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Opening extract from

Abandon

Written by

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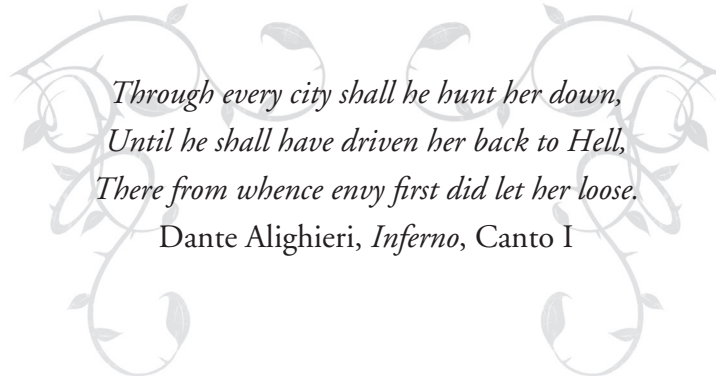
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*Through every city shall he hunt her down,
Until he shall have driven her back to Hell,
There from whence envy first did let her loose.*

Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, Canto I

Anything can happen in the blink of an eye. Anything at all.

One. Two. Three. *Blink*.

A girl is laughing with her friends.

Suddenly, a crater splits apart the earth. Through it bursts a man in an ink-black chariot forged in the deepest pits of Hell, drawn by stallions with hoofs of steel and eyes of flame.

Before anyone can shout a warning, before the girl can turn and run, those thundering hoofs are upon her.

Now the girl isn't laughing any more. Instead, she's screaming.

It's too late. The man has leaned out of his ink-black chariot to seize her by the waist and pull her back down into that crater with him.

Life as she once knew it will never be the same.

You don't have to worry about that girl though. She's just a character from a book. Her name was Persephone, and her being kidnapped by Hades, the god of the dead, and taken to live with him in the Underworld was how the Greeks explained the changing of the seasons. It's what's known as an origin myth.

What happened to me? That's no myth.

A few days ago, if you'd told me some story about a girl who had to go live with a guy in his underground palace for six months of the year, I'd just have laughed. You think that girl has problems? I'll tell you who has problems: me. Way bigger ones than Persephone.

Especially now, after what happened the other night in the cemetery. What *really* happened, I mean.

The police think they know, of course. So does everyone at school. Everyone on the whole island, it seems, has a theory.

That's the difference between them and me. They all have theories.

I *know*.

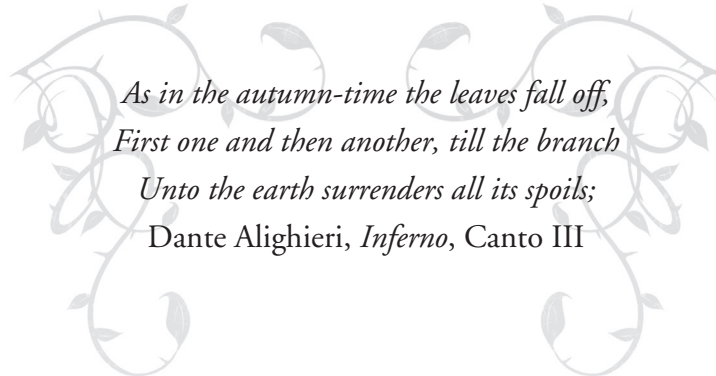
So who cares what happened to Persephone? Compared to what happened to me, that was nothing.

Persephone's lucky, actually. Because her mom showed up to bail her out.

No one's coming to rescue me.

So take my advice: Whatever you do –

Don't blink.



*As in the autumn-time the leaves fall off,
First one and then another, till the branch
Unto the earth surrenders all its spoils;
Dante Alighieri, Inferno, Canto III*

Once, I died.

No one is really sure how long I was gone. I was flatline for over an hour.

But I was also hypothermic. Which is why – once they warmed me up – the defibrillators, along with a massive dose of epinephrine, brought me back.

That's what the doctors say anyway. I have a different opinion about why I'm still among the living.

But it's one I've learned not to share with people.

Did you see a light?

That's the first thing everyone wants to know when they find out I died and came back. It's the first thing my seventeen-year-old cousin Alex asked me tonight at Mom's party.

'Did you see a light?'

No sooner were the words out of Alex's mouth than his dad, my uncle Chris, slapped him on the back of the head.

'Ow,' Alex said, reaching up to rub his scalp. 'What's wrong with asking if she saw a light?'

'It's rude,' Uncle Chris said tersely. 'You don't ask people who died that.'

I took a drink from the soda I was holding. Mom hadn't asked if I wanted a huge *Welcome to Isla Huesos, Pierce* party. But what was I going to say? She was so excited about it. She'd apparently invited everyone she knew back in the old days, including her entire family, none of whom had ever moved – except Mom and her younger brother, Chris – from the two-mile-by-four-mile island off the coast of South Florida on which they'd been born.

And Uncle Chris hadn't exactly left Isla Huesos to go to college, get married and have a kid, the way Mom had.

'But the accident was almost two years ago,' Alex said. 'She can't still be sensitive about it.' He looked at me. 'Pierce,' he said, his voice sarcastic, 'are you still sensitive about the fact that you died and then came back to life *nearly two years ago?*'

I tried to smile. 'I'm fine with it,' I lied.

'Told you,' Alex said to his dad. To me he said, 'So did you or did you not see a light?'

I took a deep breath and quoted something I'd read on the Internet. 'Virtually all NDEs will tell you that when they died they saw something, often some kind of light.'

'What's an NDE?' Uncle Chris asked, scratching his head beneath his Isla Huesos Bait and Tackle baseball cap.

'Someone who's had a near-death experience,' I explained. I wished I could scratch beneath the white sundress Mom had bought me to wear for the evening. It was too tight in the chest. But I didn't think that would be polite, even if Uncle Chris and Alex were family.

'Oh,' Uncle Chris said. 'NDE. I get it.'

NDEs, I'd read, could suffer from profound personality

changes and difficulties readjusting to life after . . . well, death. Pentecostal preachers who'd come back from the dead had ended up joining biker clubs. Leather-clad bikers had gotten up and gone straight to the nearest church to be born again.

So I thought I'd done pretty well for myself, all things considered.

Although when I'd glanced through the files my old school had sent over after it was suggested that my parents find an 'alternative educational solution' for me – which was their polite way of saying I'd been expelled after 'the incident' last spring – I saw that the Westport Academy for Girls might not necessarily have agreed:

Pierce has a tendency to disengage. Sometimes she just drifts off. And when she does choose to pay attention, she tends to hyperfocus, but not generally on the point of the lesson. Wechsler and TOVA testing suggested.

But that particular report had been written during the semester directly following the accident, when I'd had a few more important things to worry about than homework. Those jerks even kicked me out of the school play – *Snow White* – in which I'd been cast as the lead.

How had my drama teacher put it? Oh, yeah: I seemed to be identifying a little too much with poor undead Snow White.

I don't see how I could have helped it at the time, really. Because in addition to having *died*, I'd also been born as rich

as a princess, thanks to Dad – he’s CEO of one of the world’s largest providers of products and services to the oil, gas and military industries (everyone’s heard of his company. It’s been in the news a lot, especially in past couple of years) – and I also happened to have been born looking like one, thanks to Mom. I inherited her delicate bone structure, thick dark hair and wide dark eyes . . .

I also, unfortunately, inherited Mom’s princess-tender heart. It’s what ended up killing me.

‘So was it at the end of a tunnel?’ Alex wanted to know. ‘The light? That’s what you always hear people say.’

‘Your cousin didn’t go into the light,’ his father said, looking worried beneath his baseball cap. ‘If she had, she wouldn’t be here. Quit pestering her.’

‘It’s OK,’ I said, smiling at Uncle Chris. ‘I don’t mind answering his questions.’ I did actually. But hanging around in the backyard with Uncle Chris and Alex was better than being inside with a bunch of people I didn’t know. Turning to Alex, I said, ‘Some people do say they saw a light at the end of a tunnel. None of them knows exactly what it was, but they all have theories.’

‘Like what?’ Alex asked.

Thunder rumbled off in the distance. It wasn’t loud. The people inside the house probably couldn’t hear it, what with all the laughter and the splashing of the waterfall over in the pool and the music Mom had playing on the indoor/outdoor stereo speakers, not so cleverly designed to look like rocks.

But I heard it. It had followed a burst of lightning . . . not heat lightning either, even though it was as hot at eight

o'clock in early September in South Florida as it ever got back in Connecticut in July at high noon. There was a storm out to sea and it was heading in our direction.

'I don't know,' I said. I thought of some more things I'd read. 'Some of them think the light is the pathway to a different spiritual dimension, one accessible only to the dead.'

Alex grinned. 'Cool,' he said. 'The Pearly Gates.'

'Could be,' I said, shrugging. 'But scientists say the light is actually a hallucination produced by the brain's neurotransmitters firing all at once as they die.'

Uncle Chris's eyes looked sad.

'I like Alex's explanation better,' he said. 'About the Pearly Gates.'

I hadn't meant to make Uncle Chris feel bad.

'No one really knows for sure what happens to us when we die,' I said quickly.

'Except you,' he pointed out.

I felt more uncomfortable than ever in my too-tight white dress. Because what I saw when I died wasn't a light.

It wasn't anything close.

I didn't like lying to Uncle Chris. I knew I shouldn't have been talking about any of this. Especially since Mom had wanted everything to be so perfect tonight . . . not just tonight, but from now on. I really didn't want to disappoint her. She'd gone all out, buying the million-dollar house and flying in the famous friend from New York to decorate it. She'd enlisted the aid of an environmentally conscious landscaper who planted the backyard with native growth, like ylang-ylang trees and night-blooming jasmine, so the air

always smelt a little bit like a magazine ad for one of those celebrity perfumes.

She'd even bought me a 'beach cruiser' bicycle complete with a basket and bell – because I still didn't have my driving licence – painted my bedroom a soothing lavender and enrolled me in the same high school she'd gone to twenty years earlier.

'You're going to love it here, Pierce,' she kept saying. 'You'll see. We're going to make a new start. Everything's going to be great. I just know it.'

I had good reason to believe everything *wasn't* going to be great.

But I kept it to myself. Mom was just so happy. For the party, she even hired professional caterers to cook and serve the shrimp cocktail, conch fritters and chicken skewers. She'd released a flotilla of citronella candles in the pool to keep away the mosquitoes, then turned on the waterfall and thrown open every French door in the house.

'There's such a nice breeze,' she kept saying, choosing to ignore the giant black storm clouds filling the night sky . . .

Kind of like the way she was choosing to ignore the fact that she'd moved back to Isla Huesos to further her research on her beloved roseate spoonbills – which look like pink flamingos, except that their beaks are pancaked like spoons – right after the worst environmental disaster in American history had killed off most of them.

Oh, and that her bright, animal-loving daughter had died and come back not quite . . . normal. And because of that, her marriage to Dad had gone down the tubes. Their divorce

proceedings started while I was still in the hospital, in fact, when Mom kicked Dad out of the house for ‘letting me’ drown. Dad went to live in the penthouse apartment he keeps near his company’s office building in Manhattan, never imagining that, a year and a half later, he’d still be calling it home.

‘It’s much better to forgive and forget, Pierce,’ Dad says every time we speak. ‘Then you can move on. Your mother needs to learn that.’

But really, the term ‘forgive and forget’ doesn’t make sense to me. Forgiving does allow us to stop dwelling on an issue, which isn’t always healthy (just look at my parents).

But if we forget, we don’t learn from our mistakes.

And that can be deadly. Who knows this better than me?

So forgive? Sure, Dad.

But forget?

Even if I wanted to, I can’t.

Because there’s someone who won’t let me.

I don’t blame Mom for wanting to come back to the island where she was born and raised, even if it *is* ungodly hot, often battered by hurricanes, and may or may not have clouds of mystery chemicals billowing around it, in the same way I picture the evil that tumbled from the box poor Pandora opened and then let loose on humanity.

But if anyone had mentioned to me before I moved here that the name of the place meant Island of Bones in English – and *why* the Spanish explorers who’d found it had named it that – I probably would never have agreed to go along with Mom’s ‘We’re going to make a new start in Isla Huesos’ plan.

Especially since it’s hard to make a new start in a place

where you met the very person who keeps popping up to ruin your life over and over again.

Only I could hardly mention *that* to my mother either.

The fact that I'd ever even been to Isla Huesos once before was supposed to be this big secret (not a *bad* secret. Just something my father didn't know).

That's because Dad can't stand Mom's family, which he feels (not without some justification) is filled with convicts and kooks, not exactly proper role models for his only child. Mom had made me promise never to tell him about the day trip we took to her father's funeral when I was seven.

So I'd promised. What did I know? I'd never told . . .

. . . especially the part about what happened *after* the funeral, in the cemetery. The truth was, I never really thought I *had* to tell anyone, since Grandma knew all about it.

And grandmas never let anything bad happen. Not to their only granddaughters.

So I didn't even know anyone at Mom's party except Mom and Alex and Grandma, all of whom had sat in the same row with me at Grandpa's funeral. That had been a decade earlier, back when Mom's brother was still in jail.

Now Uncle Chris wasn't adjusting very well to life on the 'outside'. He didn't seem to know quite what to do, for instance, whenever one of the caterers walked over to refill his champagne flute. Instead of just saying, 'No, thank you,' Uncle Chris would cry, 'Mountain Dew!' and jerk his glass out of the way so the champagne would pour all over the pool patio instead.

'I don't drink,' Uncle Chris would say sheepishly. 'I'm sticking to Mountain Dew.'

‘I’m so sorry, sir,’ the caterer would reply, looking with dismay at the growing puddle of Veuve Clicquot at our feet.

I decided I liked Uncle Chris, even if Dad had warned me that he would embark on a dark reign of terror and revenge immediately upon his release from prison.

But all I’d ever seen him do since I’d gotten to Isla Huesos – where he now lived with Grandma, who’d been raising Alex in his absence because Alex’s mom had run off when he was just a baby, after Uncle Chris was sent away to prison – was sit on the couch and obsessively watch the Weather Channel, sipping Mountain Dew.

But Alex’s dad did kind of scare me in one way: he had the saddest eyes of anyone I had ever seen.

Except maybe one other person.

But I was trying hard not to think about *him*. Just like I tried never to think about when I died.

Some people, however, were making both those things extremely difficult.

‘Not everyone who dies and comes back,’ I said carefully to Uncle Chris, ‘has the exact same experience—’

It was right as I was saying this that Grandma came teetering down the steps of the back porch on her little high heels. Unlike Uncle Chris and Alex, she’d made an effort to dress up, and had on a filmy beige dress and one of her own hand-knitted silk scarves.

After I died and came back, my grades took a downward plunge. That’s when my guidance counsellor at the Westport Academy for Girls, Mrs Keeler, recommended that my parents find something outside academics in which to get me

interested. Children who fail to do well in school can often still be successful in life, Mrs Keeler assured my parents, if they discover something else in which to ‘engage’.

Eventually, I did find an interest outside academics in which to ‘engage’. One that ended up getting me kicked out of the Westport Academy for Girls and landed me here on Isla Huesos, which some people call paradise.

I’m pretty sure the people who call Isla Huesos paradise never met my grandma.

‘There you are, Pierce,’ she said, in a voice that made it sound like she was annoyed. ‘What are you doing out here? All these people are waiting inside to meet you. Come on, I want you to say hello to Father Michaels—’

‘Oh, hey,’ Alex said, brightening. ‘I wonder if he knows.’

‘Knows what?’ Grandma asked, looking bewildered.

‘What the light was that Pierce saw when she died,’ Alex said. ‘I think it was the Pearly Gates. But Pierce says scientists say it’s . . . what do they say it is again, Pierce?’

I swallowed. ‘A hallucination,’ I said. ‘Scientists say they’ve gotten the same results in test subjects who weren’t dying by using drugs and electrodes to their brains. Some of them saw a light too.’

‘*That’s* what you’re standing out here doing?’ Grandma asked, looking shocked. ‘Committing blasphemy?’

‘No,’ Alex said with a laugh. ‘Blasphemy would be saying the light is coming from between the legs of their new mom as they’re being born into their next life. And of course, if you were Hindu, that wouldn’t be blasphemy at all.’

Grandma looked like she’d just bitten into a lemon.

‘Well, Alexander Cabrero,’ she said sharply. ‘You are not Hindu. And you may also want to remember that I’m the one making the payments on that junk heap you call a car. If you’d like me to keep on doing so, you might want to think about being a little more respectful.’

‘Sorry, ma’am,’ Alex murmured, looking down at the champagne puddle on the ground while, beside him, his father did the same, after quickly removing his baseball cap.

Grandma glanced over at me, seeming to force her expression into something a little softer.

‘Now, Pierce,’ she said, ‘why don’t you come inside and say hello to Father Michaels? You won’t remember him, of course, from Grandpa’s funeral, because you were too young, but he remembers you and is so happy you’ll be joining our little parish.’

‘You know what?’ I said. ‘I’m not feeling so good.’ I wasn’t making it up either. The heat was starting to feel oppressive. I wished I could undo a few of the buttons in the front of my too-tight dress. ‘I think I need some air.’

‘Then come inside,’ Grandma said, looking bewildered. ‘Where it’s air-conditioned. Or it would be if your mother hadn’t opened all the doors—’

‘What did I do now, Mother?’ Mom appeared on the back porch and snagged a cocktail shrimp from the tray of a passing caterer. ‘Oh, Pierce, there you are. I was wondering where you’d disappeared to.’ Then she saw my face and said, ‘Honey, are you all right?’

‘She says she needs some fresh air,’ Grandma said, still looking bewildered. ‘But she’s standing outside. What’s

wrong with her? Did she take her medication today? Are you *sure* Pierce is ready to go back to school, Deb? You know how she is. Maybe she—’

‘She’s fine, Mother,’ Mom interrupted. To me, she said, ‘Pierce?’

I lifted my head. Mom’s eyes seemed darker than usual in the porch light. She looked pretty and fresh in her white jeans and loose silky top. She looked perfect. Everything was perfect. Everything was going to be great.

‘I’ve got to go,’ I said, trying to keep down the panicky sob I felt rising in my throat.

‘Go then, honey,’ Mom said, leaning down from the porch to press on my forehead with her hand as if she was feeling for a fever. She smelt like she always did, of her perfume and something Mom-like. Her long dark hair swept my bare shoulder as she kissed me. ‘It’s fine. Just don’t forget to turn on your bicycle lights so people can see you.’

‘What?’ Grandma sounded incredulous. ‘You’re just letting her go on a bike ride? But it’s the middle of the party. *Her* party.’

Mom ignored her.

‘Don’t make any stops,’ she said to me. ‘Stay on your bike.’

I turned round without saying another word to Alex and Uncle Chris, who were both staring at me in astonishment, and headed straight for the side yard where my new bike was parked. I didn’t look back.

‘And Pierce?’ Mom called after me.

My shoulders tensed. What if what Grandma had said had made her change her mind?

But all she added was, ‘Don’t be too long. A storm is coming.’