

Black Hill Press Novellas



RENAISSANCE SPOOK

JASON L. PYRZ

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Jason L. Pyrz



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Preface

Dying isn't all that bad. Now, dying a humiliating death? That's probably the worst thing that can happen to anyone. Ironically enough, getting mauled to death by a pack of squirrels was the best thing to ever happen to me and my family.

Let's get the introductions out of the way before we go any farther. You can call me Zack. Zack isn't my real name, or at least it wasn't before I made the big move to the other side. It was supposed to be, until my grandmother talked my mother out of it. So I ended up with the same name as virtually every other male child born in the late 1970's. My grandmother died when I was young and while I wish I could say that we've since talked and patched things up, that's not quite the way things work, at least not in the situation I ended up in. But then I had the opportunity to give myself any name I wanted, and I went with Zack.

"But wait!" You're probably saying. "I don't care what your name is/was/might have been. What about the squirrel thing?!" And I can't blame you. However, we'll get to that whole business later. I can pretty much guarantee it's not as interesting as you're building it up to be, so don't get your hopes up.

For now, the point is that you should realize that I, Zack, ceased to be and spent a good amount of time “pining for the fjords.” Being dead really isn’t all that bad. It’s a bit liberating actually, fun at times. I mean, I never spent my time hanging out in people’s bathrooms or anything like that. And don’t pretend you didn’t think, at least once when you were little, about ghosts peeking in on you while you were doing your business. After dying, I spent a lot of my time traveling and reading the books I was supposed to read in high school. But the majority of my time was devoted to my job. We’ll spend a lot of time on that topic, so hold tight.

As alluded to by the name thing, I was never someone who got exactly what he wanted. I was the guy who was always an inch or two shy of greatness—in my own mind, at least. In third grade I got married in a playground ceremony to my “girlfriend,” who then promptly moved away that summer to a town that was fifteen miles further out into the suburbs. I never saw her again, until I tracked her down online one night. After seeing how hard the previous thirty years were on her, I got to thinking that I really should have had that annulled before I died.

I was the guy who was just good enough to play a sport in college, but only until a scholarship player took my place. Every time I would come into unexpected money, without fail, I would find out, within a week that 1) the dog needed emergency surgery; 2) the movers underestimated the cost of the cross-country move and needed an extra three grand; or 3) the dog needed emergency surgery, again. The dog was lucky to be cute, because he was a pain in the ass. And immediately preceding my death, I was the guy who flirted with big-time law firms and their big-time salaries after graduating from law school—only to have them realize, usually after a year or so, that they didn’t really want to keep me around.

Yes, I was a lawyer. Go ahead and put the book down now; I won’t hold anything against you. But hey, this book is about me dying. So it can’t be all bad, can it?

The point is that at virtually every stage of my life I was under the impression that there was some celestial prankster with a camera crew, just waiting for me to get comfortable

before screwing me over. Well, color me surprised when I discovered there actually was a celestial prankster. And, I was even more surprised when I wound up working for him.

I've since forgiven him for the squirrel thing. Besides, if that had never happened, neither would have any of the following.

Chapter One

As I mentioned, and as I hope you won't hold against me, I was a lawyer right before the squirrels got me.

I'll pause here while you cheer the thought of my death. It's okay. Let it out. It's understandable, because not only was I a lawyer, I went to court on behalf of banks which took people's property away when they didn't pay their loans. I know what you're thinking, but no, I'm not writing this from Hell. Not writing it from Heaven either—at least not the official one.

If there was anything redeeming about the time I spent as a lawyer, it is that I hated every single minute of it. I went to law school so I could spend my days in a cushy office making boatloads of cash. What I got was a job where I spent my days in lifeless, harshly lit courtrooms. Faded carpet under my shiny black wingtips, florescent fixtures buzzing and flickering above. Surrounded by sobbing families, whose homes were being taken away by residential mortgage foreclosure attorneys. All to pay my student loans and not much else.

But enough about me, let's talk about me. Did I mention I die soon? Let's get to that.

It was a warmer-than-average December Thursday in the suburbs of Chicago. A stiff southerly breeze ripped the

remaining leaves off the trees, blanketing the lawn I had just raked the week before. It was one of those days that smelled and felt a little like spring, the cruel joke being that the Midwestern winter had not yet begun. Up until the day before, I was employed by a bank litigation firm doing the work I'd grown to despise.

Maybe it was the fact that I failed to share the same enthusiasm for crushing people's souls as my superiors. Perhaps I just had a knack for working for complete jackasses. Whatever the reason, for the second year in a row, I lost my job within three weeks of Christmas. Well, I didn't actually lose those jobs. I was "let go." Which sounds so much nicer, doesn't it? As if your boss is actually doing you a favor by letting you go onto bigger and better things without having to worry about that silly salary with which you'd been paying your bills.

"Don't let us hold you back; we are letting you go! You are young! You have your whole life ahead of you! Go, be free!"

On that abnormally warm December weekday, the day after getting canned, I was the only one home. Gwen, my wife of twelve years, had left to take our daughter, Zoey, to preschool and run errands. Making the most of my liberation, I decided to sleep in.

I rolled out of bed around eight in the morning and made my way to the living room couch, pausing long enough to see Gwen and Zoey on their way out the front door. Continuing to my cushiony base of operations, I set out to plan my day, which was sure to be the first of many such days in the coming months.

Should I clean the house? Rake all those damn leaves that just fell? Pick up all those landmines on the dog run beside the house?

After careful consideration, I decided that it was best not to do anything too ambitious just yet. I mean, I didn't want to set expectations too high for what would be accomplished during that round of unemployment.

My first emancipation from the workforce had come the day before my previous firm's Christmas party and had lasted exactly three months. During that time I managed to

paint a few rooms around the house, fix some things that were on the to-do list for a while, and get through a couple of dozen library books. My wife put a spending moratorium in place each time I lost my job, which was happening so often we considered putting the rules in writing. That morning, the day after my second canning, I originally planned on tackling a few more items on the list, but why rush it? I had all the time in the world. So I thought.

Even though I resolved to do nothing all day, boredom got the better of me. Within two hours I was outside, picking up the dead branches that had blown off the evergreens in the backyard. Despite the fact that we lived on the outskirts of Chicago's suburban sprawl, the prior owners of our house had landscaped the place as if it were a north woods cabin. The backyard was absolutely jam-packed with overgrown conifers that routinely clogged the gutters and killed the grass we repeatedly attempted to plant underneath them.

We had only one garbage-collection cycle left that fall before the city stopped its free yard waste pickup. I figured I would gather up as much as I could and put it out by the curb to save us a few bucks on those special stickers they made us put on the yard waste bags during the rest of the year. I ended up spending more time than I was anticipating in the back yard, cleaning up downed branches and pine needles. Sweating under the December sun, I stripped down to my t-shirt. My bare arms were absolutely covered in sap. Not the worst thing I'd ever been covered in, but this isn't that type of book.

The squirrels were out in force that day (I told you we would get back to the squirrels). I had been fighting with the damn things since we moved into the house two years earlier. They dug holes all over the yard, conducted suicide missions to get to the birdfeeder that hung from one of the trees, had gang fights that spread from tree to fence, and I'm pretty sure I once saw a squirrel orgy back there. Cheeky bastards. Thankfully, Zoey was still at the age where she accepted any explanation, no matter how absurd. She was satisfied to know they were wrestling.

Maybe it was the bright blue skies and the warm temperatures, or their instincts to stock up before winter hit,

but the twitchy things were all over the place that day. Running along the fence. Chasing each other through the trees. Some just sat there and screeched at me as I intruded upon their lair. Ignoring their protests, I finished ferrying the last of the downed branches, along with the pinecones and other suburban flotsam, to the curb in front of the house. I was headed back inside, through the open garage, so I could hop in the shower and get all the sap out of my hair and off my arms. On my way, I nearly tripped over the remnants of a bag of birdseed that sat against the wall, providing a safe haven for all manner of creepy crawlies living underneath. The ones that hadn't been mortally wounded in the event scattered to the other dark corners of the garage when I kicked their home a good three feet off its foundation.

Never one to provide a safe haven to nightmarish insects, I decided to empty what was left in the bag into the birdfeeder so I could get it out of the way. Even though the seed was more likely to end up feeding the damn squirrels than it ever was to see the inside of a bird, I picked up the bag and headed back around the house to the backyard.

Twitchy & the Gang greeted me with a chorus of shrieks as I invaded their sacred territory, but otherwise kept their distance. They knew their meal train was coming down the tracks. Headed straight toward the gnarled old elm from which the birdfeeder (or fancy piñata if you were a squirrel) gently swayed in the breeze.

That's when it happened.

Chapter Two

I had never seen anything quite like it before, except for that time back in high school when I came out of surgery after breaking my arm and saw the doctor, like an angel, standing over me with the bright halo of surgical spotlights surrounding him. The morphine drip, or whatever happy juice they were pumping into me, likely added to the effect. This time, however, there was no discernible light source. There was no bag of IV candy hooked into my arm, and the doctor looked really, really worried.

"Oh wow, Zack. That wasn't supposed to happen!"

"Huh, what? What's wrong? I feel fine." I felt a bit disoriented, but otherwise fine.

Although the pause before his response was only a few seconds, it seemed like an eternity. An eternity in which I came to terms with the reality of my surroundings. For starters, as my eyes adjusted, there, lying next to me, was me.

"Yeah, a few things about that. Number one, I'm not a doctor. Number two, you're not exactly fine. And number three, we should probably get out of here before your wife gets home. You don't want to see that."

He must have said this, because I can recall it now, but at the time, I just sat and stared at myself. And the squirrels. Those damn squirrels.

One minute I was taking in a scene that hadn't fully registered, the next I was being pulled off the ground and thrust through a door that, five seconds before, hadn't been standing freely in my backyard. Through the door was a room that looked like something out an Italian palace turned museum, filled with gaudy yet very boring artwork. Everything was gold and red, and every last square inch was covered with paintings. It took me a second to realize we had just entered the room through one of them. So not fine art, I guess you could say, but framed pictures.

"Okay, look," he said, panting from the effort it'd taken to pull me off the lawn and drag me into... into wherever he had just dragged me.

"I'm not a doctor," he continued. "I'm more of a, well, they call us directors. You can call me Horace, on account of that being my name and all."

He straightened up and collected himself, his chin slightly turned up as if I was supposed to know who he was or otherwise be impressed by what he just told me. The rest of his appearance conjured up images of MBA students or rich kids using their parents' country club membership. Horace looked to be in his late twenties or early thirties, with sandy-blond hair that was neatly parted to the side, flat-front khakis, a blue gingham shirt, and a pair of brown suede loafers. The only things missing were the popped collar, the draped sweater over his shoulders, and a girlfriend named Buffy. I was too confused and upset to be impressed by any of this.

"Right, Horace. Let's start with what the hell you were directing in my backyard, how the hell we ended up in a museum, and why the *hell* are there two of me? And why is one covered in squirrels?"

"I said I was sorry!"

"Sorry for what?" I panted. "Okay, I think we need to restart this conversation. What just happened?"

I'm not sure if there is an ideal expression you should have when breaking the news to someone that you are responsible for mistakenly getting them fatally mauled by squirrels. But that is exactly the look my new acquaintance gave me when he spoke. If I ever need to tell someone that I

accidentally caused their death by squirrel feeding frenzy, I'm convinced that I will give that same exact look without even thinking. Somehow, it made the news easier to take. The news being that I tripped on a squirrel hole in the backyard and knocked myself unconscious, my head smacking off the tree on which the birdfeeder was hung. The news that, on my way to the ground, the bag of seed I held had tumbled, showering bird seed all over my body, still sticky with pine sap—essentially turning me into a giant chew toy.

Not that the squirrels in my backyard were ever shy, but apparently it took them a few minutes to determine that I wasn't going to move any time soon. As far as I know, and I don't know very far, squirrels are not carnivorous. However, the bird seed was basically fused to my skin by the quickly hardening pine sap. I must have been out cold, because I didn't stir in the slightest when one of them nipped a little too deep, a little too close to an artery. As I lay there, unconscious, fertilizing the lawn, I became the only person in the history of the world to be eaten alive by squirrels. Or so I was told.

Okay, maybe "eaten alive" is too strong a phrase to describe what happened to me, but it sounds far more interesting than saying I got nipped by a squirrel trying to make off with some birdseed which was glued to my wrist. In the end, I just slowly bled to death. Either way, the result was the same. I was let go from life.

"I told you," said Horace. "This wasn't supposed to happen quite like this."

My body (or whatever it was now) was numb and my mind swam from hearing the whole story. I looked around in a daze and noticed the door from which we had entered the room. It was an oil painting of what looked exactly like my backyard. The main difference between it and your usual oil painting—aside from the fact that I had just walked through it—was how it appeared to be moving. Or rather, the things *in* the picture were moving. Everything, with the exception of the heap on the ground that used to be me.

Chapter Three

Horace strolled over to an oversized chaise, covered in red velvet with large golden feet that looked like lion paws. The chaise was on the opposite side of the room from the painting we had just walked through, underneath a huge, arched window. As I regained my senses, I was able to make out low buildings and rolling hills outside the window. The hills were covered in green grass, small stubby trees, large stately pines, and scattered rocky outcroppings. Further in the distance, I could make out the hazy shadows of a mountain range. If I had not just been in my Midwestern backyard thirty seconds before, I would have sworn I was in Florence, or a reasonable facsimile thereof.

"We are in Florence."

Horace had apparently noticed my confusion as I stared out the window. He explained further.

"Upper management really fell in love with the style when it came around, so they decided to ditch the whole Giza Plateau motif and got with the times. Only thing is, they've decided to keep everything as-is ever since. You are currently standing in the nerve center of our little operation. The Palazzo."

"Yeah, that clears things up. Thanks."

"I'm trying to be helpful here! It's not every day we get visitors from the other side," Horace said. "Well, no. I take that back; it is every day we get visitors from the other side... quite a lot really. But we don't often get people over here by mistake."

"Just so long as you realize I have no idea what you are talking about, I think we'll be fine." I was still in shock from the events of the past half hour, so I was definitely a bit more out of it than usual—like when you stand up too quickly after sitting down for too long. Only this head rush wasn't going away.

"Look," Horace said. "The easiest way for you to understand what is going on here is to think of this as Heaven—although that's really a different department—and to think of me as something like a guardian angel, even though they've got their own union."

I gave him a look which must have conveyed the fact that I wasn't buying any of this. I was absolutely positive it was all a dream and that I would wake up in my own bed, with my wife standing over me to tell me she was taking Zoey to preschool. Then I would reluctantly roll out of bed to begin the daily job search.

"If you really want a job, one of the reasons I've brought you over here is to discuss just that."

Okay, how the hell did he guess *that* from my body language?

Horace rolled his eyes.

"Obviously the subtly thing isn't going to work with you," he said. "You are dead. I'm sorry, but it's true. I'm actually a little more sorry than usual because it was kind of my fault."

"You killed me?!"

"No. Mr. Nips, that toothy squirrel killed you."

Rather than clear things up, I became more confused as he went on.

"So you, being my guardian angel—"

"I said *like* a guardian angel," he said. "Again, different unions, different job descriptions."

"Okay. So you, being my non-union guardian angel, were supposed to protect me from the squirrels but you fell asleep on the job? Am I getting warmer?"

"Ice cold, actually. Maybe you should have a seat and let me finish before you try drawing any more conclusions."

"Fine," I said, as I pulled up a matching ottoman. Whoever built the place, they were big on appearances. It was odd because Horace, aside from that weird glowing thing he had going on, looked like he could have just walked out of a Banana Republic catalog. He didn't look like the puffy-hatted, ruffled-shirt sort of guy who belonged in those surroundings.

"Thank you, I try to keep current," Horace said as he stood up and began pacing the room, the soft soles of his Hush Puppies silent on the marble floors. "Starting at the beginning, you are dead."

"Do you really need to keep saying that?" I asked. I had always thought that my death would be absolute nothingness, and here I was, in what was quickly becoming an Abbot and Costello skit. I didn't need to know who was on first; I just needed to know what the hell was going on.

"I'm trying to tell you what is going on. And I need to keep saying it because it needs to sink in before we can move on. We can skip the gory details of how, as there is really no need to revisit that. You are currently on the other side, and I'm afraid that's the best we can do in terms of place names. This isn't Heaven, this isn't Hell—it's best to think of this place as a control room, for those things that *can* be controlled, that is."

Horace stopped pacing long enough to open a gilded chest set against a far wall, from which he pulled a crystal decanter filled with a nasty looking concoction that seemed of the chest-hair-growing variety.

"Can I pour you one?" he asked.

I nodded lamely as he poured two glasses, put the stopper back in the decanter, and closed up the chest. He continued his monologue as he brought me my glass.

"We've got a few different types on this side. We've got people like you—your normal, average human who no longer has a body to call his own, but can't move on just yet."

"Move on to where?"

"That's an upper management decision, but usually it's just back to the other side again. The only ones who stay here are those who possess a special skillset we can use, or those with extenuating circumstances."

"And what would those be?"

"Then we have those like me," said Horace, ignoring my question and handing me the glass he had poured; it was fizzing. "I said you can think of me, and the rest of us for that matter, as something like angels because most people over there think that's what we are. I blame the marketing department. We don't have quite the same exposure as they do, what with all the holy books and such." Horace paused to take a sip and motioned for me to do so as well.

"Dr. Pepper?"

"Nectar of the Gods!" he replied, holding up his glass to salute, then throwing the rest of its contents down his throat.

This was too weird to be real. I pressed on with my questions in hopes that the right combination would snap me out of the spell I was under.

"Okay, so we've established that this isn't Heaven or Hell, and that you are technically not an angel."

"Right," Horace said. "And you're not dreaming, trust me. Mostly what we do is make sure that everything runs smoothly on the other side. Even though you've split the atom, discovered fire, and created reality television all on your own, you still need a lot of guidance. That is where we come in. Think of the Earth, or rather, your perception of the earth until half an hour ago, as one giant movie set. All of the people living on that side are actors and, while they are not aware of it, they are acting out individual scripts that we have developed *over here*. Now, every movie has a director, and some even have two or three. You've got your executive director and then, depending on the size and scope of the movie, you may have a second unit filming at another location with another director. Right now we have around seven billion actors over there, so you can imagine we have a lot of units, and a lot of directors."

"You mean to tell me that Heaven is one big movie studio?"

"For the millionth time, this ain't Heaven. Now, if I may?"

"Right. Damn. Sorry... Is there one?"

"That's not my department. Anyway, as I was saying, we have our fair share of secondary units and each one of those units needs a director. I am one of those directors. Each unit is made up of a few dozen humans, assigned completely at random but far in advance, and is helped along their path with the assistance of their director. Just like Hollywood, each director has their own style. Mine happens to be what you would call dark comedy, and you had the fortune of being assigned to my unit."

"So my never-ending streak of bad luck... I have you to thank for that?" Although I didn't want to acknowledge it, things were less dreamlike by the second. The situation was still as absurd as ever, but this was definitely unlike any dream I'd ever had before.

"Afraid so," said Horace. "On the bright side, your life made for some quality entertainment over here. You were a big draw."

That stung. Being told that you suffered through your entire life for no reason outside of providing entertainment for a bunch of bored demigods isn't exactly ego-boosting material.

"Being your beloved clown doesn't make me feel any better," I snapped.

"You should be thankful things have mellowed out around here over the past few millennia. And, it's best not to think of us as gods."

"Can you please stop doing that? I get it—you can read my mind. Can you just pretend for a moment that you don't have that ability?"

"Sorry," said Horace, not looking sorry at all.

"Anyway, as I was saying, things have gotten pretty chill around here lately. Remember Job? You might have read about his wacky exploits in a little book called the Bible? Yeah, he was in my unit."

"Wait, that story was true?"

"Of course! That was some of my best work. Not every day you get published in a holy book." He took a moment to

eyeball his empty soda glass disapprovingly, then tossed it out the window. Immediately afterwards, I heard it shatter on the cobblestones below. Then, with a blue flash and a barely audible *zip*, a brand new glass, exactly like the one that had just been defenestrated, materialized next to the soda chest. Horace waited for my reaction like a parent watching a child open a present they know the child will like. I must have given him what he wanted, because he continued.

“Pretty cool, huh? That’s nothing compared to what I’ve got in mind for you.”

Chapter Four

I was born at two in the morning on a rainy summer day in the late 1970's. There was nothing remarkable or noteworthy about my birth—so I thought—other than the fact that I was a planned “oops.” Meaning, only one of my parents was surprised when the test came back positive.

Horace and I sat in a dark room in the basement of the Palazzo. It could have passed for a typical man cave in any large home, complete with an LCD projector broadcasting the hilariously sad story of my life against a large screen that dropped down from the ceiling.

“Just because the architecture and décor are straight out of the fifteenth century, doesn’t mean we haven’t upgraded the technology,” Horace said. A bucket of popcorn and a couple of large sodas sat between us.

“So what, is this where you show me what a wonderful life I really had and then dispatch a second-class angel to save me?” I asked.

“Don’t worry. We’re not going to watch the whole thing, just the good parts.”

The image on the screen was of the hospital room where I was born. In the room was my mom, my dad, my grandma, a delivery nurse, and... Horace?

“What the hell were you doing there?”

"Wait for it."

My mom cradled me—or rather, the small, wrinkly, purplish, troll-looking thing that I assumed to be me. My dad sat on a chair in the corner, his eyes wide and dazed, his fingers nervously drumming on the yellow vinyl armrests, still somewhat in shock now that he had two sons. My grandma sat on a stool next to the bed, and Horace stood behind her, almost on top of her, completely unnoticed by anyone in the room. Just then, another nurse entered the room carrying an armload of paperwork.

"Do we have a name yet?" the nurse asked cheerfully.

My dad looked up at the nurse, his face like a deer in the headlights. He finally blinked and looked toward my mom.

As my mom began to speak, Horace placed a hand on my grandma's shoulder, and she immediately interrupted.

"I really think you should seriously consider the name we talked about last week."

My mom looked back at her in stunned silence.

"But mom, we discussed this. You know we want to name him Zachary."

"Boom!" said Horace triumphantly, as he paused the playback and looked at me expectantly.

"That's it? That's what you do? Seems a little childish and petty, doesn't it?"

"Well, maybe now, but this was just the beginning. Let's resume, shall we?"

The images on the screen came back to life and my grandmother continued.

"Zachary is such a biblical name, and you don't even go to church. I really think you should consider the other name I suggested. The Winters, the Gregories, and the Leonards, you know—the young couple that just moved in down the street—they all have sons with that name. It's very popular."

Now there were not one but two deer caught in the headlights. My mother stared off into space for a moment, looked back at my dad, and then, as her shoulders slumped, fixed her gaze on the wrinkly purple troll. My mother, who had never said no to my grandmother in her life, informed the nurse that my name would not be Zachary.

Horace paused the playback again.

"Pretty good, huh?" he said.

"I have to say, I'm still not entirely impressed if all you do is change people's names and get them eaten by small woodland creatures."

"Well, that's not *all* that I do."

Sensing an opening, I continued down a path that I hoped would push Horace's buttons. It was the least, if not the most childish thing, I could do to the man who killed me.

"That didn't seem very exciting. I mean, what was the point? So you had my grandma talk my mom out of naming me Zachary? I don't get it."

"Of course, taken by itself, the name change trick isn't going to seem like much. But it was the small, first act in a much larger body of work, one that, as you know, ended a bit prematurely with that squirrel nonsense back there."

"Is this why you brought me down here? To watch your home video collection of each moment I was screwed by fate?"

"I wouldn't call it fate. It was pretty much always me."

"Thank you, but the visual I'd prefer is that of being screwed by an invisible force, not by you. No offense."

"None taken," Horace said, although there was a hint of dejection in his voice. The shrug of his shoulders made me feel as though it did get to him a little.

"So why are we down here?"

"Think of it as job training."

"You want *me* to do this? No thanks, I'm not interested in getting my wings."

"I can't force you to do it. The population is growing faster than we can keep up with through our traditional development system. Plus, I kind of owe you for the squirrel business."

"So you kill me, then you offer me a job to do the same thing to other poor saps?"

"Haha. I see what you did there. Pretty funny."

"What are you talking about?" I snapped.

"Poor saps? Sap? Bird seed? Squirrels? Oh, never mind."

I chose not to dignify that with a response.

"What do you mean by job training?" I asked again.

"Again, it's completely up to you. As I said before, my style is dark comedy. There is a segment of the population on this side that really enjoys that sort of thing, and I could use some fresh ex-meat like you."

"Meat?"

"Sorry. A little colloquialism we have on this side for those on the *other* side. We tend to shy away from the whole 'living vs. dead' thing because honestly, that's not really a valid distinction."

"Why meat?" I knew where he was going with this, but I wanted to hear him say it.

"Because that is basically the only difference between what you are now, and what you were then. You are still you, just, well, *minus* the meat suit."

"Sounds a little morbid, don't you think?"

"It sounds less pretentious than always having to refer to them as 'the living,' but if you don't like the sound of it, call them 'breathers.' That's fairly popular around here as well."

"Yeah, that's not much better," I said. "So you're telling me that the 'directors' are actually directors in the Hollywood sense?"

"You can say that, especially since that's pretty much what I've been telling you since you got here. There are the dark comedy guys like me, and then we've got action thriller guys. We also have our mystery directors. Think Amelia Earhart and Jimmy Hoffa. Horror directors, you know, plague, pestilence, that sort of thing? If there is a corresponding film or literary genre, we probably have a director for it."

"In other words," I said, trying to wrap my head around the idea, "I could theoretically end up being a sappy feel-good romantic comedy director, if I wanted?"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Horace said. "Slow down there kiddo."

It was weird to hear myself called "kiddo," especially by a guy who looked a good five to ten years younger than I was.

"I didn't say I was going to let you be a director. That kind of career advancement takes time, lots and lots of time. Like, millennia. I can fast track you, put you on the centuries

track, but you still need to get some experience under your belt first."

"Okay. I'm not saying I actually want to work for you, but does this experience involve having to watch more of this show you've got queued up here?"

"Of course!"

"Then let's go ahead and get it over with."

The images on the screen lurched back to life. Next up was a scene in the house I grew up in. My whole family was there—my older brother, my parents, and me. I looked to be about two or three years old. My brother and I were playing with some *Star Wars* figures on the bright orange, shag carpet.

Horace shot me a sideways glance and said, "Still have any questions about why we stopped updating the place after the Renaissance?"

Just then Horace entered the scene with a kitten tucked in his arms. As he set it down on the front porch, the poor thing began to wail.

"You brought us a kitten? How is that even...?" I stopped short and Horace just looked at me and grinned.

"I was deathly allergic to that thing! I had pneumonia three times before I was five! I spent eight years getting three shots a week for my allergies!"

"And all I had to do was drop off a cute little kitty."

"Are you sure you're a dark comedy director and not some sort of Satanic-cult guy?" I asked. "I'm not sure putting a preschooler in an oxygen tent is exactly laugh-a-minute material."

"When you've been doing this for as long as I have, and when your audiences has been watching it for as long as they have, your perceptions start to shift a little."

The show continued, in light-speed fast forward. Horace would slow the video down to savor his favorite moments. There was the time in first grade where the teacher didn't believe I had to go to the bathroom—I had been crying wolf all day—and I ended up going in my pants. My third grade playground marriage was featured prominently, as was the stellar start to my basketball career that was shattered, along with my arm during my freshman year in high school. Each time, without fail, there was Horace. Whether it was egging

me on to annoy the teacher, placing real estate fliers in my grade school wife's mailbox, or prompting my friends to challenge me to a contest to see who could hang on the basketball rim, he had a hand in what seemed like every bout of bad luck I ever experienced.

"How do you live with yourself, doing this to people?" I asked.

"Says the bank lawyer."

Touché. The video played on. College, making the volleyball team and then getting benched when the star scholarship player arrived the next year. Getting laid off twice in the same year by the same company before I went to law school. He even had a hand in the fortune we spent on our dog's vet bills. Every time we were on the verge of paying off one debt or another, along came Horace to make sure the dog needed emergency eye surgery, knee replacement, or any number of other, expensive, vet calls.

Finally, we arrived at the squirrel scene.

"Wait, why did we skip over getting canned by those law firms right before Christmas two years in a row?"

"Oh, I actually had nothing to do with that. Lawyers tend to do well enough on their own in screwing people over. I took a little break and let the partners do my job for me. Those guys are great. All about proper utilization of resources."

Even though I had just lived, and died, through the squirrel scene a few hours earlier, it seemed a lifetime away.

"That's because it technically *has* been a lifetime," said Horace, reading my mind again. "This video here, it might look like we're watching it mostly on fast forward, but we are the ones who are skipping ahead."

"You really look like you are just itching to explain this one, so go right ahead."

And he was. Horace sat there with a big old smile on his face, and large, expectant eyes. He had gone from the parent watching his child open a present, to the kid just itching to tell a secret.

"Right!" he started. "You can see that things are a little different on this side. We, meaning those of us in the director ranks and above, have been given certain abilities to assist us in our jobs. One of those abilities, as you have already experienced firsthand, is the ability to travel between here and there virtually unimpeded. Another one, as you have seen, is the ability to influence events over there without being noticed." Horace stopped to take a sip from his oversized nectar-delivery system.

"The most useful trick we get to use, though, is the ability to manipulate time. We can speed it up, slow it down, reverse it, or stop it completely."

"If that's the case, why didn't you use your super powers to keep me from dying at the hands of a squirrel?"

"Number one, because I wasn't paying attention."

At least he was honest.

"Number two, I really didn't think anyone was capable of being killed by a squirrel. And, number three, under no circumstances are we allowed to go back and change a script that has already been put in motion. That is why sometimes things go terribly wrong over there. You know those moments that make people question whether there is a God? It's usually the result of poor planning on this side that gets out of control."

"If it causes so many problems, why follow the rules?"

"You've seen *Ghostbusters*, right?"

"Of course."

"Crossing the streams was bad, right? Every cell in your body exploding at the speed of light? That sort of thing? Think of changing a script like crossing the streams."

"Yeah, but at the end of the movie they crossed the streams and saved the day."

"But the entire city was covered in marshmallow fluff. No. No way. This would be on a much greater scale, and the fallout wouldn't be nearly as tasty."

"Wow, you guys really are big on the Hollywood metaphors up here. What'd you do before movies were invented?"

"What makes you think the idea didn't start over here and make its way back to the other side?"

The lights came back up and he continued. "If you are interested, I can start you off as a production assistant. You'd get to spend time over there, a lot of time, doing some reconnaissance and gathering intelligence. Basically helping me plan the scenes, that sort of thing."

"What special powers do I get?"

"Easy, killer. The only *abilities* you'll get are the abilities to slip back and forth between here and there, via your painting, and the ability to go unnoticed on the other side. You won't be able to influence events. You won't be able to contact or communicate with anyone, at least anyone with more than half a brain, and you certainly won't be able to manipulate time."

"Well, that is a bit of a buzzkill. And come to think of it, why would I accept a job from the guy who killed me?"

"I'm not going to beg. If you don't want the job, we send you on your merry way. You simply get put back over there to start over. No guaranties on where or how you will end up, though. Could be born to royalty. Could be born in the slums of Mumbai. Could be super lucky and come back as a sea sponge. Wouldn't that be nice? Spend your life at the bottom of the ocean only to get plucked out, dried up, and then rubbed up against some guy's—"

"I get it. No guarantees. So we've got the cons laid out pretty well. What are the pros?"

"As I was saying. If you say no, you get spit back into the machine. If you say yes, you get to stay here for as long as you like. You also get to enjoy the French benefits of—"

"French benefits?"

"Yeah, all the other cool stuff that comes along with a job, intangibles and such."

"Pretty sure you mean fringe benefits."

"No, we don't have those here. Besides, look around, even if we did have uniforms, they wouldn't be cowboy outfits. Completely wrong historical period."

"Wait, but—"

There was a knock on the door then, preceded by the entry of a short, grey-haired, Italian woman who looked vaguely familiar. She looked like a composite of every librarian I had ever seen, if they had all been Italian. Horace looked annoyed.

"Yes, Lorenza?"

"When you are done in here, Signor Horace, *He* would like to speak with you. In private." The inflection in her voice was slight, but I definitely caught it.

"Yes, fine."

There was no response from the librarian. To say she was expressionless would be incorrect. While there was no hint of a smile, or any emotion whatsoever, she definitely had an air of sourness about her.

"Lorenza, please, I'm busy?" he said as he looked sideways at me, turning the statement into a question as if asking her to get out.

With flared nostrils and a slight look of disgust thrown in the direction of Horace, the librarian nodded at me and bowed in his direction, slinking backwards through the door.

"*He?*" I asked. "Sounds important. What was that all about?"

"Oh, never mind Lorenza. She's relatively new around here. She's one of the secretaries—sorry, *administrative assistants* that upper management uses. Thinks she's special because of her position."

Horace's pursed lips communicated a slight bitterness about this, but he quickly picked up his train of thought again.

"What, new like me?"

"She's got a few years on you. We actually picked her up with the Palazzo."

"So, not new at all then?"

"I said *relatively*. Now, as I was saying, if you stay here, not only do you get to hang out with the cool kids and enjoy all the best this side has to offer. You, my friend, you will get to peek in, whenever you want, and watch your daughter grow up."

The words came out of my mouth before I even had a chance to form them in my head.

Jason L. Pyrz

“How soon can I start?”

Chapter Five

In addition to offering me the job and allowing me to stick around, Horace allowed me to use the painting that opened up to the house where I left Gwen and Zoey. I didn't get to use it at all during my orientation period, and to be honest, I didn't want to pop over and check in on my own funeral and the emotional fallout caused by my departure. Although I didn't feel dead, I was still an emotional wreck those first few days. People say death is only hard on those who are left behind. Those people obviously don't know what they are talking about, because, despite the wondrous world in which I now found myself, it was excruciating for me. Here I was, not alive but still conscious and self-aware, separated from my family by what seemed like a technicality.

Horace, either because he was cognizant of my mental state or completely oblivious to it, kept me busy. There wasn't much time to think about my situation. My orientation lasted about three months, during which I shadowed Horace around the Palazzo as he went over scripts and developed strategies to bring them to fruition. The more time I spent with Horace, the more human he seemed to me. There was little about his personality that screamed "divine" or "supernatural." For the most part, he seemed like the kind

of a guy I would have enjoyed hanging out with before I didn't have the option not to. Not someone I would go out of my way to be friends with, but someone whose company I wouldn't despise. His apparent lack of empathy toward my situation made the transition a bit easier. There was no pity party to be had, so, instead, I focused on the job. While I still worried about the impact my leaving had on them, it was nice knowing that the fat life insurance payout would keep Gwen and Zoey from being turned out onto the streets.

Thankfully, in one of the rare moments of my life that slightly offset my otherwise horrible luck—or rather, Horace's horrible influence—Gwen and I had just been talked into a couple of rather large life insurance policies by an eager, young financial services salesman. You know the type; the one who asks about the friends he can “talk to” before he's even done inking the deal with you. I often wondered if his commission was revoked after I died within the first year—I never cared enough to look into it. In any event, the point is that Gwen and Zoey were set for life. As pathetic as it sounds, with my track record of getting laid off, they were probably more secure with me gone.

I had slightly more time to myself once the orientation period ended and, hoping that four months was enough time to put between my passing and my first ghostly visit, I finally gave the painting-portal a try.

I was wrong. It was one of the hardest things I had ever done.

It was late March and spring had just sprung. Of course, being Chicago, there was still a foot of snow on the ground. That was probably a good thing, as it covered the scene of the incident. I made my way from the back yard into the house and stopped dead in my tracks. Sitting there, on the couch in front of the fireplace, were Gwen and Zoey, looking exactly like they did the day I left. I had no idea what I was supposed to do.

I quickly realized that this wasn't something I was prepared to do. I just stood there, for a good fifteen minutes, watching them as they cuddled and spent time in their own little worlds. Gwen was engrossed in one of her campy romance novels, and Zoey had her nose buried in one of the

decommissioned smart phones we gave her when we had upgraded to the newer model. After staring at them for what would have been a very awkward amount of time had they been able to see me, I turned around and slipped back through the portal. The entire time I was there, neither of them had said a word.

§

Those first few months were some of the most painful and difficult. Gwen and I had been together for about twelve years, but it was the effect my absence had on Zoey that was difficult to witness. Zoey was only four when I left; old enough to remember me but young enough where, I hoped, my absence didn't leave too big of a hole in her life. That didn't mean, however, that my leaving went unnoticed. She asked the types of questions I imagine most young children ask when they lose a parent. When was Daddy coming home from heaven? Maybe Daddy could come back just for a day, to play? But she never cried. She was too young to grasp the finality of it all, but I could see the disappointment in her blue eyes when Gwen would explain that daddy couldn't come back, not even to play for an afternoon.

My visits were frequent. On my free nights, I would sit on Zoey's bed and listen to Gwen read bedtime stories, then linger after Gwen had turned out the lights and closed the door, just to watch Zoey fall asleep before heading back to the Palazzo.

Some mornings I would tag along when Gwen took Zoey to preschool, listening to the conversations they had as they walked. These were very serious conversations. One in particular involved Zoey's plans to bring a certain theme park mouse home so she could "take good care of him." She was deadly serious about it. Gwen didn't have the heart to tell her that there were laws against kidnapping.

We—that is, Gwen—would drop Zoey off and get her set up in class. As soon as her coat was shed, Zoey was off and playing with her friends, and Gwen would head home for three hours of alone time. Sometimes, after she dropped Zoey off, I would stick around the house to be with her. But usually, I would leave her alone and head back to the

Palazzo. Even though she had no way of knowing I was there, it still felt right to give Gwen her privacy. That's what I would have wanted from any ghosts shadowing me during my lifetime—just a bit of common courtesy. Toward the end of the school day, if I was still free, I'd pop back over to walk with Gwen back to preschool.

When I was still alive, I would sometimes pick up Zoey by myself. The moms would be off in their groups talking about whatever it is that suburban housewives in yoga pants talked about. Then there was me. The untouchable adult male, the only one around for miles apparently, in the middle of my invisible ten-foot bubble that no mother dared to enter lest she end up having to talk to the freak who wasn't working like the other dads. Things were usually better when I was there with Gwen. Her presence would offset whatever creepy vibes I was apparently giving off, and a brave mom or two would venture over and say hello. Now that I was finally able to see how things were when I wasn't physically there, it was funny to see how much they included Gwen in their conversations.

At least I wasn't missing much. I didn't care about their Paleo recipes or what happened on the previous night's Bachelor. I was there to see my daughter. As they stood there in their own little reality-show-obsessed worlds, I would stand with my face pressed against the one-way window that looked in on the classroom. I could have slipped inside the room without anyone noticing, obviously, but playing by the rules helped me feel human.

Right before the teachers unlocked the door, the kids would frantically scurry about, putting away the toys, running to their cubbies, and getting their jackets on. The door would pop open then, the moms would file in, and the kids would wave and shout as soon as they spotted theirs. It made me smile every time I saw the one on Zoey's face as Gwen entered the room, but it was a fleeting joy.

"Mommy!" she would say, her tiny feet kicking like crazy as she sat on the bench, that big, beautiful smile lighting up her face.

Then she would crane her neck to look for me behind Gwen. Her smile would fade for a second before she would

zero back in on mommy and throw her arms around her neck.

I often wondered why I had chosen to stick around and torture myself like this when I could just have easily have been reincarnated as a banana slug and have absolutely no recollection or concept of the pain. To some extent it was torture, but a torture I felt I had to endure. I owed it to the both of them to stick around and be a part of their lives, even if they had no idea I was there.

I hoped it would someday get easier and, eventually, it did.

Chapter Six

Not everyone is “lucky” enough to get a director. It’s based on a lottery system, the chances of winning roughly 50/50. Even with half of the world’s population free from the directors’ interference, the control of the other half is enough for upper management, as they’re called, to keep a handle on things. That was the only lottery I ever won. Neither Gwen nor Zoey were tapped to be directed, so pity their bad luck for being associated with me. However, even if Gwen had never met me, it would likely have been some other poor schmuck. That’s just how it works. As I said, they have their hands in the affairs of just enough lives to influence virtually everyone else’s.

My life before the squirrels wasn’t all gloom and doom, as I have probably led you to believe. I actually had quite a bit of good fortune—of course, usually before some catastrophe or another. During some of those good moments, I was able to travel and see a good portion of the world. Working for Horace guaranteed that I was still able to do so, albeit in a slightly different fashion.

The actors I helped keep tabs on for Horace were spread throughout the globe—bad luck isn’t limited by geography—but I couldn’t just pop up wherever and whenever I want, like him. As he made clear upon offering the job, the only

special powers I had were the ability to travel back and forth across the void using the picture that led to my house, and to remain invisible to everyone and everything once there, with very limited exceptions. The only other portals to which I had access were the ones that opened up into areas on the map that weren't readily accessible by reliable transportation. If I could get there via plane, train, automobile, or boat, that was how I traveled. If I needed to visit a tribesman in the middle of the Amazon, or a fisherman on an uncharted island in the middle of the Pacific, only then did I get to use the special preset portals that would get me there in an instant. Not that I got those assignments. This wasn't the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, and there was no Babel Fish to stick in my ear that would make me magically understand every language in the universe. The cases I got sent out on were those that either involved English-speaking targets, or where understanding the language wasn't important. I spent most of my traveling around Europe and North America.

Once on the other side, apart from the invisibility thing, I was pretty much bound by the same laws of physics as the living, as I continued to call them (I never got comfortable with the whole "meat" and "breather" thing). This meant that I was often to be found, if you could see me, occupying a seemingly empty airplane seat on my way from one place to another. It wasn't that I couldn't occupy the same space as someone else, but it made for a very unpleasant tingling sensation that I preferred to avoid. Solid objects, on the other hand, were still solid objects. If an object was movable, the spirit-world equivalent could be moved while the real-world version stayed put. I never got around to taking a physics course in school and, while I could grasp the basics, the limit of my understanding was hit well before I got anywhere near supernatural physics.

Filling an empty airplane seat isn't as easy as it may sound, not that it really sounds easy to find empty seats on a modern commercial airliner. We have already established that Horace wasn't the only director. Therefore, it stands to reason that I was not the only production assistant running around on the other side. On the contrary, the world is

crawling with them. The easiest way to tell who they were, aside from the fact that the living paid no attention to them, was that they made eye contact with you. Every so often I would mistake one of the living for a fellow production assistant, like when a person stared back at me. Turned out they were just overly-sensitive. Where do you think ghost stories come from? For the most part, though, my contact with the living was rare. Production assistants share the type of bond that I imagine is shared among migrant workers in a country where nobody speaks their language—people just didn't notice us; we kept to ourselves; and we quietly performed the jobs for which we were there.

One of my fellow migrant workers, with whom I had a habit of bumping into often, was a guy named Marcus. Marcus was bearable, and even entertaining in small doses, but Marcus had his own habit. Marcus liked to talk, a lot, and one of Marcus's favorite subjects was Marcus. Throughout the course of our acquaintance, I learned that Marcus was an adrenaline junkie. He liked fast motorcycles, BASE jumping, skydiving, and pretty much anything else that involved speed and a good chance of ending up smeared against an immovable object. He had that dark-skinned, vaguely Asian look to him. You know, the one where he could have been part Hawaiian, maybe a quarter Mexican. Whatever he was, you could tell, before he told you, that he was the type of guy girls were all over before his incident.

One of the stories that you would hear, repeatedly, if you spent any time around Marcus at all, was the story of how he met his end on the other side. According to Marcus, he was zipping along the 405 freeway one day, splitting lanes on one of those Japanese motorcycles. Unfortunately for Marcus, he didn't quite have time to stop, or anywhere to go, when a distracted Orange County trophy wife, in one of those soccer-mom-sized, baby Hummers, decided to switch lanes without warning. This was one of those times where not even the California helmet law could have helped. Running into the rear end of an obnoxiously large (yet comically small compared to a real Hummer) SUV at eighty plus miles per hour was more than enough to give Marcus an express trip to the Palazzo.

Marcus worked for the director, Cyrus, whose specialty was action and adventure scripts. To hear him tell it, Marcus would have been sent right back to the other side to start over if he hadn't been so perfect for the job. Besides, there was nothing tying him to the other side. No unfinished business to clean up. But when it came to adrenaline-packed and testosterone-soaked story lines, he was born—or rather, died—for the job.

Along with the conclusion that he was a first-class douchebag while he was still alive, any time spent with Marcus was enough to prove that he was also dumber than a box of rocks. It was almost as if my repeated run-ins with him was one last joke played on me by Horace. It got me thinking about how I ended up working for Horace in the first place. I mean, Marcus was a guy who seemed like he lived his entire life in preparation for his position. While I enjoyed a touch of *schadenfruede* every now and then, I would never have categorized myself as someone who was experienced in making other people miserable.

Though, the more I thought about it, the more I realized that I did have plenty of experience making people miserable. One of the reasons why I hated being a lawyer was that no matter how well I did—no, especially if I did my job well, it was guaranteed that at least someone in the world absolutely hated me. That's just the nature of being a trial attorney who specialized in representing banks. Anyway, I kept telling myself that I must of had at least one shred of humanity left, if only because I hated being a lawyer so much. Rather than over-analyzing my purpose at the Palazzo, I took Horace at his word that he felt guilty for letting me become one of his more amusing Darwin Award winners.

§

Most of the jobs that Horace sent me on were merely information-gathering assignments. Tracking the movements of our marks, getting an idea of their habits, relationships, and anything else that would come in handy when scripting out their lives. You couldn't really call them covert operations, because there was almost no chance whatsoever

that I would be found out, but I still liked to imagine I was a black ops agent or something. A spectral spook, so to speak.

Horace had a few thousand breathers for whom he was responsible, but at any given time I was collecting data on only a few dozen of his more involved cases. I would spend anywhere from a few hours to a few days with one, hop a flight to another city and check in on another. I would continue on like that for a week or two at a time. Traveling by air becomes far less of a pain and not nearly as time consuming when you don't need to worry about checking in or going through security, but it was still a soul-sucking experience. Every so often I would run into Marcus or someone else I recognized and we would spend some time exchanging notes on our assignments. Mostly we would talk about the "collateral damage" from our travels among the living—in other words, the people with whom we accidentally made contact. It was never willful or malicious, at least it wasn't in my case, but there was always some amusement to be had when you got through to a breather.

Back when I was still alive, I was addicted to those shows where they get a group of Goth kids together to walk around old houses with questionably scientific devices to try and flush out any paranormal activity. Much like learning the secret behind an amazing magic trick, or finding out that Santa Claus was one of your parents, it was a bit of a letdown to find out what was really going on when something was "haunted." I mean, it's true that there really is some communication going on between the living and the not, but that's about where the magic ends. For the most part, hauntings are nothing more than some bored guy on this side trying to see if he can do his best impersonation of Patrick Swayze from *Ghost*. Most of the time it failed miserably and you'd get a guy, who nobody could see, waving his arms around frantically and screaming his head off. Kind of sad, really. Every once in a while though, you got one of those people who was sensitive and simple enough to pick up on whatever wavelengths we operated on and, voila, you had yourself a haunting. Animals are a different story altogether. The next time your dog barks for no reason? Trust me, there's a reason.

Chapter Seven

It didn't take long for me to adjust to life in the Palazzo and on the road. The years began to add up, and being at the Palazzo started to feel as normal as life on the other side had. I still had my family even if they didn't have me, and I had a steady job which is better than anything I'd had since graduating from law school. While I sometimes wished upper management had kept the Ancient Egyptian motif, I was comfortable in the nether-Florence of the eternal Renaissance. Despite the intimate familiarity I gained with the public areas of the Palazzo and its immediate surroundings, I never ventured very far from the city center during those early years. Instead of exploring during my off hours, I was more interested in spending time with my family.

My room at the Palazzo was tucked away down a side corridor, far from any of the arterial hallways and the parlor that housed the painting to my backyard—the same one that Horace had first brought me through right after I died. Even still, the gaudy opulence of the main corridors made no obvious attempt to recede in the less-visited reaches of the property. Although I have a tendency to refer to it as my room, it was actually more like an apartment, and a good-sized one at that. There was a foyer complete with a nude

statue which, had it been less cold at the time of his sculpting, could have doubled as an impressive coat hook. The main living room was at least five hundred square feet, with a row of windows along the back wall. The bedroom had an oversized four-post bed that, although technically not needed, was still nice to have. I discovered that it was a good idea to shut down and rest every night, if only to keep me sane. The rest of the Palazzo, despite the number of people who lived within its walls, always felt more like a carefully-preserved museum than an apartment or office building. At any rate, the place always reminded me of the summer I spent in Italy while I was still alive.

§

It was the summer between my sophomore and junior years of college and I had just finished a two-week course at my school's extension campus in Rome. My twentieth birthday fell during those two weeks, as did the momentous occasion of my first alcoholic beverage (which was followed, in rapid succession, by many more). I had visited Florence that summer and spent way too much time walking through palace after palace filled with paintings, sculptures, and furniture that was never meant to be used as actual furniture. Now I was living in one of those museums.

Because I was still technically a teenager that summer, my fondest memories were of those late nights, back in Rome, spent wandering the city under the influence of my newfound liquid friend. One of those nights stood out from the rest. It was around four in the morning and I was waiting at a bus stop in a deserted Piazza Cavour. Just me, a couple of other students, and an old, grey-haired lady under a bright yellow umbrella. On the other side of the piazza, a bus driver stood outside his idle bus. The first hint of purple light appeared in the sky to the east, a fine mist came down from a passing cloud, and the faint sound of an Italian opera floated from the speakers of a small stereo clutched in the old woman's other hand.

The dreamlike moment shattered as the previously-idle bus rumbled to life in all its diesel-belching glory. The driver pulled up to the stop and we all stepped into our harshly-lit

fluorescent wake up call. All of us, except for the old woman with the umbrella and stereo. Maybe she was catching a different route. Maybe she just didn't want to get onto a bus with three obviously-intoxicated American college kids, I remember thinking.

§

Sometimes, things were the same around the Palazzo. Was I really dead and hanging out with ghostly overlords in a mediaeval palace, or was this simply a dream or a trick my brain was playing on me in the instant before my death? Inevitably though, real life—or death—would come rushing back in one form or another. The most common form was Horace, popping in to send me off on another one of his jobs.

I've already told you that Horace wasn't the only director. Horace never gave me a solid number, but hinted that there were around a hundred directors, all of them living within the walls of the Palazzo at any given time. Most of them, including Horace, have been around since the beginning of human existence, but there are some junior directors as well. Not that it makes much of a difference; the most junior director I knew was promoted about the time a certain child in a manger was entertaining a trio of royal visitors on the West Bank. Needless to say, the prospects for someone wanting to get into that line of work are exceedingly slim.

It takes a special breed to be a director. A handful have opted for a vacation by living out a life on the other side. Others have simply decided they were done and chose to blink out of existence forever. While upper management tends to frown on voluntary resignations, due in large part to the difficulty of finding and training suitable replacements, there has never been any hesitation in dismissing a director for breaking the rules. Generally though, directors do their thing without much oversight and without incurring the wrath of upper management. Sure, there are mistakes, such as the one that led to me becoming squirrel food, but those types of mistakes are expected and even factored into the grand scheme of things.

The type of rule breaking that can get a director canned involve offenses such as one) the aforementioned stream-crossing, also known as messing with a script already set in motion; two) attempting to directly influence the life of someone under another director's influence; and three) disobeying an order from upper management.

I've never heard of a director being involuntarily terminated, but according to Horace, it's not pleasant. Mostly it is the revocation of power that causes the greatest pain. Imagine having the ability to step between worlds at will, control the flow of time as if it were a movie on your DVR, and have near-absolute control over the lives of thousands of individuals. Imagine having that power for centuries or even millennia longer than the existence of the world's greatest civilizations. Now imagine having all of those powers stripped away and you become nothing more than a ghost. If you are lucky, you simply go mad. If you are unlucky, you teeter on the edge of madness, for all of eternity, fully comprehending what you once had and how you lost it all.

Upper management? Nobody below the director rank seemed to know anything about them, but the questions and rumors ran wild among the production assistants. Was upper management a group of individuals? A single being? If anyone knew, they said nothing. I know what you're thinking, and yes, it's possible that upper management is God. It's also possible that upper management is merely another level of celestial bureaucracy. I never found out definitively.

Below the director level, and below the production assistant level even, is the elusive messenger class. The rumors among the production assistants were that these people lacked the talent to draw the attention of the directors, but were dedicated and pure enough of thought to be used as the mouthpieces for upper management. Someone once floated the theory that the messengers actually were upper management. Those who claimed to know, they said that the messengers lived as hermits in the hills just outside of town.

Then there was everyone else. Just as with your typical urban environment, there were people from all walks of life. When the coffee place on the corner of the Palazzo was in

need of a new barista, there was a good chance that some kid working at a Starbucks on the other side would “accidentally” ride his bike into the path of a garbage truck.

The one major thing that struck me as odd when I first “moved” here was the fact that it wasn’t filled to the brim with billions of souls. After all, wasn’t that where everyone went when they died?

Well, the big mistake in my thought process was that it wasn’t the place everyone went when they died. If it had been, that would make for an extremely inefficient system. No, instead, most people are spit right back out into the machine as soon as they die. When their old body stops working, they get slapped into a new one and have another go at life. Call it reincarnation if you want, but it’s really nothing more than a well-organized recycling program.

The numbers always seemed perfectly balanced too. As soon as someone blinked out of existence or got recycled, someone new would arrive to take their place. Upper management has supposedly kept the joint running like clockwork for all time. Horace may not have been expecting me to bite it so soon, but upper management certainly did.

Chapter Eight

As the years passed and I continued to do Horace's bidding, there were definitely times when I wasn't sure whether I made the right choice in taking the job. For the most part, being able to look in on my family offset any discomfort I felt in doing the things Horace asked of me. This was made easier by the fact that the looking-for-daddy moments didn't last much longer than the preschool days. The joy of watching Zoey grow up replaced the pain of watching Zoey ask for me to come home. I tagged along on some of the vacations Gwen took with Zoey, and watched Zoey's face light up when she finally got to visit the mouse. It didn't seem to bother her, at this point, that she couldn't bring him home with her. I saw her off to her first school dance in junior high, and was there when she came home crying because none of the boys asked her to dance. I wanted to explain to her that junior high boys don't ask anyone to dance, but Gwen did an awesome job explaining without me.

The years were filled with family moments that I missed, while actually having been there. Dance recitals, tae kwon do tournaments, swim practices. I was there when Zoey decided to play the clarinet in the school band, and I didn't complain when she, like her daddy, wanted nothing to do with it after a few years. Over time, these moments softened my opinion of

Horace. He may have been responsible for my death, but he made up for it as best he or anyone else could have, I suppose.

Still, most of my time was taken up by my job, which, I had to admit, was starting to seem as bad as the one from which I had been let go right before my demise. Don't get me wrong, there were some bright spots, like when I would be handed a case involving a politician. As with lawyers, politicians have an uncanny knack for making their lives, and the lives of those around them, miserable. That's not to say they couldn't use a helping hand from Horace every now and again. And generally, we never supplied the other woman; we just made sure she held onto the blue dress. Likewise, we didn't force the married, conservative, family-values candidate to shack up with his gay masseuse and ecstasy dealer. We just made sure that the only form of payment our politician had was a personal check.

I never minded ruining these peoples' lives, mainly because they brought their problems upon themselves and deserved to get knocked down a notch or two. But most of the cases dealt with people who were just like me. Your average schmuck just trying to get by. Those were the cases I didn't want anything to do with, and thankfully, Horace usually assigned them to someone else. That freed me up to deal with the high-profile cases. The politicians, the celebrities, the rich and powerful. Those who craved the spotlight but didn't respect its glare. My favorite cases were those that actually turned out to be funny to some extent, and not just sad. Cases where the world, or at least a good chunk of it, could share in the joke.

Still I never had the enthusiasm for the work that Horace obviously did. Every once in a while I got stuck doing one of his grunt cases and I hated it. One in particular struck me as especially sadistic.

It was sometime around my tenth year of working for Horace. Zoey was in her mid-teens and, while she was still an amazing kid, she was a teenaged girl living with a single mother. I stopped visiting as often as I had in the past, partly because of the occasional tension between Zoey and Gwen, but also because Gwen had started dating again around this

time. In other words, I started off this assignment in a bad mood.

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It was the middle of the summer and Horace was sending me to London to give a Yeoman Warder—one of the traditional guards at the Tower of London—a crippling fear of ravens. For those of you who might spot the cruelty in that task, legend states that ravens must be kept in the Tower at all times or the kingdom will fall. It didn't sound exciting, and I was definitely not excited to be there. The weather was typical London. Cool, overcast, drizzly. It did nothing to lift my spirits.

So, you're probably asking, how does one develop a fear of the exact same birds with whose care he is charged? In this case it was quite simple. Start with an Alfred Hitchcock marathon, throw in a dash of Poe, and follow that up with a good old bird-stalking. You know, a raven here, a raven there. Doing nothing expect watching his every move. Then he sees that same raven again, say... perched on his window sill, still watching. Pretty soon he sees that raven everywhere. Maybe the next day there will be two? Three? It all really depends on how far over the edge you want to push him.

Horace wanted me to push this one hard. Our poor mark was beyond terrified. He couldn't go to work. He lost his job. He wouldn't leave the house or even look outside his windows anymore. Our handiwork sent him on a one way trip to involuntary commitment.

That is why I quit.

It just wasn't worth it anymore. I knew Gwen and Zoey were going to be just fine without me always lurking around, not being able to do anything anyway. And besides, I figured that once I was reincarnated, I wouldn't know any better.

I picked up my books and papers and hopped the next flight back home so I could slip back through the portal. It was ironic that I had to fly from London to Chicago to get to Florence, but I had long ago stopped thinking of the absurdity of the situation. First class from Heathrow to O'Hare was absolutely empty. As I settled into the slightly-

Jason L. Pyrz

less-uncomfortable seats of the first class cabin, who else but Marcus came strolling through the door.

“Hey Zack, long time no see! Boy, do we have a lot of catching up to do!”

And I thought things couldn’t get any worse.

Chapter Nine

The plane landed and, as usual, Marcus and I were the first ones up and waiting for the door to open. One of the benefits of being invisible is not having to comply with all lighted placards and crewmember instructions.

Marcus and I parted ways in the terminal, him off to catch a connecting flight to Los Angeles and me to find a taxi going my way. Before I stepped back through the portal one last time, I wanted to spend a few final moments with Gwen and Zoey.

As soon as Marcus's back was turned, the world stopped completely, disappearing in a bright, blue flash and then fading to absolute darkness. I was completely paralyzed for an instant, followed by the sensation of weightlessness. A few seconds later, the entire effect played itself in reverse, only instead of the international terminal at O'Hare, I was in my room back at the Palazzo.

"What the hell?"

I strongly suspected that Horace was responsible for zipping me back to the Palazzo, but nothing was going to stop me from visiting my family before I dealt with that situation. On the bright side, Horace's trick had made it easier for me to get back to the house, since all I had to do was walk down the hall to the portal.

On my walk to the hallway, I saw the note that Horace had attached to the back of my door.

Library. Now.

Sure, Horace. I made my way down the corridors to the parlor that held the portal to Gwen's house. Horace could wait. As I stood in the parlor, looking at the art-covered wall, I could immediately tell something was wrong. The once-living image inside the frame of the portal was frozen. It looked no different than any of the other paintings lining the wall.

I walked cautiously toward the painting, my outstretched hand in front of me. Instead of an open window, my fingertips met the textured canvas of an ordinary oil painting. Gwen's house was still there, a light in the window blazed out onto the grass in the backyard. I ran my fingers across the surface and touched the face of the woman sitting in the window. In this rendering she was faceless, but I knew who it was supposed to be.

My face turned red hot and I began to shake with anger.

"You bastard!" I shouted.

I grabbed at the sides of the frame and pulled as hard as I could, in a futile attempt to rip it from the wall. Embarrassed by my inability to make it budge even a fraction of an inch, my rage grew hotter. I thrashed my fingers at the canvas itself, my only goal being to destroy something that belonged to Horace, the all-powerful jerk who could simply replace it with a snap of his fingers. I shredded the canvas and pulled it from the frame, revealing nothing but an utterly non-remarkable wall behind.

I stormed off toward the library with the ripped canvas in my hand. I kicked open the door as hard as I could, hoping to do more damage to the precious Palazzo, and flung the remnants of the painting on the ground, right in front of Horace who was bent over a table with his back to me.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I screamed.

"More like what the hell is wrong with you? We were so close to finishing up with the bird guy. I had to pull someone off another assignment to pick up the slack for you." His voice was unnervingly calm, almost mocking as he

responded without turning to face me, bringing my anger to a new level.

"Screw your bird guy. You can take those ravens and shove them up your ass for all I care!"

That last statement must have gotten to Horace because he turned around and fixed me with a stern, schoolteacher stare. His voice was slow and deliberate.

"Screw him or not, you had a job to do, and you blew it. How am I supposed to handle that?"

"Fire me for all I care. God knows I'm no stranger getting canned. But, no, screw that—I quit!"

"Oh, you quit, do? You think it's that easy? You think that's a good idea?" The expression on Horace's face went from stern to amused, which made me nervous, but no less angry.

Not sure of what he had up his sleeve, I throttled back the intensity of my tirade.

"Yes, yes, I quit. And yes, I think it's a good idea. One that would have worked out a hell of a lot better if I'd gotten to say goodbye to Gwen and Zoey as I had planned before you pulled that stunt," I said, motioning to the ripped up canvas on the floor.

"I can't let you take advantage of the benefits if you're not going to do the job."

"So what? You're going to punish me for forcing you to scare innocent people with substitute production assistants?"

"It's not a punishment, Zack. It's the rules. You work for me, you follow the rules, you get the perks. You don't work for me, you don't follow the rules, you don't get the perks. It's very simple."

"Well that's a pretty shitty trade if you ask me."

"You don't think you got a good deal out of this?" Horace said, cocking his head to the side.

"No, to tell you the truth, I think this entire arrangement sucks."

"Okay. Let's hear it then, Mr. Pity Party." With this, he sat down on the table and threw his hands over his head. "Please enlighten me. How exactly do you think you've gotten the short end of the stick here?"

"Oh, I don't know. I die because of you, and then I spend eternity doing your pathetic bidding?"

"Regardless of the fact that you've been able to watch your daughter grow up?" he said, crossing his arms.

"Yes," I said, crossing mine.

"Regardless of the fact that you've been able to visit your family pretty much whenever you've wanted?"

"Visiting usually supposes that both parties acknowledge each other's presence."

He ignored this and continued.

"Regardless of the fact that less than one in a million get the chance that you've been given?"

"Is it supposed to make me feel special that you picked me to kill and enslave? Because it doesn't."

"Well," he said, and then paused for a few seconds. Finally, he broke his gaze and looked down to pick an imaginary piece of lint from his pants. "Would it make any difference to you," he continued without looking up, "to know that you and your entire family were scheduled to die the weekend after I arranged the squirrel mishap?"

"No, it... What?"

"That's right," Horace said, looking back up at me with the slightest hint of a smirk.

"Wait, so does that mean..."

"It wasn't an accident, Zack. I purposefully had you killed."

"And how does that make things any better?" I said, throwing my arms out in exasperation.

"Because it was better than the alternative."

"What alternative could have been worse than killing me?"

I know that I pissed many people off over the years, starting with the poor kid I terrorized in grade school for having the misfortune (through no fault of his own) of having an amusing last name. Then, of course, there were the people whose businesses I went after as a lawyer. There were plenty of people who hated me, fine, but who would actually want to kill me?

"Why me?" I asked, before he had the chance to respond to my original question.

"Because you were the one who was going to put up that dried-out Christmas tree that weekend. You were the one who was going to string the lights with the faulty bulb that night. And, a week later, you were the one who was going to leave the lights plugged in when you went to bed late that night. That's why."

He paused and looked at me for a response, but I had none. I tried to process the horror of what he was saying, but he continued. As he did, he hopped up from the table and walked closer to me, staring me down as he finished dropping the bomb.

"Because you weren't there to do any of that, your house never burned down, and your family was never burnt to a crisp."

The heat that had been radiating throughout my face instantly drained away, as did the rest of the feeling in my phantom body. I was completely numb.

"You... You sacrificed me to save my family?"

"It was the only..."

"No, no... It's... Don't... You don't need to explain."

In the span of less than five minutes I had gone from wanting to destroy Horace for the pain he had caused me, to feeling like I owed him my life, all over again, for saving the lives of the two people I loved more than anything.

We both stood there, avoiding each other's gaze. Thankfully, Horace broke the silence.

"I couldn't bring myself to do it," he said with a shrug. "I mean, yeah, I've been doing this for, well, forever basically. But when I saw what was supposed to happen to Gwen and Zoey because of you... I don't know, I just couldn't let that happen. There is no way your daughter deserved to go out like that, regardless of what your script said."

"Wait, whatever happened to never crossing the streams?"

"I didn't exactly change your script, I just hastened it up a tad. You were always supposed to knock your head when you fell against the tree. I just added a few more details to make sure that—that you never woke up again afterwards."

"So you killed me before I could kill my family."

"Yes. And given the fact that they're both still alive and well, I would say the plan worked out just fine."

"Wow. I—I'm sorry, I had no idea."

"Of course you didn't. Nobody does. Do you know what would happen if upper management found out?"

"So why did you do it then?"

"I already told you. I don't know. Maybe I'm getting soft after all these years." Horace looked around the room, searching apparently, for help with what he was trying to say.

"I never had a problem messing with you when it was just you, but I couldn't bring myself to let Gwen and Zoey get toasted just because it was called for in your script."

"So why didn't you just tell me from the beginning?"

"And how well do you think that would have gone over? Do you think you would have been able to keep that secret for long? The only reason I'm telling you this now is because I still need you over here."

"Not that I'm going to, but what makes you think you can trust me to not spill your secret now?" I said, with a raised eyebrow. I wasn't about to believe everything he was going to tell me.

He smiled at this, the tension between us finally broken.

"Because if you do, I go away and this all ends. You're done here and you're shipped back over there to take your chances with what life deals you the next time around."

"Right... But that's always been the case. At least, the part about me starting over as a worm or whatever."

"Yes. But in addition to that, there's been some recent developments around here." Horace turned around and sat back on the table, bringing his right hand up to rub the back of his neck, as if he struggled with how much he wanted me to know.

"Such as?" I egged, prodding him.

"Such as the fact that your family isn't quite out of the woods just yet," he said, looking down at his pants again.

"What is that supposed to mean?" I said, closing the gap between us, trying to draw his attention back to me.

Horace looked up at me and responded.

"It means we'll cross that bridge when we get to it, that's what it means. Now relax and let me handle things," he said, standing up and walking to the other side of the table. "I'll let you know when to start worrying, but we have a long time before that even becomes a blip on our radar."

"And, in the meantime?"

"In the meantime, we carry on with business as usual. Just as if this conversation never happened."

"And what conversation would that be, Signor Horace?"

I nearly jumped out of my skin. Horace shut his eyes tight and clenched his jaw.

"Shit," he whispered under his breath. "Never mind, Lorenza. I was just having a conversation with my production assistant about his job performance."

Lorenza emerged from the labyrinth of bookshelves behind Horace, bearing a stack of ancient texts. The knowing look on her face betrayed the fact that she knew Horace had lied to her.

"Very well, Signor Horace. Hello Signor Zachary."

"Lorenza," I squeaked, nodding in her direction.

Horace and I watched as she walked straight to the door. Just before getting there, she turned back toward us. We weren't free of the Signorina that easily.

"Scusi, but you seem to have dropped something, Signor Zachary," she said, her gaze falling on the crumpled canvas between me and Horace.

"Right, thank you, Lorenza," said Horace.

"Good day," she said, bowing her head slightly, then turned to leave the room. As soon as the door clicked shut, I turned to Horace, my eyes wide and my heavy breaths filling the silence.

"Do you think she..."

"Calm down. Even if she did," he said, "it would be her word against mine."

"But if she's working for upper management, don't you think—"

"No, I don't think. I know. In the grand scheme of things, she's a newborn. And, she's only an assistant. It would be her word against mine, and we all know how that goes."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. Now come on, are we good? Can we get out of here and get back to things now?"

This wasn't how I pictured the day turning out, but Horace's revelation definitely put a new spin on things.

"Yeah, we're good. Just give me some time, okay?"

"Deal. I'm going to grab a bite. You want to come along?" he said, pointing toward one of the windows.

"No, thanks. I think I just need to take a little time to myself."

"Fair enough," Horace said, as he straightened himself up and made his way to the door.

"Hey, Horace?" I blurted, my voice cracking.

"Yeah?"

"Thank you. For everything."

He smiled and nodded. Then he looked at the heap of canvas on the floor.

"Why don't you go for a visit?" he said, as the canvas dissolved before my eyes.

"Right. Thanks."

And with that, he turned and left me alone in the library. As soon as the door closed, I crumpled into a chair next to the table and cried like a baby.

Chapter Ten

A little more than decade passed since I'd had that conversation with Horace in the library. And while the thought of those ominous words still gave me an anxiety attack, the passage of time had pushed them into the far recesses of my mind. The years had passed much as they had when I was alive, slowly at first, but increasing in speed the longer I was around. I began to see how immortality—or whatever existing forever in this state was called—might actually be bearable. After the first couple of centuries, the individual years would just seem to fly by.

A few months ago I celebrated the twentieth anniversary of my arrival at the Palazzo. The date stopped having any melancholy significance a while back, in much the same way December 7, or, the date that was supposed to live on in infamy, had gradually faded from public consciousness. When the intervening years are filled with memories and events that are just as important, in their own way, everything begins to even out and no one event becomes as all-consuming as it once was. Sure, if you had deep, personal ties to an event, the importance of it never really fades. Going with that theory though, I guess you could say I was deeply and personally tied to my own death. However, after

realizing why I died, I stopped looking at the date as one to be mourned.

That morning I was visiting with Zoey, who by then was in her mid-twenties and past the teenage years (and the attitude that came with it). I wasn't there in the hope of catching her pining for her daddy; I just had some free time and wanted to spend it with her at her new place.

She had lived on her own ever since she graduated from college, and I was thrilled when she decided to skip law school and do something meaningful with her life. Rather than follow her daddy in that regard, Zoey followed in her mother's far-more-righteous footsteps and became a teacher. Third grade to be exact.

There was more going on in Zoey's life than just a new job and living quarters; she had just gotten engaged to her childhood sweetheart. Well, actually, they had gone to the same preschool together, so I knew him as a four year old, but they didn't get to know each other until a mutual friend set them up in college. Despite all the "rules for dating my daughter" jokes of which I was so fond, I actually liked the guy. I mean, as a preschooler he was alright, but as an adult he seemed to be, a little like myself. He had a decent sense of humor. He didn't take himself too seriously. He wasn't a fan of his given name. But most importantly, from what I observed, he treated Zoey like a princess so he was alright in my book. His name was Mason, although that was his parents' fault, just as mine was, so I tried not to hold that against him. Not to mention, he was carrying on his family's tradition by attending medical school, and I certainly had no objection to my daughter marrying a doctor.

Speaking of Zoey, the changes over the years had been subtle. Whereas she used to look like a mini version of Gwen, she now looked like she could pass for being Gwen's younger sister. Long gone were the chubby cheeks, the squeaky voice, and the gap-toothed smile. But, some things didn't change. One of her favorite things to do when she was little was to make "surprises" for people. These were usually pieces of paper covered with drawings and stickers, crammed into an envelope and handed straight back to the person whom helped her make it. Sometimes she would get really

ambitious, attach a piece of yarn to her creation, and call it a necklace. Nobody was exempt from her gift list. That morning, this bit of her personality made an appearance. I sat there watching her as she put together homemade decorations and cards for her grandparent's wedding anniversary party that was quickly approaching. The quality was a bit better than necklaces she used to make.

Suddenly, everything stopped moving, just as if someone had pressed the pause button. This had happened enough in the past for me to know that my free time was coming to an end.

"Hey, I'm not interrupting anything, am I?" Horace said, as he popped into existence right next to me.

"Not at all, just killing some free time."

After that day in the library, I made it a point to try and be more tolerant of Horace's quirks, but sometimes he really did pick the worst possible times to drop in and ask for something. Thankfully, the words that came out of my mouth were able to mask the words in my mind that wanted to come out of my mouth. That day, nearly ten years prior, the tables had completely turned. I had gone from believing that Horace owed me something, to believing that I owed Horace everything.

"She's really grown into something special, hasn't she?"

Okay, maybe I wasn't hiding those thoughts as well as I imagined; it wasn't like Horace to offer unsolicited compliments.

I smiled and nodded, trying not to let him grab too much of my attention away from Zoey. I still couldn't help but be mesmerized by my greatest achievement.

"Look, I hate to lay a last-minute assignment on you like this, but I've let things slip a little too much with that Ukrainian sheep farmer and we need to pull the trigger fairly soon."

Oh yeah, the cheeky Ukrainian sheep farmer. So that was the assignment that was going to pull me away from my daughter on the anniversary of my death. Really, after working for Horace so long, nothing should have come as a surprise anymore.

He continued, "I need you to hop on over there and figure out when he's planning on heading to the parade, where he'll be staying, and how he's getting there. You know the drill."

"No worries, I'm on it."

"Thanks, Zack. I don't care what the others say about you. You're okay in my book. Oh, and I'll need that info by next week if at all possible."

And with that, Horace was gone and the world was back in motion as though it hadn't skipped a beat. I walked over to Zoey and gave her a phantom kiss on the top of her head. A smile crossed my face when I remembered how she nearly broke my nose once when I attempted the same thing and she'd jumped straight up at the same time. I'm not sure if it was what she was reading, or if she could somehow sense my presence, but a smile crossed her face as well.

In the grand scheme of things, if I was going to be called off to work, it could have been worse. Pavlo, the Ukrainian sheep farmer, was one of my more, shall we say, entertaining projects. You see, Pavlo was slated to have a rather embarrassing encounter with a member of his flock. During some previous reconnaissance, I learned that Pavlo was planning on showcasing some of his finest at an annual sheep herding parade. (Yes, there is a place in this world where that counts as entertainment.) I will spare you the details, but let's just say that my current assignment involved pulling together the intelligence on how best to shed light on Pavlo's propensity toward unholy unions.

But before leaving to attend Pavlo, I stuck around for a few more minutes. There weren't likely to be any flights headed to Europe that early in the morning anyway. I didn't notice Zoey get up as I was pondering my next move with Pavlo, but when I did snap out of my daze, Zoey was right in front of me, looking me directly in the eyes.

We stood there, just staring back at each other for what seemed like hours. Finally, about ten seconds later, she spoke.

"I miss you, Daddy."

"Zoey?" I squeaked.

It had to be a dream. Either that, or it was some kind of warped joke that Horace decided to play on me. In any event, it just couldn't be happening; there was no way she could see me. Not after all of these years. People don't all of the sudden become sensitive to our presence.

"Zoey?" I said again. "You can see me?"

I knew I was setting myself up for disappointment, and her next move confirmed my suspicion but still broke my heart. She stepped forward, right through me, and plucked a picture frame off of the bookshelf directly behind me. As she crossed through the space I was occupying, instead of the uncomfortable tingle I usually got in those situations, it felt like I was hugging my preschooler again. I could smell the way her hair used to smell when I would cuddle with her. I could feel her sticky little fingers, covered with whatever goo she had gotten into just before running over to me. Most of all though, I could feel her love for me, and that was what I missed the most.

The picture she picked up was a faded printout of the two of us at a daddy-daughter dance. It was a luau theme, and we were both wearing silly tropical hats and goofy sunglasses. As the tears began to roll down her face, and mine, I knew it was time for me to get out of there. Fast.

Chapter Eleven

Flights between the Midwest and Kiev were never the easiest to come by, even with the Pit of Lost Souls (otherwise known as O'Hare International Airport), right around the corner from my portal. Considering the start of my day, O'Delayed was the last place I wanted to be. The best I could do was connect through Frankfurt. I chose an open row in business class so I could spread out a bit.

It was raining when I got to Kiev, and it rained every day until I left the country five days later. There is only so much gloom a body can handle, even if a person doesn't have a body in the traditional sense. By the end of the assignment I was definitely ready to leave. Ukraine had made substantial progress since the fall of the Soviet Union but it was still a depressing place to hang out, especially when you were doing so in the company of a Ukrainian hillbilly who dips his pen in the company ink, so to speak.

You would have thought that, with the advent of the Internet and all of the joyous images to be found therein, I would have long before been desensitized to just about everything there was to see in the world. Let me tell you how hard it is to get certain images out that have been burned into your brain after having seen them in the, uh, flesh. I tried not to stick around when the mood appeared to be hitting our

friend, but I made the mistake of surprising him once. Well, I surprised myself, really, as he had no clue I was there. For your sake, and mine, we'll leave it at that.

The poor sheep were getting it from both ends. Wait, no. What I meant was that, the sheep were being spooked on two fronts. First, they had the farmer who performed unspeakable deeds, then they had me hanging around, making things weird for them as well. We've already discussed how some animals are open to the power of suggestion and are more sensitive than others. Needless to say, the flock was well aware of my presence, to the point where I needed to keep my distance so as not to terrorize them any more than they already were.

I had all the intel that Horace could have needed, and more. Dates, times, locations, and names. At least, I hoped it was everything he needed. I couldn't understand a lot of it, but most of the travel details translated easily enough. It seemed like a lot of work to do just to embarrass some anonymous farmer nobody cared about, from a corner of the world that nobody cared about, but that's what we did. I was never able to pick out a pattern as to how we ended up controlling certain people's lives, but our projects did seem to spread across the globe, to all levels of society. At the very least, that case would make for an entertaining headline somewhere. Besides, wasn't that the point, according to Horace? Entertainment of the celestial masses?

My flight back to the States was packed tight due to the upcoming holiday season, and was a bit choppy to top things off. I had always been a bit of a nervous flyer when I was alive, for which I blame my mother, and that continued after my death as well. Growing up, for about ten years in a row, my family would make the trip down to Florida during the summer to spend time with millions of the world's sweatiest, smelliest, and deodorant-least-wearingist tourists—all jammed together in various theme park lines to stew in each other's earthy aromas. Only, instead of making the trek to this wondrous place via readily-accessible two-hour flights, that left at least a dozen times every day, we piled into the car and made the two-day drive.

Yes, my mother was so deathly afraid of flying that we would all cram into the car and waste four full days on a roundtrip. Just so she could listen to what robotic Abraham Lincoln had to say, without being distracted by the terror of falling from the sky. Even if it meant squeezing me and my brother, who were both well over six feet tall by the time we were in high school, into the backseat of a two-door Pontiac Grand Am for the nineteen-hour trip.

The point is that there were some strong genetics at work and, despite the frequency with which I took flights both before and after my death, I still got nervous. This was silly after my death, as the worst that could have happened to me was to be inconvenienced if the plane went down far from civilization, or in the middle of the ocean. It wouldn't have done any lasting damage, but it would have definitely made for a long walk home. I was always hopeful that, if it did happen, Horace would have beamed me back to the Palazzo.

As usual though, my flights all made it to their destinations, and within two days I was back at the Palazzo. I returned just in time for Christmas Eve, not that anyone would have known it from the look of the place. The Palazzo was the exact same, day in and day out. The weather didn't even change from one day to the next, which was odd given how green the hills were surrounding the city. Horace was nowhere to be seen, so I left everything on the desk in his room. Given the lack of a boss, and the reality that I had survived a week that would have driven me to kill myself if I wasn't already dead, I decided I would take an unscheduled break and pop over to the other side for a bit. At this point, I just wanted to spend time with my family for the holidays.

Going home wasn't the same anymore. Gwen had recently moved into a new place. Despite her on-again off-again romances over the past decade, which made me more than a little uncomfortable, Gwen never remarried. She was spending that Christmas single. I know it was selfish of me, but I was glad she never remarried or had an overly-serious boyfriend. I wanted her to be happy, obviously, but at the same time there was a piece of me that was insanely jealous whenever anyone came close to taking my place. But it

wasn't a romantic-rivalry type of jealousy. I just didn't want anyone causing Gwen and Zoey to forget me.

Given Gwen's new address, Horace allowed me to have my magic-painting-portal retooled so that it opened up there instead of the old place. I could have technically left it as it was, but there was no point in popping into existence in a stranger's back yard and seeing the tree that knocked me cold, or the still-vibrant patch of grass where I bled out.

Gwen had only lived in the new house for a few years, but even if she had lived there for a hundred, I would never have felt at home when no one else was around. It was Gwen and Zoey that made it feel comfortable for me. Thankfully, they were both there that day, as Zoey was picking up Gwen to drive her over to my mom's house for her annual Christmas Eve party. Nothing says peace on earth and goodwill toward men like crescent-roll-wrapped cocktail weenies, fried chicken, and Italian beef sandwiches. I made a mental note that when I got back to the Palazzo I would see how the chefs fared at recreating these culinary marvels. For the evening ahead, I contented myself with the company and hopped in the backseat of Zoey's car for the short ride over to my mom's place.

I always preferred Christmas Eve parties to the relatively-stuffy Christmas day feasts. For one thing, the magic of Christmas morning had yet to pass. For another, it was far more acceptable (at least in my family) to get blitzed on Christmas Eve than it was to do so on Christmas day. There was always a larger crowd at the Christmas Eve party, and that year was no exception. Mason was, thankfully, spending time with his family that year. It would probably be the last year he'd be able to dodge the obligation of my mom's party, which in her mind, pulled rank over all others.

The house was filled with aunts, uncles, cousins, and various other relatives whose official familial relationship status I had never bothered to figure out. When I was still alive, and after Zoey was born, we always left the party early so we could get her home and in bed at a reasonable hour. Now, Zoey had no problem being one of the last ones at the house, despite Gwen's well-documented narcoleptic tendencies. My mom, reaching her late seventies by this

point, still knew how to throw a party and keep up with the youngsters without missing a beat.

After a few hours of interesting conversation about the good old days and Christmases past, the talk turned to slurred proclamations of drunken love for one another. Luckily, Zoey had long ago switched over from whatever trendy holiday drink my mom was mixing up that year, because that was the cue to get in the car and drive home before happy drunks turned into mean drunks (but by no means less-entertaining drunks).

Outside, snow was gently falling and the streets were nearly empty.

"Remember the freak-outs we used to do? Daddy started those, right?" Zoey said, breaking the silence of the car. I thought it was cute that she still referred to me as daddy, probably because she never grew into calling me "dad" before I left.

"It's too cold for that, Zoey."

"Aww, come on. Just one little Christmas freak-out."

At this point, a little explanation is in order. During the summer before I left, I started a little tradition that carried on for a few years afterward. At first it was to distract Zoey when long car rides would start to get to her, but after that initial "freak-out" Zoey would demand them purely for the entertainment value. The freak-outs involved rolling all the windows down, blasting a song (usually an extremely cheesy piano-rock anthem), and playing the drums on every interior surface of the car—thereby freaking out anyone who might have had the misfortune of witnessing the event. Now, it might sound stupid, but this was pure comedic gold to a four-year-old on the verge of a meltdown. Our song of choice that summer was "Roll with the Changes" by REO Speedwagon, which is a surprisingly long piece of classic rock kitsch when you have to keep banging on the steering wheel, dash, and ceiling for the whole song.

"To what?" replied Gwen. "You can't have a freak out to Christmas music!"

Zoey pressed the voice control button on the steering wheel.

"Play REO Speedwagon.," she said, turning toward Gwen with a sly smile on her face.

"Oh boy."

The cabin was filled with the opening power chords and soaring piano riffs, as Zoey lowered all four windows at once, creating a mini blizzard inside the car. For the next five and a half minutes, we rocked out in Zoey's car. Even Gwen got into the act; she pretty much had to, otherwise she would have left poor Zoey to look like a fool. By the time we got to my mom's place, my hands were sore from beating a car. Again, don't ask me about paranormal physics.

"See? Wasn't that fun?" said Zoey.

"I can't feel my face," replied Gwen. "Let's get inside."

It was almost two in the morning, and, fortunately, Zoey was already set to spend the night at Gwen's. They planned to head over to Gwen's parents' place for Christmas dinner the next day (or rather, later that day), where Mason would join them.

I made myself comfortable on the couch next to the Christmas tree. At this late hour, there was no point in sleeping. Instead, I zoned out looking at all of the ornaments on the tree that had been acquired over the years. Ornaments from the random places Gwen and I visited, the keepsake ornaments from our parents, and the ornaments we bought for Zoey. I lied there and daydreamed about the four Christmases I spent with her in the flesh.

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After Gwen and Zoey woke up the next morning, I hung around long enough to watch them open each other's presents, then I slipped back through the portal to the Palazzo. I didn't feel the need to lurk around the dinner table that evening, and I was really jonesin' for some cocktail weenies.

Chapter Twelve

In stark contrast to the pre-holiday lull, things were busy after the holidays, as they always were. Cabin fever leads people to do strange things—and let's not even get into the number of people who think retrieving Christmas lights from the top of a ladder as it's perched on an icy driveway is a good idea.

The next time I was freed up to visit Gwen and Zoey was early March. The wedding was quickly approaching, just a couple of months away, and Gwen was in full-on mother-of-the-bride mode. There were bridal showers to plan and attend, the last-minute changes to the reception plans, catering, diva florists, and a band who had no clue who Sergio Mendes was. For a brief moment, I was glad to be dead so as not to deal with the craziness. Gwen, who had never been one for conflict or speaking to people on the phone, was currently using hers to chastise the band leader.

"Let me get this straight. You know "Y.M.C.A.," virtually every Kool & the Gang song ever written, but you don't even know who Sergio Mendes is?!"

"..."

"Yes, I realize the song is almost fifty years old, but your playlist is loaded with all sorts of other cheesy 80's power ballads. How can you not know 'Never Gonna Let You Go'?"

"..."

"Well that is the only song you absolutely need to know, so you absolutely better learn it before I absolutely tear up the contract," she said, smiling at Zoey and looking for approval of her newfound assertiveness.

"Oh that would be lovely, thank you!"

"..."

"Yes you too, I'm glad you understand. Bye bye."

After she set the phone down she steadied herself on the kitchen countertop by planting her hands flat against it. She was happy with herself, but it had obviously taken a lot out of her.

I was impressed, at least for a moment. Because although it was nice to see Gwen stand up for herself and Zoey, that pride was accompanied by an almost unbearable pain brought on by the thought of missing Zoey's father-daughter dance. Some of my favorite memories included holding little Z and dancing in circles to that cheesy song a million times, telling her "I was never gonna let her go." "Please let me go?" she would say each time, in her squeaky, high-pitched voice. And with that I would smooch her on the forehead and put her down. I'm not sure if she ever had the same dream, but from the moment we first danced around the living room to that song, I had dreamed of dancing to that song at her wedding. Although really, if you listen to any of the other lyrics outside of the chorus, it's a little creepy to use for the daddy-daughter dance.

Zoey handed Gwen a mug of the tea that she'd brewed.

"Nice work, mom! Anyway, whatever happens is fine."

"But you've always wanted to dance to that song at your wedding!"

"Yeah, but, if you really listen to any of the other lyrics outside of the chorus, it's a little creepy to use as a daddy-daughter dance song. Besides, I'm looking forward to the honeymoon more than anything right now. I haven't had that much time off in ages!"

"Which reminds me," said Gwen, apparently riding high on her surge of adrenaline. "Did we ever hear back from the hotel on the special room requests? If they mess this up for you, so help me!"

I didn't want to get in the way of things—not that I could have, but it was a good excuse—so I decided to leave the pre-wedding chaos behind and head back to the Palazzo.

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The Palazzo was the same as it was when I left it earlier that day. The same as it always was. The halls were completely empty despite the hundreds of people living within. Outside the windows of the main parlor, the golden Italian sunset baked the surrounding hills as it had every day since I had arrived. Above the Palazzo, bright red and pink clouds streaked the sky.

"Beautiful day to be dead, huh?"

I nearly jumped out of my shoes. I hadn't see Horace lounging on the chaise when I had walked into the parlor, which isn't to say that he was actually there when I walked in.

"Little jumpy today?" he said, stifling a laugh and standing up.

"You can say that," I replied. "Just a lot going on over there at the moment."

"Well, just be glad you're not wrapped up in all that wedding B.S."

I didn't respond to this because it wouldn't have been a nice thing that came out of my mouth. I would have given anything to be a part of that world, even for a minute. Horace must have sensed my unwillingness to respond and continued.

"When is the wedding?"

"About a month."

"Great. Why not take some time off and recharge your batteries? Go someplace nice. How about Hawaii? Isn't that where your daughter is headed for her honeymoon? Sounds nice this time of year."

"If it's all the same to you, I think I'll just stick around here for a while," I said, staring out the window at the hills in the distance.

"You sure? You haven't been out there in years. Might be good to get reacquainted with the islands."

"I'll be fine," I said, sighing loudly this time. I was growing weary with his presence.

"I'm not worried about you," Horace mumbled under his breath.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. Fine. Suit yourself. Forget I said anything," he said, acting surprised that I'd heard him, considering he'd obviously meant for me to hear.

"No, tell me!" I demanded, stepping close and getting in his face. "Does this have anything to do with my family?"

"Zack, chill. Everything is going to be fine."

Horace put his hand on my shoulder and looked me in the eye.

"Trust me on that."

Chapter Thirteen

And stick around the Palazzo is what I did. It had been a while since I had spent an extended period of time at the Palazzo with nothing to do. It's not that there was a lack of things to do, it's just that I usually preferred to spend most of my time by myself or back on the other side. Even though it had been years since my arrival, I still hadn't really accepted the Palazzo as my permanent home. Embarrassing as it may be, I never ventured more than a mile in any direction from the Palazzo. I didn't even know how far things extended on this side. We could have been in a big glass bubble for all I knew.

I decided one day to finally see what there was to see. I half expected to walk into an invisible wall at some point, but the world—of the Palazzo, that is—just kept going. My goal for the day was to get out of the city and climb to the top of the tallest foothills I could see from the windows of the parlor. I set off in the morning and made my way through the maze of cobbled streets, heading away from the city center. There were no identifiable shops or cafes that far from the Palazzo, maybe two miles out, only nondescript doorways leading into various apartment buildings that would have all looked exactly the same had it not been for one small detail here and there. It was exactly as if someone

had just plopped a bunch of models down and slapped a decal on one, painted the shutters differently on another. To be honest, I doubted most of the buildings that far out were even occupied. I only hoped I was still walking in the right direction.

Then it just stopped. There was no gradual decrease in the density of the surrounding buildings. No change in architectural style. No signs to mark the perimeter. The city just stopped. I came to the end of the street on which I had been walking, and took one more step onto the rough, broken cobblestone and dirt path that marked the continuation of the street and led away toward the hills. Behind me, as far as I could see in either direction, was the slightly curved outer edge of the city. It was comprised of half a dozen variations of three or four distinct building types, and was broken in places only by the streets that came to an end between them. The street I had chosen was the only one that seemed to continue. Score one for my aimless wandering.

In front of me was a vast plain that gently sloped up into the hills that surrounded the city. The landscape was typically Roman, or maybe Florentine... Definitely Italian. The decaying cobbles led off into the distance between rows of towering cypress trees. Had it not been for the lack of tombs along the side of the path, and the fact that upper management had supposedly modeled this place after Florence, this easily could have passed for the touristy section of Appian Way just outside of Rome.

Eventually, the trees became increasingly sparse and the cobbles became few and farth between. Before I knew it, I was halfway up a hill dotted with surprisingly ugly and gnarled olive trees and elegant, grandiose stone pines. The sun was high in a sky filled with white, puffy clouds. Every so often a cloud would pass in front of the sun and cause the temperature to drop a few degrees, providing a welcome respite from the heat of the day. Birds sang and insects buzzed all around. For a supernatural recreation, the place was amazingly vivid.

I had been hiking along the path for a good two to three hours and was finally in a spot where I could look back and get a clear view of the city. It looked as though I had

probably gone about five miles and, from that view, it was easy to see the city's perfectly-circular shape. The Palazzo, at the exact center of everything, was even more impressive from this distance. It was easily the largest structure in the city, and the streets radiated out from it like the spokes of a wheel.

The cobbles had ceased long before I reached the halfway point up the hill, and wild grasses had taken over the gravel and dirt. The only semblance of a path was the narrow swath of trampled grass that, unfortunately, forked ahead. Being one for clichés, I took the path that appeared less traversed and continued up toward the top of the hill.

I reached the top a short while later, and from there it was easy to see the impossibly-tall mountains that formed a perfect ring, at least thirty miles across, with the city in the center. Maybe someday I would get to see what was on the other side of those mountains, but that wasn't a hike I was ready to embark on that day. I pulled myself on top of a boulder that stood alone on top of the hill. In front of me was the city, the Palazzo prominently poking out from the center. Behind me, the rolling hills continued on for at least ten to fifteen miles, melding into the mountains. To my left, I could make out a group of some sort of animals, goats maybe, grazing on the side of a neighboring hill. To my right, near the end of the path I chose not to take, was—Lorenza?

Just seeing anyone else out there was startling enough, but to have that person turn out to be the Spooky Signorina was enough to stop my non-existent heart. I tumbled off the boulder and crouched behind it, hoping she hadn't seen my less-than-graceful dismount. It had been years since I had to hide from anything, and it's not like I ever needed to move quickly or take any sort of evasive action while on a job. It actually felt good to finally do a real covert operation, even if it was just spying on a librarian.

Standing alone on a lower peak, maybe only a quarter of a mile away, I could clearly make out the drab, shapeless outfit she'd worn every time I'd run into her in the past. Also apparent, even from this distance, was her distinctive bun of tightly-packed grey hair. Perhaps her perpetual lack of expression was due to the force with which her hair was

pulled back. It was definitely Lorenza, but what was she doing out there?

I was about to find out. Hidden just out of view, behind a few smaller boulders and the stump of a dead olive tree, was a cave opening. It didn't take a rocket scientist to deduce that Lorenza was out here visiting one of the messenger-class hermits. Everyone knew, or at least thought, that the hermits were upper management's mouthpieces to the masses. What I wanted to know, was why the hell Lorenza, a frumpy executive assistant, would trek all the way out here to chat with a guy who lived in a hole. It seemed like an unnecessary level of bureaucracy in a place that was otherwise eerily efficient. I began to doubt everything I'd ever learned about Lorenza, the messengers, and upper management.

Lorenza was holding onto a branch of the dead tree and stooping to look inside the cave. I was much too far away to hear anything, especially over the sound of the breeze rustling the leaves on the handful of trees scattered around the summit. Suddenly though, she stood stiff as a board and gave a slight bow as someone, the hermit I assume, emerged from the cave. He definitely looked the part of a hermit in the hair department, as well as the facial hair department. The aloha shirt seemed a bit out of place, but then who was I to judge a hermit's choice of style? I mean, the guy lived in a cave after all. The best way to describe him is to imagine what Santa Claus might look like if he had taken an island vacation but not a shower, for a month. He had a bushy, white beard, and a horseshoe of crazy white hair surrounding a gleaming, bald dome. Why Santa would ever want to vacation in a hole in a hill though was beyond me.

I had to cut myself off, as I was obviously overthinking the situation.

I had no way of knowing what they were talking about, but Lorenza seemed to be doing most of it. I did my best to keep still behind the boulder, but I began to think my cover had been blown. The hermit snuck glances in my direction for a few minutes but never seemed overly concerned that someone might have been spying on him and Lorenza.

My heart dropped when he raised a hand and pointed in my direction. Lorenza's head whipped around and I knew

the game was up. I began the shameful process of slinking out from behind the boulder. I mean, it wasn't as if I had followed her up there on purpose. I'm sure they would have understood once I explained the situation. These thoughts passed in less than a second, but at that same moment, a giant bird came screeching out of the sky from directly behind me to snatch some poor furry thing about twenty feet in front of the boulder. I swear it was a squirrel.

Startled, I crouched back down and stayed put, hoping that the bird was what they had been looking at all along. With the gruesome show over and their attention turned back toward each other, Lorenza made another small bow and turned to leave back down the path. As soon as she cleared the hermit's camp, I noticed the hermit throw one last, unsettling glance in my direction before heading back through the entrance to his cave. If Lorenza didn't know I was there, that guy certainly did.

I wanted to give Lorenza a decent head start so I wouldn't accidentally catch up with her on the way back to the Palazzo. That, and I didn't want to make any sudden movements in the event the hermit was still scoping out my location. Finally, after an hour, I head back down the hill. I reached the city center just as the sun dipped below the hills. The sky went from a dark purple in the east to a glorious pink in the west, and the splashing of the fountain in the deserted piazza reminded me of that surreal night in Rome, then almost forty years in the past.

Chapter Fourteen

The following weeks were largely uneventful, and I never again ventured farther than the city center. I followed my usual off-duty routine of sleeping in, strolling down to the piazza to grab a bite for breakfast, and then doing absolutely nothing, aside from maybe reading, until lunchtime. Nothingness would recommence after lunch, proceed until dinner, and then cease until after dessert, at which time it would come back with a vengeance and culminate in ten to twelve hours of unbroken sleep. Technically, none of it was really necessary, but old habits die hard and the sleep, while not needed for physical health, did wonders for one's mental health. Also, the food was amazing and there was no such thing as gaining weight at the Palazzo. I could have ordered anything I dreamed of, but, considering the surroundings, I normally subsisted on all things Italian. This place did have its perks.

But boredom finally got the better of me, and it was time to move on. I made my way to my own personal painting-portal and stepped through to find myself in the increasingly-familiar surroundings of Gwen's backyard. It was a beautiful day, and the windows to the house were wide open, the sound of laughter and conversation floating out from the

kitchen window. Gwen's house was buzzing with activity, as Gwen, Zoey, and both of Zoey's grandmothers were there.

It was the Thursday before the wedding. All of the plans were set and it was too late to change anything if they'd wanted. For the moment, the women of the family were simply gathering to enjoy each other's company before the official wedding-weekend madness began in earnest.

Zoey was telling everyone about the honeymoon plans. Zoey and Mason were going to spend a couple of weeks on Kauai which, coincidentally, was where Gwen and I honeymooned. They had most of their itinerary planned. Nothing crazy, just a smattering of activities interspersed with pool and beach days. Some snorkeling, a sightseeing cruise, a helicopter tour, and of course, at least one luau. And, as with mine and Gwen's honeymoon, there was a mini war being waged by my mother over the helicopter tour. My mother, who was never one for any form of transport that didn't have wheels, was worried sick, doing her best to talk Zoey out of it without actually saying as much. Then again, my mother was also trying to talk her out of doing the sightseeing cruise because, you know, the Titanic and all.

I took a seat in the corner and remembered what it was like to actually be a part of conversations like that, usually to my mother's dismay. Oh sure, I was still able to make my snarky comments, but my audience was significantly smaller. Gwen had spent enough time around me, and Zoey proved to be my daughter, by the snark they wielded in grand fashion. The conversation ended when Zoey promised to leave my mother all of the wedding gifts after the horrific helicopter/boating accidents that were sure to happen.

"Well," my mother began to say, "at least you have plenty of your mother in you to temper the bit that you obviously inherited from your father!"

I smiled to myself, because it was never really a secret that even my own family liked Gwen more than they liked me. And because Zoey had a bit of both of us in her.

With the honeymoon discussion officially over, the conversation turned to the rehearsal dinner and the preparation of the gift bags for the out-of-town guests. I sat there for a little while longer, taking in the comedic

atmosphere and enjoying the company. Soon enough, it was time for the grandmothers to go home, and it was just Gwen and Zoey. Zoey was staying with her mother for the weekend until the wedding party checked into the hotel.

"How often do you think about him?" Zoey asked Gwen, out of nowhere. Gwen, whose wide eyes, upturned chin, and stiff back gave away the fact that she was as taken aback by the question as I was, responded after a few seconds of silence.

"Whenever I'm not thinking about anything else, my mind usually wanders and I end up remembering something goofy he used to do, which always makes me smile."

This new topic of conversation was more than a little uncomfortable for me to sit through, so I got up and headed to the couch in the basement where I would be spending the next few days.

"That's pretty much what I remember about him," said Zoey, taking the conversation back from Gwen, who looked like she appreciated having her jump in. For my part, the statement stopped me dead in my tracks.

"Almost every memory I have of Daddy is one where he was doing something to make me laugh, like the freak outs." After a few seconds of silence, she added, "I wish I was old enough when he died to have known him better."

That was my cue. Being dead offered no defense to the dagger those words drove into my heart. I headed into the basement, got comfortable on the couch, closed my eyes, and drifted off into the same dreamless sleep that I'd had every night since I died. On the bright side, there weren't any nightmares about the pain I'd heard in Zoey's voice.

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The next day was a flurry of activity. I was content to tag along in the backseat of the car and observe, happy with the knowledge that there was no way I could mess anything up that weekend. The first stop was breakfast with the grandmothers at the little diner that Zoey had been going to since before she could talk. The service was horribly slow, the food was bland at best, and the décor had only been upgraded from tacky to slightly-less-tacky. It was their

favorite place, though, as it had been mine too, because the servers all knew us by name—especially Zoey, who had practically grown up there.

Juanita, the big, lovable matriarch of the wait staff, with her ever-changing wigs and her (usually) photographic memory, was crying tears of joy.

"I remember when you used to sit there between your mommy and your grandma and draw me pictures on the back of the placemats! I can't believe how fast you've grown up!"

"Aww, thank you, Jaunita. It wouldn't be a special weekend without a visit with you!" said Zoey.

"Oh go on, now," shushed Juanita, as she went to fetch the orange juice she mistakenly thought my mother-in-law wanted, every week, since the one time she had actually ordered one. There was also the coffee that Gwen hadn't ordered, and the chocolate milk that she still brought Zoey out of habit. My mom got her Bloody Mary just fine.

"Thanks, Juanita," said Zoey, "but I think I'll take a Diet Coke today.

"Oh! You are your daddy's daughter, aren't you?" she said with a big smile, proceeding to bring over two large mugs of liquid tooth decay.

"Brought you an extra one, just like I used to do for your daddy!"

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The rest of the day was a complete blur. There were trips to the airports, both Midway and O'Hare, to pick up various members of the bridal party. There was the trip to the spa to get everyone nice and relaxed before the big day. There were the last-minute phone calls to the florists and the band. And there was the rehearsal at the church followed by the rehearsal dinner. Thankfully, there was no cheesy "this is your life" slideshow following the dinner, as I'm not sure I would have been able to endure the inevitable daddy-daughter pictures that would have been showcased. The bachelor and bachelorette parties took place the weekend before, so it was an early night for all involved.

Chapter Fifteen

After what seemed like both an eternity and no time at all, the wedding day finally arrived.

Rather than latch onto Gwen or Zoey, I decided (since I wasn't officially invited to the wedding) to just hang out on the periphery the entire day. I brought along a nice suit because, even if nobody else could see me, I would have felt weird standing around in jeans while everyone else was decked out.

The ceremony began around two in the afternoon at the parish where Zoey spent her grade school years. It was only a mile or so from Gwen's house, so I slipped out early and walked my way over. The best thing about being invisible for a wedding is being able to sit down throughout the Catholic Calisthenics without feeling like a heathen. No standing, sitting, standing, kneeling, hands in the air, or getting in line for the Jesus biscuits. After the full-mass ceremony, where Zoey and Mason looked every bit as uncomfortable as I imagine Gwen and I had, being the center of attention for an hour and a half, the wedding party headed for the limos and their photo shoots, while the guests headed for their cars and the cocktail hour before the reception.

I hitched a ride with Gwen, as she headed straight to the hotel where the reception was being held. For what was

probably the first time since I left, Gwen seemed totally alone, and I felt terrible about it. I felt like I'd disappointed her in leaving such a dumb way. I felt selfish for thinking that she was fine because she kept busy. And most of all, I felt stupid for believing that the insurance money was a suitable replacement for having me around, even if I was just a failure.

I sat in the passenger seat and stared at her as she drove in silence. For the first time, I noticed her skin. She was still as beautiful as the day I left her, but that was twenty years in the past. Instead of the thirty-something woman I left, I was looking at a woman who was knocking on sixty. Her hands, delicate but worn, looked ancient on the steering wheel compared to my ghostly paws, still as fresh as they were when I died young so long ago. I felt guilty then, for leaving her to handle everything on her own, while I had it easy over on the other side. I hoped I could find a way to make it up to her.

When we finally got to the reception, I felt like a stranger who had walked in on someone else's party. I stayed long enough to see the pre-dinner festivities. The cake cutting. The toasts. The mommy-daughter dance. Not only did the band learn the song, they changed the lyrics outside of the chorus to be far less creepy for the occasion. All in all, it was yet another memory for Gwen and Zoey in which I wasn't there.

Chapter Sixteen

Zoey and Mason were already gone by the time most people woke up the next morning, and so was I. Them on their way to Hawaii, and me on my way back to the Palazzo. I took the following three days as my own little vacation to rest up after the emotional roller coaster that was the wedding. The past week seemed to be some of the happiest days of Zoey's life, but at the same time they were some of my saddest, because I couldn't share them with her. The steady predictability of the Palazzo, normally an annoyance, was a blessing during that time. Beautiful sunrises were followed by sunny days which were followed by amazing sunsets which were capped off by crisp, clear nights. For the time being, it was just what I needed to recharge. I left my room only to stroll down to the sidewalk cafes outside the Palazzo during the afternoons.

I enjoyed that time, unburdened by work or worry, although I was still slightly unnerved by my last conversation with Horace. I hadn't seen him since. It was the longest period of time since he first pulled me off the lawn that I had gone without seeing him. In and of itself, that wasn't cause for concern. What made me worry was the note that appeared taped, like a fig leaf, to the nether region of the

statue in my entryway. Horace could bend space and time to pop up anywhere, at any time, and he had written me an “urgent” message about my next assignment, taped to a bronze—well, you know. The note insisted that I get started on the assignment “immediately.” Horace had never shown a sense of urgency about anything that I could remember, and the note unnerved me.

Thinking that he had returned from wherever he’d been for the past month or so (how else would the note have made it to my statue?), I set off down the corridors of the Palazzo until I reached the director’s wing. I turned the corner and noticed the door to Horace’s office was slightly ajar. I walked up and pressed my way in, expecting to find him sitting behind his desk so I might inquire as to his motivation for the placement of the note and the emergency that required my presence in Detroit. Instead, I was stopped dead in my tracks by the sight of a tight, grey bun of a librarian hunched over Horace’s desk. A librarian who was, at that moment, rifling through Horace’s drawers.

“Lo-Lorenza?”

“Can I help you, Signor Zachary?”

She didn’t appear startled by my presence in the least, and continued going through Horace’s desk, which, oddly enough, put me at ease. I mean, if she were up to something, she would have been nervous and jumpy, right?

“Uhhh, I was just looking for Horace.”

“Signor Horace is not here at the moment.”

“Yes, I can see that. Do you know when he will be back?”

“I do not that, Signor Zachary.” It became obvious that Lorenza was not one for pleasant conversation.

“Do...”

Lorenza spun around and glared at me with that stone face of hers. Her grey, humorless eyes stared a hole right through me. Her tight mouth was in its permanent scowl.

“Signor Zachary,” she started. “Signor Horace is not here. I do not know where he is, and I do not have time to answer your questions. Now please, you may leave at any time.”

I stood there for a few moments, opening and closing my mouth without making a sound. I imagine I looked quite the fish. Finally, my brain caught up with my mouth.

"Thank you, Lorenza," was all I could come up with, as my feet carried me quickly toward the door. The sun poured into the office through the huge windows on the wall opposite the door from which I had just emerged, but I couldn't shake the chill that took hold of me during this most recent encounter with the increasingly suspicious assistant.

Something was definitely up. Lorenza had a nasty habit of showing up unexpectedly, and now here she was sifting through Horace papers. Between this, that day in the library, and her visit to the hermit on the hill, I had the feeling that something very bad was about to happen to Horace.

After about five minutes, my heart finally stopped racing and I went to the reception area in which Horace first introduced me to the Palazzo. I sat down on the chaise, which showed absolutely no sign of aging since I first saw Horace perched upon it twenty years prior. I took out the note that Horace had left me, and read it again, carefully looking for any hints as to what was going on.

According to the note, there was something brewing with a new mark that I hadn't worked on before, some CEO in Detroit. Thankfully, the project didn't seem to have any sort of sexual aspect to it. From all appearances, the guy was outside of our usual cast of characters. A successful businessman who, on the surface at least, was squeaky clean, an upstanding citizen, and envied by pretty much everyone in his hometown. My orders were vague. "Go and do some surveillance. Pay special attention to his chauffeur."

That was it? How was that an emergency? I don't know if my senses were on heightened alert due to the business with Lorenza, or the odd nature in which Horace had given me the assignment, but I wasn't so clueless that I didn't see this project had something to do with all of the recent mysteries. I just hoped my family wasn't involved somehow, given the fact that I was still obviously there for a reason. However, seeing as how nobody in my family had ever been, nor planned to be anywhere near Detroit, there had to be something else going on. Zoey and Mason were already in

Hawaii, and Gwen was back at home as far as I knew. Maybe this was something personal?

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I was in Detroit within a few hours, following the smell of money to the new mark. While I thought Horace's note was strange to begin with, it became even stranger when, upon arriving and doing some basic reconnaissance, I discovered that there *was* no chauffeur.

Great, I thought. Now Horace was wasting my time and sending me on wild goose chase. Still, I didn't want to discount Horace's note too much, as there was still something about the tone of the note and the manner of its delivery that didn't sit well with me. I decided to stick around for a while to see what I could dig up. It was almost like being back at the Palazzo, but only if the Palazzo had been built in the 1980's and not redecorated since.

The place was huge, both inside and outside. Everything was black and white, and there were gaudy carvings of African safari animals all over the house. To complete the tacky-design-trifecta, there were Patrick Nagel paintings on most of the walls, with just a bit of neon here and there to complete the straight-out-of-*Miami-Vice* effect. It was almost as if the house was built and designed specifically to be used as a set for the show, and then preserved for future generations to gawk at and enjoy. What Colonial Williamsburg was to the eighteenth century, this guy's place was to the Reagan decade.

I was about to start packing it in after a few hours, when I overheard a conversation that sent a chill down my spine. The CEO lounged with his two children, a son and a daughter both in their early twenties. They were all out back on the patio overlooking the back yard, which looked more like the south lawn of the White House. The place even had a helipad and Playboy Mansion-esque pool, complete with grotto.

"Why don't we rip that thing out already and put in a putting green, or at least put up a backboard so we can play some half-court games on it," said the son, motioning with his head toward the helipad.

"I don't know," said the father. "I guess it hasn't had much use since Eli took that job in Hawaii."

Oh shit, there it was. This wasn't about Horace. Or maybe I was thinking too much into it? I mean, it's not like Horace was one for being subtle. If Zoey was really in trouble, why send me to Detroit, instead of coming right out and telling me? Or sending me to Hawaii?

Oh double shit... He *did* try to send me to Hawaii!

"Seriously," added the daughter. "Those adrenaline-junkie types don't tend to stick around the Midwest for long, do they?"

And triple shit.

It was all coming together, and I knew just who was involved.

§

I was back at the airport within an hour, where I managed to catch a series of connecting flights between Detroit, Los Angeles, and Honolulu, to get me to the islands as fast as I could.

Everything after hearing those words at the 80's palace was a blur, but fortunately, the flight from Detroit to L.A. had given me some time to get over the various negative scenarios I concocted in my mind. I had no idea what was going on, but I feared the worst. The fact that Horace was nowhere to be seen only made my imagination that much darker.

The atmosphere on the plane during the trip from L.A. to Honolulu was considerably brighter. Perhaps it was because it was filled with vacationers on their way to an island paradise, instead of bankruptcy attorneys and opportunists on their way back from the skeleton of a once-great American city. I was stuck with the last empty seat on the plane. Three hours into the flight, I remained wedged in between a hefty Hawaiian in the window seat and the odd-man-out, in the aisle seat, who didn't fit in the next row forward, with the rest of his family. I had read the in-flight catalog at least half a dozen times already, as well as the airline's own "magazine." Had I known I would be taking such a long flight this time out, instead of just popping back and forth between Chicago and Detroit, I would have brought something from the

Palazzo to help pass the time. Desperate for distraction, I picked up the Spanish-language airline magazine to flip through.

About three-quarters of the way through, opposite a full-page ad for "The Country's Best Steakhouses" (yes, it was in Spanish, but it was otherwise the same exact ad that has appeared in every airline magazine since the beginning of time), was an article that was written completely in English.

"Good, you're reading this. So I guess you're actually brighter than I gave you credit for," it began.

I shut the magazine and flipped it over in my hands, inspecting the front and back covers. I'm not sure what I thought I would find, but it seemed like, if someone were directing a movie with this as a scene, that's what my character would have done. I cautiously opened the magazine again and continued reading.

"Finished? Good. By now you've no doubt put two and two together and realized that things are about to get serious in paradise. Don't trust anyone, especially him."

Especially him? What was that supposed to mean?

A hand landed on my shoulder and I nearly jumped out of my seat.

"What up, bro?" said Marcus. "Horace finally letting you get out into the civilized world on your assignments?"

As I struggled for something to say, Marcus's habit of incessantly blabbering on let me off the hook.

"Anyway, I didn't know you were stuck back here. I just came back from first to stretch my legs and do a circuit, check out the sexy stews in cattle class, you know."

"Yeah," I stuttered. "I, uh, I didn't even see you when I got on."

"No worries. So what's taking you to the islands? Someone going to regret sitting under a coconut tree? Dolphin trainer going to be getting a little too friendly with Flipper?"

"Neither, actually," I replied, folding the magazine and trying to look nonchalant about hiding it under my crossed arms. I did my best not to let on that I knew Marcus was likely involved in a scheme that was going to involve my daughter as collateral damage.

"Horace has been gone for a bit, so I thought I would take advantage of the free time and head someplace different for a change."

"Awesome. Well, if you make it to Kauai let's take in a luau or something. I've got a project I'm finishing up there over the next week or so, but will have some time to kill," he said, with a smile that knew nothing of subtlety.

"Sure thing, Marcus," I said, squeezing the magazine until my knuckles turned white.

"Right on. Well, don't be a stranger," he said, as he turned to strut back to his seat as if he were walking a fashion show runway. I wondered if he realized nobody could see his stupid ass besides me.

I opened the magazine again as soon as he passed through the first-class curtain.

"Yes him," it continued. "Be careful. We won't have many friends after this."

Marcus and I spent the rest of the flight without exchanging a single glance, let alone another word. Not for the first time on a flight, I was glad he wasn't sitting anywhere near me.

Chapter Seventeen

Marcus and I exchanged glances as we went our separate ways in the terminal. Him toward his connecting flight, and me in the opposite direction. I needed to put some space between us so that it wasn't obvious that I was going to be getting involved in his next assignment somehow. Maybe I was just paranoid, but the look he gave me on my way out convinced me that he already knew why I was there. Forget keeping my distance. I decided I would take the first flight the next morning.

I had only ever been to Hawaii once before, on my own honeymoon, but I never spent any time in Honolulu. Not knowing where to go, and not really in the mood to sightsee, I headed for Waikiki Beach and strolled along in the shadow of the high-rise condos and resorts. It was easy to imagine I was Thomas Magnum, complete with my own internal monologue. What was going on? How much did Horace know? What role was I going to play in whatever danger Zoey was about to become part of?

"Easy there, Magnum. One question at a time."

"Jesus, Horace! A little warning next time, please?"

Sure enough, there he was, lounging in the front of an otherwise-unoccupied pedicab with a great big straw hat

pulled low over his face. He flicked the front of the hat up and smiled at me.

"Or, are you going by 'Rick' today?"

"Call me whatever you want," he shot back. "But let's keep this conversation moving. Hop in before Higgins gets wise to us."

As with everything else on that side that we commandeered for our own use, the original pedicab stayed absolutely still while Horace pedaled its spirit-world doppelganger away down the beach. Despite the seriousness of the situation, it amused me to imagine an unoccupied pedicab rolling down the sidewalk with terrorized tourists scattering every which way. To the people we were trying to hide from, unless they got a good look at the two of us, they wouldn't be able to tell the difference unless Horace pedaled straight through one of those tourists. Which he promptly did.

"Shit!" Horace yelled.

"Let's just hope nobody noticed. And maybe pay attention to what's in front of you, huh?"

I had never seen Horace flustered before, but something was definitely getting to him.

"I assume you are going to tell me why you've been gone so long, and what brings us both out here to the middle of the Pacific?"

"Your daughter is going to die next week."

Say what you want about the man, he did not beat around the bush when the time came to be direct.

Even though I had anticipated that day, or something like it, for the decade leading up to that moment, I still felt all color drain from my face.

"You're... We're going to make sure that doesn't happen," he continued. "And in doing so, we're going to make some people very unhappy."

"So why are you in on this? Why not just me?"

"Because," he said, "you'll need my help, and..." He paused.

"And what?"

"And this goes deeper than just a bad script."

"Not that I'm arguing, but how deep does this go, and when does it stop?"

"Let's just say that this isn't about random chance and entertaining the masses back on the other side. This is nothing more than another second unit director getting his nose bent out of shape and taking it out on one of my assistants."

I was at a loss for words, which was good, because Horace was finding a lot of them at the moment.

"There's nothing he can do to me, and it's no secret you're my number one—"

"I'm your number—"

"Shut it! As I was saying, he can't do anything to me, so the next best thing for him is to do is go after you... or at least your family."

"What the hell did you do to this guy?"

"It's a long story, but it pretty much boils down to jealousy. Someone can only take so much of the good brother, bad brother thing before they snap. In this case, the snapping point came after about five thousand years."

"Your brother is a director? Wait, you have a brother? You have a family? When were you planning on filling me in on this little—WATCH OUT!"

The ghost cab jerked violently off the sidewalk and into the street as Horace swerved to miss a beach bum selling sunglasses attached to a piece of cardboard. I don't know what would have drawn more attention to us—plowing straight through the guy, or the circus resulting from the near miss and Horace frantically steering his way through a street of cars, our cover blown.

"It's all good. I got it," Horace said nonchalantly, as we hopped back up on the curb. "Anyway, as we all know, Zoey doesn't have a script, and neither does Gwen."

He clearly wasn't interested in fielding questions about his recently-divulged family, and went on with his explanation.

"So the next best thing he can do is involve them as collateral damage in the script of one of his own breathers."

"Seems kind of childish," I said. "I didn't realize Mason was the action and adventure type."

"When you've been stuck on the outer-edge of adolescence for the greater part of recorded human history, you perfect the art. Despite how long we've been around, Cyrus is only nineteen, hence the adrenaline-fueled, action style scripts he gets to direct. And it's not Mason he's using."

I learned more about Horace and the other directors on that ride than I had learned in all of the previous two decades combined.

"Your buddy, Marcus—in case you haven't already figured it out—is a few bulbs short of a marquee and the perfect goon to run point on this script."

"So you said in the magazine. Do you think he—"

"Yes," Horace interrupted. "He knows you know, and he knows you are going to try to stop him."

"So what is the point with all this cloak and dagger garbage?"

"Because I'm almost positive that upper management doesn't know about *either* of us at the moment. The script change was done without permission—"

"Yeah, about that... I think we might have a problem."

"I already know about Lorenza. She's harmless and clueless."

"How did you—never mind. What do you mean she's harmless and clueless?"

"Just like any other coattail rider, she thinks she's got more authority than she does simply because she gets to rub elbows with upper management." Horace was clearly unimpressed by Lorenza, but his sarcastic tone of voice gave away a hint of jealousy.

"Besides, she's more of an annoyance than anything, I wouldn't worry about her."

"But do you know who I saw her talking to?" I asked.

"I said don't worry about her."

"Okay, fine."

After a few seconds of riding along in silence, I tried again.

"So why don't you just run it up the chain of command? Call Cyrus out on it?"

"Because this isn't grade school!" Horace turned his head toward me and snapped. "Besides, you know how it is

with siblings. The one who tattles is usually the one who gets in more trouble."

It wasn't a satisfying answer, or one that even made sense given the gravity of the situation, but it was clear it was the only one I was going to get.

"Anyway," he continued, a bit calmer, "neither one of us is currently playing by the rules. We're both off the reservation, so to speak. He doesn't want to draw any more attention to himself than he already has, and neither do we."

"So what is the plan? How do we foil the plans of an omnipotent being, hell-bent on getting his revenge?"

"It's not revenge; it's just his immature little way of rebelling... and," he said, turning his head and winking, "the omnipotence thing only works when we're paying attention."

"Nice, so all that practice of running around for you over the years is finally going to pay off, huh?"

"More or less. Remember, I've known about this for quite a long time now."

"So does that mean you have a plan?"

"Um, not exactly."

"You've had at least ten years to anticipate this day, and you don't have a plan?" I always knew Horace was a little flaky, but that didn't seem like him.

"How is this for a plan? You sit tight for a few days."

"Not much of a plan." I didn't like where that was going, but Horace continued.

"You move too soon, someone will notice. Take some time to enjoy the island."

"Yeah, that'll happen with the shadow of my daughter's death looming over me. There's got to be something I can do, or we can do, rather than take a vacation."

"Right, well, that is a fair point. But like I said, there's not much you can do at this point, so just try to relax. I will do my best to gather the intel on this one and work something out."

"And?" I prompted, attempting to see if there was any more brilliance he cared to share.

"And if you don't hear back from me within a week, get yourself over to Kauai as soon as possible."

Chapter Eighteen

Six days passed since our beachfront ride, and Horace had still not gotten back to me. If it were any other situation, I wouldn't have thought anything of his waiting until the last minute to show up again. However, I was hoping that he understood the gravity of the circumstances and wouldn't leave me hanging like that.

There really wasn't much I could do. If I couldn't head over to Kauai to see Zoey, and I had to wait around there for Horace, my options were limited. My time basically consisted of strolling up and down the beach, sleeping in unoccupied hotel rooms, and watching television at a beachfront bar. Halfway through the week I got the bright idea to start researching the helicopter companies on Kauai to see what I could learn about the helicopters they flew. My options at the library were extremely limited, and I wasn't able to find user or maintenance manuals online—go figure.

Even though that idea turned out to be a bust, it took up two days during which I would have otherwise just sat around doing nothing, as I had done the first half of the week. The weather and the scenery were perfect every day, but I was in no frame of mind to enjoy any of it. The worst thing I could do, according to Horace, was draw attention to myself. Normally that wouldn't have been a problem, given as how

normally nobody could see me. Unfortunately though, the people who were on the lookout for me that time were be the *only* people who could see me.

That morning I woke up early and, unable to sleep any longer, walked down to the beach. That early in the morning, the homeless were just beginning to break camp to move somewhere less conspicuous during the day. When I was still alive, I had always said that I would walk south if I ever found myself homeless, rather than spend a winter freezing on the streets of Chicago.

I walked past a handful of them, oblivious to my presence. The men were mostly kids in their late teens and early twenties, emaciated by their poor diets and their skin weathered by the tropical sun. Of course, every group has its outcast, and there he was. On the outskirts of the makeshift refugee camp was an older guy, much older, who also appeared to be well fed... Very well fed.

I turned my head and kept walking, as the last details of his appearance caught up with me and smacked me right across the face. I had seen that shirt before. And that hair. I spun around and locked eyes with the hermit for a split second before he simply vanished into thin air. None of the other guys in the group noticed that one of their own just disappeared before their eyes, because they had never seen him standing there in the first place.

It is exceedingly difficult to scare a ghost, but I was absolutely terrified. First, because the situation was just straight up creepy. Second, because I was certain that this development meant we had been found out. All I wanted was for Horace to show up and tell me he had a plan, and that everything was going to be alright.

I wanted to run, but where was I going to go? It wasn't like I could have run into an early-morning diner and scream out that I was a ghost being tailed by another ghost because I was trying to stop yet another ghost from turning my daughter into a ghost. So rather than do anything, I just stood there staring at the crashing waves that had replaced the spot in my field of vision where, seconds before, hermit Santa stood.

And at that moment, I decided I was done waiting around for Horace to save my daughter for me. I started walking and wouldn't stop until I found myself a seat on the next island chopper to Kauai. If Horace needed to find me, I'm sure he could have used his fancy godlike powers to track me down.

Chapter Nineteen

I hopped one of the first inter-island flights to Lihue that morning, the ones that take only about forty-five minutes but bounce around the entire time. Once there, I had to find my way to where Zoey and Mason were staying. They were booked in one of the mega-resorts on the south shore, near Poipu. As there weren't that many major hotels on the island, and they mostly had their own shuttles, it was easy enough to find the one where my daughter and son-in-law were staying.

It was a beautiful, sprawling hotel. Right on the sand of a manmade beach that had been reclaimed from a rocky shore, with a collection of private swimming pools. The lobby, while covered, was completely open to the elements on the ocean side, so as soon as you stepped through the front doors you were greeted with all manner of tropical plants, exotic birds, and the sound of the surf crashing in the distance. Why Gwen and Zoey decided to stay in Chicago after the insurance payout was beyond me.

My first order of business was to find my kids and make sure they were still safe. Knowing full well that this was their honeymoon, and that Zoey and Mason were both grown adults, I made sure to steer clear of their room so as to avoid any awkward situations that would scare me for the rest of my afterlife. A quick stroll past the pools was enough to

accomplish that goal. There they were, and there she was. Just a couple of weekends ago, I witnessed one of the happiest moments of her life. Just a few days removed from that event, here in paradise, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was about to witness something unimaginable. Even though there was no way they could have sensed my presence, I still kept my distance to give them their privacy. It was mid-afternoon when I found them, and the itinerary for them that day consisted of nothing more than relaxing around the resort and that was fine with me. I set myself up on a deck chair on the opposite side of the pool from them and tried my best to relax, which wasn't happening.

It was day twelve of their two-week honeymoon and I needed to figure out, quickly, what Marcus and Cyrus were up to. Their plans somehow involved the helicopter tour Zoey and Mason planned for their last full day; that was not a huge conclusory leap to make. Horace had all but told me what the plan was when he sent me off to Detroit to learn about the hot-shot helicopter pilot who had relocated to the islands. I had less than two days to keep that flight from happening, and I had no clue how I was going to do it without Horace.

After a couple of hours and a few more drinks served in coconut shells, Zoey and Mason gathered their things and headed back to their room to get ready for dinner. I tagged along, close behind, so I could find where there room was. To avoid any of the aforementioned emotional scarring, I wanted to come back later, when they weren't there, so I could look around and gather some more information on the helicopter tour.

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They had a large suite with a full ocean view and two balconies, one off the main living room and one off the bedroom. All of their travel papers were scattered on the coffee table in the living room and there it was. Saturday morning at 10:00 a.m., the grand tour with Air-loha. Thankfully, Zoey and Mason had already taken their sightseeing cruise, so my mother had only one thing left to worry about. For once her fears were justified, not just for the

reasons she was thinking, which probably involved gremlins, or terrorists... or gremlin terrorists.

The only thing they had planned for that Friday was a luau that evening in Princeville, on the north side of the island. That gave me time to work on things around the resort, as well as the opportunity to hop a ride with them as far north as Lihue so I could do some reconnaissance at the airport. I didn't want to stick around their hotel room, and seeing as how I had all the information I was able to get from their end, I left and looked for a nice spot along the beachfront to zone out and brainstorm. After a few minutes of walking along a path bordering one side by the beach, the other side by some sort of fancy shrubs illuminated by flickering tiki torches, I found an unclaimed bench overlooking the ocean and sat down. From there, all I could hear from the resort was the occasional strain of slack-keyed guitar and steel-drum music. I had just over thirty-six hours before things got real, and I hadn't seen Horace since my first day in the islands.

I thought maybe I could fly back to the mainland, hit the portal, get to the Palazzo, and see if Horace was there. Would that have left enough time to get back to the island if he wasn't? Maybe I could tip off upper management to the fact that a director had gone rogue and was about to kill my daughter and son-in-law? (Although, admittedly, I was far more concerned about Zoey, as I'd never really *met* Mason, it would seem odd if I made this all about Zoey, wouldn't it?)

None of these plans were realistic. I seriously doubted that Horace was sitting around the Palazzo, absentmindedly waiting for me to come remind him that we had serious business to take care of. No. If he wasn't there with me, it was because something had gone wrong, or maybe he was still working on making things right. As for turning stool pigeon and ratting out both Cyrus and Horace for going off-script, I had no idea where to even begin. The hermit Santa I saw on the beach? He was the only one, besides Lorenza, who I could even tenuously associate with upper management, and Santa most likely knew something was going down.

I put Zoey's chances of coming out of that weekend alive at about fifty-fifty, and that *all* depended on whether Horace decided to show up. I didn't like those odds, nor did I like putting the life of my daughter in the hands of a guy who had already admitted to purposefully killing me (albeit, to save Zoey). I had to take matters into my own hands, but I had no clue where to start. Sure I had been Horace's number one for the previous twenty years, but I was always just the reconnaissance guy. He was the one who actually executed the plans.

To be completely honest, I had no idea where to start because I had no idea what I could have done. I had next to no power aside from making contact with certain animals and individuals whose IQ's were not much more impressive. At that time, I couldn't see how either of those two populations could help me save Zoey.

I decided I couldn't wait until the next afternoon to start looking into the situation at the airport, so I started walking. Unfortunately, there was nobody on their way to the airport at that late hour, so I made the fifteen mile trip on foot.

I spent most of the journey in near-total darkness. The two-lane "highway" that circled the island was all but deserted in the wee hours of the morning. I would be thoroughly surprised if I had a more than ten cars pass me during the five hours it took to walk to the airport. I did, however, encounter a brood of wild chickens just after I set off on my journey, which gave me an idea.

I'm not sure I would have done it if my daughter's life weren't in danger, or if anyone would have been able to see me, but I spent a good half hour on the ground with those chickens, trying to get to know them. I thought maybe, just *maybe*, I could convince them to hang out in the middle of the road the next day, snarl traffic a little and keep Zoey and Mason from getting to the airport.

The chickens obviously didn't speak English.

Feeling like a fool for having wasted so much time, I left the chickens and set off again toward the airport, passing one of those pop-up canopy tents with a "COCONUTS!" sign propped against the monkeypod tree that stood nearby. Get

them to stop there, maybe? Not sure what that would accomplish, I filed it away for further internal discussion.

Once I finally made it to the highway, there was nothing worth noting until I reached Lihue itself; nothing, that is, except a sheep farm. I thought about trying the same thing with the sheep as I had tried with the chickens. The good news was that sheep were significantly brighter than chickens. The unfortunate news was that sheep had long-ago developed the ability to communicate with each other, even scattered across the globe. It wasn't something that anyone back at the Palazzo was overly concerned with, so the only guesses as to how this worked ranged from stupid to really stupid. One theory went that all sheep were innately psychic, which is why they always tend to follow one another (Yeah, I never got that connection either). You can bet your ass though, if any government found out about this, there'd be study upon study revolving around militarizing sheep.

The point of all that backstory is that the sheep weren't having any of what I was telling them. All they knew was that I was the guy who got their Eastern-European pals into an uncomfortable place. It turned out to be even more futile than with the chickens. While the chickens were too stupid to get anything I was saying, those sheep were well aware of the message I was trying to get across; they just couldn't be bothered to help me.

"Fine!" I yelled at the sheep when I got back on my way. "There goes any chance of me turning down an assignment like that in the future!"

I dragged myself up to the fence surrounding the airport as the sky was beginning to show signs of the coming sunrise. Lihue had a tiny airport but, given its unique tourism industry, had about a dozen helipads to accommodate the various tour operators that were based there. It was easy to spot the Air-loha helicopter. Being the most well-known of the charters on the island, they had the fanciest helicopter on the choicest pad at the airport, nearest the parking lot and right next to the trailer that held their offices.

I poked around for any signs that the helicopter was damaged, sabotaged, etc. This was hampered by the fact that I had absolutely no idea what I was looking at. I looked

down the line at the other helicopters and ran into the same problem. I really should have thought that out a little better.

Seeing as how I had spent all night walking fifteen miles and talking with animals to get there, I decided I would spend as much time at the airport as I could.

Cars started trickling in sometime around nine in the morning. By that time, I had already been over every inch of every helicopter on every pad at the airport. That first wave of cars brought the employees of the various tour outfits, pilots, and office staff alike.

The whole time I sat there, I did not see a single helicopter pilot for a single one of the tour companies who did *not* look like a middle-aged used car salesman. Not one of them fit the image in my head that was painted by the conversation in Detroit and my knowledge of Marcus and Cyrus's usual marks. Most of the guys were a variation on the same general theme. Paunchy, middle-aged guys with slicked back hair and bushy mustaches, loud aloha shirts, khaki shorts, and gleaming-white gym shoes. Even more discouraging, not one of them was named Eli from what I could overhear.

The situation was getting more hopeless by the minute. I sat there all morning and into the early afternoon, watching the waves of tourists come into the parking lot, load up into the helicopters, take off for a spin around the island, and return anywhere from thirty to forty-five minutes later, happy and unharmed. There obviously hadn't been anything done to the helicopters yet.

The last of the day's tours had just landed, and it was getting close to five in the afternoon. I had a choice to make. I could either stay there all night to see if Marcus showed up to sabotage the helicopter, not being able to do anything about it if he did, or I could go spend one last night with Zoey.

I left the helicopter area and headed over to the main terminal. Zoey and Mason would have already left for their Luau in Princeville, so rather than hop the shuttle south to their resort, I hopped the next one heading up north.

Chapter Twenty

I definitely wasn't dressed for it, but they can't throw you out if they can't see you. It was certainly one of the fanciest luaus I had ever seen, not that I frequented enough luaus to be an expert by any stretch of the imagination. Gwen and I had actually gone to a luau at the same place back on our honeymoon as well, but the scene was significantly more posh since the turn of the century.

I walked through the crowd and down toward the beach where the roast pig was about to be exhumed from his hot, shallow, and sandy grave. On the beach, looking out over the bay and standing in the exact same spot, where I remembered standing with Gwen, were Zoey and Mason.

"I have a picture of my parents standing on this same beach from their honeymoon," Zoey said. "My mom always jokes about the so-bad-it's-good haircut she was rocking in that picture, and how chunky my dad was. Apparently, he thought it was a good idea to *put on* weight before the wedding so he could fill out his rented tux better."

"He sounds like he was a fun guy to have around," was all Mason said. I couldn't blame him. I was never good with conversations when the topic turned to death or lost loved ones.

"From what I remember, and I *do* remember some despite losing him so young, he was a blast." Mason kept quiet and let her talk. "My mom says she used to call him my own personal clown, because every time I was sad or crying for whatever reason, he would come in and start doing something stupid to make me laugh."

"Do you remember anything in particular?"

"Well, I've already introduced you to the joys of the freakout."

"Yes, yes you have."

"Yeah, well, I have this one memory of him that is really vivid. It was just before he died. I don't know why I was crying, but we were at my grandma's house and they had this big island in their kitchen, and it was covered with mail or papers, or something. He walked in and started pretending he was falling down, over and over again like he was slipping on the floor. Each time he fell, he'd take a bunch of papers with him and there was stuff flying everywhere. I don't think my grandma was too thrilled, but I just remember it being the funniest thing ever."

"I'm glad you can remember him. I can't imagine what it was like for you to lose him at such a young age, but it sounds like he really loved you."

"Yeah, I know he did."

The stroll down memory lane was interrupted by the announcement that the pig was ready to be pulled from the imu. The rest of the crowd made its way down to the beach to see their dinner brought forth, and Zoey and Mason went to join them.

I kept my distance for the remainder of the luau, making sure that I was always able to see Zoey, but not close enough to eavesdrop. If I got the chance to talk to her tomorrow, I wanted to be able to say that I respected her privacy.

They ate, they danced; Mason even got on stage to sing "Tiny Bubbles" during the audience participation portion. Finally, though, it was time to head back to the south side of the island and get some sleep before the big day. I climbed in the back of their rental car, a nice little convertible, and watched Zoey the entire way back to the hotel.

When we got there, I followed them back to their room and decided I would camp out that night on the lanai off the living room. It didn't matter that the chairs weren't conducive to sleeping, because I couldn't have slept if I tried. I just wanted to be close to them.

Chapter Twenty-One

The sky turned from black to purple. Saturday morning had finally arrived. The sun wasn't up yet, but the birds begun to sing. I still had no idea what I was supposed to be doing, and Horace was nowhere to be seen. I was in a full-blown panic, but there was apparently nothing I could do, at least nothing I could think of doing. I sat there on the lanai, waiting for the sun to rise and for Zoey to wake up. I wanted to squeeze her tight and not let go. I wanted to keep her locked up in the room all day. Most of all though, I wanted to apologize to her for failing her, yet again.

I was woken from my thoughts by an extremely unpleasant sound.

"Give up yet?" asked Marcus, suddenly appearing on the lanai in the chair opposite mine. "You know you can't win."

I nearly jumped over the balcony, my nerves were so frazzled.

"Whoa! A little jumpy there, Zack?"

"I'm gonna jump up your goddamn ass!" I shouted, although, in hindsight, I'm not sure it came out quite the way I wanted it to. Unfazed at the time, however, I continued.

"So this is just a game to you?"

"I'm just doing my job. No need to get upset."

"Did you realize your 'job' isn't an official script? Did you realize you're just a stupid pawn in Cyrus's petty little revenge scheme?"

"Details, man. I'm just following orders."

"Yeah, and how well did that defense go at Nuremberg?"

"Dunno. I never watched Duck Tales."

"Duck, what? That's Duckburg, you moron."

If there were any sort of a trial when everything was all said and done, I'm pretty sure Marcus would have been found mentally unfit.

"Why am I wasting my time talking to you? Why are you here?"

If I could have hurt him, I would have jumped across the table to rip his throat out one, for threatening my daughter and, two, for being such an idiot.

"Anyway," he continued, "after this all goes down, I hope there aren't any hard feelings."

"Hard feelings?! You're about to kill my daughter because your director has an inferiority complex, and you want me to forgive and forget?"

"Zack, man, I just don't get how is that so bad. Haven't you always wanted to see her again? Once I finish this job you'll get that chance." As he said this, he leaned back in his chair and put his hands behind his head, like he *expected* me to thank him for what he was about to do.

"I'd rather she live a long and happy life."

"That can't happen. Cyrus gave me a job, and I need to do it. If I don't, I'm back over there—I can't go back over there."

"So that's it? You're afraid of what life might have in store for you next time around, so you're just going to pull whatever crap Cyrus dumps on you? You're going to sell your soul because you're a selfish coward?"

Marcus stood up and pointed at me. Before he could do anything, the door to the lanai slid open and Marcus disappeared as quickly as he had materialized. If Cyrus was bending the rules like that and using Marcus like a scared, cornered animal, what else did he have up his sleeve?

Chapter Twenty-Two

Zoey came out and sat in the chair vacated by Marcus. Seeing her there, so happy and so completely unaware of the cosmic pissing contest into which I had gotten her into, brought tears to my eyes. There was nothing I could do, and Horace had deserted me.

"All set for Jurassic Park?" said Mason, pantomiming tiny T-Rex arms and joining Zoey on the lanai.

"Huh?"

"T-Rex... Tiny arms."

"Yeah, I got that. Thanks. But what's that got to do with today?"

"The movie, you know? That opening scene where they fly right toward the island in the helicopters? That was filmed right here!"

"That came out about twenty years before I was born. It's not really something in my bank of useless trivia."

"Well I'm not even a year older than you. Don't know where I picked it up. Maybe the brochure?"

"Nerd."

"Hey!" countered Mason, pitching a bagel in Zoey's direction, and eliciting a squeal in the process.

I got up and left the room so they could have their first marital spat in private. I took the elevator to the first floor and walked past the row of boutiques on my way to the lobby. One store was selling sand dollars, seashells, and other Hawaiian novelties that were harvested somewhere in the Philippines or Long Beach. Another store sold "Resort Apparel," which is just code for "the same crap that old people buy at your local Wal-Mart, but at obscenely-inflated prices here."

I walked past a few more shops selling t-shirts and sundries, and finally I came to the obnoxiously plush, open-air lobby. I hunkered down on one of the many wicker lounge chairs scattered around, and tried to figure out a way to keep Zoey and Mason from getting to the airport. But unfortunately, my idea well had run dry.

So there in the lobby I sat, listening to ukuleles, Bob Marley tunes, and squawking parrots, scowling at every happy person who walked through the front entrance.

"You're not wrapped up in a murder plot between two immortal god-like man-children," I grumbled at them. But, of course, nobody heard me and they continued on through the lobby to get leid by hula dancers. After an hour or two of that, it was about nine in the morning and time to go.

The trip to the airport was much shorter than my hike the previous day. We were in the car for maybe half an hour, but I tried everything I could to keep Zoey from making that flight. The chickens failed spectacularly to implement any portion of the plan that we had gone over the day before. *Too* stupid, just as I suspected. They just looked around, confused at the familiar voice inside their heads, and went back to picking at the gravel on the side of the road.

Next up was the coconut stand. I still had no idea how I could possibly use that detour as a way to keep them from reaching the airport, but I pleaded and begged, and tried to perform every type of supernatural juju I could come up with to get Mason to pull the car over and stop.

"Should we?" Mason asked, a promising start.

"Sure, we've got time."

Thank God, I had somehow gotten through!

Mason pulled the car into the gravel lot next to the stand. He and Zoey were barely out of the car before the proprietor pounced on them.

"Hello youngins!" said the old lady who ran the place, greeting them as if they were old friends. "Come to pay me a visit again, have you?"

"Haven't missed a day yet since we've been here!" said Zoey, smiling.

Well shit. Maybe I hadn't gotten through to them after all.

"What have you got planned for today, now?" said the old lady, handing them each a freshly-tapped coconut. "This is your last day, no?"

"Yep, last full day," said Mason. "On our way to the airport for a helicopter tour of the island, then we've got dinner reservations at the seafood place back at the resort."

Maybe I could get her to talk them out of it? I mean, she sold coconuts from a tent on the side of the road—my chances of getting through had to be pretty high, right? I tried everything I could to get through to her. I tried commanding her, in my best ghostly voice, to dissuade them from getting on a helicopter.

"Oh, those are lovely! You'll have a great time!"

Next, I tried getting her to give them bad directions.

"There's only one road around the island. It's impossible to get lost."

I even tried getting her to steal Mason's wallet when he left it on the table, thinking maybe they wouldn't let him on the helicopter if he didn't have his ID.

"Mason, honey, you've gone and forgotten your wallet!"

So much for that. I hadn't gotten through to her one bit. Back in the car, though, as we pulled away from the roadside stand, there came a lively shout of "Demon be gone!" from under the tent. Maybe I should have started off by introducing myself.

My final hope of keeping Zoey and Mason from getting to the airport on time rested with the sheep. After yesterday, I wasn't holding my breath. But as the car sped along, I noticed brake lights where the road should have been clear. We caught up with the cars in front of us and discovered that

traffic had been brought to a standstill by sheep jammed on the road next to the farm!

"This isn't good," grumbled Mason. "We're cutting it close as it is. If we can't get through, we're not making that flight."

"Don't worry about it," said Zoey. "If we miss it, we just spend all day at the pool. I've had worse contingency plans."

"Yes, what an excellent idea!" I shouted. "Why not just save time and turn around now?"

Just then, the sea of sheep began to part, and the lead cars started creeping forward through the flock that was still tight on both sides of the road.

"There we go! That wasn't bad at all," said Mason, obviously more excited by the prospect of dying a horrific death than by spending the day at the pool.

I screamed at the sheep and, admittedly, felt a little silly for doing so.

"You little wooly bastards! You did this just to spite me, didn't you?"

One of the larger sheep turned its head and looked directly at me as we slowly made our way through. With as arrogant a face as a sheep had ever made, it let out a loud bleat in my direction.

"Your farmer is getting a visit from me as soon as this is over!"

And that was it. Nothing else to do but sit back and wait for the arrival at the airport. In a fit of frustration, I leaned forward to the hood of the car, passing through the dashboard in ghostly fashion, and started digging at the wires and tubes of the engine. I would have been just as well off waving my hands around in the air. Unlike Marcus, I still had the same limitations as all the other production assistants.

§

Ten minutes later, we were there. Pulling into the airport to meet fate. To meet the fate that Cyrus had unjustly cooked up for us. Mason parked the car in the dirt lot near the helicopter pads and, after gathering their things from the

back seat, he and Zoey made their way to the trailer that served as the main office for Air-loha Helicopter Tours. Marcus was nowhere to be seen, and neither was Horace.

I walked over to the helicopter to inspect it for any signs of tampering since the day before. Everything looked the same as it did when I last looked everything over. That meant absolutely nothing because, as we've already covered, I knew absolutely nothing about any type of aviation. Also because I had no way of knowing that Marcus hadn't jacked things up before I got there the day before, and that the flights that went off without a hitch were just lucky.

All the pilots were there too, running around and making their cursory inspections of their helicopters, and giving their passengers the pre-flight briefing. They weren't all the same as the guys who were there the day before, but still none of them had the adrenaline-junkie thing going for them, especially Zoey's guide. A Twinkie junkie maybe, Zoey's guide fit right in with the other pilots. A little older than the others, he was probably in his mid-fifties but had on the same uniform as all the other pilots, right down to the bristly Burt Reynolds mustache and the tacky shirt covered in hula girls that was tucked into his shorts and stretched to capacity over his prodigious belly. When he spoke, he sounded straight from Long Island. How was that guy on Cyrus and Marcus's list?

I thought I could maybe try getting some birds to fly into the rotors as they started up, perhaps ground the helicopter that way? Only problem is that animals, while generally open to suggestion and not too bright, were not usually keen on suicide. Besides, after the farce with the chickens and the sheep, there was even less chance of having that work. I was desperate and losing faith.

"HORACE!" I screamed, the birds on the far side of the helipads scattering in every direction. I was impressed with my ability to reach that many animals at once, until I realized what had really spooked them. Rumbling in from the service entrance to the north was a gleaming black pickup truck pulling a big, black trailer. Dust flew everywhere as it sped along the short dirt road toward the tarmac.

"Sorry I'm late, brah!" shouted a voice from the cab of the pickup.

Bingo. In the driver's seat was a young guy (compared to the helicopter pilots, at least) in a tank top and wrap-around sunglasses, with a mop of bushy blonde hair under a Detroit Tigers hat. So that was Eli.

If I needed any more confirmation, it came in the form of Marcus, who was riding shotgun, the license plates reading "ELI DUD." I assumed that was supposed to be short for "dude." Unfortunately, the chances that Eli was brighter than Marcus were getting slim.

Eli pulled the trailer over to the opposite side of the Air-loha trailer and skidded to a stop near one of the actual runways, right in front of a young couple sitting in the Island Ultralights waiting area, and looking slightly annoyed at the late arrival of their tour guide.

"No worries, mis amigos!" Eli said, as he hopped out of the cab and ran around to open the back of the trailer. "Had a little trouble back there with a bunch of sheep in the road, but we've still got plenty of time to get you both up in the air."

By this point, he began pulling out one of those powered hang-glider things from the trailer, or maybe it was an ultralight. Whatever it was, it looked less like an actual airplane and more like a go-kart strapped underneath a parasail with a big-ass fan on the back.

"Who wants to go first?" he asked, looking at the couple.

Marcus came walking around the front of the pickup and smiled at me.

"You didn't think we'd just have their own pilot crash the copter, did you? Besides, take a look at those dudes," he said, motioning to the group of helicopter pilots. "None of them would have a Cyrus script. Their sorry asses are more up Horace's alley, just like you."

"So, what?" I replied, not giving him the satisfaction of responding to his stupid insult. "This is it? We go up in the air, you go up in the air, and you get Eli to Al Qaeda that thing into the helicopter without our guy noticing?"

"Yep, that's pretty much it. Everything's all set and ready to go. Because of the unfortunate hold up with the

sheep on the highway, he's going to overlook one critical step in his pre-flight checklist. That—coupled with the fact that he's going to be rushing to get this tour finished before his next appointment—means there's nothing anyone can do now to keep that crash from happening."

"Look," I said, switching gears, trying to appeal to his simple side. "I don't know what you're afraid of on the other side, or what Cyrus told you to rope you into this, but you don't need to do this."

"I don't make the rules."

"To hell with the rules!"

At that point, after all I'd been through and after the past few sleepless nights, I left all sense of shame on the ground and tried to appeal to his emotions. I was already on the verge of tears having felt so useless in the fight to prevent my daughter's senseless death. I started pleading with Marcus to call it all off, tears flowing freely.

"Pull it together, man," he replied. "You know as well as anyone that it's not that bad. Hell, I've had more fun over here than I ever did before that bitch ran me over."

I was more pissed than anything, so I let him have it.

"That's it? That's why Cyrus has you by the balls? Because you're afraid your fun is going to end if you stop being his bitch?"

"Hey, wait a minute," he stepped forward as he began. I didn't let him continue.

"No, I get it. You don't see a problem with what you're doing because you were pathetic when you were alive. Ending up as a greasy spot on the pavement was the best thing that ever happened to you because nobody gave a shit about your sorry ass over there!" I had given up trying to sweet talk him into stopping.

Marcus's eyes widened and his nostrils flared, like a bull about to charge.

"Tell me," I continued. "How many people showed up to your wake? Your funeral? All you had over there were a bunch of floozies using you until they found someone to bring home to mom and dad, and all you've got over here is an overgrown boy-god who is going to use you until *he* finds something better."

"Which is more than you've got right now," he shot back. "Where is Horace, by the way?"

"You sonofa..."

I charged at him but stopped dead in my tracks when I heard the helicopter's rotor sputter to life behind me.

"Better hurry," Marcus said, "if you want a front seat for the show."

"We're not finished," I said, as I turned to run back toward Zoey's helicopter.

"Have a safe flight!"

Resisting the urge to tear his head off and shove it sideways up his rear end (if only I had the ability) I sprinted to the Air-loha pad just as Burt Reynolds was finishing his pre-flight checks. As Zoey and Mason were the only passengers that morning, and I didn't know what else to do, I hopped into the vacant front passenger seat and buckled in.

I did everything I could, which wasn't much, to make sure that everyone else was buckled in securely. Basically, this consisted of me looking at everyone's seatbelts. I studied the pilot's face to make sure he was paying attention and that his eyes weren't bloodshot—you never know what these guys drank for breakfast. Before I knew it, we were off the ground.

Great, I thought, this helicopter is about to get torpedoed by a defective hang-glider, I can't do anything about it, and I'm going to see the whole thing happen.

I looked down as we climbed out of the airport and saw Eli, the male half of the annoyed couple, and Marcus all loaded up. Marcus sat nonchalantly on a crossbar, holding on with one arm wrapped around a pole.

I couldn't believe he was actually going through with it, and that he thought we were somehow going to be buds again afterwards, not that I ever considered him a bud before. Most of all though, I couldn't believe that was how it was going to end for Zoey. Oh, and Mason too I guess.

Chapter Twenty-Three

At least I finally knew how it was going to happen, and that the problem wasn't with the helicopter in which we were all flying. That narrowed down my range of options from being incapable of keeping the helicopter from malfunctioning, to being incapable of preventing the helicopter from getting hit by Eli, Marcus, and Innocent Guy A.

I spent the first fifteen minutes of the flight trying to get through to the helicopter pilot to see if there was any way I could get him to change course. I waved my hands through his face, I tried pulling the controls out of his hands, I even tried sitting in the pilot's seat with him. All it accomplished was cause that uncomfortable tingling feeling, and fill my senses with the overwhelming smell of stale coffee. The guy was having none of it. He droned on, like a smooth-jazz dj, pointing out the driest, wettest, highest, and most expensive areas of the island. When he wasn't dazzling Zoey and Mason with his scripted knowledge of Kauai, he was pumping clichéd Hawaiian music through the headsets. At that moment, we were cruising to the Hawaiian cover of "Over the Rainbow." Zoey and Mason were having a great time pointing things out to each other and, for the most part, ignoring the tour guide.

When I wasn't trying to communicate with Zoey, Mason, or the pilot, I was looking around frantically, trying to spot the direction from which our doom would come. I stood up and pressed myself against the window so I could get a better look.

Finally, there it was. Slightly behind us and closing fast from the left. There was no way the pilot could have seen it unless he got out of his seat, pressed his own face against the window, and looked up. It was still a good ways off, and higher than we were, but it looked like we were both headed for the same place. All I could do was look at Zoey and enjoy her smile, while she still had not a care in the world and not a clue as to what was about to happen.

Suddenly, the chopper dropped low to the water. Oh thank God, I thought. He spotted him!

"And now we're going to recreate the approach to the island, made famous in a movie you may have seen, by the name of *Jurassic Park*."

Damn. The little maneuver was part of the tour; the pilot still had no clue that we weren't alone up there. Mason shot a snarky glance at Zoey.

"Told ya!"

"Oh, whatever!"

They shared a laugh, and I had the morose thought that it would probably be their last. The fan on the back of the ultra-light, almost directly above us and still out of the pilot's view, was shooting sparks and belching black smoke. All I could hear was the engine and rotor noise from our own helicopter, so there was no way anyone else, especially with their headsets on, could have heard anything amiss. Marcus clung to the back of the ultra-light, like an overgrown gremlin. I guess I owed my mom an apology.

Within seconds, the ultra-light was close enough where I could clearly make out the terror on the faces of all those aboard, with the exception of Marcus, who was grinning from ear to ear. We made eye contact and he gave me one of those "whattya gonna do?" shrugs.

There was only one thing I *could* do at that point. I quickly looked back at Zoey, one last time—I didn't want to see her when we were hit, but I couldn't pull my eyes off of

her. And then it was too late. With the pilot and Mason both looking out the right side of the chopper, the expression on Zoey's face turned from glee to sheer terror as she lifted her head and looked straight ahead out the front window.

"Look out!" she screamed.

Everyone, including me, whipped their heads around, just in time to see the biggest bird any of us had ever seen, coming straight toward the front window. The pilot jerked the controls to the left, and the flaming shell of the ultra-light, passed to the right, unseen by everyone except me. Everyone else had their eyes fixed on the bird and then out the left window as the pilot banked hard in that direction. The ultra-light fell silently into the waves below, without Marcus on board.

The pilot, without missing a beat, continued with the tour.

"Well that would have made for a messy windshield!"

Chapter Twenty-Four

The helicopter blipped out of existence.

The pilot blipped out of existence.

Mason blipped out of existence.

Zoey blipped out of existence.

Existence blipped out of existence.

There was nothing left. No sign of Marcus. No sign of the wreckage of the ultra-light he had aimed at us.

As my eyes and brain adjusted, I could make out the faint contours of a glowing blue ball, and I was inside. Just me and... the bird? It was the only thing from the previous instant that I could still make out, but even that seemed to be changing before my eyes. It resembled...

"Horace?"

Squawk!

"Why—I mean, how—I mean... What the hell?"

"I'll make this quick and easy to understand, as I have no clue how much time we have before it'll be our turn," he said, his body morphing back into its human form.

"But where..."

"Just shut up and listen. This may be your only chance to hear what happened," he said, looking around conspiratorially. "We caught upper management's attention,

and let me go on record saying this probably won't be the most pleasant experience you've ever had."

I was speechless.

"Okay, good. First things first. We won. Aside from the scare with that bird back there, Zoey is perfectly fine, and will be for a long, long time to come."

A chill ran through my body, and then it went numb. I had difficulty concentrating on his words after that, but he continued to recount exactly what had happened. His plan worked perfectly.

"You had a plan? Nice of you to fill me in! Why did you leave me to flounder around without a clue?"

"Because that was part of the plan. You were the ruse. With all of your crazed antics, how could anyone *not* have paid attention to you? You even drew the attention of my... of upper management. Kudos to you!"

Begrudgingly, I saw his point. He continued.

"The plan all along was to fly that bird straight at your daughter's helicopter so the pilot would swerve away from the power glider crashing down from above. Had you actually left for the Islands when I told you to—remember that?—you would have drawn even more attention from the beginning and made my job a little easier. But it all worked out in the end." He stood there with a big, closed-mouth grin, as if waiting for me to congratulate him.

"How did you know that was going to happen?"

"Because I pay attention. Cyrus is not very subtle. Besides, his office is right next to mine. The walls aren't all that thick."

"You eavesdropped on his conversation with Marcus?"

"Don't act like you're offended! We just saved your daughter, remember?"

"But how did you know he wasn't trying to throw you off, like you did with him? And if all you had to do was turn yourself into a bird this whole time, *Zeus*, why bother involving me at all?"

"A. Because he's not that smart. B. Because we had fun, didn't we? C. Zeus turned himself into a swan, *thank you*. And D. Because I was playing a hunch that might lead to shit!"

"Lead to shit? That doesn't sound..."

"Yes, shit!" he said frantically, waving his hands around and looking for something to grab. "Hold on tight. It's our turn."

And with that, the bubble burst and we went plummeting. I should say *I* went plummeting, because I had no clue where Horace went. He disappeared with the bubble.

Chapter Twenty-Five

It felt like I had been falling a good five minutes, but the sudden impact of the cold, hard floor did nothing more than send a slight electric shock through my entire body. It was hard to get a sense of size because the room was filled with a blinding light, but it felt cavernous. I was in one piece but my ears were ringing, and it felt like I was discharging static electricity. It reminded me of the times I'd slid down those plastic slides in denim jeans while playing with Zoey at the park.

I looked to my right and saw Horace standing there, looking more nervous than I had ever seen him, but otherwise unharmed.

"Where are—"

"Shhh!" he shot back, bringing his index finger to his mouth.

A figure began to emerge from the light, walking toward us. I pulled myself up off the ground and stood up to see better.

"He will see you now," it said, as the light faded to near-total darkness.

"Lorenza?" I stammered. Seriously, was there anywhere she wasn't?

Another voice boomed throughout the room then, belonging to none of its three visible occupants. Lorenza took a few steps back, and the voice thundered from every direction at once.

"Well, well, well, Horace. What sort of a mess have we gotten ourselves into this time?"

It paused.

"And look, you've brought a friend. Hello Zachary."

The voice was not sinister or threatening in any way. If anything, it reminded me of Mickey Rooney when he would play the voice of Santa Claus in those old stop-motion Christmas specials from the 60's and 70's. The voice continued.

"Lorenza, let's take a look at your report."

"Wait, you mean ...?" I began.

"Yes, Zachary. Lorenza assists me in the *compliance* department. She has been observing you for quite some time."

"She's been spying on me?!"

"She collects data, Zachary, much in the same way you assist young Horace here."

"But I thought she was just a—"

Before I could go any further, a bright yellow umbrella materialized in her left hand, a stereo in her right. The soft strains of opera wafted into the air. She looked at me with a wry smile and raised eyebrow.

"Are you *serious*?" I said.

"What is *that* supposed to mean?" said Horace, gesturing to Lorenza's props.

"That's enough. The report, please, Lorenza?"

The umbrella and stereo disappeared as Lorenza brought her hands together in front of her, as if she were holding an open book. A second later, out of a sizzle of blue flame and with a faint *zip*, a thick manila folder appeared in her palms. She took the folder and held it up with her left hand, where it promptly vanished into a similar blue flame and a *pop*.

Lorenza stood silently as the voice read through the report. At least, I assume it was reading through the report.

"Well now, Horace, it appears you have been quite busy lately. Let's see here. Rewriting scripts, yes. Interfering with

other directors' scripts, of course. Involving a production assistant in a tiff with your brother..."

"I can explain, sir."

"Can you, Horace? Can you explain why you've decided to ignore eons of set precedent and turn the world into your own little playground with your own little rules? Let me answer that for you. No. No, I don't think you can explain."

My eyes had adjusted to the darkness by now, but I still couldn't make out the source of the voice. I could, though, see the room more clearly and my initial sense was correct. Wherever we were, there were no walls or ceiling. Lorenza stood, sour-faced as ever, in front of us. Noticeably absent from the room were Cyrus and Marcus.

"I've already dealt with them, Zachary."

Shit, I thought.

"Language, please."

"I'm sorry, sir."

Ignoring me then, he went on.

"Rather than taking your word for it, why don't we let the facts speak for themselves?"

With that, a projection screen materialized out of thin air, ten feet in front of us—the two defendants. What followed was a recap of the past two decades, not unlike what I had watched with Horace after I had first arrived. Everything was there, beginning with the squirrels. My projects, my free time, and, of course, the last few weeks. I was so relieved that I never stooped to hanging around in people's bathrooms.

The voice returned.

"It looks like you've had some interesting adventures since joining us here, Zachary."

"I've been doing my best, sir," I replied.

"Is that what you call it?"

"Ease off!" said Horace.

"Horace!"

"Dad!" Horace yelled, clenching his fists and stepping forward.

Dad? My head was already swimming, but this newest revelation about the size and significance of Horace's family tree had thrown me for loop. Horace shot me a sheepish sideways glance.

"Dad," he continued, with a bit more civility. "Zachary has done nothing but follow orders, follow them well, and follow them without breaking any rules since arriving here. You know yourself that he wasn't even supposed to transition when he did. If anyone should be punished, it's me. Zack was just along as an observer these past few weeks. He didn't do a thing to change any scripts; that was all me."

This was met with silence. The only sound in the room was Horace's panting. After catching his breath, either from speaking so quickly or from the excitement of talking back, he continued.

"The only reason he is here today, in front of you, is because of me. I needed him to keep Cyrus from discovering my plan. I needed Zack to help me prevent Cyrus from using a doctored script to kill an innocent..."

"I've heard enough," said the voice, quietly this time.

"But—" Horace stammered.

"No, now it is my turn."

"I—" I tried, only to be cut off.

"You would be best served by keeping quiet at this point, Zachary. After all, considering the *other* judges you faced throughout your previous career, you should know better than anyone when it is best to keep silent."

That statement could mean something really promising, or really ominous. I chose not to guess which.

The voice continued.

"Now, Horace, I will deal with you later; my decision regarding your production assistant has already been made. A director breaking the rules is one thing, but a production assistant behaving as you have is wholly unacceptable."

"But I never bro—" I pleaded.

"With that said," continued the voice, loudly drowning out my groveling. "With that said, I believe there have been some *mitigating factors*. Lorenza?"

On cue, Lorenza produced another phantom folder and passed it up to Horace's invisible father, which is to say, she held the folder above her head until it disappeared.

"Based on what Signorina Lorenza has collected, I have made my decision of what must be done with you."

"Done with me?" I squeaked.

"Yes, Zachary. It is clear you are not capable of remaining a production assistant, nor will you ever become a director with such a colorful history in your file. For these reasons, as well as some very important others, you cannot remain here."

"What others!" I demanded, cut short by the same blue glowing orb that had enveloped me earlier. This time, though, I was the only one suspended in the prison cell.

"Wait!" Horace and I shouted simultaneously.

"Zachary," said the voice. "I truly apologize for everything."

Lorenza walked toward me then, stopping only when she was inches from the surface of my spherical prison.

"Goodbye, Signor Zachary," she said with a—smile?

I could have sworn I saw her wink, just before the world as I knew it exploded with blinding blue light. Then it felt like I was being sucked up into a giant cartoon vacuum cleaner. You know the type— where the character's body stretches comically, starting with his head and all the way down to his toes, just before his feet finally get plucked off the ground and he snaps back to normal size. I was surrounded by the deafening sound of rushing air, lending even more to the sensation of being in a vacuum cleaner. That less-than-pleasant feeling was followed by complete stillness, silence, and absolute darkness. I lost all sense of time and space and, slowly, proceeded to lose consciousness.

Chapter Twenty-Six

It took a few moments before I finally came to. It was still dark and I had a pins and needles sensation crawling all over my skin. Despite the fact that my central nervous system—or the spectral equivalent thereof—was in complete disarray, I could feel that I was lying flat on my back. There was a stiff breeze blowing over me, albeit without the vacuum sound, so I knew I was no longer in my cell. It was chilly, which meant I wasn't in Hawaii either. Something was familiar, though, a smell that wasn't there a moment ago.

I opened my eyes long enough to see a blurry pendulum swinging above me, set against a bright blue background. I shut my eyes tight against the harsh light, and squeezed them in an effort to ward off the pins and needles.

"What the hell is this, now?" I thought.

I opened my eyes again, slowly, and as the previously-fuzzy features of the pendulum slowly came into focus—the wooden frame, the—I couldn't keep my eyes open long enough to make any sort of reasoned guess as to where I was. It had only been about ten seconds since I woke up, but it seemed like an eternity. It took every ounce of concentration to stay awake. I hadn't felt like this since before I died. My nose was working, though, and that smell—it smelled like... Spring?

My eyes snapped open and there, swinging back and forth from the tree above me, against a blazing blue sky, was an empty birdfeeder.

The fog in my head cleared out immediately and I sat up with a jerk. Squirrels scattered everywhere. The pins and needles vanished as the squirrels took their sharp little claws with them. Only then did I begin to notice a throbbing headache. I doubled over in pain, and as my hands shot up to grab my aching head, they brought handfuls of birdseed with them. Of course I knew where I was.

So that was my punishment. My hell. What kind of sick joke did upper management have in store for me? Banished to die all over again? This time getting to deal with the discovery of my body? I looked around but couldn't see Horace anywhere. He wasn't going to save me this time around. Also absent was Lorenza. I assumed the voice of Horace's father was gone, but I couldn't test that hypothesis by simply looking around.

But there was someone else with me. Someone who filled me with even more dread because of what was about to happen. Standing there, near the corner of the house, was Gwen. She looked the same as she did the day I left, only this time I was able to see the horrified expression on her face as she found my body beneath the tree. She stood there, mouth open, staring in my direction.

Those sick bastards.

"We need to leave in fifteen minutes! What's going on back here? And what happened to your head?"

Uhhh...

That didn't sound overly hysterical given the circumstances. I looked around for my corpse but I wasn't where I had left myself two decades earlier. I reached up and ran my fingers across my forehead. There was quite the bump where there shouldn't have been. My brain was reacting slower than usual, but then it registered. I was the only version of me in the backyard, and she *saw* me. I looked back toward Gwen again and she looked me straight in the eyes.

"Are you okay?" she said, worry in her voice.

Tears welled up in my eyes but I did my best to hide them. Punishment, cruel dream, whatever this was, I didn't care. I was going to make the most out of it.

"Yeah, I'm good. Just... spilled some, uh, birdseed and I was just, um..." I scrambled to find something coherent to say, but it's not every day you find yourself thrust back into life after being dead for twenty years. Try to work that one out.

"Are you sure? That's a nasty bump you've got there. Maybe you should go lay down, I can get Zoey by my—"

"No!"

Gwen just stared at me.

"I mean, no, I'm good. I just knocked my head on the tree when I bent down to pick up the bag. I'll come with."

"Okay, but we're running out of time. Go get in the shower and you can worry about that mess later. Besides, the squirrels will probably have that all cleared up by the time we get back."

"Yep, definitely."

My head was still throbbing, not only from the knock I had received via the tree, but from trying to digest what was happening. First thing first, I had to make it to my feet.

Success! Not knowing how long this dream was going to last, I ran straight over to Gwen and wrapped my arms around her, nearly knocking us both to the ground in the process.

"God, I've missed you!"

"You sure you are okay?"

"Perfect!"

"Then go, get inside. Weirdo!"

I sprang into the house like a kid going into the family room on Christmas morning. Twenty years had passed, but I could remember every last thing as if I had just left the day before. I hurried to the bathroom to scrub off as much as I could before we had to leave. I pushed open the door and—

"Hey, stranger!"

There, in my bathroom, was Horace. He was wearing a large smirk and was, by all appearances, perfectly fine.

"Holy Hell!" I screamed at the sight of him. "What the—"

"What the' is right! Been I while since I've seen this happen. I mean, I had a slight hunch, but you never really can tell what's going to happen for sure, right?" He leaned back a little, put his arms out to the side, and nodded his head. "So whattya think?"

"What do I think? Really, Horace? The bathroom?"

"Well I would have..."

"Whatever. Is this what happens when you cross the streams? If this is the Hell I have to spend eternity in, this is pretty twisted. Why are you here? Shouldn't you be in your own version of purgatory, or does mine just happen to include you?"

I could see Horace trying to process what I was saying. His expression went from utter confusion, to hurt, to that "Oh, yeah" realization look.

"Ohhhhh. Well, I guess this might not be setting in quite right. This definitely is not Hell, Zack. This is your, well, they are referring to it as your settlement."

"Potato, potahto."

"No, no, no. What I mean is that upper management, whom you now know includes my father, realized there were issues with the scripts as they pertained to you and your family, especially after your mishap with the squirrels and the drama with Cyrus."

"But I thought you were the reason the squirrels killed me?"

"I was, and he knows that. I'm not going to speculate as to his reasons for doing things, but I guess he saw what happened and wasn't exactly thrilled with what the script writers had originally planned for your family considering that you were the only one being directed."

"But how—"

"I said I don't know why, I'm just guessing. But when combined with the way Cyrus tried to mess with things after I saved your family the first time, I guess this is dad's way of setting things straight."

"So how long does this last?"

"Lasts until you die, obviously."

Then it hit me like a freight train. The realization that I was getting the only thing I had wanted for the last twenty years.

"You mean, this is real? I'm back? I'm... alive?"

"Pretty slick, huh? You being born again?"

"Oh hey, can we not use that term?"

"Okay, this is your party. Let's call it your rebirth. I've actually only seen it happen a handful of times since I've been doing this. You might recall a guy by the name of Jesus? Yeah, he was one of the first cases. We were still working out the kinks back then, so it caused a bit of a stir. Still dealing with that one, strangely enough."

"Wait, so Jesus isn't really the—"

"Now don't go putting words in my mouth, I never said that, did I? I never said there wasn't any cross-departmental work going on. Anyway, in your case, nobody will ever have a clue as to what happened."

"Nobody except me, that is. That's going to make things pretty damn awkward around here... Wait a minute! I can totally be like Biff from the second *Back to the Future*! Put some money on a few games and such?"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! Hold on there, bucko. Don't get too excited. This is only temporary, I can assure you. The memories of everything that happened between you smacking your head and waking up just now, including this little conversation we're having, will all fade in short order, and you'll finish up the rest of your breather existence without a clue of the last twenty years."

"No clue whatsoever?"

"None. Zero. Zip. Zilch."

"Not even the memory of one Super Bowl score?"

"No way."

"Okay fine, I get it. How long until they fade?"

"Eh, hard to say. Three to five days, maybe? You know, just enough time to jot something down if you wanted to." Horace winked as he said this.

This seemed like cheating.

"I can do that?" I asked.

"Normally, no. But let's just call this another part of the settlement. But no scores! That is explicitly verboten!

Remember though—well, you actually won't remember anything so that's a bad choice of words—just because you've written something down, doesn't mean you will actually remember having done any of it."

"Got it. Thanks." By this time, I was wondering why Gwen hadn't rushed in to see who I was talking to or why I hadn't gotten in the shower yet. Then I saw it. A drop of water was suspended in midair, between the spigot and the bottom of the sink. I looked up at Horace, who flashed me a big smile and wagged his eyebrows.

"Come on now," he said. "You don't think I'd chance you looking like a raving lunatic the first time you've seen your lovely wife in twenty years, do you?"

"You always were the considerate type," I said, rolling my eyes.

"Nice. Now go on. I'll get out of here so you can make yourself presentable."

That was our goodbye? Our last words exchanged in the bathroom? I had never really thought about it before; I always assumed I would be working with Horace for the rest of eternity. I realized how much I was going to miss him, for the next few days at least. It gave me a lump in my throat.

"So this is it? That's all? Are we ever going to meet again?" I wasn't sure what answer I wanted to hear, especially knowing what was supposed to happen to my family the following weekend.

"Probably not. He's taken me off of your script. Actually, you don't even have a script anymore. You've been emancipated, for lack of a better word. Your life is yours to mess up as you want."

"Really?" I was stunned.

"I didn't say it would be any better, just up to you... Without the chance of having someone like me hanging around to get you eaten by a pack of twitchy rodents or burnt to a crisp in a Christmas tree fire."

"But—"

"You'll be fine. I'll see you—"

"Wait! Just one more thing I need to know, before you leave."

"What's that?"

"Back there in Hawaii, when you turned yourself into a bird."

"Yeah?"

"That wasn't the first time you'd ever done something like that, was it?"

Horace smiled again.

"Take care, Zack. You've got a family to look after now."

Horace disappeared in the blink of an eye, and the only sound that followed was the *plink* of a water drop hitting the porcelain wash basin.

"Hey, who is Juergen?" said Gwen, walking into the bathroom.

"What? I didn't say anything."

"No, no you didn't. Juergen, the guy who left the message on the answering machine. He's the one who said something," she said slowly, with a touch of sarcasm. "A message about a job. You might want to listen to it."

"Oh right, yeah. Horace and I go way back."

"Horace? What? Who the hell is—"

"Juergen! I meant Juergen. Did I say Horace? I don't know where that came from. Who's Horace? I don't even know a Horace!"

"Yeah... So, anyway, you might want to listen to that message. But hurry, otherwise we're going to be late getting Z."

"Sure. Yep. All over it. Message from Juergen."

I ran into the office after Gwen, shedding birdseed with every step I took, and we listened to the message together. The message, according to the timestamp, had been left while I was out working in the backyard. It was from one of my old friends from college who I had kept in touch with over the years. Apparently, he had caught wind of my getting laid off the day before and wanted to see if I was interested in a job opening with the company he worked for. They just opened up a position that was right up my alley and had absolutely nothing to do with practicing law.

"I can't guarantee anything," Juergen said in the message. "But I know how much you've been hating the law stuff lately, and you've got a tech background. So it's worth a shot, right?"

Damn right it was! This was the second time in the past three years that he had hit me up to come work with him. The first time I turned him down because I didn't realize how life-sucking being a lawyer was. I promised myself I wouldn't turn him down a second time, and that I would call him back as soon as we got back from picking up Zoey. Gwen just looked at me and smiled.

"Wouldn't that be nice if it worked out?" she said.

"That wouldn't be my luck if it did."

"I don't know," Gwen said. "Not sure if it's just the nice weather or what, but I've got a feeling our luck is about to change."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

I was finally able to shower and scrub off all visible detritus, although I was still a bit sticky in places from all the sap. At that point, though, nothing could keep me from getting out of the house and down to the preschool as fast as I could. I rushed to get dressed, my clean clothes catching on the patches of pine tar still stuck firmly to my skin, and I nearly dragged Gwen off of her feet on my way out of the house.

It was less than two blocks to the preschool, located in a Lutheran church at the end of our street. We got there early on account of my brisk pace down the sidewalk.

The kids were still playing at the different stations in their classroom, and there she was. My first glance of Zoey with my flesh and blood eyes (trust me, the distinction is important) was through the one-way glass window between her classroom and the hallway where the parents waited for dismissal. She looked exactly the same as the day I left her. I wanted to run inside and squeeze her, and hold her forever, and never let her go... but that would probably raise some eyebrows from the yoga-pants crew.

Then it hit me. I realized that I was standing there *because* of Zoey. Everything I had done over the last twenty years had been because of her. Had it not been for the love of

my daughter and my desire to see her grow up, I wouldn't have hung around the Palazzo any longer than it would have taken for me to tell Horace to send me back. Had it not been for Zoey, I could have spent the last twenty years as a sea cucumber.

Nobody could have predicted it—or maybe it was planned all along by upper management—but who knew that my sticking around and working for Horace would have led to me back here? I guess Horace might have known. In which case, he really was my guardian angel.

My eyes began to tear up again. If the moms avoided me before, they kept a little extra distance that day. The five minutes until dismissal was an eternity. Gwen chit-chatted with neighbors I hadn't seen in two decades, just like normal: "Yeah, we're going to stay here for the holidays this year." "Sure we can schedule a playdate some time. How about after New Year's?" "Oh, he just bumped it clearing some branches from the backyard. He's fine."

At long last, the door popped open to reveal the kids lined upon the bench in front of their cubbies. Zoey's was about three quarters of the way down the line, so I couldn't see her immediately, but I could see her feet kicking away. Not wanting to break protocol, or scare any children, I took my place behind Gwen and followed her into the room.

"Mommy!" Zoey shouted, her little feet kicking faster and faster, her big, gap-toothed smile lighting up her face.

Then she craned her neck to look behind Gwen and, you know what?

The smile didn't fade.

Jason Pyrzs was born into the unfortunate situation of having a family name with no true vowels. Having lived most of his early childhood in the near southwest suburbs of Chicago, directly under the approach to Midway Airport, nothing exciting really happened to him with the exception of the time he got to shake Mr. T's hand on a school field trip to a movie set.

Jason attended college at Loyola University Chicago, where he was a member of the NCAA D-1 Men's Volleyball Team. After graduating, he used his Political Science degree to become a webmaster and spent the better part of a year in Boston, working for a company there before he realized that the weather wasn't any better and promptly moved back to Chicago. After riding out the dot com bubble and getting caught in the burst, he moved to Los Angeles (where the weather was significantly better) and attended Loyola Law School.

Ten years and three cross-county moves later, Jason has forsaken all things law, and is back where he almost started, working in Chicago for a technology firm located in San Francisco (at least the weather is nice when he visits his boss).

Jason currently resides in Naperville, IL with his wife, Sue, and their daughter, Elizabeth Darcy. In addition to working and writing, he spends his free time playing video games with his daughter, riding his bike, and playing volleyball in various adult hack leagues. He also recently began running, seriously, so that he could beat his 11-year old nephew in a 5k "Turkey Trot" that Sue signed everyone up for. The nephew won.

Jennifer is an editor, reader, and writer. She is a Southern California native and recent graduate of Chapman University where she studied creative writing. During her time at Chapman, she was an active participant in the writing community, serving as Editor in Chief of *Calliope, Art and Literary Magazine*, and President of the Creative Writing Club. She has also volunteered for WordTheatre and as a judge for the California Coastal Commission's Coastal Art and Poetry Contest. Jennifer assisted Ryan Gattis in editing *The Cost of Paper: Volume One* for Black Hill Press, and her work has been published in *Calliope, Art and Literary Magazine* and *Riviera Orange County* magazine. Her goals are to continue fostering passion and an appreciation of writing in others and to continue work as an editor and author in the publishing industry.

Noah MacMillan is a designer and illustrator living in St. Louis, where he graduated from the Communication design program at Washington University. His work is inspired by mythology, the natural world, and St. Louis' local architecture. He creates graphically bold conceptual images with almost shocking punctuality. He is available for illustration and design projects large and small and for cookouts. Noah is also a member of the BrainDrain Collective and Citypulse.

