of the remainder of the show.

Chapter 15

As we exited the theater, a devotee of Eldon Fish, speaking as a self-styled authority that one might refer to as a fan or a buff or even a groupie, explained that Melba Hockenberry, the disgruntled woman who had hurled five tomatoes toward the stage, had been the serial murderer's eleventh wife. Obviously proud of her intimate, detailed knowledge of the Top Hat Killer, the Eldon Fish expert explained, no, pontificated, "Few people understand how dreadfully Melba Hockenberry suffered before being overtaken by death. Eldon Fish, an undisputed genius though he was, had inadvertently miscalculated the amount of poison introduced into her bowl of clam chowder. The

dosage, though fatal in the long run, was of an insufficient quantity for producing a speedy death. Poor Melba Hockenberry, fitfully thrashing on her deathbed, desperately clung to life for many long, agonizing hours before finally breathing her last.”

Another of the serial killer’s admirers objected saying, “I’m afraid you err on one or two salient points. Eldon Fish used a blend of two poisons, not one, and had clandestinely introduced the fatal toxins into his wife’s bowl of mushroom bisque, not clam chowder.”

Annoyed by the verbal rebuke, the first buff answered stiffly, “I stand behind my claim that her bowl of clam chowder had been tainted by a lethal dose of poison. To my understanding, Melba Hockenberry was not particularly fond of mushroom bisque.”

“And I have it on good authority that clams caused Melba Hockenberry to break out in hives, hence, she had not succumbed to tainted clam chowder.”

“And I have it on even better authority that Melba Hockenberry was highly allergic to mushrooms.”

“And I have it on the best authority that Melba Hockenberry absolutely loathed clam chowder.”

“Loathed clam chowder? Melba Hockenberry was born and raised in Boston, and I’ve never known a true Bostonian to refuse a bowl of clam chowder.”

“Melba Hockenberry died with mushroom bisque on her lips—end of discussion.”

“Melba Hockenberry’s last meal on earth was a bowl of clam chowder—now the discussion is really over.”

“You’ve got clam chowder in the head.”

“And you’ve got a mushroom for a brain.”

Annoyed, I turned to face the two quarrelers and demanded, “Clam chowder or mushroom bisque. Does it really matter?”

“Yes, it matters, and as this discussion doesn’t concern you, go chase your tail and leave us be,” cried the one.

“Yeah, keep your nose out of our business,” warned the other. “Have you even read dear Eldon’s book? Probably not.”

“I prefer literature that is a bit more substantial—and in my estimation, this Melba Hockenberry should have pelted the old miscreant with something more potent than tomatoes,” said I. “The two of you speak of him as though Eldon Fish is some sort of hero. What is wrong with you?”

“What do you know, Mr. Bigmouth?” brayed one of my adversaries. “And never mind about Melba Hockenberry. A slow, lingering death is a small price to pay for fame and recognition and the prestige of being one of Eldon Fish’s late wives. I wish I had been married to him.”

“Oh, to be numbered among the thirteen would be an honor I would die for,” readily agreed the other. “Melba Hockenberry will be forever known as the Top Hat Killer’s eleventh wife. What’s a few ounces of rat poison when compared to the bragging rights each of his murdered wives enjoy?”

Exie, who had remained silent throughout this ruckus, grabbed my hand and said, “Come along, Woody. I think you’ve caused enough of a row as it is.”

“Did you expect me to stand by and say nothing as these two babbling nincompoops canonized a worthless old scoundrel like Eldon Fish?”

“Some of us find Eldon Fish sort of dashing,” she answered rather dreamily. “Frankly, I think Melba Hockenberry should be ashamed of herself for whacking a famous personality like Eldon Fish with rotten tomatoes. Her behavior was tacky.”

“I don’t understand your thinking, Exie,” said I. “Why would you, a victim of an abusive husband, side with an old devil who made a career of mistreating the women he married.”

My observations must have caught her off guard, for as her face flushed a deep scarlet, she appeared to be at a loss for a ready answer. “Well...uh, I...”

Not wishing to humiliate my only friend in hell, I quickly changed the subject. “What would you like to do next? How about lunch?”

She smiled. “Lunch? I can rally around this suggestion. My belly is feeling kind of hollow.”

“What do you have a taste for?” I asked.

“Pizza!” she cried. “I’ve been craving pizza since about forever. Yum!” After consulting her phone for the location of a nearby pizzeria, she announced, “Anchovy Joe’s is only a couple of blocks from here. I’ve never had their pizza, but if you’re feeling adventuresome, we can give it a try. Sound okay to you?”

“Lead the way, Exie.”

Grabbing my hand, she said, “Follow me!” Along the way, we passed an auditorium with colorful banners and a digital display board announcing The Greater New Babylon Cat Fanciers’ Society’s Best of Breeds Cat Show. Turning to me, she asked “Do you like cats?”

“I certainly do,” said I. “According to da Vinci, the smallest cat is a masterpiece, and who am I to disagree with such a genius? What about you?”

“I adore cats,” she said. “After pizza, let’s check out the show. Okay?”

“Sure,” said I. “Since my arrival in hell, I’ve yet to see a single cat or dog. I was beginning to wonder.”

“A lot of underworld folk own pets,” she explained. “I’ve thought of adopting a cat myself.”

Business was brisk at Anchovy Joe’s. Obviously, this was a local hotspot. Several minutes passed before we were ushered to an available table. When, at last, my companion and I were seated, I turned my attention to the menu.

Anchovy Joe’s Climate Conscious Pizza

“For pizza lovers who care more about making a statement than quality!”

Welcome to Anchovy Joe’s Climate Conscious Pizza. What makes us different from other pizzerias? At Anchovy Joe’s, our pizzas are never baked. Baking requires ovens, ovens require fuel, and the expenditure of fuel irreparably harms the environment, so we serve our flavorful, mouth-watering pizzas in the raw. At Anchovy Joe’s Climate Conscious Pizza, you get uncooked pizza dough for not a lot of dough, so indulge your appetite as well as your sense of righteous indignation with any of our tempting, climate conscious flavor favorites.”

Smile and Say Cheese.....1 T

We begin with a raw slab of dough blanketed with our signature marinara sauce before adding a generous layer of blended exotic cheeses. Go ahead, smile, and say, “Cheese!”

Proud Minimalist.....1 T

What’s better than a generous lump of uncooked dough with absolutely, positively, definitely nothing on top? Sounds yummy, right? So, when you say, “No toppings,” we say, “No problem!”

Proud Ultra-Minimalist.....1 T

Just like the Proud Minimalist, but without the dough. The ideal choice for those with lighter appetites.

The Faux Mushroom.....1 T

Upperworld dwellers who confuse toadstools for mushrooms may end up on a coroner’s slab with a tag affixed to their big toe, but here in hell, eating toadstools will only cause a temporary episode of severe abdominal cramps followed by rampant diarrhea. Knowing you won’t die from eating poisonous toadstools, our faux mushroom pizza is a delightful change of pace for indiscriminate diners looking for something that’s definitely out of the ordinary. (Patrons ordering the Faux Mushroom will be given barf bags at no additional cost.)

The Transchovy.....1 T

We begin with a hefty lump of raw pizza dough. Next comes our absolutely saucy sauce. After blanketing our gooey-good dough and our one-of-a kind marinara with a generous layer of our specially blended exotic cheeses, we pile on the meat of goblin sharks who once identified as anchovies. You’ll absolutely swear these transchovies are as lip-smacking good as the real thing. Satisfy your appetite while showing your pride, and remember, queer never tasted so good!

Note: Our cheeses taste so much like real cheese, we dare to call them cheese, even though they are not, and if we disclosed the real ingredients in our cheeses, it would only spoil your appetite, so don’t give it another thought.

As Exie poured over the menu, I said, “Girl, I refuse to eat a slab of raw dough covered with a lot of spurious ingredients.”

“Then order the *Proud Ultra-Minimalist*,” she replied. “I think I’ll have the *Smile and Say Cheese!*”

“Let’s get out of here,” I said. “Who in their right mind wants an uncooked pizza?”

With the same disapproving tone an exasperated mother gives an unruly child, she said, “Oh, Woody! I do wish you’d stop complaining. Instead of focusing on eating raw pizza dough, think how you’re doing your part to save the environment.”

“Save the environment? We’re talking about hell—the netherworld!” I cried. “The day is coming when every square inch of this infernal place will be tossed into the Lake of Fire. What will become of your beloved environment then?”

Laying down her menu, she fussed, “There you go again, Woody! As you seem to hate hell so much, why don’t you go back to your precious upperworld and leave the rest of us alone! We don’t need your kind down here.”

Stunned by the venom in her words, I immediately rose from my seat to leave, but with a look of regret in her wide, shining eyes, Exie grabbed my wrist and pleaded, “How could I say such a thing? Oh, Woody, that was wickedly cruel of me, and I should have never said what I did. I know it’s improper to apologize down here, but will you forgive me, Woody? You really are a wonderful guy, and I like your company ever so much—at least, some of the time. Well, most of the time. Anyway, I’m truly sorry that I lashed out like I did, so please don’t walk away. I couldn’t abide having you angry with me.”

“Calm down, Exie. I suppose I bear some of the blame for provoking you.”

“No, I was way out of line, Woody. I had no business snapping at you. Maybe I should wash my mouth out with soap and water.”

“For some reason,” said I returning to my seat, “I find it impossible to remain angry with you.”

“Really? You’re not put out with me?”

“No.”

“No?”

“No.”

“Whew—I’m ever so glad to hear we’re still friends.”

“Our friendship is strong enough to survive a few bumps,” I reassured her.

“That’s right. Our friendship is strong enough to take an occasional hit, and do you know why, Woody?”

“Tell me, Exie.”

“Our friendship is bulletproof because I have you wrapped around my pinkie finger,” she giggled.

“Is that what you think?” I laughed.

A server appeared at our table and greeted us with, “Welcome to Anchovy Joe’s. Have you decided what to order?”

“Yes, I’ll have the *Smile and Say Cheese* pizza, and my companion, who seems to have lost his appetite, will have the *Proud Ultra-Minimalist*.” Looking to me, she asked, “Are you okay with iced water?” Moments later, the server delivered two pizza trays; Exie’s contained a flattened lump of raw dough, a smattering of a sickly looking red sauce, and some pale crumbles masquerading as cheese. The pan set before me was, of course, empty, and in my opinion, appeared to be the more appetizing of the two.

It was rather amusing watching Exie struggling with the miry, gooey glob that stuck to the pan, stuck to her fingers, and stuck to the roof of her mouth. Initially, she put up a brave front. She would chew awhile, smile as though enjoying herself, and then make three or four valiant efforts at swallowing the sticky mess. With her mouth full of raw dough, she boasted, “Yum! What a treat! This pizza is really quite good, Woody—absolutely delicious—the sauce is amazing, and we’re doing our part to save hell from a climate catastrophe.” I did not believe a word of this, but as I said, she was making the best of a bad situation with all the bravado she could muster.

“You’re not a very good liar,” I teased.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Precariously balancing a bite-sized dollop of raw pizza on her fork, she waved the unappetizing morsel under my nose and urged, “Give it a try. You might like it.”

“I’m perfectly happy with my *Proud Ultra-Minimalist*,” said I.

After another unenthusiastic bite or two, Exie laid down her fork. “I’m not as hungry as I thought,” she said.

Approaching our table, the server noted Exie’s left over pizza and asked, “Would you like a to-go box?”

After forking over the obligatory two Tetzels for a pair of tickets, Exie and I joined the hundreds of other cat fanciers assembled inside the great exposition hall. I was immediately taken aback, and had you been with me, I think you would have been equally unsettled, too, for what we saw were not cats. What we saw were women and men garbed in feline-themed costumes. One might have thought before us was the cast of a popular Broadway play, but these “cats” were not professional stage performers. The “cats” in the cat show were people who identified as cats. Disturbing as this was, I was doubly troubled by Exie’s failure, intentional or otherwise, in recognizing this for the farce that it was. Reminiscent of the foolish emperor who paraded about in his nonexistent finery, we were patrons of a cat show that featured not so much as a single bonafide feline; rather, on display were only delusional people dressed as cats.

“Exie,” said I, “do you sense something strange or different about these cats? Is there anything that appears a bit off or out of the ordinary?”

“Such as...?”

“Such as there is not a single cat in the entire length and breadth of this infernal auditorium.”

“Shush, Woody!” she hissed.

“Stop shushing me!”

“If the kitties hear you speaking ill of them, they’ll be offended,” she warned.

“And if these kitties can understand the nuances of human speech, they’re not cats! Furthermore, I don’t like being shushed!”

“Okay, I won’t shush you, but do stop complaining. Can’t we simply enjoy the cat show like everyone else?” she begged.

“Fine,” I agreed, “but let’s first see some real cats.”

“I don’t know what’s wrong with you,” she argued. “I see plenty of cats. There are cats everywhere. Just look at that adorable little tabby playing with her rubber mouse. Isn’t she precious?”

“Exie,” I asked, “Do you even know what a cat is?”

“Huh?”

“Define cat.” I insisted. “What is a cat?”

With a shrug and a toss of her head, she answered, “Why ask me? I’m not a zoologist.”

“I’m no zoologist, either, but I’m also no fool and, girl, these creatures with their sewn on tails and fake whiskers are certainly not cats.”

Throwing up her hands, she cried, “Woody! Lower your voice! People will hear you! Do you wish to offend everyone in this place? How about a little tolerance?”

Incensed by the absurdity of it all, I fumed, “Stick around this place if that’s what you want, but as I’ve already seen enough, I’ll be waiting for you outside.”

Appealing to my softer side, Exie threw her arms tightly about my waist and whispered, “Please don’t go. How could I enjoy myself without you? You’re ever so much fun to be with and, if you don’t mind my saying, you’re the gentlest, kindest, sweetest, most understanding man I’ve ever known.” Acting on a hunch that a syrupy dose of babytalk might further her cause, she rested her head against my chest and cooed, “Pwease don’t go, Goody-Woody...otay?”

“Exactly how low will you stoop to get your way, Exie-Wexie?” I snapped.

“Okay, maybe these aren’t cats in the strictest biological sense,” she admitted, “but the people inside the costumes identify as cats and, well, isn’t that all that really matters?”

“And if I identified as Jesus Christ, would you expect me to walk on water?”

Once again frustrated by my appeal to reason, Exie moaned, “Oh, Woody, you are impossible. Must everything make sense? Does everything have to be true? Can’t you just go along with everyone else and learn to accept things that aren’t necessarily so?”

“Would you prefer that I identify as a blithering fool? Maybe, then, I’d be silly enough to believe these misguided souls in leotards are cats.”

“But, Woody,” she begged, “if these people are happier living as cats, what right do we have in robbing them of their joy?”

“And who are they to insist that I set aside my ability to reason in order to play along with their little charade? What right do they have in asking me to check my brain in at the gate simply to satisfy their own peculiar whims and fetishes? No one can rightfully tell me to lower the quality of my thinking simply to placate a gathering of delusional people much too confused to determine who or what they really are.” As Exie gave me a wide-eyed look of incredulity, I added, “Let them play games in their make-believe world, but please don’t insist that I join in their foolish fancies.”

“Woody, wouldn’t this be a perfectly wonderful time to demonstrate a little kindness?”

“You want kindness?” I asked. “Fine, I’ll buy flea collars for the lot of them.”

“Attention, valued guests,” announced a cultured voice over the auditorium’s public address system, “the Siamese Cat All Things Siamese Challenge will commence shortly

on Stage B. Our current champion, King Yule, owned by Agnes Brenner, will face five worthy challengers. This is an event you'll not want to miss, so come join us as our six feline competitors scratch and claw their way to the championship title."

"As we are here," I conceded, "let's see what this competition is all about."

Flashing a smile, Exie said, "That's the right spirit."

On stage were six women and men attired in Siamese cat costumes; behind them hovered their protective "owners." According to the breed in which they identified, each disguise had ivory colored fur with darker fur covering their extremities, that is, their paws and tail. I must admit their costumes were rather charming. Though human, their mannerisms and behavior were unmistakably feline. One of the cats was toying with a ball of yarn. Another yawned as though ready for a nap. Two or three of the owners were preening their pets. At a table to the left sat three judges. All bore serious expressions. The refined voice over the sound system continued, "Welcome to the Siamese Cat All Things Siamese Challenge. As I introduce the participants and their owners, please hold your applause until the end. To the far right of the stage is King Yule, the reigning champion. Behind him is his owner, Agnes Brenner. Next to King Yule is Bo Peep and her owner, Oscar Quill. Next is Little Princess and her owner, Myra Snipp. Beside Little Princess is Troublemaker—let's hope he doesn't live up to his name, ha! ha! Troublemaker is owned by Luna Pettibone. The little dear preoccupied by her ball of yarn is Cinderella. Cinderella's proud owner is Zola Tanquati. And on the far left side of the stage is Orville owned by Fuster Drinbull. Let's give our amazing Siamese cats and their wonderful owners a warm round of applause."

After much enthusiastic handclapping and cheering, the announcer explained the rules. "Each of our participants will be asked a question pertaining to either Siamese history, geography, or culture. One incorrect answer will result in the participant's elimination. With each new round, the questions will become increasingly difficult. We now ask the

owners to exit the stage.” As the owners removed themselves, another round of applause filled the auditorium.

“The first question goes to King Yule, our reigning champion. In what year did Siam become officially known as the Kingdom of Thailand? You have thirty seconds—and no coaching from the audience.”

King Yule yawned, stretched, and in a sleepy voice answered, “1939.”

“King Yule is off to a good start,” the emcee congratulated. “1939 is the correct answer.” The announcement was followed by a quick burst of polite applause. King Yule’s owner, Agnes Brenner, was visibly pleased.

The emcee continued. “The next question goes to Bo Peep. Because of the fertile floodplain and monsoon climate, the land, historically speaking, has long been suited for rice cultivation. Name the region where, in the 11th century AD, rice growing and trading states began flourishing.”

Bo Peep purred, blinked her eyes twice, and answered, “The upper Chao Phraya Valley. Meow.”

“The upper Chao Phraya Valley is correct,” announced the emcee. At this, King Yule hissed while batting a paw at his challenger. Bo Peep returned the hiss and struck back. “Our contestants are discouraged from hissing and batting other contest participants. Owners, be advised that your pet’s aggressive behavior may be grounds for disqualification. The next question goes to Little Princess. Are you ready, Little Princess?”

Little Princess, the cat whose fascination centered on a ball of yarn, answered, “Meow!”

“Very well, then. What is the highest point in the kingdom of Siam?”

Exie whispered, "These are difficult questions."

Little Princess, to her credit, was up to the task; proving her knowledge of Siamese geography, she answered, "The summit of Doi Inthanon, which rises 8,415 feet above sea level, is the point of highest elevation."

The emcee said, "Little Princess, you have answered the question correctly."

As the audience cheered, Exie said, "Why do they call them 'dumb animals?' These questions would have stumped me, and I'm human. I'd say these cats are very smart."

After the participants settled down, the emcee said, "The next question goes to Troublemaker. Are you ready, Troublemaker? Of economic importance is the land's abundance of coastline. How many miles of coastline are there?"

True to his name, Troublemaker answered, "I don't know, and I don't care. Now, will someone kindly point me to the nearest litter box? I have a deuce to drop." The cat's owner, embarrassed by her pet's overtly rude behavior, boarded the stage, gave Troublemaker a spritz of water in the face from a spray bottle, and led him from the platform while fuming, "Bad kitty! Bad kitty!"

Exie leaned to me and said, "I once read there are no bad cats, only bad cat owners."

After an awkward pause in the proceedings, the emcee solemnly announced, "Our judges have determined that Troublemaker is permanently banned from future competition in New Babylon, and, for the record, the correct answer to the previous question is 2,000 miles. The next question goes to Cinderella. Are you ready, Cinderella?"

Cinderella meowed in the affirmative.

“Between the 13th and 15th centuries, a new and highly resilient kind of rice, known as floating rice, was introduced. From what land did this floating rice originate? You have thirty seconds to answer.”

While fastidiously grooming herself, she answered, as if this contest was an inconsequential matter that bored her, “India, I suppose.”

“India is the correct answer.”

As the audience applauded Cinderella, I whispered, “Stay and watch the rest of the competition if you like, but I feel a need to get up and stretch my legs.”

Strolling about, I spied upon a man posing as a ginger-colored tabby cat; as his owner was nowhere in sight, perhaps, I thought, he may agree to grant me an interview. As I approached, the tabby gave me a curious eye. “Are you a friendly kitty?” I asked.

“By chance,” he inquired, “do you smoke cigars?”

“No,” I answered.

“That’s too bad,” came his melancholy reply. “My human says smoking is a vulgar habit, but she has plenty of vulgar habits that I’m expected to tolerate. Had you a spare cigar, I would have enjoyed sneaking a few puffs before my human returns.”

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“That’s another thing about my human that annoys me,” he complained. “How would you like answering to Sugarplum? Sugarplum is a perfectly dreadful name, but did my human consider my feelings when choosing this overly sentimental moniker? Absolutely not.”

“What name would you have chosen for yourself?” I asked.

“Chopin,” he beamed. “Chopin is a name that would make any cat proud.”

“Are you a music lover?” I asked.

“If you don’t rush off, you’ll hear me performing Chopin’s *Piano Concerto Number One in E Minor* on the piano. The music competition is scheduled to commence immediately after the spelling bee. Mind you, there’s no shortage of musical talent among the show’s participants, but as I’ve more than a few trophies and blue ribbons under my collar, I’m feeling confident.”

“Would you object if I asked a personal question?”

“Ask away,” he answered.

“Why are you a cat?”

“That’s an easy question to answer. I am a cat because I loathed being a human, and as I’ve always loved cats, I chose to be one.”

“Now that you identify as a cat, is there anything about being a human that you miss?”

“Cigars,” he unhesitatingly replied. “Of course, I’ve been known to slip out of our apartment for a leisurely smoke. There’s a delightful little tobacco shop right around the corner from where my owner and I live. The tobacconist and I discuss music over cigars. Later, when I show up at our door, my owner gives me such a fussing, but what are a few ‘naughty kitties’ after a stimulating conversation and a satisfying smoke?”

“Have you considered asking the tobacconist to adopt you?”

“That’s out of the question,” he answered. “His wife is allergic to cats. Besides, my owner would never give me up.”

“And you have no say in the matter?” I asked.

With a philosophical shrug, he responded, “What do you expect? I’m a cat. Anyway, my owner isn’t all bad.”

“Is that so?”

“She has a trained voice. From time to time, we perform duets. And when I used the piano legs as scratching posts, she had the instrument expertly refinished.”

“Have you considered going back to being human?”

“Why should I?”

“Allow me to rephrase the question. Are you happy being a cat?”

Toying with the tail sewn to the rather striking costume he wore, Sugarplum replied, “My answer would depend upon how one might define happiness.”

“Very well, then. How would you define happiness?” I asked.

“Oh, I don’t know,” he considered. “I’m not suicidal, if that’s what you mean. Of course, suicide is not an option in hell.” Licking his left paw, he continued, “I suppose I am neither happier nor sadder down here than I was up there, but to its credit, hell is more accepting of one’s eccentricities. Then again, I hear the upperworld is becoming much more tolerant of aberrant behavior, but down here, the anything goes policy has been alive and well since the death of Cain.”

“No boundaries in hell, right?”

“No boundaries.”

“Do you like hell? Are you comfortable being here?”

“If you are asking if I would have preferred going to heaven when I died, the answer is no. Don’t get me wrong. I’m not an atheist. I believe there is a God who created everything, including me, but I don’t think my Maker and I would have gotten along very well. For starters, He would have made these grand plans for my life and, well, I’m not sure I would have found His intentions for me all that agreeable. Had I lowered my guard and submitted to His will, He would have gone to work shaping and molding me into the image of His Son Jesus. Well, I didn’t want to be like Jesus when I lived in the upperworld, and I don’t particularly want to be like Jesus now. I don’t think being like Jesus would suit me. Regardless, my aspirations aren’t quite so lofty, and so I settle for living the life of a cat. Getting back to your original question, let’s just say I’d rather be an alley cat in hell than a prince in heaven.”

“You’ve answered my questions forthrightly,” said I. “Can I do you a good turn?”

“Be a good lad and slip around the corner and buy me a cigar.”

Just then, a fretful, arm waving, highly excited woman bounded toward Sugarplum and me shouting, “I’ve cautioned you against talking with strangers, but you never listen to me. I’m not at all pleased by your cavalier behavior. Do you understand? Pay attention when I’m talking to you, Sugarplum.” Giving me a stern eye, she warned, “Who are you? What business do you have talking to my precious kitty? Are you some sort of sneaky, lowlife catnapper? What are your intentions with my Sugarplum?”

“You’ve misjudged me,” I explained. “I meant no harm to you or your, uh, cat.”

“So you say,” she snapped. “I know your kind, mister. Furthermore, if my precious kitty has been begging for cigars, you are not to give him any, or I’ll deal with you in a way you’ll not soon forget. Smoking is a dreadfully loathsome habit, and I won’t stand for it. Have I made myself clear? Away with you, and leave my kitty and me alone.”

Chapter 16

“Woody,” Exie eagerly exclaimed, “let’s head to Stage D for the spelling bee.”

“A spelling bee? Are you sure?”

“Sure, I’m sure. The big event is scheduled to begin in ten minutes, and I’d like us to have good seats.” Taking my hand, she led me to the designated area where a dozen participants lined along the stage were preparing to prove their mastery of spelling. Frankly, I was not particularly eager to witness twelve muddle-minded people adorned in garish cat costumes reciting, “Disestablishmentarianism, d-i-s-e-s-t-a-b-l-i-s-h-m-e-n-t-a-r-i-a-n-i-s-m, disestablishmentarianism,” but as Exie appeared determined to see the performance, I agreed, with only a hint of reluctance, to join her. As we settled into two prime third row seats, she whispered, “As an English teacher, I would think that you would show more interest in a spelling bee, so why the lack of enthusiasm, Professor McCormick?”

“On the entertainment scale, I rather suspect this spelling bee will rank somewhere between marginally asinine and totally insane,” I answered.

Giving me a poke to the rib cage, she giggled, “Come now. Let’s show a little excitement. Spelling bees are fun.”

“Spelling bees are fun?” I teased. “And may I assume you also find your thrills in fountain pen collecting?”

Giving me a playful, girlish grin, my wry companion boasted, “I happen to adore fountain pens. None of those cheap ballpoint pens for me, thank you.”

“I never figured you as the spelling bee type,” I commented without mentioning that I was, in fact, an avid collector of fountain pens.

“Sir, you are addressing the Ogilvie Middle School’s eighth-grade spelling champion.”

“Is that so?”

“You had better believe it,” she said. “I beat out the competition with the word *acquiesce*. A-c-q-u-i-e-s-c-e. Are you impressed, Professor McCormick?”

“You are a woman of many talents,” I answered.

“Welcome, guests of the Greater New Babylon Cat Fanciers’ Society’s Best of Breeds Cat Show,” came a crisp, articulate voice over the public address system. “Our next event, an old-fashioned spelling bee, is always a fan favorite, and the twelve participants occupying the stage are prepared to dazzle you with their amazing spelling skills. As always, we ask the audience to remain silent and avoid coaching as our furry feline word wizards compete for the coveted first place award. If everyone is settled in, let us commence with the competition. Is everyone ready?” After a round of enthusiastic handclapping, the emcee continued, “Let the festivities beeeeeeee-gin. To the far left of the stage is Mr. Whiskers, owned by Edna Mae Waddlesworth. Mr. Whiskers and his owner traveled here from the distant borough of Brimstone to compete in this contest. Mr. Whiskers, if you are ready, give us the spelling of the word *rhinoceros*. You have thirty seconds.”

Mr. Whiskers, a black and white tuxedo who could have passed as a feline version of that old wife poisoner, Eldon Fish, appeared nonplused as he confidently answered, “Rhinoceros, r-h-i-n-o-c-e-r-o-s, rhinoceros.”

The audience showed their approval as the emcee announced, “You are correct, Mr. Whiskers. Excellent. The next word goes to Tiny Bubbles, owned by Novalentia Padrooga. Are you ready, Tiny Bubbles?”

Tiny Bubbles, a champagne colored tabby wearing an ornate, jewel-studded collar, meowed her readiness.

“Very well, then, spell the word *dromedary*. You have thirty seconds.”

Tiny Bubbles answered, “Dromedary, d-r-o-m-e-d-a-r-y, dromedary.”

As the audience cheered Tiny Bubbles, the next participant, a gray striped cat whose tail had come loose from her costume, meowed helplessly until her owner raced on stage with thread and a sewing needle. This bit of drama caused a momentary stir among members of the audience until, at last, the wayward tail was hastily reattached. With the wardrobe malfunction crisis narrowly averted, the emcee announced, “The next word, *metamorphosis*, goes to Dylan Vee. Dylan Vee is owned by Nadene Thymbulle.”

Confident that her tail had been securely attached, Dylan Vee spritely answered, “Metamorphosis, m-e-t-a-m-o-r-p-h-o-s-i-s, metamorphosis.”

“Excellent,” announced the emcee. “Dylan Vee might have been distracted by the untimely separation of her tail, but thanks to her quick-thinking owner, our contestant kitty bounced back to spell *metamorphosis* correctly. Let’s give Dylan Vee and her ever-alert owner, Nadene Thymbulle, a rousing hand.”

Somewhere between Mr. Catsby, owned by Oval T. Greathouse, who spelled *sarsaparilla*, Johnnie Cake, owned by Taqualiah Waughtorna, who spelled *demytification*, Precious K, owned by Maude and Henry Cloverdale, who spelled *eucalyptus*, and Napoleon McNipp, owned by Savannah Aileron, who spelled *bombardier*, my mind began to wander.

Handing me the dry cappuccino I had ordered, the pretty new barista named Abbie asked, “What do high school English teachers do to unwind?”

“Oh, lots of things,” I said. “There are spelling bees and dictionary swaps, and the annual North American Sentence Diagraming Olympics in Scranton is always a favorite.”

Abbie laughed. “I don’t believe you.”

“I’m not saying all English teachers are boring, but if I have a wild side, I’ve obviously misplaced it, for my life is, well, settled.”

“Settled? What do you mean by that?”

“My life is—how can I say this?—my life is predictable. Totally and undeniably predictable. Five days a week, nine months a year, I teach. During the school year, my weekends are spent grading papers and preparing lesson plans.”

Flashing a radiant smile, she asked, “Okay, so how do you fill the three months when you’re not teaching?”

“Nothing remarkable,” I confessed. “I read, putter around the yard, and psych myself up for the following school year. I wish I could thrill you with some tales of daredevil exploits, but to do so, I’d have to lie, and I make a pretty unconvincing liar.”

“What? No hobbies?” she asked.

“I pilot an airplane.”

As her eyes sparkled with obvious delight, she exclaimed, “Do you fly an airplane? Really? Flying an airplane sounds very exciting to me. Is it dangerous?”

Pleased that I had landed on a topic that had caught her interest, I considered embellishing my aeronautical feats thinking I might impress the girl, but as I said, I am an unconvincing liar, so I told her the truth. “I own an ugly little airplane that puttters around at the speed of a golfcart. She flies low and slow and, believe me, she’s nothing to look at. I keep her because she belonged to my father and, admittedly, I’ve grown rather fond of my ugly duckling.”

“I’m impressed,” she said. “You’re not as boring as you make yourself to be, Mr. Red Baron.”

“That’s good to know,” said I. “Okay, I’ve given you my story, and now it’s your turn. What do baristas do for fun?”

“I can’t speak for other baristas,” she said, “but I like flirting with high school English teachers. How am I doing?”

Had my ears deceived me, or was this drop-dead gorgeous barista giving me the green light? I wasn’t sure what to say. I’ve always considered myself something of an unassuming Joe Average—a decent sort of fellow, no doubt—but hardly the kind of man who turns stunningly beautiful women into putty, but here I stood, clutching my dry cappuccino, perhaps a bit slack jawed, while this goddess from another world was giving me the okay to flirt back.

Taking a chance, I asked, “Where do baristas enjoy dining?”

With a broad smile that made me feel weak in the knees, she said, “Are you asking me to dinner?”

“Yes,” I answered.

With a toss of her head, she said, “The answer is no. Sorry.”

Unable to hide my embarrassment, I stuttered, “I, uh, I’m sorry...I thought you might...”

“But if you ask me to go flying with you, I’ll say yes, and after our adventure into the wild blue yonder, you can take me to dinner. Oh, and so you’ll know, I’ve been craving Thai cooking. Do high school English teachers who fly airplanes like Thai?”

My mind returned to the present when it was announced that Bo Peep, one of the Siamese cats from the previous event, was the next spelling bee participant. The emcee said, “Bo Peep, owned by Oscar Quill, will spell the word *acquiesce*. You have thirty seconds.”

Scarcely able to conceal her excitement, Exie nudged me saying, “That’s my word. I won the eighth-grade spelling bee by correctly spelling *acquiesce*.”

“So you said,” I answered. “Let’s see if this pseudo-Siamese speller of syllables is up to your exacting standards.”

Bo Peep meowed, yawned, stretched, and then announced, “Acquiesce, a-k-q-u-i-e-s-c-e, acquiesce.”

“Oops!” whispered Exie. “Say goodbye to Bo Peep. Acquiesce isn’t spelled with a k.”

“You should know,” I agreed. “After all, that’s your word.”

“You’ve answered correctly, Bo Peep,” announced the emcee. “Our next contestant, Itsy-Bitsy, owned by Madge and Harriette Perkins, will give us the spelling of the word *tetracycline*. Are you ready, Itsy-Bitsy?”

Exie bolted from her seat, raised a hand, and objected, “Excuse me. Excuse me. I don’t want to be the bearer of bad news, but you should disqualify Bo Peep for misspelling acquiesce. Acquiesce is not spelled with a k.”

Immediately, a loud murmuring erupted as an infuriated Bo Peep hissed and spat while scratching and clawing at the air. Bo Peep’s owner, equally incensed by the correction, shook an angry fist in Exie’s direction and screamed, “This is outrageous! The pushy blonde woman in the third row had better ought to keep quiet and tend to her own business.” The emcee, attempting to restore calm, urged the crowd to remain seated.

Exie spoke again. “Bo Peep misspelled acquiesce. Like I said, there is no k in acquiesce. I know what I’m talking about.”

The emcee, resentful of the interruption, pointed an accusing finger at Exie and declared, “You are out of order. Return to your seat and remain quiet or you will be asked to leave the spelling bee. Is this understood?”

Flushed with embarrassment, Exie explained, “I didn’t mean to cause a commotion, but don’t you understand? Bo Peep misspelled acquiesce. Acquiesce is not spelled with a k. If you’ll consult a dictionary, you’ll see that I am correct.”

The emcee fired back, “This is your last warning. Sit down and keep quiet or leave the area.”

“But acquiesce isn’t spelled with a k,” she pleaded.

Bo Peep bounded off the stage and raced toward Exie with a vengeance. “How dare you! I’ll claw your eyes out, you meddlesome cat-hater! Who gave you the right to judge me?”

Oscar Quill, Bo Peep’s owner, bolted toward us while yelling, “Get that wretched woman out of here! I say she ought not be tormenting my precious kitty. I say animal cruelty ought never be tolerated in New Babylon.”

Exie, whose spirit appeared crushed by the outrage, broke into tears. “I am not a mean person. I do not mistreat animals, in fact, I have a special fondness for kitties, but Bo Peep didn’t spell acquiesce properly. That’s all I’m saying. Why is everyone turning on me? I’ve done nothing wrong.”

“This is Sheol,” screamed Bo Peep into Exie’s face, “and in Sheol, if I choose to spell acquiesce with a k, who are you to correct me? Who made you my judge? My truth is my truth, and according to my truth, which needs no validation from you, acquiesce is spelled a-k-q-u-i-e-s-c-e. And for the record, blondie, your breath smells like raw sewage—that’s s-e-w-a-g-e. What have you been eating? Did you treat yourself to a stinky slab of gorgonzola for breakfast? Do you even own a toothbrush?”

Having heard enough, I stepped between Exie and Bo Peep. “This has become a tempest in a teapot,” said I. “How about a little civility?”

Bo Peep took a swipe at me and hissed, “Let’s hear it for Mr. Toxic Masculinity.” Turning to the crowd, the mad cat pointed to me and cried, “Take a good look at little blondie’s big, bad boyfriend, everyone. This rube from parts unknown thinks it’s his duty to protect his stinky breath girlfriend from a helpless little kittycat who simply wants to participate in a spelling bee.” Turning back to me, Bo Peep snarled, “How would you like an eyeful of cat claw, Mr. Testosterone?”

By now, Exie's shame had given way to a sense of indignation. Though it was obvious the crowd had turned against her, she boldly stood her ground. "I won't shut up. I will have my say," she shouted. "This cat is threatening me simply because I pointed out her inability to spell a word."

"Mind your own business," and "Sit down and shut up," cried several members of the audience.

Not to be shaken by her critics, Exie demanded, "Is this a proper spelling bee or is this a spelling free-for-all? If proper spelling doesn't matter, then you may as well call off the contest, give each of these cats a trophy, and send everyone home."

Despite the venomous shouts of *animal hater*, *bigot*, *felinephobic*, *Zionist pig*, and *evil spell-checker* directed at Exie, she would not be silenced. "What is wrong with you people? Is name-calling your only defense? Why are you making a villain of me when Bo Peep's inability to spell is the real issue?"

Bo Peep wailed, "Meeeeee-ooooowwww! Who will protect me from this foul-breathed cat-hater?" Oscar Quill immediately wrapped his arms around Bo Peep's shoulders.

Wishing to cosset my outspoken companion from the sharp abuses of the crowd, I stood beside her in a show of defiance, but Exie, sensing she did not need my help or protection, pushed me back into my seat. "I've got this," she said. Boldly addressing the crowd, she continued, "What is wrong with you people? Well, I'll tell you what's wrong. You've bought into the deception of hell. I should know, for until the scales dropped from my eyes only moments ago, I was just like you—I believed every big, fat, stupid, ridiculous lie that came along. Don't you see? These cats are not cats. What you see are women and men wearing cat costumes. Don't you get it? You won't find real cats in hell. They don't belong here. And reasonable people who aren't afraid of the truth don't live in hell, either—only fools of propaganda and connoisseurs of empty

slogans can be happy in this place. Surely, anyone with half a brain would find hell intolerable, and I must have half a brain, for I no longer desire to remain in this place.”

As the crowd booed and hissed while others pelted Exie with whatever projectiles were readily available, she fearlessly continued, “I am not going to play your games any longer. Earlier, I tried eating uncooked pizza because I was told uncooked pizza is good for the environment—well, whether uncooked pizza is good for the environment, I cannot say, but eating uncooked pizza is simply disgusting, and I won’t apologize for telling the truth. If you want to fill your belly with raw dough and toppings made from who knows what, that’s your business, but don’t try forcing your standards on me. I’m not going to take your insanity any longer. Do you hear me? I’m done with hell.

“Who are we? We are people who make heroes of villains. Earlier, I found myself practically worshipping a man whose fame is based upon a long history of poisoning the women he married. What is wrong with us? I will tell you what’s wrong with us. We are fools, that’s who we are, but as for me, I am not going to buy into this underworld nonsense any longer. Don’t expect me to bow and scrape to your frauds, fakes, and phonies. From here on, I won’t be cowering to your expectations—and I won’t be humiliated by you, because I no longer care what you say about me. And no more of this holding up four fingers and expecting me to see five. I’m neither blind nor stupid, but what about you? Keep your brainless, worthless, useless demigods if you wish, but from this moment forward, I will no longer lend my ears to your false idols and ridiculous lies.”

Unheeded by cries of *bigot*, *homophobe*, and *boycott Israel*, she continued, “We are so blinded by pride, we can no longer recognize our faults—well, here’s truth for you—none of us have a single reason to be proud, but we have plenty of faults that should cause us to hang our heads in shame, though we refuse to do so. Forget your pride. Despite what the underworld continually preaches, you and I are not nearly so wonderful as we think—in fact, we’re rotten to the core. Do you hear me? We are slimy worms who behave like peacocks. Keep strutting about in your pride and arrogance if

you wish, but this lowly worm is ready to crawl away. You make me sick. I make me sick, too, but I'm going to a place where I will be transformed into something new and wonderful. Would anyone care to follow me?"

"Can't anyone shut her up?" someone cried.

"Are you troubled by the fact that our water tastes like someone left a rusty nail in the glass? Have you noticed that our food has the texture and flavor of wax? Do you wonder why our trees are barren? Where are the flowers? Where are the songbirds? Where are the billowy clouds and starry nights? Am I the only one who misses the sound of children playing?"

"Our magicians can conjure frogs and snakes and turn water into blood and overrun our fields with locusts, but where is the beauty? Why can't our magicians create butterflies or hummingbirds? Why is everything smelly or foul-tasting or ugly and loathsome? Your Tetzels will buy a night on the town or a helicopter, but all the dabbers in hell can't buy a rose or even a spoonful of real honey. How is it, people, that we've grown comfortable and totally at ease in this dark, dank, shadowy, inhospitable pit? Who told you this is paradise? We live in an open grave, or haven't you noticed?"

"Crucify her," came a gurgling cry from the back of the auditorium. "Science denier," shouted another. "Climate denier," cried yet another.

"Look at us. Yes, take a close look at yourself and your neighbors, and what will you see? Take a long, hard look if you dare, but you may not like what you see, for we wear idiotic expressions, talk in circles, and clutter our brains with tee shirt slogans. We pride ourselves as being clever, informed, and open-minded, but who among us has ever dared to question any of the faddish ideas that consistently bombard us? We sneer at logic, and we scoff at reason, but why? When did truth become our sworn enemy? Why are we eager to embrace new trends in thinking that elevate feelings over facts? Who can answer me?"

“Zionism is racism,” screamed one of the more militant cat owners. Another of the cat owners hollered, “Can’t anyone shut blondie up?” Their taunts, however, were for naught, as Exie refused to back down.

“We are wise only in our own eyes—yes, we are too foolish to recognize the fools we’ve become. You have heard it said that misery loves company, well, stupidity loves a crowd, or have you not noticed? We attempt to solve problems with slogans, but when has fanciful rhetoric ever corrected a fault or ended a crisis? Where are the heroes? Where are the thinkers? Why does hell attract pop stars and sleazy politicians while the Abraham Lincolns and the Martin Luther Kings and the Mother Teresas go elsewhere? Does this worry you? Are you troubled knowing Josef Stalin and Caesar Nero are our neighbors? We get Hugh Hefner and Margaret Sanger while heaven welcomes St. Augustine, Florence Nightingale, and C.S. Lewis. They have Mary and we have Jezebel. Does this inconvenient fact frighten you? Frankly, it scares the hell out of me, and I say this both figuratively and literally.”

“Four legs good, two legs bad,” chanted the cats on stage. Other audience members shouted, “We’ve always been at war with Eastasia.”

After surveying the restless mob around us, she shouted, “Judging by the booing and hissing, my time is running out, but before I go, have you wondered why it is always night in hell? I’ll tell you why. It is always night, because the damned are a peculiar people who despise the light. We treat light as though it is an enemy and darkness as our dearest, trusted friend. Well, people, the day is coming when we will cower in the light, for all our deeds will be exposed, and there will be no seeking refuge or hiding ourselves in the shadows. Here’s what I say—cockroaches and rats love the darkness, but I am not a cockroach, and I am not a rat. What about you? Are you content being a rodent? Does the vermin life appeal to you? If so, you’re in the right place, but I am going where rats and cockroaches fear to tread. Say, is anyone with me?”

Exie's fiery soliloquy was followed by more shouts of *homophobe, racist, climate denier, xenophobe, bigot, and boycott Israel*.

"I died once, but I will not experience a second death. I am going to live, really live, from this moment forward. What about you? Do you embrace life, or are you willing to die again? If so, be warned the second death will be far worse than the first—and the second death is coming. Do you hear me, people?"

Fearing the auditorium was ready to explode with vitriolic rage, I was eager to lead Exie away from the hostilities, but three stern-faced security guards did the job for us. In almost no time at all, the silent, sinister, stockily built trio in uniform had ushered a fist-clenching Exie and a badly shaken me through the entrance doors and back out on the downtown streets with all efficiency, expedience, and determination.

Draping an arm across my friend's shoulders as we continued down the boulevard, I said, "You gave them quite an earful, girl. I didn't know you had it in you." Exie remained silent, so I thought it wise to hold my peace, too. As we strolled along, I wondered what had brought about this sudden and unexpected about-face in Exie's attitude toward hell. Had it been my influence that had sharpened her thinking? Was my example the catalyst of change? Exie soon set me straight on this point when, in an offhanded sort of way, I casually remarked, "It is gratifying to know my words did not fall on deaf ears."

"Huh?"

"I'm glad you and I are finally in agreement about the foibles and follies of hell," said I.

Looking to me, my companion asked, "What are you trying to say, Woody?"

"Wasn't it me who convinced you that hell is no place to stake your future?"

“I love you bunches, Woody,” she said, “and I’ll be eternally grateful for the opportunity of knowing you, but if you think you’re responsible for rescuing me from the second death and the flames of eternal damnation, you’d better put your pride back in the box.” Producing from her purse an elegantly printed invitation of the finest style and quality, she said, “If you are curious as to the reason behind my sudden change of heart, please read this.”

“The Ancient of Days, your Divine Maker, has cordially invited you to come live with Him in Paradise. It is His desire to transform you from an abandoned child of wrath into a beloved daughter of prodigious worth and value. Your Savior, the King of Kings, the Prince of Peace, and the Lord of Lords, has destined you to live as a princess with all the rights and privileges of royalty knowing a princess has no business groveling about the mean streets of hell in the manner of a dirty-faced beggar. Come be with Him, and He will give you rest from the confusion and turmoil of the damned. Be on alert, for He is sending one of His trusted messengers to retrieve you. You are loved by the One whose love matters most.”

“When did you receive this?” I asked. “I don’t recall anyone handing you this invitation.”

“That’s what’s so odd,” she conceded. “I found this in my purse, almost by chance, during the spelling bee. Who would have thought He would have even noticed a worthless someone like me?”

“And you are going to meet the Lord Jesus?”

“According to the invitation, I’m expecting a messenger to pick me up at any moment and, to tell you the truth, I’m a little scared, but I’m a whole lot more excited. Why He chose me, I cannot say, but this invitation proves He loves me, and I am going to love Him in return.”

We stopped, embraced, and, for a moment, each of us wept. “Exie, I’m thrilled that you are being spared from the agonies of the second death, but there is a selfish side of me that wonders how I’m to survive this sojourn through the underworld without you. You are my friend, and my heart is going to ache once you’ve gone away.”

With glistening eyes, she whispered, “Do you mean that, Woody?” As a tear slid down my cheek, she said, “Yes, you really mean that, and I’m going to miss you just as much.”

“Without you,” I dolefully lamented, “hell is going to be a lonelier place than it already is, but knowing you are safe in the arms of our Savior is all the comfort I need.”

With a smile, she exclaimed, “I am safe. For the first time in my life, I feel totally secure, and do you know what else, Woody?”

“What’s that?”

“The absolute worst that can possibly happen to me has already happened, and from here on, nothing or no one can hurt me ever again. I have nothing to fear. Isn’t it wonderful?”

“You deserve this,” I said.

“No, I don’t, Woody,” came her firm reply. “I deserve what I got, but what I am getting is much, much better—and it’s free—a free gift.”

“I stand corrected.”

Taking my hand, she asked, “Do you suppose we were destined to meet?”

“I don’t believe in coincidences, Exie. Our encounter was according to His divine will.”

With a gentle nod, she smiled saying, “Yeah, I think so, too. By the way, my real name is Jane Hornback. I told you that when we met, remember? Plain Jane Hornback. Anyway, I suppose you should call me Jane during the brief time we have remaining.”

“Okay, Jane,” I agreed. “Now I’m going to ask you a highly personal question. Are you ready?”

“What do you want to know?”

“I don’t believe there are any what-ifs in God’s Kingdom,” said I, “but what if I had met you before meeting Abbie and proposed? Would you have married me?”

Jane gave me a quizzical eye and asked, “Had we met in the upperworld, would you have proposed marriage—or is your question strictly hypothetical, because if it is hypothetical, you’re not getting an answer from me?”

With a smile, I responded, “My question isn’t hypothetical. Had I met you before meeting Abbie, I think I would have fallen in love and proposed marriage—no doubt about it.”

“In that case,” she replied, “you would not have had to ask me a second time. I would have said yes and married you. We would have made a great couple, too, and I just know we would have filled our home with a lot of happy, well-balanced kids.”

“What might have been...” I wistfully sighed.

“No, Woody,” she answered. “Like you said, there are no what-ifs in God’s kingdom.”

“I love you, Exie...I mean Jane.”

“I love you, too, Woody.”

After an extended pause in which we clung tightly to each other, she said, “Do you realize we will have all eternity to be friends? There won’t be any goodbyes in heaven, and I think the relationships we experience up there will be closer and more intimate than even our best relationships on earth. Anyway, that’s what I think. I would have liked having you as my husband, but as that wasn’t to be, maybe you and I will have something far better in heaven—a greater and more intimate love than even the deepest love between an earthbound husband and wife.”

“You may be right,” said I. “I’ll certainly give this some thought.”

“You haven’t seen the last of me,” she laughed.

“I hope not.”

“The best is yet to come. I believe that—and I think there’s going to be a very special bond between you and me in heaven. Promise me that you’ll hold on to that thought, okay?”

“I promise.”

A long, sleek limousine driven by a splendidly attired chauffeur pulled along the curb where we stood. The driver stepped smartly from the vehicle, opened one of the doors, and announced, “Someone is waiting to meet you, Jane. I will take you to Him.”

“I’ve got to go,” she whispered. “Would you like to kiss me goodbye?”

“Yes.” As we kissed, I marveled how her breath, which I cannot deny had hitherto been frightfully unpleasant, was now as sweet as a spring day in May. The transformation was in progress. “Goodbye, Jane. How I will miss you.”

As she seated herself in the limousine, we heard the pounding of footsteps as a familiar voice frantically cried, “Don’t go! Wait for me! I’m coming! Please don’t leave without me! I’m on my way!” It was Bo Peep, the Siamese cat of sorts who had threatened to claw Jane and me during the spelling bee. Looking to Jane, the costumed woman leaned into the vehicle and begged, “Please take me with you. I don’t want to be a Siamese cat. My real name is Bridgette Pennington.” Removing an elegantly printed card from an inner pocket of her feline costume, she further explained, “I received this invitation only moments ago, and I think you were given one of these, too. Anyway, I want to be a real princess and not a make-believe cat, so is there room for me to join you?”

Jane looked hopefully to the driver who, in turn, nodded congenially. As Bridgette, all smiles and filled with laughter, slid into the plush interior of the limousine, Jane blew a kiss in my direction.

In the twinkling of an eye, Jane, Bridgette, the angelic chauffeur, and the long, sleek limousine that carried them vanished from sight. I stood alone and wept until every tear in me had been spent, but, then again, what would one expect from a man of such little faith?

Chapter 17

I cannot deny that Exie, rather, Jane’s sudden departure left a gaping void in my heart. Though ours was a brief friendship, in the short time we shared, I had come to rely upon her, not only as a trusted navigator who led me through the boggling maze of the netherworld, but as someone whose company I truly relished. I would miss her playful antics—the quirky poking of my ribcage with her forefinger, and her broad, toothy, effervescent smile. Too many people are stuffy and predictable. Maybe I am one of

them, but Jane's zest for life and her girlish mannerisms kept me amused. I would miss her sorely.

Tempering my sense of loss was the knowledge that Jane had been given everything that truly mattered: forgiveness, meaning, purpose, never-ending joy, and eternal life. While others seemingly gained the world at the expense of their eternal souls—hardly a bargain in the grand scheme of life, Jane had exchanged her drab and dreary existence for unspeakable joy and life-everlasting. Unloved by demanding parents and trodden over by a tyrannical husband, Jane's life had counted for nothing, and, in the end, this lifeless, colorless, purposeless existence was needlessly cut short because of her family's aberrant religious beliefs. Her meaningless life ended in meaningless death. Can there be a greater waste than this?

And why is it that those who believe in lies often follow their convictions with more zeal than those who understand the truth? Isn't it remarkable how false prophets generally have an easier time of marshalling their flock into action with more conviction and enthusiasm than God's true servants? How are we to make sense of the fact that those who have been exposed to the truth are frequently outperformed by those who trust damnable lies?

In the end, Jane's earthly life had counted for naught. She had gained nothing. She had lost everything. Bound by the fetters of a false religious system, Jane lived and died in abject ignorance and unrepented sin. She had been shielded from the truth by her parents and her husband; thankfully, God's will cannot be thwarted by either the efforts of mortal man or the calculated ploys of Satan. Those who will be saved will be saved and, by God's lavish grace, He had found a way of bringing Jane, a lost sinner incapable of saving herself, into His loving care. I am thankful that He takes charge of our salvation. I do not trust myself, but I do trust Him.

I want to make this point crystal clear: Were Jane to spend eternity in the flames of God's righteous indignation, she would have no one to blame but herself. No one

consigned to the pit of eternal destruction suffers unjustly. As free moral agents, we choose to be disobedient. We are proud rebels because we are, in fact, loathsome creatures whose nature has been thoroughly corrupted by sin. Those who receive the due penalties for their actions have no cause to blame God. Hell is populated by people who chose to be there, and yet, He stooped down and rescued Jane. There is no denying the sovereign will of God.

Do I understand the many mysterious intricacies of salvation? Am I capable of explaining the complexities of God's sovereignty as it relates to man's free will? No, and I will not presume to possess knowledge that isn't mine, but this I know with unwavering certainty: He is God and God does not answer to me or to any other of His billions of created beings. God, not you or me, is running this universe and, according to His divine will, Jane Hornback was snatched from the day of wrath that is to come.

I have more to say about this. Jane did not earn God's favor by being good. Jane did not receive God's total forgiveness because she deserved His forgiveness. Eternal life is not a paycheck for a life well lived. Salvation is a gift, and a gift is never earned. If salvation were deserved, that is, if you and I could lay a rightful claim to eternal life based upon our own merit, then Jesus would have suffered and died in vain, and the gift of salvation would not be a gift, but an entitlement. Would any of us dare approach a holy and righteous God based upon our own good works? Who among us can earn God's favor? Jane Hornback did not deserve God's grace—she deserved His wrath, but by doing nothing more than holding out her empty hands to receive, He transformed her from a child of wrath into a daughter of God. Today and forever, Jane is a princess.

Let's have none of this talk about the capriciousness of God. Would you charge Him with being unfair? Do so at your own peril, for God is infinitely good, and even if no one was ever spared from the second death, He would be spotless, blameless, and without blemish.

I have concluded that those who are saved must give our Lord Jesus the credit, and those who are lost have only themselves to blame. Do you find fault with my conclusions? If so, answer this question: Who made you commit the wrongs you have committed? Are you a dangling puppet whose strings are pulled by some other entity, or are you responsible for the evil you've done? (If you believe you've committed no evil, may God help you.) On the other hand, if you stand faultless in the presence of God, by whom were you saved? Certainly not yourself, for those who credit themselves as justified by their own righteousness follow a heretical doctrine that reeks of sulfur and brimstone. For the record, the lost are those who trust in themselves rather than in God.

Being good is never good enough, but being forgiven is. Those who trust in the finished work of Jesus Christ have life, but those who trust in themselves will have all eternity to lament what might be the deadliest of all lies.

As I said, I would miss the companionship of my dear friend Jane, particularly as I made my way through the dark passages of Sheol, but I now rejoice and will continue rejoicing knowing she belongs to Him. He will take good care of Jane. As to this, I harbor no doubts.

When I returned to the hotel, Nancy McGill, my short-fused, highly temperamental underworld guide, met me in the lobby with a scowl on her face and an accusing wag in her forefinger. I cared for neither. "Where have you been, and what's happened to Exotica? She doesn't answer my phone calls. Why doesn't she answer my phone calls? Do you have anything to do with this? What's been going on with the two of you? Well, speak up, man." As she spoke, wisps of yellowish smoke curled from her nostrils.

Saddened by the sudden departure of my friend Jane, I was in no mood for Nancy McGill's snarky attitude. Since we first met at the civic center, Ms. McGill had treated me as though I was something of a dunce and, in my present state of mind, I had no

stomach for any of her sharp-tongued banter. “If you don’t mind,” I snapped, “her name is Jane, not Exotica, and she is no longer in your employ. Jane has gone to be with her Father, and she won’t be coming back.”

“Well, there’s no reason to tear up the pea patch,” she exclaimed, falling back on her favorite cliché. “I had no idea she was close to her father. From what she had told me, I had the impression her father was a priggish imbecile, but if they’ve resolved their differences, then so be it. Anyway, Exotica, or Jane, and I were not particularly close, but she was a capable employee worthy of the dabbers I paid her. Oh, well, I’ll simply hire another hooker to entertain my straight male clients.”

“Do you have any news for me?” I asked.

“Yes, we are to see Admiranda Foxx,” she answered, “and based upon our phone conversations, I think she’ll take on your case.”

“The private investigator? This is good news, so when do we meet her?” I asked.

“Now, but there is a hitch.”

“What’s that?”

“Admiranda’s main office is here in New Babylon,” she replied, “but she’s currently working from her branch office in Anubis. Rather than waiting for her to return to New Babylon, which may be some time from now, she suggests you meet her there.”

“I’m okay with that,” said I. “How do I get to Anubis?”

“How do we get to Anubis?” she responded. “As I no longer have Exotica assisting me, I’ll need to accompany you myself.”

“You don’t think I am capable of traveling alone?”

“Frankly, no,” she answered. “You are exactly the kind of person who would set out for Anubis and arrive in Tartarus or who knows where, but that’s begging the issue. My guide services include a qualified escort for extended travel, so you are entitled to this benefit, even if it represents a great inconvenience to me—which it does. You’re not my only client, but I am a professional who keeps my word regardless of the extent this puts me out.”

Unable to conceal my annoyance, I demanded, “I can do without the condescending behavior, so rather than inconveniencing you, point me in the right direction and I’ll manage the trip alone.”

Changing her tone, she answered, “You? An inconvenience? Whatever gave you that idea?” In a cooing sort of voice, she continued, “Nancy McGill gives all her clients top-shelf service, and you are my client—and, if I may say, a most charming client.”

“Very well,” I answered. “Do I need to pack?”

Pointing to a pair of suitcases near the door, she smiled sweetly, yes, sweetly, and said, “I’ve already packed our bags. I’ve also purchased our tickets in advance, and there’s a limo parked outside the door waiting to whisk us to the heliport.”

“A limo?”

With merriment in her eyes, she said, “When you hire Nancy McGill, you travel in style.”

Unaccustomed to traveling in the manner of a diplomat or, for that matter, a rock star, cruising along the streets of New Babylon in the plush luxury of a limousine was a novel experience. Extending a wine glass, my guide offered, “Champaign?”

“No, thank you,” I answered.

“Caviar?”

“No, thank you.”

“Are you comfy?” she asked.

“Traveling by limo is an unexpected pleasure,” I said.

“Nothing’s too good for my valued clients.”

“I’m impressed, Ms. McGill.”

“Why so formal? Call me Nancy.”

“Very well, Nancy. Does business take you out of New Babylon often?”

“Only occasionally,” she answered. “If I am out of my office for any extended period, the paperwork has a way of piling up, but my clients’ needs come first.”

As our driver merged onto the freeway, we heard a muffled *whump, whump, whump* from the rear of the vehicle. I knew this meant trouble. The driver pulled to the shoulder, stepped from the vehicle, surveyed the problem, and returned to announce, “We’ve lost a tire.”

“I suppose I had better phone for a cab,” Nancy lamented. “I do hope this does not cause us to miss our flight.”

Looking to the driver, I asked, “Do you carry a spare tire?”

Giving me a quizzical look, the driver asked, “Why would I carry an extra tire? This vehicle is outfitted with four tires, and four tires are typically enough. Am I supposed to know when a tire will suddenly go flat?”

Put out by his flippant answer, I said, “On the topside of earth, most drivers keep a spare tire on board. A spare comes in handy at times such as this.”

The driver stiffly answered, “This isn’t the topside of the earth.”

“Maybe not,” I insisted, “but had you the foresight to pack a spare tire, we could be on our way in a manner of minutes. As it is, we’re stuck on the side of the road until help comes—and who can say how long that will be.”

Finding fault with my reasoning, the driver retorted, “And suppose the radiator had burst. Would you expect me to keep a spare radiator in the trunk? Or what if the head gasket had blown? Would you suppose a spare head gasket had been stowed inside the trunk? Or what if the alternator had...”

“Never mind,” I fired back.

Giving me an almost motherly look, Nancy said, “You are not to worry, dear. I’ve already summoned a cab who will take us to the heliport, so calm down, don’t go tearing up the pea-patch, and do not allow a minor setback to trouble you.”

In time, a cab arrived to assist us, and though its interior, compared to the limousine, was spartan, I was relieved to see four fully inflated tires with a lot of remaining tread. We were soon on our way, and, without further incident, arrived at the Greater New Babylon Heliport. As we approached the ticket counter, Nancy McGill said, “I purchased two tickets to Anubis. My confirmation is E4522390009-A-88-C-22312. How soon do we board?”

The agent behind the counter, who had been playing with his phone, explained, “I cannot confirm your previous ticket purchase—my terminal is down, but if you wish to purchase two more tickets, you may board for Anubis immediately.”

“Why should you buy two more tickets,” I complained, “as you’ve already purchased a pair of tickets online? You have a confirmation number, and that should be sufficient.”

Nancy sought to reassure me saying, “Here you are getting yourself into a needless tizzy. Didn’t you hear the agent say his terminal is down? Now relax, dear, and let Nancy take care of this. Leave the headaches to me—that’s what I’m here for.”

Nancy laid two Tetzels on the counter. With a click of a button, the agent produced two new tickets. “Your flight leaves from Ramp 71 A. If you hurry, you can catch the shuttle and save more than a few steps.”

The shuttle bus was packed to capacity, but Nancy and I managed to squeeze ourselves into the rear of the vehicle. Moments later, the bus unexpectedly lurched forward; I lost my footing from the suddenness of the jolt and fell clumsily into my guide. “Grab the safety strap,” she snapped. “Your awkwardness is annoying.”

“I’m sorry, Nancy, but I wasn’t expecting the bus to leap as it did.”

“We do not apologize in the underworld, so stop saying ‘I’m sorry.’ And do not call me by my first name,” she fussed. “Out of professional courtesy, you will address me as Ms. McGill. I may work for you as a guide to the underworld, but I’ve a right to be treated as the professional that I am, so let’s have no more of this cheeky familiarity.”

I nearly said, “I’m sorry,” but I caught myself before the forbidden words came forth. I grabbed the safety strap. Suddenly, the absurdity of her vitriolic behavior struck me. My embarrassment turned to anger. “You can be extremely rude, Ms. McGill. Do you treat all your clients with such hostility?”

Ms. McGill gave me a curious smile. “Why are you tearing up the pea-patch? And there’s no need to be so formal. My friends call me Nancy, and you are my friend.” She gently stroked my left cheek with the back of her right hand. “Poor baby! Grieving for your dead wife and trying to navigate your way around this brave new world with no more sense than a child. Not to worry. I am here for you, my darling.”

As I attempted to make sense of this sudden about-face in my guide’s bizarre behavior, I once again heard what sounded like the *whump, whump, whump, whump* of a deflated tire. My hunch was correct. The shuttle bus rolled to an unsteady stop.

The driver shouted, “Everyone off the bus. Everyone off. I’ve radioed for help, but who can say how long it will take for a tow truck to respond? Looks like you’re on your own, people.”

“Another flat tire? This is insane,” I complained. Approaching the driver, I asked, “Can’t they make a decent tire down here? And don’t you carry a jack and a spare?”

Grabbing me firmly by the arm, Nancy turned to the driver and whispered, “Pay no mind to him. He’s new here, not at all clever, and he doesn’t understand our ways.”

I pulled away from Nancy and faced the driver. “I may not understand your ways which, for the record, appear asinine to me, but I certainly understand how to change a flat tire. Do you have a spare? Let’s do this, man, for we’ve a flight to catch.”

With a patronizing smile, the driver pointed to a distant helicopter lifting from the tarmac and said, “There goes your flight to Anubis, pal, and if you must know, I don’t carry a jack and a spare.”

Nancy took me by the hand and said, “Stop this foolishness at once! Are you truly as stupid as you appear?”

I felt white-hot anger rising from deep within me. “What is stupid about offering to help a bus driver change a tire?”

Ms. McGill rolled her eyes and answered, “Do you honestly think the driver keeps a jack and a spare tire on board?”

“As a matter of fact, I had hoped he might have had the wherewithal to pack a spare for such contingencies as this.”

“For such contingencies as what?”

“Flat tires! In case you haven’t noticed, the quality of tires manufactured in hell appears to be sorely lacking in durability.”

“And had the fuel pump seized, would you have assumed he had a spare fuel pump in tow? Or had the manifold release valve locked, would you have asked him to replace the malfunctioning part with a spare manifold release valve stowed away in the luggage area? What about a stripped gearbox? Would you expect the driver to have a spare gearbox tucked away in the luggage compartment? You foolish, foolish...”

“Will you please shut up?” I exploded. “Rather than arguing about spare tires and short-sighted shuttle bus drivers, let’s come up with a Plan B. I say we walk back to the terminal and ask the ticket agent to connect us with another flight.”

She smiled at me and purred, “I like a man who knows what he wants and isn’t afraid of going after it. The problem with men today is they lack backbone, but not you, Woody. You aren’t afraid to stand up and...”

“Ms. McGill,” I interrupted, “let’s see about booking another flight.” Grabbing both suitcases, I turned in the direction of the terminal and began the long walk back to the ticket counter.

“Why so formal? Call me Nancy.”

A few minutes into our walk, we were approached by a compact motorized cart making its way in our direction. Behind the driver sat two uniformed men whom I assumed to be pilots. As the cart rolled to a stop, one of the men bolted from the vehicle and cried, “Nancy? Is that you, Nancy McGill?”

Ms. McGill’s face brightened. “Is that you, Roger?” The two fell into a passionate embrace that lasted several moments.

Pointing to me, the one she called Roger asked, “Who is he and what are you doing wandering around the heliport?”

“He’s nobody—just a client,” she answered. “We were to fly to Anubis, but the shuttle bus broke down, so we missed our flight.”

“If you can get back here in about eight hours, my copilot and I are making a run to Anubis. Our ship’s main fuel tank sprang a leak, but the mechanic swears she’ll have the tank sealed and ready to go.”

“You’ve room for both of us?” she asked.

“If necessary,” laughed Roger, “you can sit your pretty little self on my lap and we’ll stow what’s-his-name, uh, your client in the luggage compartment.”

Embracing him a second time, Ms. McGill said, “Oh, Roger, you’re such a dear. How can I ever repay you?”

“We’ll talk about that once we’ve arrived in Anubis. Go amuse yourself, and I’ll see you on Ramp 27N in a few hours. Say, do you remember our old friend Dubbert Diller?”

“Diller the Killer?” she asked. “What about him?”

“His clinic is right across the highway from the south entrance of the heliport. I hear the good doctor’s business is a bit anemic, so why not pop by for a few hands of Squanti? He’s always ready to deal the cards.”

Leaning in to kiss her friend, Ms. McGill said, “What a perfectly marvelous idea. You think of everything, Roger.”

Roger turned to the cart driver and said, “Take this pretty lady and what’s-his-name to Dr. Diller’s clinic in Guttmacher Plaza on Wichita Street, and then bring her and what’s-his-name to Ramp 27N in eight hours. Got that?”

“Yes, Captain.”

Weary of being called “what’s-his-name,” I blurted, “I have a name, if you’re interested in knowing it.”

“Sure, but let’s make it some other time.” Turning to Ms. McGill, he asked, “Do you have the flimsy little black nightie I bought when we vacationed in Sparta?”

Pointing to one of the suitcases, Ms. McGill gave her suitor a smile and a nod.

“Once we arrive in Anubis, let’s jettison what’s-his-name so that you and I can get reacquainted.” Ms. McGill appeared as if she were ready to melt in his arms. After a steamy kiss, he said, “Give my regards to Dr. D, and I’ll see you soon, sweetheart.”

Chapter 18

Etched on the clinic's glass doors were the words:

New Babylon's Women's Reproductive Health Services

Late Term and Post Natal Abortions Provided

Trust Women

Dubbert Diller, M.D.

Finding this more than a little curious, I turned to Ms. McGill and asked, "Why would your Dr. Diller operate an abortuary when human reproduction in the underworld is impossible?"

Giving me her patented boy-are-you-dumb look, Ms. McGill explained, "Well, I think the answer is rather obvious, but let's say if the unthinkable happened and a woman became pregnant, she would need a physician to terminate the pregnancy, right?"

"Has the unthinkable ever happened?" I asked. "Has there ever been a pregnancy in hell?"

"Of course, not," she replied. "The damned are incapable of reproducing. You've been down here long enough to know that, so why ask such a stupid question? There are no pregnancies in hell."

"Exactly, so why does this Dr. Diller operate an abortion clinic?"

Appearing mildly agitated, Ms. McGill answered, "Weren't you paying attention? If the unthinkable occurred and a woman became pregnant, she would require the services of a qualified physician, such as Dr. Diller, to terminate the pregnancy."

“But if women cannot conceive in hell,” said I, “there is surely no demand for Dr. Diller’s services.”

“That’s true,” she agreed, “but if the unthinkable were to occur...”

“But the unthinkable cannot occur and will not occur,” I interrupted, “because babies are never conceived in the underworld.”

“That’s right, but if the unthinkable were to take place...”

“How many abortions has your Dr. Diller performed since arriving in hell?” I demanded.

“None, of course,” she snapped. “Such stupid questions you ask. The damned do not reproduce. Our population grows through recruitment, not through reproduction.”

“Very well, then,” said I. “If Dr. Diller has never aborted an unborn child since being consigned to this place, why does he operate an abortuary? There is no demand for his services.”

“Of course, there’s no demand for his services,” Ms. McGill insisted. “Women in hell can’t have babies.”

“Exactly, so why operate an abortion clinic?”

“Are your ears made of cloth? Didn’t I just say if the unthinkable were to happen...”

“But the unthinkable has never happened, and it never will,” I cried.

“True,” she agreed. “Women in hell cannot conceive—I thought I had made that perfectly clear—but if the unthinkable were to occur, Dr. Diller would be on hand to truncate the pregnancy. He’s plenty of saline solution on hand and his scalpels are ever

sharpened. The good doctor can snuff out a child's life quicker than a cat can wink an eye."

"This is typical infernal nonsense," I muttered, "and your Dr. Diller sounds like a mercenary with a butcher knife. Ugh."

Ignoring my last remark, she continued, "During his earthly life, Dr. Diller aborted thousands and thousands of unborn children, so his experience in reproductive health care is unmatched. He has that special healing touch."

"They don't call him Diller the Killer for nothing."

"Hell is very blessed having such a distinguished physician in our midst."

"Of course, hell has him. Do you honestly think heaven wanted the old butcher?"

After passing through the doors, we were met by the clinic's receptionist, Ms. Bunti Gobbles, a daintily built woman whose deep, booming voice sounded as though it would have been better suited in the throat of a bass singer in a men's barbershop quartet. When she spoke, the ground below us seemed to rumble. As we stepped inside, she thundered, "Nancy McGill! What a surprise!"

As the two women embraced, Ms. McGill explained, "My client and I are catching a flight out of New Babylon in a few hours, so I thought you, the doc, and I might pass the time playing Squanti."

Pointing to the clinic's empty reception area, Ms. Gobbles laughed, "I think we can squeeze in a few quick hands between patients." Looking to me, the rumble-voiced receptionist asked, "Hello, sweetheart. Do you play Squanti?"

Answering in my stead, Nancy McGill said, “Forget him. He doesn’t know how to play Squanti and, frankly, he’s much too logical to learn.”

Ms. Gobbles gave me the once over. “Oh, he’s one of those, eh?”

“A regular Socrates. In his world, everything must make sense.”

“Pity,” the receptionist answered. “He wouldn’t be such a bad looking sort of johnnie if his hair was properly styled and if someone who understood the rudiments of fashion took charge of his wardrobe. Oh, dear! Does he have a bit of a crook to his nose, or is that just the lighting?” Stepping nearer to me, she said, “Let’s see your face, sweetheart. Show Bunti what you’ve got.”

“Do you mind?” I snapped.

“Hmmm...have you ever considered a nose job, sweetheart? If you were to submit yourself to my care, I could make a real man of you. Drop your pantaloons and let Bunti inspect your goods. I rather fancy you.”

Ms. McGill broke in saying, “You can’t keep him, Bunti. As he’s here on a temporary visa, he’ll be going back to the upperworld.”

In a hollow, deep-pitched voice that might have shaken the stars out of the heavens, Ms. Gobbles boomed, “A woman like me could make you forget all about the upperworld. How about it, sweetheart?”

As a man garbed in a white coat entered, Ms. McGill cried, “Dr. Diller! How is the old baby slayer?”

Dr. Diller, a rather undistinguished, ordinary looking man, returned the greeting. "I was just saying to Bunti, 'It's been too long since we've enjoyed Nancy's company around the card table. I wonder how the dear girl is doing?' Can you stay a while?"

"For a while, but as soon as our helicopter is airworthy, our mutual friend Roger is flying my client and me to Anubis. In the meantime, how about a friendly game of Squanti?"

"I'm always ready to deal the cards," he enthusiastically replied. Looking to me, he asked, "Will you make this game a foursome?"

Ms. McGill, who enjoyed answering for me, said, "He's here on a temporary visa."

"Is that so," he remarked. "What's his story?"

"He's here to find his wife," she explained. "I'm connecting him with Admiranda Foxx."

Bunti Gobbles said, "The private investigator with her own television show? She's good, but isn't her office here in New Babylon?"

"Yes, but at the present, she's working from her branch office in Anubis. Say, are we going to chitchat, or are we going to play Squanti?"

As the three gathered around the table, Dr. Diller asked, "Are we playing to win or to lose?"

Ms. McGill was the first to speak. "Lose. Always lose. You know I don't like playing to win."

"I'm okay with that," Ms. Gobbles agreed. "We'll play to lose."

“Very well.” As Dr. Diller shuffled the cards, he asked, “A klinker a hand? Any objections?” Everyone placed a Tetzal in the middle of the table. “Loser takes all.”

I could make no sense of the game. For starters, the number of cards dealt to each player appeared arbitrary. During the first round, Dr. Diller, Ms. McGill, and Ms. Gobbles each held four cards; however, in the next round, Dr. Diller was dealt seventeen cards while Ms. McGill and Ms. Gobbles both held five cards. When the subsequent hand was dealt, Dr. Diller held five cards, Ms. McGill held nine cards, while Ms. Gobbles drew six cards from what I assumed was the discard pile. There seemed to be no end to the confusion.

Additionally, I could make neither heads nor tails of their gibberish which went something like this:

“Conti.”

“Conti.”

“Quib or no quib?”

Dr. Diller threw down a card and said, “Squanti.”

Ms. McGill cautiously pulled two cards from the deck. “Conti.”

Ms. Gobbles drew a card from Dr. Diller’s hand. “Conti.”

Dr. Diller appeared agitated. “Conti?”

“Conti!”

“Quib.”

“No quib.”

“Squanti.”

“Quib?”

“No quib.”

“Conti.”

“Conti.”

“Conti?”

“Conti! Conti!”

“Squanti.”

“Conti.”

“Squanti.”

“Whoooo-hoooo! I lose!” cried Bunti Gobbles. “Deal the cards again, Dr. D!”

During a lull in the game, I dared ask Dr. Diller about his practice. “As the dead are unable to reproduce,” I asked, “why would any woman come to you for an abortion?”

Dr. Diller scrutinized his cards before replying, “They don’t come to me for abortions. Dead women don’t get pregnant.”

“But this is an abortuary!” I objected.

“Of course, I offer abortion services to women.”

“But if women in the underworld are incapable of conceiving, why would they come to you for abortions?”

“They don’t come to me for abortions,” he insisted. “Dead women cannot conceive. I thought we had established this. Deal me another two cards, Bunti!”

Dr. Diller grimly surveyed the two cards dealt by Bunti Gobbles as he continued, “This clinic exists for the reassurance of women. We know dead women cannot conceive, but if a dead woman would, by some crazy, out-of-this-world miracle, find a loaf baking in her oven, I am here to slice the bread.”

“You understand, don’t you?” added Ms. Gobbles. “We all feel better knowing Dr. Diller is on standby if the unthinkable or the unfathomable should occur. Who wants to be saddled with a needy little product of conception tugging at her breasts? What woman wants an earful of screaming every time the little brute soils its diaper? Certainly not me.”

Ms. McGill agreed. “I rest easier knowing if I should become pregnant, I can trust Dr. Diller to do his dirty to the wretched little crotch gremlin.”

Curious as to why he was wearing rubber gloves, I asked, “Is something wrong with your hands, Doctor?”

“Nobody’s perfect,” he said, “and no body is perfect. My hands ooze blood. Without rubber gloves, I’d leave bloody fingerprints everywhere.”

Nancy McGill laughed, "Imagine playing Squanti with someone who smears bloody fingerprints all over the cards. Disgusting."

"I almost lost it when Doc made me a sandwich without his gloves," teased Bunti Gobbles. "There were red fingerprints all over the slices of white bread."

"Very funny. Okay, so I've got a little blood on my hands," he said. "Is it your deal, Nancy?"

Turning to Dr. Diller, Ms. Gobbles said, "Tell our guest what happened to you! Tell him!"

Glancing in my direction, Dr. Diller said, "Some crazed anti-abortion fanatic wired my car with explosives. I was blown to smithereens."

"Blown to smithereens?" laughed Ms. Gobbles. "You were blown to hell."

Dr. Diller nodded. "I stand corrected. I was blown to hell. They say the blast scattered me all over the church parking lot."

"You were assassinated on church property?" I asked. "That's outrageous."

Nancy McGill teased, "Doc, what were you doing at church?"

Flashing a wry smile, the dead abortionist answered, "I was a deacon in good standing."

Ms. Gobbles contributed to the narrative saying, "You see, Dr. Diller specialized in late-term abortions. Women from all over the country flocked to his clinic. Back then, he was known by fanatical Christians and other such deplorables as *Diller the Killer*. Draw a card, Doc."

Dr. Diller drew a card and muttered, “Blown to smithereens. My right ear was found clear across the street.” He tossed two cards on the table.

“Quib?”

“Conti.”

“Conti.”

“Quib.”

“No quib.”

“Conti.”

During a lull in the game, Dr. Diller looked to Ms. McGill and said, “You’ll never believe who stopped by the clinic for a visit.”

With unconcealable pride in her voice, Ms. Gobbles announced, “Dr. Diller and I were visited by none other than Margaret Sanger herself. What do you think about that?”

Nancy McGill gasped, “Margaret Sanger? She’s one of my heroes. What an unexpected honor.”

With a self-satisfied smile, he continued, “Meeting the one and only Margaret Sanger was a dream come true. Oh, we had a delightful visit, and the great lady had a lot of good words to say about our clinic.”

For those unfamiliar with the name, Margaret Sanger was a eugenicist who founded the organization known today as Planned Parenthood. Disdaining both motherhood and people she considered inferior, Margaret Sanger promoted forced sterilization among

blacks, Jews, Arabs, Native Americans, and others whom she had deemed as “human weeds.” Her so-called “Negro Project” was launched specifically to retard the number of Americans of African ancestry. It is likely that her preoccupation with eugenics, that is, the science of controlled human breeding, was spawned by the writings of Charles Darwin and the politics of Adolf Hitler.

Unable to conceal my contempt, I said, “Why the fanfare? Margaret Sanger was a vile, evil woman. How can you, in good conscience, bow and scrape to this vulgar creature?”

Looking rather severe, Dr. Diller pompously announced, “I must insist you not speak disparagingly of this valiant pioneer in women’s reproductive freedom.”

“You’ve got that right, Dr. D,” snapped Bunti Gobbles. “During my earthly life, I had three, count them, three abortions, one, two, three, and I owe it all to Margaret Sanger. Thanks to her, no little boy or girl ever called me mommy.”

“You’ve made a good point, Bunti,” agreed Ms. McGill. “During my earthly life, I enjoyed a lucrative career as a logistics specialist with a tobacco exporter. Had it not been for the heroics of our local Planned Parenthood clinic, I would have been forced to say goodbye to the tobacco trade in order to raise some snotty-nosed brat I never wanted.”

“We owe this inspirational lady an immeasurable debt of gratitude,” eulogized Dr. Diller. “Think of the untold millions of little boys and girls who would have been born had it not been for the bravery, courage, and determination of Margaret Sanger.”

“Say what you will,” said I, “but Margaret Sanger was a vile, unspeakably evil woman whose mission in life was built on a contempt for decency and a hatred for others.”

Ms. Gobbles sneered, “I suppose you consider Mother Theresa a great humanitarian.”

“As a matter of fact, I do.”

The three immediately burst into a fit of laughter.

“I might have figured as much.”

“Yeah, he is exactly the kind of person who would lionize an old witch like Mother Theresa while sullyng the sacred name of Margaret Sanger.”

“Aren’t you glad he’s only here on a temporary visa?”

“You said it. Hell can do without his type.”

“I’ll say. He certainly isn’t one of us.”

“What a rube.”

“You said it. What a rube.”

In time, they eased up on the personal insults and returned to their game. After each player tossed a Tezel into the pot, Bunti Gobbles dealt the cards in a most curious fashion. Dr. Diller received four cards for every card dealt to Ms. McGill, and Ms. Gobbles dealt herself only one card for every two cards held by Ms. McGill. Next, Dr. Diller laid five cards face down after announcing, “No quib.”

Drawing two cards from Ms. Gobbles hand, Ms. McGill uttered, “Squanti.”

In turn, Ms. Gobbles spread her cards face up and said, “Conti.”

After this, cards were flying everywhere.

“Conti.”

“Conti.”

“Quib.”

“No quib.”

“Squanti.”

“Quib.”

“No quib.”

“Conti.”

As the pace of the game slowed, Nancy McGill said, “Let’s see the photos of Margaret Sanger’s visit.”

Bunti Gobbles obliged by producing her phone. As the three poured over the series of photographs, Nancy McGill commented, “I love how Margaret Sanger continues dressing in the style of the 1920s—and just look at that gorgeous hat. She looks good in a hat.”

“Yes, the hat is certainly lovely,” agreed Ms. Gobbles. “She reminds me of the flapper girls from long ago.”

“I’ll say,” Dr. Diller exclaimed. “She’s the bee’s knees.”

Suddenly, Ms. Gill exclaimed, “This is certainly odd. In this photo, Ms. Sanger appears to be, well, uh, pregnant. And she looks like she has a baby bump in this photo, too. What gives?”

“You know how it is down here,” Bunti Gobbles explained. “Nobody is perfect, and no body is perfect. You blow smoke from your nose, the doc leaves bloody fingerprints, I have a foghorn voice, and Margaret Sanger’s tummy looks like a watermelon.”

“I’d swear she was carrying twins,” Ms. McGill added. “And what’s this? According to these photos, she isn’t wearing shoes. Why is Margaret Sanger barefoot?”

The doctor spoke up. “She has a condition known as Grierson-Gopalan Syndrome. Her feet are overly sensitive, and any kind of footwear seems to exacerbate the problem.”

“Poor Margaret,” said Ms. Gobbles. “Her only relief comes from going about barefooted.”

My curiosity piqued, I stepped nearer Bunti Gobbles’ phone to see the Margaret Sanger photos for myself. To be sure, the founder of Planned Parenthood appeared to be barefoot and pregnant, though, of course, she was not with child—she only looked to be carrying a baby or, perhaps, two babies. Her belly was very pronounced.

A young woman bearing a pensive expression stepped anxiously into the clinic. As she nervously surveyed her surroundings, the abortionist and his receptionist gave the other a knowing glance. “I wonder what name she’s currently using?” whispered Dr. Diller.

Faithful in the fulfillment of her office duties, Ms. Gobbles promptly rose from the table to greet the incoming patient. “Welcome to the New Babylon’s Women’s Reproductive Health Services. How may we help you?”

“I-I-I’m sorry,” she stuttered, “for, uh, for coming in without—without an, uh, without an appointment.”

“That’s quite alright,” assured Ms. Gobbles. “There’s no reason to be nervous—you’re among friends.”

“I suppose I’m a little shaken,” the uneasy visitor admitted. “Is the—is the doctor available?”

“Yes, the doctor will see you in a few moments,” Ms. Gobbles calmly answered. Handing the patient a tablet, the receptionist continued, “As soon as you complete these medical forms, Dr. Diller will see you.”

“My—uh, my hands are, uh, shaking.” Bursting into tears, she cried, “I’m frightened. I think I’m pregnant, and my boyfriend is furious, and he’s threatened to leave me, and I just don’t think I can raise a baby on my own.”

“Everything is going to be fine,” soothed Bunti Gobbles. “You’re in no condition to fill out these forms, so I’ll help you, okay?”

The patient dried her tears and whispered, “Okay.”

“What is your name?”

“My name is Mabelynn Philbin.”

“Your address and phone number, Ms. Philbin?”

“I live at 2121 Sink Street, and my number is 341629-502.”

“Are you currently employed, Ms. Philbin?”

Stumbling through her words, the fretful patient replied, “I, uh, I’m an actress, but when I’m between, uh, when I’m not, when I don’t have a part, I decorate cakes for, uh, Thomlinson Sisters Bakery over on Canal Street.”

“Very good,” replied Ms. Gobbles as she entered the relevant data into the tablet. “And in the event of an emergency, who should we contact?”

Fighting to hold back the tears, she said, “My boyfriend’s name is Tyshawn Loomis, and his number is 665587-502, and he works for Mr. Sparkle Car Wash on Lloyd.”

“One last question,” said Ms. Gobbles. “What are your symptoms? What makes you think you’re pregnant?”

“I don’t just think I’m pregnant,” the patient insisted. “I, uh, I *know* I’m pregnant.”

“Is that so?”

Nodding her head, she explained, “It has been forever, uh, forever since—it has been forever since I’ve had a, you know, had a per—period.”

“Alright,” said Ms. Gobbles. “Follow me to the examining room and Dr. Diller will see you shortly.”

As Ms. Gobbles led the patient from the waiting area, Dr. Diller explained, “She has a new name with each visit. The last time she was here, her name was Molina Amherst, and if memory serves me, she was Sunny Templeton before that, and somewhere along the way, she was Puyallupina ‘Polli for short because it’s easier to pronounce’ Ginger.”

“Are you saying she’s a regular?” asked Ms. McGill.

“Like clockwork,” answered the abortionist. “Her symptoms are always the same—no menstrual cycle, morning sickness, and strange food cravings.”

“But menstrual cycles are strictly an upperworld phenomenon,” Nancy McGill objected. “Women in the underworld never have periods.”

“Of course, and I lay out the facts during each visit,” Dr. Diller said. “She’ll leave here feeling better, but in almost no time at all, she’ll be back with the same complaints.”

“What can you do for someone like this?” Ms. McGill asked.

“The same as always. I’ll give her a thorough examination, assure her that she’s not pregnant, prescribe a placebo, collect her Tetzels, and send her away. Now, if the two of you will excuse me, I have a patient to see.”

“If we have a son,” asked Abbie, “shall we name him after you? How does Sherwood Alexander McCormick, Jr. strike you?”

“Let’s not,” said I. “Do you want our son tormented with nicknames like Sherwood Forest or Sherlock Holmes?”

“I like the name Sherwood,” said Abbie. “Will you think I’m pretty when my belly is big and round and ready to pop out a miniature Woody?”

“Or a miniature Abbie.”

“Okay, or a miniature Abbie,” she laughed. “Will you think I’m pretty?”

“I’ll think you’re drop dead gorgeous even when you send me out in the middle of the night for a strawberry milkshake or whatever it is you happen to be craving.”

“Well, please don’t bring me a strawberry milkshake,” teased Abbie. “Strawberries make me break out with hives. Would you have your poor, pregnant wife covered with red splotches and itching all over?”

“How do you feel about chocolate milkshakes?”

Giving me a smile that melted my heart, Abbie said, “I’m okay with chocolate milkshakes, but if you really, really, really love me, and I know that you do, you’ll bring me French vanilla shakes with lots and lots of whipped cream.”

“And a cherry on top?”

“That goes without saying, but if you want to impress this girl in a special way, top off my French vanilla milkshake with two cherries. Nothing says love like two cherries.”

“I love you, Abbie.”

“I love you, too, Woody.”

“Abbie, will you marry me?”

Abbie giggled, “You’re so silly. This is the fourth time this week you’ve proposed marriage, and I’ve said yes to you each time.”

“I know,” said I, “but I like proposing to you.”

“You do?”

“Sure, because I enjoy hearing you say yes.”

“Then ask me again.”

Stooping down on one knee, I asked, “Abbie, will you please marry me?”

“Yes, I will marry you.”

After half an hour or so, Dr. Diller, Ms. Gobbles, and the patient returned to the clinic’s reception area. With a faint smile, the young woman said, “Tyshawn will be ever so pleased knowing I’m not pregnant. I don’t mind telling you he was ready to pack his bags and leave when I told him I might be carrying his child. He was furious with me. He struck me in the mouth and said he isn’t ready for fatherhood. I don’t know what I’d do if Tyshawn left me.”

“You can tell Tyshawn he has nothing to worry about,” said Dr. Diller.

“I hope so,” said the woman. “Good men are hard to find, you know, and I don’t want to lose this one.”

Dr. Diller and Ms. Gobbles soon rejoined Ms. McGill at the card table. As the game resumed, Dr. Diller drew four cards from the deck, placed three cards face up on the table, drew one card from Ms. McGill’s hand, passed two cards from his hand to Ms. Gobbles, drew another card from Ms. McGill, placed that card face down, and announced, “No quib.”

In unison, Ms. McGill and Ms. Gobbles jubilantly cried, “Squanti!”

Realizing he had been outmaneuvered, Dr. Diller tossed his cards on the table. “I don’t trust either of you women!”

I glanced at the “Trust Women” banner hanging over the surgery entrance.

Chapter 19

Although underworld travel accommodations are frequently unreliable, and posted timetables are rather hit or miss, travel is cheap and, to my amazement, the HelioStar XT2500 helicopter was the epitome of travel comfort. This was, no doubt, the most sumptuous aircraft I had ever experienced. The cavernous passenger cabin, properly configured, might have seated thirty travelers in reasonable comfort; however, our machine's seating capacity had been limited to eight allowing for an abundance of stretch-out-and-relax-to-your-heart's-content comfort. Additionally, the seats were uncommonly wide and deep, luxuriously cushioned, fully adjustable, and equipped with variable speed messaging mechanisms. Rather than sitting, the pampered traveler was cradled; I never knew an aircraft passenger seat could be so enticing.

As Ms. McGill and I boarded the helicopter, I was surprised to note the presence of only two other passengers on board—and one of the passengers was the largest, ugliest toad I had ever seen, or ever hoped to see. This mammoth herptile would have tipped the scales at twenty pounds or more. What else can I say?—the creature was covered with bumps, its hide was a color I might describe as seasick green, and it bore an austere expression common to all frogs or toads or whatever. Although I tend to have a soft spot in my heart for animals of all varieties, I took an immediate disliking to this creature.

The exceedingly large toad rested in the lap of one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen. Her smooth, flawless skin was the color of ancient copper, and her long, voluminous hair was dark as the night. Her large eyes sparkled like diamonds, and her lips, full and pouty, could drive a less resolute man mad with desire. What a lovely being she is, I thought, but why is a giant toad parked on her lap? The Herculean-sized amphibian with its bulging, emotionless eyes was adorned with a festive pink bow which did not add to its appearance. Despite the loving attention of its owner, the wretched thing sat motionless as if oblivious to its surroundings.

As our seats were configured in two facing rows of four, I found myself sitting directly across the enchantingly beautiful lady and her disturbingly ugly toad. Though I attempted to be discreet, I could scarcely stop staring. Back and forth, my eyes would settle on her exquisite beauty before wandering to the hideous creature nestled in her lap.

I was not the only one staring. More than once, I found the beautiful lady's lovely dark eyes fixed on me, and more than once, she graced me with an ever so faint smile. And more than once, I reminded myself that I was here in the underworld for the sole purpose of finding Abbie, and a faithful husband ought not be so easily distracted by another woman's beauty.

I nudged Ms. McGill and whispered, "Why is a giant toad sitting on that woman's lap?"

Glancing momentarily at the lady and her reptilian traveling companion, Nancy McGill's attention hastily returned to her tablet as she muttered, "The toad is sitting on the lady's lap because that's where the toad prefers to sit. As to referencing the creature as a 'giant toad,' I've seen bigger."

"You've seen bigger? Really?"

"I've seen bigger. Really."

"Is the creature a pet?"

"Is *what* creature a pet?" she asked.

"The giant frog, of course. Is the giant frog a pet?"

"A pet? *Whose* pet?"

“Is the toad the pretty dark lady’s pet?”

“I find your incessant questioning annoying,” Ms. McGill complained. “If you want to know if the toad is her pet, go ask her, and stop bothering me.”

“Do you think that I should? What if she doesn’t want to be approached by a stranger?”

Ms. McGill gave me another of her why-were-you-born-without-a-brain stares. “The pretty dark lady is dying to meet you. She finds you attractive and would like to make your acquaintance. Go strike up a conversation with her—I could use a break from your society.”

Doing my best to overlook her condescending attitude, I hesitatingly asked, “Do you really think she wants to meet me?”

My companion grabbed me by the hand and led me across the aisle to where the pretty frog lady sat. “What’s your name?” Ms. McGill asked.

In a soft, timid voice, she answered, “My name is Vanya. Vanya Subramanian.”

“Very well, Vanya,” said my underworld guide in a business-like manner. “This man is obsessively preoccupied with you, and as you find him irresistibly attractive, and as I am in a mood that does not include his wearisome companionship, he is all yours—all yours, that is, unless I want him back.” Turning to me, Ms. McGill said, “You’ve been properly introduced, so chat her up while I enjoy not being with you.”

Vanya smiled. “It is true,” she said. “I am intrigued by you. I perceive you are a good man.” As she spoke, I was a bit shaken by an audible whistling sound originating from her nostrils. To my amazement, the pretty dark frog lady’s nose whistled each time she exhaled. The shrill whistling sound reminded me of an old-fashioned steam locomotive pulling away from a train station. Noting my surprise, she explained, “What can I say?

Nobody is perfect, and no body is perfect. My nose whistles, but I am perfect in every other way. What is your flaw?"

"Oh, I have plenty of flaws—too many to mention. By the way, my name is Sherwood McCormick, though my friends call me Woody, and, if you have no objections to my company, I am curious about your, uh, companion."

Beaming with delight, Vanya lovingly stroked the toad at rest on her lap and explained, "This is my daughter, Prissy. Prissy is the love of my life. Would you like to hold her?"

The whistling from her nostrils was difficult to ignore. "Maybe later," I said. Noticing an expanding wet yellowish stain on Vanya's snowy white sun dress, I asked, "This may sound like a silly question, but isn't Prissy potty-trained?" My sensitive nose further suggested the frog's incontinence. The creature must have had a huge bladder.

"I should never wear white when I take Prissy on an outing," she confessed between nose whistles, "and the heliport's gift shop doesn't stock baby diapers, so there was nothing I could do. I hope you do not mind. Her baby pee is rather pungent, but Prissy is such a dear."

At that moment, the revving of the turbine engine and the *whoosh whoosh whooshing* of the spinning blades filled the cabin, and our helicopter lifted from the ground. We were on our way to Anubis. As our airship gained altitude, the expanse of New Babylon spread below us like a million pinpoints of sparkling, twinkling light. I marveled thinking New Babylon, only one of countless underworld boroughs, was greater in area and population than any metropolis on the topside of earth.

"Prissy and I will be right back," she whispered. Lifting the toad from her urine-soaked lap, Vanya carried the miserable creature to the helicopter's lavatory.

While Vanya attended to her toad, the cockpit door opened and Roger, appearing rather pleased, stepped into the cabin and fixed his eyes on Nancy McGill. “How would you like joining me on the flight deck?” he asked. “My co-pilot failed to show up, so I’m all alone and am in desperate need of a gorgeous woman to keep me company.”

With two quick bursts of smoke shooting from her nostrils, Ms. McGill coyly replied, “And what are your intentions, Captain?”

“My intentions are strictly dishonorable,” he answered. “If you could read my mind, you’d probably slap me in the face.”

“And if you could read my mind,” she teased, “you’d understand I’m the kind of girl who can’t say no to handsome helicopter pilots.”

Beckoning Ms. McGill to the cockpit, the pilot said, “Your client, what’s-his-name, can make time with the frog lady while you and I get reacquainted, if you know what I mean.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” she purred, “and I’m ready, Captain Roger, for you to take me to new heights, but while I am busily distracting you, who’s going to fly this great big helicopter?”

“We just installed a new Vance Fordstrom AG1000 autopilot in this ship,” he answered. “Let’s see how well it functions, shall we?”

Wondering what kind of air charter service allows its pilots such liberties, I looked on in disbelief as Ms. McGill and her lusty pilot disappeared inside the helicopter’s cockpit. Moments later, Vanya and her toad emerged from the lavatory. The smell of frog urine was not quite so pronounced, and it appeared that her Prissy was wearing a makeshift diaper. “Thankfully,” Vanya explained, “I found some hand towels in the overhead bin, and I managed to blot the excess moisture from my dress, though I am still far from

presentable. Do you find me, in my current state of dishevelment, altogether unappealing?”

“Oh, no,” I answered. “Accidents will happen.”

“You are a very gracious gentleman,” Vanya replied. “Do you like children?”

“Yes, I happen to like children,” I answered, though I failed to mention a certain disdain for the handful of unruly high school students I seemed to face each year. “Before my wife died, we had planned to fill our house with children.”

“I perceive you would be a good father,” she said. “Would you like to hold Prissy now?”

“Maybe later,” I suggested. “Do you live in Anubis?”

“Yes, Prissy and I make our home in Anubis,” she answered. “We have a pretty little cottage that is within walking distance of a perfectly lovely park. I would prefer Prissy growing up away from the hustle and bustle of the city. Ours is a quiet neighborhood.”

“Are you employed?” I asked.

Vanya shook her head. “I do not want Prissy raised in a daycare center, so I am a stay-at-home mom,” she explained. “Of course, being a single mother has its challenges, but I do my best to make ours a happy home.”

“I’m certain you do your best,” said I.

“Might I inquire as to your purpose for travelling to Anubis?” Vanya timidly asked.

“I don’t mind you asking,” I answered. “I came to the underworld on a temporary visa to search out the whereabouts of my late wife, Abbie. Navigating my way through hell

which, by the way, is much deeper and wider than I would have imagined, is daunting beyond my capabilities, so I am engaging a private investigator to head the search. Have you heard of Admiranda Foxx?”

“Admiranda Foxx? Yes, of course, everyone has heard of Admiranda Foxx,” Vanya said. “For my tiny daughter’s sake, I prefer not having a television in the home, but there is a popular TV show based on her adventures as a private investigator.”

“So I’ve heard. This Admiranda Foxx must be something of a celebrity, and with such a reputation, I can only assume she knows her business. This gives me hope.”

“What will you do while Admiranda Foxx searches for your late wife?” Vanya asked.

A bit taken aback by her question, I responded saying, “Frankly, I haven’t given this matter any thought. I suppose I’ll find an apartment and look for ways of busying myself until Ms. Foxx locates my Abbie.”

I had almost forgotten about the big amphibian resting in Vanya’s lap until the creature let loose with an unexpected, thunderous *crrrrrrrooooooaaaaak!* “Oh, dear,” cried Vanya, “my baby is hungry.” Hefting the toad into my lap, she hastily explained, “You must hold Prissy while I prepare her dinner.”

Although I was hardly thrilled having the enormous frog lounging in my lap, I said nothing while attempting to conceal my contempt for the creature. From her oversized travel bag, Vanya produced a large glass jar filled with a gooey, greenish gray, foul-smelling, altogether disgusting substance that was about the consistency of oatmeal. The odor from the open jar caused my stomach to violently twist and knot. “Wh-what’s that?” I managed to ask.

“Pureed locusts,” she answered. “Prissy loves her pureed locusts.” Waving a mound of the glop before the frog, the creature sprang to life by eagerly devouring the contents of

the ladle-sized feeding spoon with its lightning quick tongue. As the frog gulped down each loathsome spoonful, its bulging eyes momentarily retracted into its head—though it is rather hard to distinguish where a frog’s head ends, and where its body begins. Vanya appeared to take much pleasure as the toad devoured its dinner and, to be sure, one could scarcely find fault with the pampered amphibian’s appetite. Prissy was no finicky eater; she hungrily attacked each ladle of pureed locusts with gusto.

Scraping the last mouthful from the jar, Vanya cooed, “That’s a good girl who eats all of her dinner.” Finally, the feeding was over. With its belly full, the toad returned to its motionless state of stoicism. How this stunningly beautiful woman could devote so much affection to this hideously ugly toad was beyond my understanding. “All gone! Pretty little Prissy ate every bite of her dinner. Mommy is very proud of her good girl.”

Returning her attention to me, she explained, “As you can see, I put Prissy first in all that I do. I am a good mommy. Prissy deserves a good mommy, and I do my best, though being a single parent can be very difficult.” Continuing in her soft voice, she added, “I may make motherhood look easy, but it’s not. At times, I feel overwhelmed.”

Not knowing quite what to say to a woman whose maternal affections were lavished on a twenty pound hop toad, I simply said, “I’m certain you do your best.”

Pleased by my complimentary words, she went on to say, “I work very hard making ours a happy home—and it is a happy home. You will not find a speck of dust anywhere in our happy home. I am a very good housekeeper. I am a very good cook, too, although Prissy is too young for anything but baby food, but my cooking is excellent. Do you enjoy tasty and expertly prepared Indian dishes?”

“Very much so,” I answered. “I am particularly fond of vegetable korma and palak paneer and, of course, garlic naan.”

With a sweet smile, she answered, “You would be pleased, then, with my excellent cooking.”

“No doubt.”

“If you like lentils, I have a recipe for a tasty dal makhani.”

“I do like lentils.”

Both Vanya and I were surprised when Nancy McCormick, who was only partially clothed, burst through the cockpit door followed by our pilot, who was shirtless and clutching a bottle of wine. “You naughty, naughty boy,” she laughed. “Shame on you!”

“You bring out the tiger in me,” he exclaimed.

After the randy pair playfully scampered around the cabin while taking no notice of Vanya and me, they quickly bounded back to the cockpit where, I assumed, their lusty antics continued.

After a moment or so, Vanya commented, “The pilot is not a gentleman.” Her voice was very grave. “I do not approve of men like him. He is not a good man. Men like him do not make good daddies. Men like him do not appreciate happy homes.”

“As to his disregard of traditional family values,” said I, “you are probably right.” Remembering his role as the pilot-in-command of our air ship, I went on to ask, “I wonder who is minding the controls? Let’s hope the autopilot doesn’t fail us.”

“No, he is not a gentleman,” she said, “but you are a gentleman, are you not? You would not behave so shamefully, would you?”

“If I were the captain of this bird,” I answered, “I’d not be chasing a half-naked woman in front of the passengers, if that’s what you mean. His lack of professionalism doesn’t inspire much confidence.”

“I am pleased to hear you say so,” she replied. “I perceive you are a good man.”

“Thank you.”

“Good men are not easily found,” she continued somewhat forlornly. “Most men would rather romp and frolic. These men are only interested in drinking to excess and chasing frisky women, but a good man concerns himself with family and home.”

“I do not like that pilot.”

“He is something of a character.”

“I do not think much of the woman who introduced us, either.”

“Nancy McGill? Yes, she can be rather difficult, but as she is my underworld guide, I am stuck with her for the time being.”

“That ungentlemanly pilot and that loose woman are not good people. Would they care about making a happy home for themselves? No, for they are not good people.”

Unsure how to respond, I said nothing.

After a few silent moments passed, Vanya wrinkled her nose and asked, “Do you smell something, Sherwood?”

She was right in asking, for the faint odor of petroleum had seeped into the cabin of our aircraft. Alarmed, I bolted to the cockpit door, which, as I expected, was locked.

Hammering on the door, I heard the pilot yell, "This area is off limits. What do you want?"

"I smell aviation fuel."

"Of course, you smell aviation fuel," he answered impatiently. "The main fuel tank has sprung another leak. Those fool mechanics didn't do their job."

"What do we do?" I asked.

"What business is this of yours?" he testily responded.

"I am a passenger on this bird, so a ruptured fuel tank becomes my business, too," I fired back.

"If you must know," he yelled, "the leak isn't all that bad and we'll probably have just enough fuel to get to Anubis, so get back to your seat and don't bother me again."

Realizing there was nothing I could do, I returned to my seat.

Lowering her eyes, Vanya, who appeared unperturbed by the helicopter's leaky fuel tank, leaned near me and asked, "Tell me again, Sherwood, do you like children?"

"When they are well-behaved, yes, I like children."

"I do not think our pilot likes children," she said. "He is not a good man. You like children. You are a good man."

Again, being unsure as to what I should say, I simply smiled.

“Do you think our pilot cares about living in a happy home? No, I do not think he would appreciate a happy home that is neat and tidy and where tasty dishes are served at mealtimes. He is not a gentleman, but you are a gentleman.”

Wondering where this discourse was leading, I said nothing.

“Prissy and I have a happy home, but our happy home is missing something,” she said. “What is missing? Missing is a good daddy. Prissy has a mommy who loves her, but she needs a daddy who loves her, too. Do you not agree that a beautiful little baby girl like Prissy deserves a good mommy and a good daddy?”

Groping for words, I said, “Well, uh, yes, I suppose you are right.”

“Good men are not easy to come by,” she again lamented. “I am speaking of a good man who loves children and who appreciates a tidy home and tasty dishes served at mealtimes. I am speaking of a good man who cares for his family and who is not lazy and who works hard so that his family has everything they need.”

I wanted to say, “Hell is hardly the place to search for a good man,” but I thought it would be better to skip the editorializing and simply say, “Vanya, you are a lovely woman, and I am sure there is a man out there who will appreciate you, Prissy, and your array of domestic talents.”

“Yes, there is such a man,” she agreed, “and that man is you. You are the man I want.”

Shaken by her unexpected profession, I said, “I’m flattered by your attention, but you don’t seem to understand my situation. I am not looking for a new wife. On the contrary, I’m here to find my late wife Abbie.”

“Are you not a gentleman?” she asked. “Are you not a man who likes children? Are you not a man who would care for his family? Are you not a man who appreciates a happy home?”

“Well, yes, I am all that,” said I, “but I cannot be your husband. It simply wouldn’t work.”

Vanya appeared surprised. “Husband? I am not in search of a husband,” she objected. “Even though I am very lovely and most desirable in every way, I cannot be your wife, and I do not want a husband.”

My head spinning with confusion, I said, “I am afraid I do not understand. Didn’t you just say that I am the man you want?”

“Oh, yes,” she said with a sparkle in her lovely dark eyes. “You are the man I want, but not as a husband.”

“Then what do you want of me?” I asked. “I don’t understand your intentions.”

Giving me a look of earnest approval, she explained, “Our happy home needs a daddy. You are a good man. I want you to be Prissy’s daddy. You will come and live with us in our happy home. You will go to work and make money to buy the things we need. As your reward, you will enjoy tasty dinners and a tidy home and the adoration of a beautiful woman and her precious baby daughter.”

“Say what you will,” I answered, “but it sounds like you want me to be your husband, and I already have a wife.”

“No, no, no,” she gently explained. “I do not want you to be my husband, for you are never to touch me for sexual gratification, but I believe you would be a good daddy for Prissy. Our happy home needs a good daddy who will go to work and care for his family. Do you understand?”

“But Vanya, my visit to the underworld is only temporary. In time, I will return to the upperworld.”

Vanya nodded agreeably. “Yes, in time you will return to the upperworld, but while you are here, you can be our daddy and live in our happy home and go to work to earn money to buy things that your family needs. I will prepare tasty dishes for you to enjoy, and you will never come home to dusty furniture or sinks filled with dirty dishes. You will live with Prissy and me in our happy home.”

Now that I understood her intentions, I thanked her saying, “This is a very generous offer, but I do not plan on being in Anubis for any appreciable period of time. As I said, I am here to find my late wife Abbie. After Abbie and I meet one final time, I will return to my home in California.”

Placing the big toad in my lap, Vanya said, “If you will excuse me for a moment.”

Thinking she needed to visit the helicopter lavatory, I was surprised when, instead, she marched toward the cockpit. “Open the door, Captain sir. I wish to speak with the lady known as Nancy McGill.”

Moments later, Vanya emerged from the aircraft’s cockpit with Nancy McGill at her side. Ms. McGill, clad only in a skimpy little nightie and sipping wine from one of her stilettos, approached me saying, “This woman and I have come to an understanding, and this is the plan. We will be landing in Anubis in about fifteen minutes, that is, if Roger is sober enough to find the heliport, and if our fuel tanks don’t run dry along the way. Now, as Roger and I have decided to elope, I am no longer available to serve as your underworld guide, but don’t worry, for this woman, who fancies you more than a little, has agreed to take care of you. You’re going home with her. Got that?”

“But what about my meeting with Admiranda Foxx?” I asked.

“Admiranda Foxx is expecting you,” she replied. “Now, everything is settled. You’ll live with this woman and her, uh, daughter while Admiranda Foxx searches for your late wife.”

“But...”

“This discussion has ended, and that takes care of that,” she firmly stated. Turning to Vanya, Ms. McGill said, “Take care of him. He hasn’t the brains of a baby and ought not be allowed on the streets alone. You will find him a reasonable companion as long as he isn’t questioning you about why the damned do the things that we do. And when he appeals to logic, simply ignore him. I don’t think he can help himself.”

Vanya appeared pleased by the new living arrangements. Lifting the toad from my lap, she whispered, “Prissy, our happy home now has a new daddy who will care for us by going to work to earn money to buy the things we need. In turn, you must be a good daughter and mind your daddy and give him lots and lots of love. Do you understand? Of course, you do, and I will continue being your good mommy who changes your diapers and gives you warm baths and cooks tasty meals and keeps a tidy home.”

Draining the last of the champagne from her stiletto, Ms. McGill said, “How I love a happy ending. Now if the three of you will excuse me, I had better help Roger land this old whirlybird.”

Chapter 20

An obnoxiously boisterous voice common among the inebriated blasted through the aircraft’s cabin speakers. “This is your captain, Roger ‘the Dodger’ Heathcliff speaking. We will be making an IPW approach into Anubis shortly. For those of you unfamiliar with aviation terminology, IPW is short for ‘I’m pretty wasted.’” At this, our pilot-in-command let loose with a protracted howl of self-indulgent laughter. “Besides being dog

drunk and totally preoccupied by my sweet little honey in her skimpy black nightie, our petrol supply is nearly depleted, thanks to a leaky fuel tank that our worthless mechanics failed to repair, right? But there's good news in all this, folks, for Nancy McGill and I are tying the knot and you'd all be invited to the big event were it not for our decision to run away and elope. Anyway, people, the ground is rapidly rising to meet us, so prepare yourself for a..."

Before the pilot could finish his sentence, our machine violently slammed against the ground. Neither Vanya nor I were injured, of course, for infernal bodies are impervious to accidents and mishaps; nonetheless, we were shaken by the brute force of the impact. Only Prissy the toad, who had been napping in Vanya's lap, seemed not to have noticed the trauma of the crash. As I rummaged through the wreckage in search of our luggage, Vanya said, "As our happy home is near the airport, there is no need to waste money on cab fare when we can walk."

"Walk? Are you sure?" I asked. "We have luggage and, of course, Prissy."

"We will not waste our money on cab fare," she insisted. "I will carry our daughter while you manage our bags."

As Vanya appeared determined to have her way, I figured arguing the point would be futile, but when, a full two hours later, we finally arrived at the small bungalow she called "our happy home," I sorely regretted having given way to her frugal demands. After two hours of trudging along endless roadways, my feet burned as if they were on fire while my body mercilessly ached from wrangling two large suitcases along with Prissy's hefty travel bag.

As the underworld is cloaked in perpetual darkness, my first impressions of our "happy home," that is, Vanya's small bungalow, was limited to the area made visible by the illumination of a single streetlight. As far as I could determine, her quaint little cottage had a homey look reminiscent of 1950's Americana. All that was missing was a

Studebaker parked along the curb. With Prissy nestled in her arms, Vanya said, "This is our happy home. When we step inside, I would prefer that you remove your shoes while taking care not to scuff the floor or the furniture with our suitcases."

Just as I had expected, the inside of the house was spotlessly clean, tidy beyond description, and decorated with inexpensive bric-a-brac, homey needlepoints, and a preponderance of framed photographs of her beloved Prissy. As I removed my shoes, Vanya said, "Welcome to your new happy home. Are you not pleased by what you see?"

Mindful to scuff neither the floor nor the furnishings, I complimented the orderliness of her home saying, "You certainly are a marvelous housekeeper. I've never seen such tidiness under one roof."

Pleased by my flattering words, she explained, "I work hard making ours a happy home and a tidy home. Now, if you will excuse me, I will take our beautiful daughter to the nursery and put her to bed. Babies require plenty of rest." Though I was far from comfortable with Vanya's constant referencing of the large toad as "our daughter," I decided to address this issue another time.

Despite Vanya's tireless efforts at making her cottage cozy and inviting, I sensed that everything was in its proper place with the exception of me. I did not feel as though I belonged. Vanya belonged. Prissy belonged. The "Welcome to Our Happy Home" needlepoint belonged. The cheap table lamps and the slightly yellowed doilies belonged. Everything in the house belonged except me. I was desperately out of place. Had I not been exhausted from the long walk and a stranger to Anubis, I might have fled the frog lady's immaculate, dust-free, everything-in-its-place white frame bungalow for a hotel room, but I resolved, for the time, to make the best of this uncomfortable situation. Soon, I would be meeting the famous detective, Admiranda Foxx, who would track down Abbie. Upon reuniting with Abbie, I would immediately forget all this nonsense involving huge toads, fanatical housekeeping, and maternal devotion gone awry.

Several moments passed before Vanya returned. "Prissy is fast asleep," she whispered. "We must speak in low voices so as not to disturb her sweet slumber. Little ones require plenty of rest."

"After the long hike from the heliport, I could use some rest, too, and then I'd like to freshen up."

"Certainly," she said, "but allow me to first show you about our happy home, and then you may retire to your room. Yes, that's right, I have thoughtfully set aside a spare room for your relaxation and comfort. Now, the room to our right is Prissy's nursery. Gently opening the door so as not to make any disturbing sounds, I peered into the nursery where the large toad was sleeping in a pink bassinette. Accordingly, the nursery walls were painted a matching pink. With the lacy curtains and a mobile suspended from the ceiling, the nursery looked exactly as a proper baby nursery ought to look; however, I was quickly reminded that the charming little room was occupied by a hideously large hop toad who devoured pureed locusts and croaked rather than cried when ready for its dinner.

Next, Vanya led me to the kitchen. Sparkling clean and tidy to a fault, she explained, "My kitchen is organized just the way I like it, so if you feel the need for something to eat or something to drink, do not help yourself, rather, ask me to fetch whatever it is that you need. If you were to poke about in my kitchen, you might inadvertently disrupt the orderliness that I've worked so very hard to achieve. You will not disturb the orderliness of my kitchen, will you, Sherwood?"

"No, if I should need a glass of water or a sandwich, I will come to you."

Stepping back into the living area, Vanya said, "Should we choose to entertain guests, this is where we will gather. Otherwise, I prefer the living room not to be used unless you, Prissy, and I choose to congregate as a family for a special occasion. I am

speaking of a birthday or some other cause for celebration, such as you receiving a job promotion. Otherwise, the living room shall remain off-limits. I cannot abide a living room that looks as though it has been lived in.”

Standing before a closed door, Vanya explained. “This is my room. As there will never be a reason for anyone other than me to enter this room, I see no reason to open the door for your inspection.” Judging by the determination in her tone and mannerisms, I naturally assumed that I was the *persona non grata* she had in mind. To ease her concerns, I pledged never to enter her room. This appeared to satisfy her.

Pointing to a cramped little breakfast nook furnished with a small round table and just two chairs, she explained, “This is where you and I shall dine on tasty dishes that I will have expertly prepared for our mealtimes. Prissy, of course, will be fed in her nursery until she’s old enough to sit at the table with the grownups.”

Next, she led me to the room I would occupy. As underworld dwellers do not sleep, my room had no bed. In hell, beds serve strictly as platforms for sexual activities. No bed would be needed in this happy home; however, my room was furnished with a small writing desk, a chair, an empty bookshelf, and a tabletop radio with a handwritten warning against playing the instrument at an excessively high volume. Besides two or three photographs of Vanya and Prissy, the walls were decorated with plaques and placards extolling the virtues of hard work, diligence, and positive thinking. I was reasonably certain the pithy quotes adorning the walls of my room could be attributed to Horatio Alger, Robert Schuller, or Norman Vincent Peale. Vanya had, no doubt, prepared this room well in advance for the day when, at long last, she wrangled an unsuspecting man who would play the role of daddy and provider to her big toad. As to the strategically placed placards, I could only assume these were intended to combat any notions of laziness in the man she had enlisted. I was already learning that Vanya had an intense dislike of men lacking in motivation and perseverance. To be sure, men should care for their families and I, too, look down upon any man who will not provide for his wife and children, but to what extent was I obligated to Vanya and her twenty

pound frog? I vowed to sort all this out later; for now, I was simply too tired to think this matter through.

“By the way,” I asked. “Where is the bath?”

Lowering her eyes, she said, “You may use the outbuilding in the back yard.”

“Is there no bathroom in this house?”

“Yes, Sherwood, there is an indoor bathroom, but as I am most uncomfortable sharing a bathroom with a man, I would greatly prefer, no, I must insist that you make use of the facilities located behind our happy home.”

Feeling a mounting sense of anger welling within, I snapped, “You must be kidding.”

“Do not complain, Sherwood. You will find the outdoor bathroom adequate for its intended purposes.”

“I’m not allowed to use the indoor bath?”

“No, Sherwood. The indoor bath is strictly for my use.”

I fumed, “Are you saying I must relieve myself in an outhouse because you are too damn delicate to share a bathroom with me? Well, it appears as though I’ve certainly grabbed the dirty end of the stick in our cozy little living arrangement. Now, if you will kindly point me to the nearest hotel, I’ll be on my way.”

What followed was a flood of tears and uncontrolled sobbing. It was all very sudden and quite unexpected. The tiny cottage was filled with mournful wailing and, I suppose, even a bit of teeth gnashing. My unguarded words had obviously injured her more than I had intended, and as I stood helpless and frozen, I realized the petite woman’s spirit had

been crushed and it was I who was to blame for all this. I felt wretched knowing I had wounded her feelings.

“Oh, Sherwood,” she whimpered between sobs, “how can you say such wicked things? How can you be so cruel?”

“It was not my intention to upset you, but if I am not welcomed to make use of the indoor bathroom...”

“You hurt me with your hateful, malicious words,” she cried.

Groping for a response, I uttered, “And you hurt me with your refusal to allow my use of the indoor bath.”

“What happened to the good man I met in the helicopter? What happened to the man who said he loved children and happy homes?”

Fumbling for an explanation, I tried easing the situation by saying, “I had no business speaking to you as I did. I realize apologies are considered inappropriate in the underworld, but I deeply, deeply regret the harshness of my tone.”

“And do not forget the profanity that escaped from your mouth. You said ‘d-a-m-n’ in my presence,” she uttered while choking back the tears.

Laden with guilt, I again apologized for my lack of discretion. “I had no business speaking to you as I did. Again, I will ask for your forgiveness.”

“I invite you into my happy home and I share my beautiful daughter with you, and you make all this fuss over a simple matter such as an outdoor privy,” she managed between sobs. “Have I not promised to prepare tasty dishes for your meals? Have I not provided a spotless home for your comfort and enjoyment? Have I not given you a

family you can call your own? Where is your gallantry? Where is your spirit of give and take? Please tell me you are not like other men, Sherwood—men who are lazy and drink too much and think only of satisfying their carnal desires—men who are petty and demanding—men who make vulgar sounds in the bathroom. You are not such a man, are you, Sherwood?”

“No, I am not, and if you will forgive me, I promise to do better,” said I.

Fault me if you will, and you likely will fault me, but my backbone tends to jellify whenever I’m confronted by a woman in tears. Although I knew that I was not entirely in the wrong, I hastily backed down from my threat to leave her and Prissy for a hotel room, though a hotel room was exactly where I wished that I was at that moment. “I misspoke, Vanya. I was out of line. I should have never said those things. Once again, please forgive me.”

“I forgive you, Sherwood,” she said while drying her eyes. “As we are both weary from travel, let us retire to our rooms for a brief time of rest and reflection. I will come and knock on your door when your tasty breakfast is ready. Now enjoy some quiet time before I send you out to find work.”

“Yes, of course, I will look for a job, but first, I need to contact Admiranda Foxx to schedule our consultation.”

Giving me a disapproving look, she said, “No, Sherwood, you must first find a job and then you may consult with your detective.”

Breakfast, when it came, consisted of a small cup of black coffee, a thin slice of dry toast, and an egg laid by some creature other than a chicken. “You must hurry and eat your tasty breakfast,” Vanya ordered, “and then it is off you go in search of a job.”

“I’ve been thinking, Vanya, that as I came to the underworld for the sole purpose of locating my late wife, I should first pay a call to the private investigator, Admiranda Foxx. Afterwards, I will seek employment while Admiranda Foxx engages in her search.”

With a fresh batch of tears welling in her dark eyes, I hastily retracted what I had just said. “Never mind, I can meet with Ms. Foxx after I am gainfully employed.”

Wolfing down my scant breakfast, I took a cold shower in the spartan outdoor bathroom and readied myself for the job hunt.

Presenting myself for her inspection, Vanya eyed me critically. With a demure sigh, she said, “I do not approve of your choice of neck ties, and your hair wants trimming, but we haven’t time for all that. Now, do you remember all that I’ve told you?”

“Yes,” I answered.

Unconvinced, she said, “Repeat back to me the instructions I gave you, Sherwood.”

“When I leave our home...”

“Our *happy* home,” she corrected.

“When I leave our happy home, I am to walk to the end of Honeysuckle Valley Lane, and then I am to turn right on Willow Creek. I am then to make another right where Knotty Pine Way intersects Willow Creek. When I reach the end of Knotty Pine, I will head left until I reach Woodland Parkway, and Woodland Parkway will take me to Anubis Business Park. How am I doing?”

“And what are you to do once reaching Anubis Business Park?”

“I am to knock on doors in search of employment opportunities,” I dutifully answered.

“There are dozens of businesses located in the Anubis Business Park for you to call upon,” she instructed. “When you enter a business, stand erect, do not slouch, wear a studious expression, appear eager, and smile, but do not smile too often, or you may give the impression of being an idiot.”

Trying hard to conceal my annoyance with Vanya’s mother-henning, I promised to stand erect, appear studious, and smile only when appropriate. Reaching to straighten my necktie, the necktie that had failed to meet with her approval, she further explained, “I have no patience with lazy men who refuse to work. Good men are never idle. I want you to be a good man and find a job. Prissy deserves a daddy who works hard to earn money to buy all the things that his family needs. You are not a lazy man, are you, Sherwood?”

“No one can rightfully accuse me of laziness,” I answered rather stiffly. “Have a little faith in me, Vanya.”

Realizing, perhaps, she had been pushing me too hard, Vanya smiled and said, “I have faith in you, Sherwood, and I just know that you will make Prissy and me very proud of you.”

“I suppose I had better be on my way.”

Handing me a brown paper sack, Vanya said, “I prepared a tasty, home-cooked meal to enjoy during your lunch break.”

“That was thoughtful of you,” I said.

“Your daughter Prissy and I will be waiting for you to return,” she said as I stepped out the front door.

Following the route prescribed by Vanya, I arrived at the Anubis Business Park on foot about an hour later. Though I tend to enjoy walking, I would have preferred arriving at my destination by cab, but Vanya insisted that cab fare is a senseless waste of money despite the fact that, according to the topsy-turvydom of the underworld economy, a Tetzels spent is a Tetzels gained. It is like money on a loop; of course, infernal money isn't worth much, but, then again, nothing in hell seems to be of any appreciable value.

The first business I encountered was a long, squatty, windowless warehouse constructed of corrugated metal. A sign over the drab structure's entrance read, "Bluett and Coy, Ltd. Breeders of Venomous Reptiles." Next to Bluett and Coy was Anubis Auto Glass Repair and Replacement. Thinking I'd prefer working with auto glass to venomous reptiles, I decided this would be the first stop in my quest for employment, and this proved to be a good decision, for a handwritten note posted on the entrance door read, "Bookkeeper Wanted—Apply Within."

Remembering Vanya's instructions, I stood erect, bore an expression of quiet confidence, and approached the receptionist with only a hint of a smile. "I'm here to discuss the bookkeeping position."

The woman behind the front desk, whose attention had been occupied by a bridal magazine, asked, "You're applying for a job wearing *that* tie?" Before I had a chance to respond, the receptionists picked up the phone and said, "Ms. Kenilworth? This is Blanche at the front desk. There's a man standing here who wants to apply for a situation with our firm. Yes. No, I don't think so. Yes. What's that? Okay, I will tell him." Cradling the telephone receiver, the receptionist announced, "Take a seat. Ms. Kenilworth will be with you shortly." She then turned her attention back to the bridal magazine.

Attempting to strike a friendly conversation, I asked, "Are you engaged to be married?"

Beaming with pleasure, she replied, “Why, yes, I am engaged to be married shortly.” Turning to a photograph of a model dressed in a white, lacy, strapless bridal gown, she held up the magazine for my inspection. “My wedding dress looks just like this. What do you think?”

“You have chosen a beautiful dress for the wedding,” I said.

“Yes, it is beautiful,” she agreed. “Since winding up in hell, I’ve been married twenty-nine times and this wedding gown is, by far, the most flattering of them all.”

“You know what they say—the thirtieth time’s charm. Say, tell me about your fiancé,” said I. “What’s the lucky fellow like?”

“His name is Roger,” she gushed. “He’s a helicopter pilot and he’s ever so handsome. Maybe you’ve heard about my Roger. His helicopter crashed at the Anubis heliport a few hours ago.”

“You don’t say,” I exclaimed. “Believe it or not, I was a passenger on the ill-fated helicopter that went down.”

“Really? You were on my Roger’s helicopter?” she squealed with no concealment of surprise. “My, it is certainly a small underworld. Before the crash, did you have an opportunity to meet my fiancé?”

“Only briefly,” I answered. “He seems to enjoy his work, that is, he was having a jolly time in the cockpit.”

“I suppose you couldn’t help but notice that Roger is a very handsome fellow,” she continued. “I’m such a lucky girl to have him for my own. Speaking of Roger, I’ve been expecting him to telephone me, but I haven’t heard a word from him for the longest time.”

Maybe he's tied up because there's a lot of paperwork to fill out after a crash, but I do wish he'd pick up the phone to check in with me."

Though knowing her fiancé Roger was, at that exact moment, eloping with Nancy McGill, I thought it best to say nothing. She would discover the truth about him soon enough.

This Ms. Kenilworth, a tall, severe looking woman dressed in somber gray, invited me into her office. Not one to waste time with pleasantries, she began firing one question after another before I had even settled myself into the chair across from her desk. "Did you bring a resume?"

"A resume? No," I ruefully admitted.

"Do you have a list of references?"

"No."

"Do you have auto glass experience?"

"No."

"Do you have any kind of automotive experience?"

"No."

"You've never worked in the field of automotive parts or accessories?"

"No."

Pressing the issue, she asked, "No automotive experience of any kind?"

“Admittedly, no,” I answered.

“Tell me about your sales management experience.”

“I don’t have any experience in sales management,” I replied.

“Well, have you ever worked in sales training?”

“No, Ms. Kenilworth.”

“Do you have any kind of sales experience?”

“No.”

“No sales experience whatsoever?” she pressed.

“No.”

“None whatsoever?”

“None whatsoever.”

“Are you familiar with Jericho Heights?” she asked.

“Jericho Heights?”

“Jericho Heights.”

Feeling rather self-conscious from my inability to give Ms. Kenilworth any kind of affirmative response, I confessed, “I am not familiar with Jericho Heights.”

“You know nothing of Jericho Heights?”

“No, Ms. Kenilworth.”

Looking more severe than ever, she said, “Let’s recap what we’ve discussed. You’ve no automotive experience, correct?”

“I have no automotive experience.”

“And you have never been employed in the auto glass industry?”

“I’ve never been employed in the auto glass industry.”

“And you’ve no sales management experience?”

“I’ve never worked in sales management.”

“In fact, you haven’t a shred of sales experience of any kind, right?”

“Regrettably, no.”

“And you know nothing, absolutely nothing, of Jericho Heights?”

“Should I?”

Tapping an impatient finger on the top of her desk, she demanded, “Do you know so much as a single soul in the length and breadth of Jericho Heights?”

“Until a moment ago, I’d never heard of Jericho Heights.”

Extending a cordial hand, she rose from her desk and enthusiastically announced, "Congratulations, you're hired."

Somewhat dumbfounded, I said, "I am? You're offering me a position with your company?"

"You're perfect for the job," she said.

"I am?"

"You are, of course, prepared to relocate to Jericho Heights without delay."

"I only arrived in Anubis hours ago," I objected. "Why should I pack my bags and rush off to Jericho Heights?"

Giving me a quizzical look, she asked, "Where else would our Jericho Heights sales manager live?"

"I'm your new Jericho Heights sales manager? How can this be?"

"How can this be?" she repeated. "You're the ideal candidate. You meet or exceed every qualification. You're perfect for this position."

"I appreciate your confidence," I attempted to explain, "but circumstances prevent me from straying from Anubis. I cannot leave for Jericho Heights."

As her face darkened, she asked, "If you are unwilling to relocate, why did you apply for the Jericho Heights sales management position?"

Realizing the source of the misunderstanding, I explained, "There has been a mix-up. I distinctly told the receptionist that I was interested in the bookkeeping position."

“You want to be a bookkeeper?”

“Would I be asked to relocate if I were offered the bookkeeping position?”

“No, as a bookkeeper, you would work from this location.”

“In that case, I want to apply for the bookkeeping position.”

Obviously put out by my refusal to accept the Jericho Heights sales management job offer, she pointedly asked, “Are you turning me down?”

“I simply cannot leave Anubis,” said I. “I deeply regret the misunderstanding, but, again, I clearly told the woman at the receptionist desk that I wished to inquire about the bookkeeping situation.”

“You did?”

“Yes, Ms. Kenilworth.”

“You want to be a bookkeeper?”

“Yes, Ms. Kenilworth.”

“Then why didn’t you make your intentions clear in the first place?”

“I did, Ms. Kenilworth.”

Giving me a look of earnest expectations, she asked, “Might you reconsider? Jericho Heights is a most desirable place to live and work. Jericho Heights is far more

cosmopolitan than the sleepy little borough of Anubis. Anubis is boring. Jericho Heights is the place to be.”

“I don’t think I would be a very good sales manager, and, besides, if you understood my circumstances...”

Leaning back in her desk chair while staring at the ceiling, Ms. Kenilworth lamented, “Lately, nothing has gone my way. Nothing.”

“How’s that, Ms. Kenilworth?”

“First, my fiancé, who promised to meet me for breakfast, never arrived, and I’ve not heard from him in hours. Not one word.”

“Have you tried phoning him?” I asked.

“Have I tried phoning *who*?”

“Have you tried phoning your fiancé?”

“Oh, him? Yes, I placed several calls to his number, but he doesn’t answer.”

Looking to placate her, I suggested, “Maybe his phone isn’t working properly or, perhaps, a problem has cropped up at work that’s preventing him from accepting your phone calls.”

Giving me a nod, she answered, “You’re probably right. My fiancé, Roger Heathcliff, is a pilot. A few hours ago, I received word that he crashed his helicopter coming in from New Babylon. I suppose Roger has a lot of paperwork relating to the accident.”

Wondering how many women this Roger had in tow, I said, “Yes, there are reports to file and forms to complete. Your fiancé is probably up to his earlobes in paperwork.”

“Of course,” she replied. “I ought not worry. I’m sure I’ll be hearing from my Roger soon enough.”

Not wishing to speak any more of this Roger Heathcliff, I asked, “By the way, Ms. Kenilworth, who would I see about the bookkeeping position?”

“The bookkeeping position? Oh, you’ll want to speak with Walt Ditmore. His office is down the hall to the right. Head that way, and I’ll phone to let him know that you’re coming.” And so I went.

Rising from behind his cluttered desk, a tallish, ruddy-cheeked man dressed in a garish checkered suit greeted me with a cheery, “Hello, hello, hello, hello! The name’s Walt Ditmore, just like the sign on the door says, but my friends, and even my enemies, call me Logan. Now what can this old country boy do for you?” There was something unsettling about the man’s appearance—and it wasn’t just the tacky suit he wore—there was something else about the man that seemed cockeyed, and then it struck me. Rather than shell-like earlobes, Walt Ditmore had floppy ears, much like the ears of a beagle, that hung down to his shoulders. In every other way, he appeared normal, but there was no denying that his ears would have been better suited on a hound dog. Out of respect, I vowed not to stare at the man’s floppy ears.

“It is a pleasure meeting you, Mr. Ditmore,” said I. “My name is Woody McCormick.”

“None of this Mr. Ditmore jazz,” he said. “As I was saying, everyone calls me Logan. Now, what can I do for you?”

“I’m here about a job,” I answered. “I am to understand you have an opening for a bookkeeper, Mr. Ditmore.”

“Call me Logan,” he repeated. “Yes, we have a need for a bookkeeper in our insurance department.”

“I would be interested in knowing more, Mr. Ditmore, I mean Logan.”

“Certainly,” he said. “Our company has a crackerjack salesforce that writes policies that cover the replacement costs of cracked or shattered auto glass such as windshields, back glass, and door windows. If a policyholder’s vehicle requires glass replacement, the policy covers one hundred percent of the glass and installation costs. We pride ourselves in offering our customers excellent coverage as well as speedy claim service. There’s no better auto glass replacement insurance on the market, and to back up my words, three of the twenty-seven taxi services, automotive dealerships, and rental car agencies based here in Anubis are our valued clients—and we’re working to win over the other twenty-four.”

“Sounds like an ambitious business plan, Logan.”

I was surprised to hear him say, “You’re hired. Can you start work immediately? The department is a mess, and we need you right away.”

“Uh, well, certainly,” I managed to say, “but aren’t you interested in knowing my background? I’m sure you’d like hearing my qualifications.”

“Why bother?” he answered. “Can you do the job?”

“Yes, I’m sure I can,” said I.

“Very well, then,” he replied. “The job is yours. Are you ready to dive in with both feet, Woody my boy?”

“I certainly am, Logan.”

Giving me a stern look, he warned, “You’re not to call me Logan. You are to address me as Mr. Ditmore.”

“I meant no offense, Mr. Ditmore,” I explained, “but didn’t you instruct me to call you Logan?”

“That I did,” he answered, “but when you accepted the bookkeeping position, you became an employee, and while friends and acquaintances are free to call me Logan, I expect my subordinates to refer to me as Mr. Ditmore. It’s a matter of respect and maintaining a proper business decorum.”

“I’ll remember to call you Mr. Ditmore.”

“Fine, but if you quit the firm or if I terminate your employment, remember to call me Logan. Understood?”

“Yes, Mr. Ditmore.”

“Follow me,” he said. “I’ll take you to your new office.”

How about that? You’ve just completed the first twenty chapters, but there are twenty more strange and bizarre chapters remaining. In the second half of this book, you’ll learn of Sherwood and Vanya’s engagement, their rise in social status, their purchase of a twenty-one room mansion once owned by an infamous dictator, and, of course, Sherwood’s eventual encounter with Abbie.

Are you curious as to the outcome of our infernal story? Of course you are, and the best way of satisfying that curiosity is by ordering either the electronic version or the print version of *The Grateful Damned* by Michael Blunk.

[The Grateful Damned: A Curious Sojourn into the Land of Perpetual Night: Blunk, Michael: 9798218972592: Amazon.com: Books](#)

By the way, feel free to drop me a note at dr.michaelblunk@gmail.com and/or visit my website at [Home | Michaelblunk](#)

Live everyday as though it were your last, for the day will come when it *will* be your last, and what follows next is up to you.