



Old Blood (Experiment in Terror 5.5)

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Category: Fantasy, Horror

Description: A haunting novella from the Experiment in Terror Series...

From her harrowing introduction in Darkhouse, the spectre known as “Creepy Clown Lady” has been a constant fixture in Perry Palomino’s life. But beyond the horrid makeup and piercing stare lies Pippa, a woman just like everyone else.

Well, not quite.

When Perry discovered Pippa’s message to her and Dex on the EVP recordings, she thought she heard the last of the old woman’s message. She was wrong. In the novella Old Blood, Pippa relays the tale of her troubled and tortured past, revealing how an aspiring actress and loving mother fell into madness and how an unfathomable betrayal led to her untimely death.

For Perry, the repercussions of her message are life-shattering.

Old Blood is #5.5 in the series and occurs between books #5 On Demon Wings and #6 Into the Hollow

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Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:49 am

Prologue

My dearest Declan and Perry. I don't know if you'll ever hear this. If these tapes are something you'll listen to again, if you'll keep listening to the end. I know everything is a mess right now and you're both hurting from what happened. Sometimes I may not be able to reach you but I can see you. You're with me – both of you – always, even if you aren't with each other.

Declan, if you do happen upon this one more time, you need to go after Perry. Swallow up your pain and pride and go to her. She needs your help more than ever and I don't know how much I can do for her. Here on the Otherside, I feel things...see things. Things that were once people who want to take her. Things that one day might come for you again. I'm afraid time is running out. So pick yourself up off the floor and go to her.

If you happen to hear this, bring this recording along with you. And when you save her, play it for her.

My story is her story too.

CHAPTER ONE

I don't know where to begin. Looking back on one's life is a daunting task, trying to recall every month, every year. Even here, in this Thin Veil, where my memories seem sharper, it's difficult to recall the many details of my life. All that stand out are the important moments, the moments, big and small, that shaped the path I chose. The same path that led me to my death. And led me to you both.

I never thought I'd tell a story that would end with the way I died. This won't be a pretty one. But it's the truth and someone needs to hear it. Especially someone like you and Perry. You both are so much like me. So much like each other. If anyone can learn from the mistakes I made it would be you.

I just hope that by the end, you'll find it in both your hearts to forgive me.

According to the records, I was born on a surprisingly cold day in May of 1925. There had been a rare snow storm that swept through the wooded valley where my father and mother lived in their tiny stone house and I was born under thick flannel sheets with the doctor coaxing me to breathe.

I regret that first breath.

My parents were particularly hardy Swedes. The woods encompassed a large lake, with the nearest town a two-hour walk away. My father was a Lutheran minister for a church that was on the other side of the lake. In the summer he'd row across the shallow waters, in the winter he'd skate. My mother was uneducated and liked to stay home and knit extra thick socks for the cold months. My earliest memory is of me itching away at the scratchy, coarse wool that covered my feet like abrasive boots.

We didn't have many possessions as my father was staunch in his belief that God gives us everything we need. To him, this also included love. I never saw an ounce of it from him, not to me, and not to my mother. To him his God was everything and we were just creatures of the night. Simple people. Sinners. He never said this outright, but you could see it in his eyes. The way he'd look down at his worshippers was the same way he'd look at us.

My mother was a quiet and well-mannered person who had been stripped of her backbone. I remember watching her at the stove in the mornings trying to heat the water to make coffee. She looked so small and frail, hunched over and defeated by

life. Then there was I. Even at six, I was tall for my age and a bundle of energy that rattled my father's nerves. I'm fairly certain he saw me as a spawn of the Devil. He was never cruel in his beatings, but he made sure I felt them. He didn't like it when I made up stories about young girls lurking in our garden and wolves tearing babies apart. He said my imagination would be my demise one day, my ultimate sin, and if he didn't use his belt the way God told him to, I could never be saved.

I'm sure you realize that there were young girls hiding behind tomato plants and that the woods were full of hellhounds that ate abandoned children. I saw them, which makes it true. I never once doubted myself even when I should have. That's the main difference between you and me.

The first time it happened though, I did blame my mother. You wouldn't know it by looking at her, by watching the tight line that formed between her eyes as she knitted, the clipped and cautious way she talked around my father, but my mother was a wonderful storyteller with a surprising sense of humor. On Saturdays she would take me out into the woods and we'd follow this well-trodden trail through the birch trees until pine and rock took over and we could pass no more. We would stop at a ragged bolder and she'd hand me a piece of licorice. I'm sure she thought the salty sweet treat was the reason I looked forward to our walks, but that was only a bonus. I liked being with my mother as much as I liked being away from my father. She was like a different person all together. She still spoke in hushed tones, but her eyes would dance as she told me the legends of the land, about supernatural beasts that roamed the woods and lived in the lake and about clever trolls who waited for young girls like myself. The stories were half a warning – I see that now – to stay safe at home and never wander into the woods by myself, but I also knew it was a way for my mother to express herself. Maybe it was a way for her to feel like she was giving me something since we were allowed to have so little.

So, on one summer evening, when the light almost kissed midnight, I fell ill. I don't know what it was exactly, but it struck around dinner time, a terrible piercing at my

temple that caused my arm to spasm and knock the smoked trout out of my plate. The pain was so bad that I could only curl up in a ball on the cool floor. My father was out at the church and my mother didn't know what to do. Back then we had no telephone, no radio, no anything. Not even a horse. My mother placed a cold compress on my head and got me into my bed, then she left for the closet neighbor, who was about a twenty-minute walk away.

The pain continued for a few moments until all I could see were black spots and waves and then as quickly as it had come on, it stopped. The pain had vanished and I felt fine. Perhaps better than fine. I listened hard as the ringing left my ears and was comforted by the rattle of woodpeckers outside and the silence of the house. For once, I was left all alone and I could do whatever I wanted.

I slowly got up and smiled at the sunshine that was pouring in the window. I remember a lake breeze blowing back the red and white muslin curtain and I smiled so wide it hurt my cheeks. This was freedom. My first taste of it.

I walked down our narrow staircase to the living room and kitchen and thought about what I could do in the next forty minutes or so. There was a chance that mama was running so I'd have to do it fast.

Unfortunately there wasn't I could do. As I said, we didn't have many possessions and the things I loved most were books that mama read to me when papa wasn't looking but I couldn't read yet. So I settled for licorice. I knew it was hidden in the washbasin on the highest shelf.

I brought out the chair from underneath the table and began to push it toward the shelf when I heard a peculiar sound. A giggle.

I stopped and looked around. I was alone in the house, I knew that. Yet there it was again. A light laugh. It was girlish and airy and sparkled in the breeze.

I forgot all about the sweets and walked over to the front door. I paused before I put my hand on the knob, listening again for the laugh. Now, there it was. It was definitely coming from outside, definitely not my mother. Nor a neighbor for I had never seen any children around except for the boy at the goat farm my mother was on her way to.

I felt a strange cool feeling travel down my spine. It made me wince and I began to second guess going outside to investigate but I still did. My hand turned the knob like it did every day and I stepped outside into our yard.

Our house may have been small but our yard was bigger. It stretched all the way down to the lake's edge where dull brown sand mixed with skinny weeds. Today the water lapped noisily at the shore in a hurried manner, like it was rushing to get somewhere. Perhaps the house. Perhaps me.

I shook such foolish thoughts out of my head and tried not to think about the giant fish woman my mother told me lived in the lake. I faced the trees that bordered the grassy yard and watched as they swayed against each other, their bright leaves glinting in the soft light.

The giggle resounded again. This time it was coming from behind the house where my mother kept a vegetable garden and a small root cellar for preserving over the winter.

I crept along the side of the house, grateful that my tiny leather shoes were worn and didn't squeak. When I reached the edge of the building, I slowly inched my head around and looked at the garden.

I didn't move but my breath left me.

In the garden, behind the tomato plants that were snaking up a knotted wood plank,

was a girl. She was maybe a year older than me, about the same height. She had the blondest hair I had ever seen, a sharp contrast to my mass of dark waves. She was wearing a red dress that fell in a straight line, free of the bunching I was used to wearing, and shiny white shoes.

She was hiding behind that plant. And she was watching me.

There was no use in me ducking behind the wall. I had been seen and from the strange look in the girls aqua eyes, it looked like I had been expected.

I cleared my throat and tried to speak but all speech had left me. I tried again, worried that something bad would happen if I didn't say something and finally my tongue worked.

"I'm Pippa Lindstrom," I said, keeping most of my body out of her sight. "What's your name?"

I expected a response. Even for a little girl, it was a straight forward question. But the blonde one just lifted her finger to lips, a skinny pale thing I glimpsed through the tomatoes. Her eyes flashed wide and shot to a place over my head.

I followed her gaze.

Behind me, near the start of the path that led into the woods, was a tall, dark man. He was only darkness. I know this doesn't make much sense but I could barely make out any of his features, anything that made him human. Everything about him was shadows and black and emptiness. He was dressed in a black cloak, black shoes and pants and his bare skin, his neck and face, looked as if he was standing in the shade of a dense tree.

Only he wasn't. The sun was directly on him but it didn't...reach him. It was if the

light couldn't even illuminate a single cell on his body.

My blood froze like a winter lake. I looked back at the girl behind the tomato plant and she was still there with her finger to her mouth, her eyes pleading with me not to say anything.

So I didn't. I didn't even nod in fear of giving her away. I just calmly looked back at the man as if he was the only person I saw outside my house.

The man stared at me. I don't know how I knew this because I couldn't see his eyes, even if he had eyes. But he was staring and in that way the owl does before he decides to bite the head off a mouse. It was predatory.

Then he turned and walked into the woods. Maybe he floated, my memory is a bit fuzzy. If I recall correctly, I think he just disappeared into the bark of the trees. But he was there one minute and the next he was gone.

Sure that the black man had vanished, I stepped around the house and walked toward the girl. She stumbled back a few feet, looking scared. I noticed how white her shoes stayed, despite the layer of mud in the garden from yesterday's rain. It was strange. But what wasn't?

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:49 am

“Who are you?” I asked, wanting an answer this time. “Where do you live?”

“I live in the lake,” she said.

I giggled and put my hands on my hips. “You’re a liar. No one lives in the lake.”

Not even monsters, I thought. That was make believe.

She shook her head and began to walk through the mud. Her feet never left any footprints.

Was this make believe too?

“Where do you live?” I asked again as she skirted past me and walked faster, heading for the side of the house. I followed after her, my eyes glued to her feet that never got dirty, that never made a mark.

“I live in the lake,” she said again, as if I didn’t hear her.

As she reached the front and the lake loomed before us, the water calmed instantaneously. Like there was a switch that made the currents move and stop.

I knew the girl didn’t live in the lake, but I also knew not to argue with her. She was the first girl my age that I had ever talked to. I wanted her to stay around and play with me. I wanted to give her licorice from the washbasin and ask her to stay for cake but I quickly realized the lake was the only thing she aware of now.

“Don’t go,” I cried out after her, my long legs catching up. “Please.”

“I have to go home now. He’ll find me here.”

“Who?” I asked. I was walking beside her now and struggling to keep up. Though I was tall, she was a bit taller, older and more determined. Her fair hair bounced around her face and her aqua eyes were focused on the water. She didn’t blink at all.

“Where are you going?” I asked, stopping just as my own shoes almost met the shoreline.

She didn’t answer and she didn’t stop. She walked straight into the lake, effortlessly, as if the water were just air. Her clothes didn’t even soak in the liquid. The water slid around her like a shiny curtain and within seconds her head disappeared. She was in the lake.

I took off my shoes and tossed them onto the grass behind me, thinking not to get them wet for whatever reason, and then I went in the lake too. It was cold as January and deeper than anything, not the warm shallow water it should have been. Within seconds my body had seized up from the temperature and my feet couldn’t find the muddy bottom. My head was above water, then my nose, then nothing at all. I sank and sank and sank until I found my blonde friend again.

At first I thought she was grabbing hold of my leg. Perhaps she was going to pull me up to the surface. My lungs hurt and my eyes were burning and I needed air more than anything.

But in the last moments before I lost consciousness I realized she wasn’t grabbing me.

She was bumping into me.

She was upright, swaying in the murky water like a reed in the current. Her hair floated around her like a golden net. At her feet, at her white shoes that were now muddled with scuffs and dirt, were thick, rusted chains. They wrapped around her slender ankles and thin socks and kept her down, anchored to the bottom.

She looked dead until she raised her head at me.

My own face looked back.

I screamed and a rush of water filled my lungs within seconds. The watery world became shadows.

The next thing I remembered was waking up in my own bed, covered in a thick quilt, a mug of hot tea beside me.

I was in my tiny bedroom. It was nighttime, but I didn't know when. All I knew is that my mother was in the middle of speaking to me, as if I had been speaking to her too. It was boring stuff, something about a church and a minister.

Downstairs I heard cupboards slamming shut, a sure sign that papa was angry. Was he angry at me? What had happened?

My mother sensed my apprehension because she smoothed the hair off my head.

"You musn't talk about that girl anymore," she whispered. She leaned in close and I caught a whiff of the perfume she only wore on Sundays. Had I been sleeping for a couple of days now?

And the girl. The girl with the blonde hair and the boxy dress and the white shoes that wouldn't smudge until she was dead at the bottom of the lake. She had been real. She wasn't a dream. I had seen her, hiding behind that tomato plant.

“He’s being good not using the belt,” she continued. “You need to keep being good too.”

I wanted to say so much, but I couldn’t. I had no idea what I had been babbling about in my half-dead delirious state. There was no doubt my parents would have chalked any mentions of the girl to over-imagination, lies, and possibly the Devil’s work.

A few days later, when my parents deemed me as normal and no longer a threat to myself, we heard news from a local woodcutter who was passing through. Greta Lund, the young daughter of one of papa’s worshippers, had been found dead at the bottom of the lake. A man had been fishing and his hook got caught on her net of hair. There was no mention of chains but I knew what I had seen. I had seen her and I had seen what had really happened to her. She had been murdered. Was it the blackened man? I didn’t know at the time. But I knew then that what I saw was real and not real all at once. I was special. And not in a fortunate way.

CHAPTER TWO

The second time this sort of thing happened to me, I was a few years older and could no longer blame my mother’s stories for giving my gift fire. She had stopped telling them many years ago. It was the first time my special sight caused loss – I no longer had that closeness with my mother.

I had started going to school in Ullapa, the closest town and would get a ride in every morning with our neighbor Arstand and his son Stäva. As you may recall, Arstand was the goat farmer who found me, along with my mother, floating in the lake when I was six. That explained why Arstand was always a bit jumpy with me, as if I was going to pop up and say “boo!” at any moment.

But he tolerated me enough to fit me in his new vehicle and take me to school. My parents were still behind the times and my father shunned motor vehicles as being

unnecessary idols and symbols of gluttony. I suppose he was right, but it was still a convenient way to get around.

Stäva had ended up being my only, and, by default, closest friend. He was a bit strange and funny to look at but strange suited me just fine. He was small for his age and had ears that stuck out. Arstand called him “elefant.” It didn’t seem to bother Stäva much though. He had a sunny personality and loved to listen to me prattle on about this and that. He was also quite the adventurer and when we first started playing together we would explore the farm he lived on, climbing up into the haylofts and jumping onto the piles below or feeding the baby goats (when we weren’t chasing them around). My parents weren’t too happy that I was spending so much of my time away from home, but I suppose my mother felt she was in debt to Arstand and after a while they didn’t seem to mind. Perhaps it was a relief to them that someone else was taking care of me.

It was at Stäva’s that I was introduced to more modern conveniences, aside from the car of course. Being a goat farmer was more profitable than being a minister and they had things such as a library and a radio. The library was a great place for me to sink my teeth, especially as I had learned to read at that point, but the radio trumped all. When I was there after school, his father, mother and two younger brothers would sit around the giant radio and listen to broadcasts coming out of Stockholm. I found the news to be boring, except when it touched on the troubles in Europe, but I lived for the plays and radio shows that played after. It was then that I fell in love with acting and the theatre. I couldn’t see the show of course, and I had never seen a performance in my life as church singing didn’t count to me, but I could envision it all in my head like I was there with the actors.

“I’m going to be on the radio one day,” I remember whispering into Stäva’s funny ear. We were sitting on the braided rug in his living room, a place that smelled like a mix of manure, sour milk and home baked bread. It doesn’t sound like a winning combination but it’s funny now how that smell makes me think of home, even though

it wasn't my home. It's not that Stäva's parents were particularly nice to me. Like I noted, Arstand was always watching me carefully. His wife Else was a nice woman but she seemed lost in her head more often than not and spent most of her time working with the goat cheese or doting on Stäva's younger siblings. I wasn't a pest to them but I wasn't loved either. Yet I still had a sense of freedom and hope in their peculiar-smelling place.

With the idea of being an actress in my head, I focused solely on that. I mentioned it once to my parents and ended up getting a belt across my thigh. It didn't hurt. I was too angry for it to hurt. I was angry at my father for being so close-minded about his daughter's dreams (for what were we without dreams) and at my mother for never sticking up for me. Ever since the lake incident, when she stopped with her stories, she stopped being my friend as well. It hurt more than anything, more than all the belts, more than the feeling of drowning in that ice cold lake.

So I never mentioned it to my parents again but that did me no good. I should have known they'd investigate where the sinful idea came from and when they found out I'd be listening to the radio I was banned from going to Stäva's. They didn't care enough to ban me from seeing him in particular, just that I couldn't listen to the radio. My ears couldn't be polluted by foreign ideas. They even had a talk with his parents and to keep peace as neighbors, they agreed. What was it to Stäva's parents anyway? They didn't care if I couldn't listen to the radio. One less child crowding their house.

It didn't break me, however. I merely became more resolved in my determination that I would be an actress one day. I'd find a way, somehow.

But since I wasn't allowed to spend too much time in Stäva's home anymore, we were left to our own devices in the great outdoors. Playing in the hay and harassing goats became tiresome by the time I was nine, so we started going on after school jaunts into the woods.

There was a part of me that was a little chicken over the tall trees and dark paths and I was forever on the lookout for a man with no face. He didn't show up. But something else did. Something much more horrific.

It was a cool, grey day in early fall. The leaves had just gone from crisp red to the color of soggy wood as they clung helplessly to the branches.

Stäva was walking ahead of me as he did, leaves crunching beneath him. He was two years older and only lately did he start to grow into his age. He often walked ahead, pretending he was a woodland hunter, or perhaps a wily prince, and kept me behind him. I didn't mind the protection, even if it was from an 11-year old.

I also didn't mind when he stopped on our walk at one point and took my hand in his. It was the first time I remember feeling the difference between us. He was a boy and I was a girl and that little thrill shot up my arm, the same feelings I imagined when I had listened to the more romantic parts of the radio shows.

I suppose I was so awed by the simple gesture of hand holding that I didn't hear the howl first. Suddenly Stäva's grasp tightened on mine and his bright eyes searched the greying woods.

"What is it?" I asked, not used to seeing panic on his face.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:49 am

“Did you hear that?”

I tensed up and listened.

I heard it. A howl, like a wolf or a wild dog. It came from our left and seemed to fill the trees like a blanket.

I looked back at him with frightened eyes.

“We should head back,” he said.

I nodded but just as we turned on the path I heard a child’s cry mixed in with the canine’s.

I stopped and pulled hard on Stäva’s hand as he tried to keep walking.

“Listen!” I whispered hoarsely.

“We can’t be out here with wolves!” he yelled back, struggling to keep his voice down. All Swedish children were likely to have been told tales of vicious wolves in the wild woods. I had heard mine from my mother. But the human sounds made this story different.

“There’s a girl out there!” I told him as I heard another whimper coming from the same direction. I wasn’t actually sure if it was a girl or not, but they were young like us and needed our help.

“I don’t hear anything, come on,” Stäva said pulling at me again.

“No!” I yelled and ripped my hand out of his sweaty grip. “Listen again, you can hear it.”

The wolf howled first. Then fierce, drooling growls swarmed us. And finally, the child’s cry.

“Daddy” I could hear the child yell.

But Stäva was immune.

“I don’t hear anyone but wolves. We have to get out of here.”

“You go!” I said and then I turned around and took off at a gallop into the darkening trees, toward the horrendous sound of snapping jaws.

I was aware of Stäva yelling behind me and perhaps for a bit he may have given chase. I certainly don’t blame him for letting me go, or if it was a case of him not being able to catch up. He was older but I was the same height as him and my legs were born to run. Within a few minutes of tireless scampering through the birch trees and overgrown roots and berry patches, I was alone.

Alone and cursing myself with the only bad words I knew.

I waited with my hands on my knees, my socks splattered with mud, breathing heavily. I had lost the path at some point, so it didn’t help that I was lost along with being completely alone.

Another howl and another human cry.

Of course I wasn't completely alone.

"You're an idiot, Pippa," I said aloud, hoping maybe Stäva would hear me. Hoping the wolves wouldn't. Just what was I thinking? I was tall but I was still nine and my survival skills consisted of picking berries and throwing stones. I was hardly a candidate for a rescue mission. And Stäva had never heard the child crying. Perhaps it was all in my head.

But now. There it was again.

"Someone help me!" the child cried and now I was certain it was a girl younger than me.

My fingers and toes ached with the cold that was steadily encroaching. Autumn in Sweden wasn't very kind. It would be blissfully warm one day and then a frozen wasteland the next. Being in the dark woods overnight could possibly kill me. Yet the fact remained that I had chosen to come out here and with that lay my fate. Knowing was better than not knowing, even if I wound up dead.

I know such thoughts don't make a lot of sense when you take into account how young I was. But there was a part of me that didn't fear things the way I should have. Though I was still afraid, the concept of death was one that never had much weight with me. It had nothing to do with my father and his religious ways, instead it was a matter of having experienced death before. I knew I died in some way when I found the girl in the lake. I don't know how I came back to life but I know that even though she was dead she still protected me. I felt safe knowing I could walk away from such a thing.

It was foolish of me to think that. I was young and, as I said to myself, an idiot. But that's the way it was. I'm sure you might think it noble that I would risk death to save a stranger, but I don't know if that's how I saw it. It was more a matter of something I

had to do, than something I should do.

So even though every part of my body was cold and screaming for me to yell for Stäva, to at least try and find my way back before the real darkness set in, I didn't. I walked toward the noises like some child martyr, creeping silently as I could through the rough and dying foliage.

The darkness was dropping quickly and the forest began to take more ominous shapes. As the white bark of the birch gave way into rock and pine, my eyes played tricks on me. I saw shadows, shapes and faces everywhere I looked. It took all my nerve to keep it together and walk on.

Finally I came to a small clearing where the dying twilight penetrated enough for me to see.

I'll never forget it and I would pray every night that I could.

In the clearing, trampling down the long, wild grass were three dogs. I say dogs because they didn't look as sleek and lupine as wolves. They were bulkier, sloppier, and lacked any grace I would associate with them. Even while killing, wolves can look elegant. This was plain revolting.

The dogs were pulling at a young girl, maybe a few years younger than I. She had long brown hair that swung around her head as it lay limply to the side. One crocodile-toothed dog had one of her tiny feet in its mouth. Another had a hand and another the arm, teeth chomped down at the tender inside of the elbow.

They were tearing the girl apart and it took me a second to realize one of her legs was missing, ripped off somewhere underneath her bloodied skirt.

I froze, unable to move, to speak, to breathe. I don't even know how I existed in that

moment except to say that I saw it all.

The dogs never looked at me, they just continued to pull and tear until the one dog ripped the hand away at the wrist. With a wet, red tear she slumped unevenly to the ground as the remaining dogs played tug of war from opposite sides.

Then she lifted her head up and looked at me.

She was still alive. Her face was white as snow, her eyes pink and puffy.

“Why did he leave me?” she cried out, her voice barely heard above the dog’s snarls, their sick, chomping jaws.

I couldn’t speak, I couldn’t say anything. I was foolish. Helpless. Useless.

The girl kept her dark eyes on mine, almost oblivious to the horror which was happening.

“Why did he tell me to go?” she asked, expecting an answer from me. I could only shake my head slowly from side to side, not even sure if what I was watching was real, though I knew it was.

The dog at her foot gave a throaty growl and took a large bite near her knee. With one sickening solid chomp it tore it off. Not cleanly. It was messy, bloody, a gruesome mix of bone and stringy tendons.

The girl finally stopped looking at me. She closed her mouth. She closed her eyes.

In my head I heard her.

Go Pippa, run now!

I couldn't explain how she was able to get inside me but she was. I didn't waste any time either. The spell-like haze I was under lifted and pure panic filled my able joints.

I took off into the woods like a shot, not looking behind me once. Her cries had stopped but the snarls of the monsters carried on and followed me until I was coming out of the woods just outside of Stäva's place. I ran until the warm lights of his house welcomed me home and I told his worried family what had happened. I left the part about the girl talking to me in case they didn't believe it, but I told them everything else. At least Stäva could attest for the dogs being out there.

In my hysterical state I was driven home and sent to my bed with a strong cup of vodka and tea that mama made me drink in a few gulps. My parents were worried about me, how could they not when I saw what I did. But from the glances I caught between them, I knew they were worried about more than dogs. I just didn't know what.

That had happened on a Friday, so I didn't get a chance to see Stäva and his family until the weekend was over. I had spent my days inside, my mother terrified of another dog or wolf attack. When I finally got into Arstand's car on Monday morning, he told me that a few hunters had scoured the woods over the last few days. They found evidence of wild dogs in the area, perhaps a pack that had been tormenting chickens the next town over and they found traces of girl's clothing. But the clothing had been decaying and out in the woods for many, many years. Whatever the dogs were fighting over wasn't a young girl.

But I knew what I saw. The fact that there had been clothing found only gave me the proof I needed. The girl I saw wasn't alive, just as the girl in the lake wasn't either. She was probably a victim of neglect. You see, in the old days when families had sick children or were unable to care for them, they would take them out to the woods and let them be eaten by wild animals. That practice had stopped a long time ago, but I believed I saw the remains of it. One last cry for help...directed at me.

I thought about that for many years to come. Thankfully nothing that terrible haunted me in the years following. I never saw any more wild dogs or girls in the garden or men of shadows. I concentrated on my acting now that I was taking part in the program at school (somewhat secretly) and tried to forge my way forward the best I could.

Only on some days would I stop and wonder, why me? Why did they choose me when they could have anyone else?

I still don't really know.

CHAPTER THREE

When I said that nothing that terrible haunted me, I meant it. I was still haunted but by less terrible things.

There was the time I saw twin boys appear behind me when I was walking home from Stäva's. They never said anything, they just stood there with their pale faces and stared at me. It made me uneasy, to put it mildly, and they followed me down the road. It was only near my house that they ceased to exist, literally shimmering away like the air above hot pavement.

Another time I was serving detention after English Language class. I can't remember what for but I was a particularly rambunctious student and had a hard time sitting still. To my teacher we were alone however I was very much aware of an older boy in the corner of the room. At first he tried to get my attention by calling my name over and over again. The teacher never noticed so I had to assume he was a spirit of some kind. It helped that his eyes were bright purple with no pupils to mar the blank slate. Very unnatural.

When I continued to ignore him, he worked his way up to spitballs, flinging them in

my hair. It was curious because the spitballs were real and stayed in my hair until I found some of them later that night. Finally, the boy gave up and left the room, a trail of shiny blood following him out the door. I watched my teacher carefully to see if he saw anything at all. He only shivered as the boy passed him by and didn't even bat an eye when the door opened and the bloody nuisance stepped out.

Little incidents like this happened all the time and I went on ignoring them. I didn't know what they wanted but when I was in public, it was wrong to ask them. Small town mentality existed back then and I did not want to be branded as the minister's crazy daughter.

At any rate, I had the theatre to keep me company. I joined the tiny drama club with the aim of putting on *A Midsummer's Night's Dream* by the year end. With my perseverance I won the role of Helena and wouldn't you know it but Stäva got the part of Demetrius. We were sixteen now and he had grown into quite the handsome young man, something I had never noticed until I was in the play with him. Surely I had noticed the way some of the girls my age would drool over him, but to me he was always the boy next door, the goat boy, my closest and dearest friend.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:49 am

That all changed when we decided to go for a walk after school to discuss the play. We stayed clear of the woods as we usually did and strolled along the edge of the lake until our path turned upward into rolling hills of rye that waved in the breeze.

It was October and very cold but the sun was strong and heated my skin that wasn't wrapped in shawls and wool. The sky was as wide as a dome with that surreal blue that contrasted with yellow fields, just like the country's flag.

"Pippa," Stäva said, his voice low and his brow knotted. I stopped and looked at him, not used to seeing him look so grave.

He reached out for my hand and grasped it tightly. My mouth opened and a tiny "oh" came out, though I wasn't really sure what was going on. Were we rehearsing?

"We have to be young lovers," Stäva continued. I nodded. His eyes were filled with fear and something else I had never seen before. I had never seen lust on a man. It was so very different from the big doe-eyes the girls would give him.

"Yes. For the play," I told him.

His eyes narrowed slightly but were tempered by a lazy smile. "Yes, for the play."

"Are you nervous?" I asked. I suddenly was. My eyes dropped from his strange expression and focused on his long fingers curling around my own.

"Very," he whispered. I still didn't look up. The dynamic between us, between best friends who shared everything and were as comfortable around each other as worn

socks, had changed. I didn't like to feel nervous because of Stäva and I didn't want him to be nervous because of me.

"We can act. We are actors," I said quietly. I took my eyes away from our hands and looked at the yellow grass at my feet.

"We don't have to," he said and he took his other hand under my chin and tipped it up so I was forced to meet his eyes. Before I could process what was happening, his lips were on mine. It wasn't easy – it was both our first kiss. Our teeth knocked against each other and his nose pressed uncomfortably against my cheek.

I wish I could say that the kisses improved after that. They didn't. But I had figured that was the way things were. I had no frame of reference, after all. Oh, I didn't mind when Stäva kissed me or touched me but I didn't feel the way he felt. I didn't have the girly deer eyes and I didn't have that lustful look that was always on his face.

Nor did I feel anything the first time we made love. I say made love because I truly did love Stäva with all my heart, but it was a different kind of love. It was more brotherly than anything else. Though sex had been ingrained my head as morally wrong by my father, I broke the rules and decided to bed Stäva in his hayloft one balmy summer night. I hoped by doing so, the way I felt about him would change, that I would awaken some sexual being in my 17-year old soul.

All it ended up doing was awakening my fertility.

I ended up pregnant.

I figured it out after missing my monthly red visit and being sick for days on end. I didn't tell my parents, knowing how they'd feel about it. I didn't tell Stäva either. I knew there would be no point.

Children were something that I eventually wanted. But there were so many more things I wanted before then. I wanted to live. I wanted to spread my wings and get out of this small, dead place. I wanted to move to Stockholm and experience the city life. I wanted to take my acting and apply to somewhere that counted; not a tiny school but a theatre with paying patrons and lavish seating. I wanted that life first. Then I would work on what was expected of me. It's not that I didn't want to fall in love and start a family. I just wanted the choice of when.

If I told Stäva I was pregnant, he would make me go through with it and I loved him enough to do so. He already talked about us getting married. If I wanted that life, being a farmer's wife in a small town, maybe doing the occasional play in between pregnancies, then I would have been thrilled. Any girl would be so lucky to have Stäva as a husband and the father of their children. But I wasn't any girl. Far, far from it.

I got rid of the seed inside me by paying a visit to the local witch. This sounds fantastic, I know, but there is no way to describe her. Some said she was just the local whore, others said she made potions and powders when she practiced witchcraft, others said she was a holistic, natural doctor. All I knew was that she lived alone in a cottage in the high woods, where tall trees climbed upward into rocky outcrops and that no one said her name in public. They just called her "häxa" or The Witch.

There was a single dirt path that led the way, the age-old grooves in the dirt from hundreds of years of horse and donkey-drawn carts. I was frightened to death of going to see her but the prospect of having a child and being tied to the town was even more frightening.

The woman's name was actually Maria and even though she was intimidating with her wild white hair and rough mannerisms, she was rather nice. She made me up a tonic to put into tea, a combination of local sage, leaves and other herbs. She warned me against the pain and the bleeding but didn't pass any judgment on me for asking

for it. It was like she understood where I was coming from and an expression of pride passed through her tired eyes when I told her my plans for the future. I was glad my secret was safe with her and hers – that she probably was a whore, judging by the man who came knocking on her door while I was there – was safe with me.

The next month was a blur. I passed the seed in the lake on a clear evening. The sun had just gone down enough past midnight that no one would see me if they were looking. I didn't like the idea of being in the water still, but as soon as the bleeding became nonstop, I felt it was the cleanest choice. I was afraid of what the smell of all that blood would attract from deep inside the woods. I suffered through the pain I deserved.

After that, it was time to go back to school. I had other plans. The abortion ravaged me with guilt daily and the longer I stayed where I was, living with my parents, going to school, going steady with Stäva, the more I felt guilty for what I had done. If I was going to go through such a selfish event, I had better follow through with my reasoning. Otherwise what was the point?

And so I dropped out of school just as we came into the last year and decided to head to Stockholm to pursue my dream. Maybe then the guilt would stop clawing at me.

My decision came as a shock to everyone I knew. Stäva wouldn't come with me and didn't understand how I could leave him. Neither did any of my classmates or teachers – to them, we were the perfect couple. My parents were livid. They told me that if I left I would not have a home to come back to when I returned. In other words, they disowned me. I expected as much from my father and didn't really care what he thought but my mother's actions surprised me. I suppose she was so hurt that I would leave them that I didn't deserve to be her daughter. I am still not sure if that's true or not. On good days I think my mother was wrong to shun me like that. On bad days, I couldn't really blame her. At least it prepared me for a pattern that would endure for the rest of my life. Looking back, I wonder where my "karma" began to

fester. Was it when I had the abortion? Or was it when I selfishly abandoned my only love and family?

I left the place of my childhood with nothing on my back but a small sack full of belongings. I can still tell you what was in there: Two dresses, one fancier than the other. A tube of red lipstick for “acting” purposes. A clip for my hair. My nightgown, corset, stockings and two pairs of bloomers. A copy of Dante’s *Inferno* in English to help my language skills (I nicked it from the school library). A tiny notebook and pencil. A handful of licorice.

I didn’t have any money and was planning to hitch rides to the big city, but Stäva surprised me and borrowed his father’s car to drive me to nearest train station. It was about an hour away and together we had our last ride together. He didn’t say much to me but I could see how I was breaking his poor heart. It absolutely tore me up inside and I when he hugged me goodbye – slipping a wad of kronas in my pocket for the train and a few nights in a hotel – I broke down in tears. As emotional as I was on the inside, my steely reserve finally collapsed and in his arms.

“I don’t understand you,” he whispered into my ear as I choked back the tears that wouldn’t stop coming. “But I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

And with that ringing in my ears, I got on the train and left my old life behind for good.

CHAPTER FOUR

In some ways, I did find what I was looking for. When I arrived in Stockholm two days later, dirty and tired, I was immediately enthralled by the big city. There was a pulse here with bright buildings as high as I’ve ever seen them and so many people it was like I was swimming in a sea of them. Speaking of the sea, the water stretched onward dotted by hundreds of tiny islands. This wasn’t a lake but a moving and

breathing sea that stretched to faraway lands. It was a gorgeous and bustling metropolis to this country girl and I probably stood on the streets for hours, just gazing at everyone and everything.

Eventually I had to fix myself up, eat and sleep so I found a nearby boarding house by enquiring into local shops. It took a few tries and a lot of my patience until I found one that was willing to take me in. The war was going on and though Sweden was a neutral country, there was a surplus of people from Norway, Denmark and Finland hiding out in Stockholm until the war was over.

The place I ended up finding was a bit run-down but it was for women only, and that made me feel safe. No one was very talkative and they kept to themselves, but the owner helped me with finding a job. I worked as a maid at the house for two weeks, my work for my keep in return, before I found my dream job – or the closest thing to it.

A community theatre had an opening for an “all hands” type woman. They wanted someone with experience in the theatre, particularly in either makeup or wardrobe, and who would also be able to clean-up the theatre after the performances and rehearsals.

As you can imagine, I jumped at that listing. At school, I had done the makeup for the plays as well, and though I didn't have experience with wardrobe, I knew I had a flair for it regardless. In my mind, I was perfect for the job and I was determined to get it.

The theatre was downtown but near a rather derelict area. I was scared out of my wits going there to meet the manager, just as I had been when I met with Maria in the woods. In my town, I was never leered at by strange men, I never had vagabonds shout rude words at me. Part of me wondered if it was some kind of test that I'd have to go through, to see if I wanted this life badly enough.

By the time I made it to the theatre, I was a pile of nerves. It didn't look like much from the outside, just a grey stone building with chipped pillars and slippery steps, and I started to think if I had perhaps made a mistake.

But the door flung open and a rush of warm light bathed me from the inside. Before me stood Lisbeth, the theatre manager. She was taller than I and in her late thirties, wearing men's trousers and a short, curled do. Her lips were smeared with red lipstick that matched my own (later we would simultaneously compliment each other on it) and a smile that lifted my weary heart.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:49 am

“You must be Pippa,” she said, holding out her hand.

I nodded, feeling shy for the first time in a while and shook her hand back. Hers was strong and vibrant.

She ushered me into the building and it was then that I knew I had passed the test. I was meant to come here.

Though falling apart on the outside, inside the theatre was opulent in a museum-type way. The halls had plush, dark green carpeting, creaky chandeliers hung from the ceiling, and tapestry paintings of classic performances and plays, from Roman theatre to Shakespeare, hung from the walls, competing for space with fading posters of shows long past. There was a staircase leading to the balcony level that had gold-glazed railings, that even though they were old and chipped, still gleamed like the heavens. The theater itself had rows of velvet and gold-trimmed seats in a deep, wood brown.

Then there was the stage. It wasn't a big theatre but it was big enough for me. The red curtains were embroidered with metallic swirls and hung from the edges of the stage while ornate fixtures framed it from above. The stage was a worn wood that had seen decades of dancing feet. I immediately saw myself up there too, receiving red roses that were chucked from the crowd.

At that moment I knew I'd do anything to get the position but as fate would have it, I didn't have to. I guess Lisbeth liked me or saw potential in me or perhaps took pity on me, but I was more or less hired on the spot. I would be starting in two days and would be in charge of makeup, wardrobe and cleaning on performance and rehearsal

nights. I would also attend any cast and crew meetings that she would arrange. The pay wasn't very much considering some days I'd be working every night and others I'd barley be working, but it was something and I would have been a fool to turn it down.

My luck improved later that night when one of the main actresses, Anne Todalen, made an appearance.

Anne was 22-years old and had been acting with the company since she was my age. She told me she finally worked her way up and this was the first year she was a featured player. She also told me that she was looking for a new roommate. Anne was renting a small apartment not far from my boarding house and said her previous roommate got married, leaving her unable to take care of the rent on her own. I assured her that I wouldn't be getting married anytime soon.

"Sure, but look at you," Anne said to me after we said our goodbyes to Lisbeth. "You're beautiful. Once our actors get a glance at you, they'll all be fighting for your hand."

I laughed and blushed at the compliment as we made our way out of the theatre and into the September night. Being with Anne made me feel safe in the seedy area and what she had said tickled my fancy. Perhaps I would finally meet a man who I'd love in more than one way.

Anne wasn't bad-looking herself. She had a face and body that was made for performing. She was tall and not reed thin, which was good for being seen on stage. She had a pretty face with a wide mouth and nose that was slightly too large, but paired with her sparkling eyes and high cheekbones, her parts created a sum that was just as intoxicating as her personality.

The next day I moved out of the boarding house and settled into a place that would

become my home for the next five years.

Anne's apartment was on the top floor of a white-washed building which was a real drag when you came home from shows absolutely exhausted but it was a place I loved to pieces. It was a tiny one-bedroom apartment with a shoebox bathroom and a balcony that only fit two chairs and no table. Some of my best memories were sitting on that tiny space during the summer and smoking cigarettes over beer and vodka as Anne and I watched the city wind down from another long day.

Because Anne had the bedroom to herself, I got the sofa in the living room. These were pre-Ikea times but us Swedes still knew about the "futon" before the rest of the world. It was comfortable enough and though I lacked privacy, I didn't have to pay as much in rent. My salary barely allowed me to live as it was but Anne was paid more and was always generous with her budget. She would often cook on the days we had off and would make too much, so I had no choice but to help eat it. I knew she did this on purpose, so I didn't feel bad about her charity, but the food was so good that I didn't care. Besides, I knew it made her feel good to do things for me. Like me, she didn't have the best upbringing either and we both leaned on each to replace that.

At first my job was extremely nerve-racking. Back in the country, I never had a problem being loud and outspoken but in the theatre, I was in constant awe of everyone around me and constantly aware of how I didn't measure up. From Anne, Marianne and Henri, to Frederick, our star player, to the supporting cast of Paula, Johanne, Vala and Peter, each actor was larger than life.

It should be noted that not everyone was as lovely as Anne, either. Frederick was a menace to me and to everyone around him. He was relatively famous in Sweden for his good "dark" looks (though to be honest, I think he resembled a monkey in a tuxedo) and over-the-top acting style and he never let anyone forget it, especially someone like me, who, as a cleaner was the lowest of the low. Every time I would do his makeup before a performance he'd ask if I had washed my hands and even when I

said yes, he would make some comment on how no dirty housekeeper should be allowed to touch his face.

I wanted to slap him in his ape face, but of course I never did. I held in my feelings and harsh words and dealt with it. And with time I began to see how he would grate on everyone else's nerves. He once refused a kissing scene with Anne because she smelled of herring. The remark was ridiculous because everyone in Sweden smells like herring.

Eventually though, my work got better as I settled into the role. I became less nervous about putting makeup on the actors and after a while, when we branched out onto more fantastical plays, I was able to do some really creative artwork with my makeup. Clowns, fairies, witches, starlets – I was able to do a range of looks from just my own imagination. The clothes became more interesting too and I quickly taught myself how to sew in my spare time. Before I knew it, I was making clothes for the cast - as well as myself. Another way your frugal Pippa was able to pinch pennies.

It was as my career was getting more fluid and comfortable though, that other parts of my life were getting...strange.

One night I was cleaning up after a performance. It had been a particularly tiring night with everything going wrong. The stage scenery had fallen during a scene, Paula fell and hurt her ankle during a dance routine and had to be replaced by Anne's understudy. There was a snowstorm outside and only half the theatre was full. By the time everyone was done, they just wanted to go home. I told Anne to go on right ahead and not wait for me. She was exhausted from performing five days in a row and in pain and I had at least an hour of cleaning up to do. I told her I'd take a cab home, a necessary expense sometimes and especially when the weather was foul.

I was sweeping the floor in between the seats when I heard a peculiar laugh fill the

theatre. My heart stopped and I listened with my ear cocked. Everyone had gone home, hadn't they? Perhaps one of the actors was still hanging about.

I looked around but couldn't see anyone.

"Hello?" I called out. I waited for a few tense moments then shook my head and resumed sweeping. Sometimes, when I particularly tired, my eyes and ears played tricks on me.

Then I heard the laugh again, followed by a thump-thump of wood. I flung my head in the direction of the stage and gasped.

There was a teenage boy sitting on the edge of the stage, his long legs kicking up and down against the side.

Thump-thump.

Thump-thump.

"Can I help you?" I called out, squinting at him to get a better look.

He wasn't one of the actors but he could have been a patron who fell asleep on the balcony or something of that nature. He was wiry and tall with a shock of red hair and a freckled face. He wore a huge grin, like he was enjoying himself as he watched me clean, like that was the greatest entertainment on the planet.

He didn't answer but I wasn't about to be intimidated by someone who looked at least a couple of years younger than me. Still, I clutched the broom hard in my hand as I walked over to the aisle and slowly made my way toward him.

I noticed then that he was holding an apple in his hands. Its shiny red color flashed as

he quickly spun it around. He had on leather shoes, shortened pants and suspenders over a dirty white shirt. A newsboy cap sat on his head. It was not the style of our times. He looked like he had just come out of an orphanage with only used clothes from yesteryear on his back.

Still, he continued to grin at me. It began to unsettle me.

“Who are you?” I asked.

He tossed the apple up in the air and caught it just as he jumped off the stage. I staggered a few steps back, not wanting him to get too close to me. Up close he wasn’t as tall as I thought, just long-legged, but I felt uneasy around the stranger and probably because he was a stranger.

“Jakob,” he said, holding out one hand for me. “Pleased to meet you.”

I eyed his hand, wondering if I should shake it or not. I then looked to his eyes. They were a strange grey color, as if they had no color at all and there was no discernible ring around his iris. The grey just sort of bled out into the white of the eye, creating a marble statue effect.

Somehow, as I was lost in those strange eyes, I found my hand in his. He pumped it twice, firmly, then dropped it to his side.

“I’m...” I said, then stopped myself. Was it safe to reveal my name?

“You’re Pippa,” he said. He smiled and took a huge bite of his apple.

“How did you know my name?” I asked, startled.

He shrugged and looked around him. “I know a lot of things. Not a very good gig, is

it?”

I was still wondering about my name, so it took me a second to realize he was pitying me.

“It is what it is,” I said haughtily and the grip on my broom tightened.

He shrugged again, chomped on the apple and walked past me, sauntering up the aisle to where I was earlier.

“Well I won’t keep you,” he said over his shoulder.

I hurried on after him. “Where did you come from? How did you get in here?”

He raised his shoulder, about to shrug once more, but I took my broom and poked him square in the back. Hard.

“Ow,” he cried out and turned around. A piece of apple shot out of his mouth and landed at my feet. I hated knowing I’d clean it up later.

“Tell me how you got in here or I’ll report you to the police!” I kept the broom in front of him, wielding it like a sword.

“I’m always here Pippa. You’re not very observant, you know. Your head is in dreamland.”

What on earth did that mean?

He read the confused expression my face and put his hand out, lowering the broom. He had this way about him that was almost hypnotic, like he had some spell over me that went in and out of range.

“I’m here to help you. And calling the police would do no good.”

“Help me?” This was starting to feel as outlandish as one of the plays we put on.

“You’ll see. When you’re ready.”

And then he walked out into the foyer and through the front door. A gust of white snow blew in and danced in the air as the door closed behind him.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:49 am

I stood there, leaning on that broom, for a very long time.

CHAPTER FIVE

Jakob was on my mind for the next couple of days. He was right about my head always being in a dreamland, only this dream was about him. I couldn't figure him out, who he was or where he came from. Why was he so cryptic, so vague? What did he mean when he said he would help me?

My memories of the girl in the lake and those tearing wolves came flooding back and that was the sole reason I never told anyone about Jakob. I knew there was a slight chance that it was all in my head, or perhaps I'd seen something that was only meant for me. I also knew that Jakob could have also been a living, breathing boy who came in off the street searching for warmth. He could have been any of those things and it was the not knowing that anguished me.

Finally, after the last performance of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, I saw Jakob again. The snow was building throughout the day, but the evening still went well. Anne was swept away on a date by one of her new suitors, and I had no problems taking another cab home.

After I was done cleaning up, I locked up the theatre and bundled a scarf around my neck, preparing for the cold walk to find the nearest cab. It was lucky that when the snows came, the derelicts in the neighborhood were inside, hiding from the minus temperature and I felt a lot safer walking short distances.

I was just coming off the last step and onto the snow-dusted sidewalk when my boot

slipped and I began to pitch forward. I knew I'd hit the snow hard but hopefully it would be soft enough to break my fall.

I never did hit the ground. A hand shot out from behind me and grabbed hold of me, lifting me up to my feet.

I gasped. It was Jakob. He grinned at me in his boyish glee and stepped back.

"You almost fell."

"Where did you come from?" I gasped. Never mind the fact that he just saved me from possibly hurting myself – I knew when I walked down the steps there was not a single soul in sight. There was no earthly way that he could have been hanging about to save me.

"Around," was his answer.

"That is not an answer, young man," I said, taking a step toward him. I was no longer afraid. "Where did you come from?"

He watched me carefully for a few seconds, a bit of the sparkle leaving his eyes. Then he shrugged at some internal dialogue he was having with himself and pointed to an area at the side of the theatre, between the building and snow-covered bush.

"From the bushes?" I asked dubiously.

"No, look closer," he said.

I squinted my eyes, unsure what he was saying. He took my hand in his and raised it so I was pointing at the area.

“Do you see the waves?”

I didn't know what on earth he was getting at. What did he mean by waves? All I could perceive was a building, a bush and snowfall.

And then, as if my eyes adjusted themselves, I saw it. I saw the waves. The air in front of the bush danced and jostled, like I was looking at the reflection of the scene on the surface of a waving pool of water.

“That's where I come from.”

“What is it?” I whispered, sure that I wasn't supposed to be seeing this magical thing.

“The Otherside.”

I took my eyes away from the hypnotic dance and looked at him. His grey eyes glowed in the light of a yellow streetlamp.

“Can I go there?” I breathed.

He chuckled and turned his back to me and started to walk along the sidewalk into the city.

I ran after him. “I was serious.”

“Pippa,” he said, but didn't say anything else.

“Who are you? How do you know me?” So many questions were begging to tumble out of my lips.

“I told you, I'm Jakob. I'm from the Otherside. From the Thin Veil. And I know you

because I've been watching you your whole life." He said all of this like he was listing off his favorite comic books.

"The Thin Veil?" I stammered and stopped walking. The words sounded familiar but I had no idea why or how.

He stopped too, the snow whirling around his slight frame. He didn't seem the slightest bit cold.

"You'll freeze if we don't keep walking. Don't worry, I'll keep you safe until you get a cab."

"How?"

He walked off and I followed again, my boots kicking up the snow. My legs were starting to go numb.

"How what?"

"How...everything," I said. "What are you?"

He looked at me over his shoulder and smiled. "Jakob. Pay attention."

"Are you dead?"

"It doesn't feel like it."

"When were you born?"

"A long time ago."

“Can I go to the Thin Veil?”

Now it was his time to stop. He placed his ungloved hands on my shoulders and shook me ever so slightly. His grey eyes looked deep in mine. It was odd sometimes how boyish he looked, just like any 14-year old kid, then in the next minute it’s like he would grow a million years inside.

“You can but you shouldn’t.”

“What’s there?”

“Others like me. But they aren’t all like me.”

I paused to wipe rogue snowflakes out of my face. “Ghosts?”

He wiggled his thin lips around and his eyes roamed in the empty space above my hat.

“Something like that.” He tugged at my arm. “Come on, let’s keep walking, it’s not safe.”

I was eager to get out of the cold but I looked around at the empty streets. “But there’s no one here.”

“That you can see,” he said just as the lights of a car flashed in our eyes. Jakob raised his hand and for a second I thought how foolish that gesture was. How could the car see him if he was a ghost?

But the car stopped and it was indeed a cab. The door opened and a man stuck his head out. “Excuse me miss, do you need a ride?”

I looked at Jakob who whispered. “He can’t see me.”

“But-”

“Don’t talk to me, he’ll think you’re a nutcase.”

I nodded, shocked and walked toward the cab driver.

“Y-yes please,” I said. The driver gave me a wave to come over.

I looked behind me at Jakob.

He was gone.

After that incident with Jakob, I didn’t see him for a very long time. I didn’t see him until my life took an entirely different direction. I didn’t see him until after I fell in love.

The following Spring, when the cool winds swept in from warming climates and pushed the snow away, Frederick announced he was leaving the company. I knew Lisbeth was concerned at his departure because even though he was a pain to work with, his name did draw in the crowds. Everyone else was overjoyed, including me and even Lisbeth admitted it would be good to have some fresh, younger blood in the company. Because Frederick was at least ten years older than Anne, their pairings on stage were always a bit off.

One day I came into work for an impromptu meeting with the cast and crew. Lisbeth had settled on a more-or-less unknown actor by the name of Ludwig Ericsson. I was unprepared for the sight before my eyes.

Ludwig was tall, well over six-feet, with shiny honey-colored hair that dazzled under

the lights. His skin was a smooth, tan-color that was only a shade lighter than his hair. Against the glow, his teeth shone white and his eyes were a beautiful clear blue.

I was speechless and could only smile like a fool when he shook my hand. His skin on mine made my nerves jump inside and it felt like we were the only people in the room. Of course, we were surrounded by everyone else in the theatre and he had to introduce himself to all of them. Still, it sounds silly now, but I felt his attention, even when he wasn't looking at me. Something had just happened between us and I couldn't quite articulate it.

Anne did though. Anne knew men like the back of her hand and she was always with a different one. Some of our friends would call Anne a "loose woman" behind her back, but I lived with her and I never saw any of her male friends stay the night (although she would sometimes stay out until the wee hours). Besides, it didn't matter what Anne did as long as she was happy and I was more than happy to talk about Ludwig when she brought him up later that night. I wanted her expertise and advice for this new endeavor.

"He likes you," she said with a smirk as she piled some boiled dill potatoes onto my plate. It was a late dinner, as was usually the case for us. The balcony door was open a little, shuffling a bit of cool air into the apartment but I felt all warm inside. The brandy I was slowly swilling also helped.

I blushed. I couldn't help myself.

"Who?" I asked more coy than I normally dared.

"You know who. Ludie."

I raised a brow. "Is that his name?"

“Ludwig is a horrible name,” she said between bites. “So Ludie it is. And you know he fancies you. I saw the way he held your eyes earlier.”

I brushed it off, not wanting to get my hopes up. I had noticed though, the way he kept looking at me throughout the night and was giddy that she had noticed it too.

“Well I am sure I just reminded him of someone.”

“Yes. A beautiful young woman. You be sure to watch out for him.”

Now I felt a bit concerned. “Watch out?”

She winked at me. “You might fall in love, Pippa.”

And I did. I think I was in love with him the moment his hand grasped mine. All these years later and I still feel that way. Some love doesn’t die, even when you do.

Naturally, I was not sure what Ludie really thought of me. Our first time together was fraught with nerves and embarrassment on my behalf.

It was before the rehearsal of Hamlet and the cast had to be in costume, which meant I was dressing them up and doing a light dusting of makeup.

I was as anxious as anything when I knocked on Ludie’s dressing room door. He and Anne were the only ones with private ones, while everyone else shared the men’s and women’s rooms. I probably would have preferred to have done him up in a more public setting as the idea of being alone with him was nerve-wracking but that was not the case.

“Come in,” he said. His voice was deep and rich and carried through the door with ease. The placard on the front still said Frederick. I was surprised he hadn’t taken it

with him when he traded us in for a larger, more prestigious theatre deeper into the city.

I took in a deep breath and pushed my hair behind my ears. I had paid extra attention to my face that morning, making sure my lipstick was on neatly and not half off my lips as usual. I knew I wasn't bad to look at and that I often had the attention of young men, but there had never really been any reason for me to look good. I had kept my head down and focused on work until I met the one man who made me focus on him.

I opened the door and stood awkwardly in the doorway until Ludie turned in his seat and grinned. Amazing how the parting of teeth and lips and the scrunching of eyes can act like a wave. It welcomed me and made me blush from the tops of my head to my toes. Oh, I was certainly a goner.

"Pippa," he said warmly, keeping his eyes locked on mine.

I looked away as I closed the door gently behind me, feeling quite unnerved and hot. My chest began to steam under my dress. I kept my eyes on the floor, feeling scrutinized like a bug under a microscope as I walked over to him. I purposely wore flat shoes that day, not wanting to add extra height to me, even though he was much taller, but that did not prevent me from wobbling like a drunkard.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:49 am

I stopped beside him and looked into the mirror across from us, lit up by high wattage bulbs. It felt safer to look at him there, direct but indirect.

My, how his face belonged there, framed by the lights. Never you mind my pale one with my dark hair, how I contrasted horribly with him. He was such a delight to look at. He knew it too, I could see the way he lifted his chin as if he was used to being admired so.

“So,” he began, then smiled again instead of saying anything.

I knew I had to start talking even though my tongue was tied.

“I’m just going to put some powder on your face,” I said, sounding unintelligent and completely young.

“You’re not going to put me in my clothes first?” he asked. “What if you decide the green robe would better go with green shadow on my eyes?”

“Oh, you’re right,” I said stupidly even though he was joking. I put my makeup kit down on the counter and made my way to the racks where I had put his costume the other day. I had his measurements given to me, but this would be the only time he’d be fitted.

Fitting men in costume wasn’t something I particularly minded (with the exception of Frederick) but now I felt uncomfortable, not professional by any means. I was very much reminded that he was a man and I was a woman.

Ludie, however, gave no hint of anything except unending ease and charm. I took in another deep breath and brought his Prince Hamlet costume off of the rack and walked it over to him.

“Here you go,” I told him. I held it up and he eyed it carefully.

“You won’t help me?” I searched his face for sincerity and found none.

“How old are you?” I asked.

He finally looked surprised about something. “I’m 25-years old. Why?”

“Well, then I guess you know how to dress yourself.”

I placed the costume in his hands and headed for the door.

“Call me when you are properly attired,” I said and stepped out into the hallway, shutting the door behind me.

I let out the breath I was holding and shook out my arms and legs. He was already doing a number on me. Still, I showed him I wasn’t going to fall for any lothario type advances. This was my job and I had to treat it as such.

That didn’t stop me from grinning to myself until I heard him call me back in.

He looked rather ridiculous in the costume. It was all green. The velvet robe, the high-waisted pants, the shirt. Even the pointy shoes.

“How is it?” he asked as he eyed himself suspiciously in the mirror.

“You look like a tree,” the words escaped my lips.

I thought he would take offense to that. If it had been Frederick, I would have never heard the end of it and he would have probably demanded some other woman work on him, one who didn't compare him to plants. But Ludie wasn't like that.

Ludie laughed. It was loud and calming at the same time. Uninhibited.

"You're quite right Pippa, I do look like a tree," he twirled around so we could get the full effect of the cape. He paused and pondered his reflection. "But what kind of tree? That is the most important question. What kind of tree would Hamlet be...or not to be?"

I couldn't help but laugh at his corny joke. "That is the question."

After that, things got easier between us. I should say it got easier after I poked him in the eye with my makeup brush. I felt so terrible about it but Ludie said the only way he wouldn't tell Lisbeth that the makeup artist tried to blind him was if I agreed to go out for dinner with him the next night, before the round of shows began.

You know I said yes.

I won't go into too much detail for the sake of you both. I know the last things you want to hear about are the sordid thoughts and actions of this woman in love. Yet, I also want you to understand just what Ludie did to me – and why our affair would affect me for the rest my life.

CHAPTER SIX

Needless to say, I was fretting about the apartment all of the next day. I hadn't been with a man in years and part of me was afraid that it would be just like the time with Stäva. That I would feel nothing and, because of that, there would be something very wrong with me.

The other part of me was excited, a feeling that was scary in its own right. What if I fell for this man? What if he broke my heart? What if the date went wrong and he never wanted to see me again and I'd have to spend the rest of my career working under him?

Luckily, Anne was around to talk me down and make sure I had enough to eat. She dressed me up in the finest dress I had, one I had snatched from the theatre, and for once I had my own hair and make-up done. I wanted to wear my hair down – it was long and shiny– but she put it up with curls which highlighted my cheekbones and eyes. She nixed my usual red lipstick in favor of something more “kissable.”

Then she gave me a round of advice on how to be a lady. Let the man open doors for you. Laugh at his jokes. Try not to drool over him like a fool. Don't talk down to him or poke fun of him.

Also, when she thought I wasn't looking, she slipped a condom into my dainty purse. I was shocked and a bit abhorred by her actions. Condoms were for sailors and dirty prostitutes. They weren't for young ladies like myself and Anne.

I could tell from the look in her eyes though, she was just trying to prevent another pregnancy with me. I had broken down drunk with cognac one night and told her everything that had happened. I was dying of shame still and it helped to have someone else know what I had been through. Anne was looking out for me and far ahead of her time when she whispered, “The man may rule the date, but don't count on him for everything.”

Truer words had never been spoken.

Ludie rang the buzzer five minutes early, cutting into my preparedness time. I slammed back a shot of vodka hoping to relax myself in a hurry and danced on pins and needles until he arrived at the door.

He looked absolutely gorgeous, wearing a dashing dark blue suit that illuminated the golden tones in his hair.

“Ladies,” he said as he took off his sharp fedora and did a slight bow from the waist. “I am here for the beautiful Pippa Lindstrom.”

Forget about the vodka – just being in his presence made me feel drunk. Thank goodness for Anne who put my coat on my back, my purse in my hands and led me to the door like an invalid.

“I expect you’ll return her at a reasonable hour,” Anne said. Her voice was hard but her eyes were good-humored.

“A reasonable hour by my standards or by your standards?”

Anne pursed her lips. “Well, I’m going to guess they are the same.”

He winked at her, happy with that response and held his arm out for me. I had enough sense and power to oblige and together we stepped out of the apartment. I looked back one last time at Anne but the door was closed and I was alone with Ludie once again, about to embark on an evening that was very much on the table. This wasn’t about work. I wasn’t with him because I had to be. I was with him because he wanted me to be.

Outside, Ludie’s car was waiting. It wasn’t new but it was shiny and sleek like it had been painted with a million pounds of chrome. It was also sky blue and extremely eye-catching in a time where decadence and frivolity was frowned upon. Ludie didn’t care though and as I stepped into the car, he informed me that he had bought it after his first big theatre gig. It cost more than his living expenses, so at first he was sleeping in it until he could afford an apartment again. But to him, he worked hard and he deserved it and it was a sign he was living his dream.

That was always Ludie's philosophy in life. There was much to be admired about that, taking what you knew was yours and enjoying the finer things. Later on I would realize how selfish that way of thinking could be. Everything was always owed to him and there never were any consequences, at least not for him. If he thought he deserved something, he went for it, even if it meant trampling over other people.

But I will get to that later. For now, I was enthralled with him and his dashing looks and mannerisms. He took me to a fine seafood restaurant on one of the upper class streets I never walked down because it inspired too much envy in me. He wasn't recognizable yet, not the way Frederick was, but women stopped to stare at him just the same.

They also stared at me and unlike the doe-eyed girls that fawned over Stäva in school, these were full-grown women with hearts full of jealousy and hate. I was their enemy just for being on the young man's arm and though I knew I wasn't too bad looking myself, it brought upon feelings of being inadequate.

Ludie did his best, however, in making me feel like I was the only one in the restaurant. He asked me many questions about myself and always kept his bright eyes tuned to mine. Oh, he wasn't mysterious either and would gladly answer any questions I had about him. I learned about his upbringing (in Gotland), his family (father died when he was young, he was still close with his mother and two younger sisters), his love for performing arts (he was a dancer before he moved into acting). The night flew by in a whirl of clinking cutlery, smoke, coffee and brandy. Our talk was easy, the flow between us was effortless. As first dates go, this one could not be topped.

I am sure you don't want to know how the night continued but I can tell you that I was very much a lady and I was home at a reasonable hour – even by my own watch. I burned inside for Ludie, feeling flames that I had never felt before but that night I had listened to the caution in my heart, that feeling that I had to approach things

slowly and carefully.

If only I kept on listening to the whisper inside, the one that knew of things to come. The next time Ludie and I were together we made love. Love, right in his dressing room, a ferocious and consuming sort of love making that both surprised and scared me. It turns out my fears were unfounded and there was nothing wrong with me at all. I had found the one I was meant to spend the rest of my life with and my body responded in kind.

And so began our very messy, passionate affair. Things were easy at first. We couldn't get enough of each other and were intimate every chance we got. As we would emerge from the back looking rather untidy, it soon spread like wildfire that we were an "item." Lisbeth had a few words for me, mainly not to get too close to a man like Ludie and to be aware of our working situation, but I was reckless and stupid and didn't listen. What did Lisbeth know about men anyway? I knew Ludie and he was mine.

But Lisbeth was right. Ludie was a performer, an actor, and as such he not only attracted a great deal of attention from the opposite sex (indeed, the looks he got on our first date were nothing compared to the ones he received while reciting Shakespeare on stage), he was moody, selfish and insecure by nature. He demanded time and attention, not just from me, but from everyone. He was jealous of every man who talked to me, including the other actors, yet he enjoyed the flirtations of other women. He would be in a joyous, generous mood one night, and depending on how much he drank or how well his performance was perceived, he would turn angry and cynical the next.

I wasn't the sort of woman to take things lying down, either. Despite the rules that Anne had told me, I did often poke fun at him and I often talked down to him. It was hard not to when he was behaving like a child. What resulted were nights of constant fighting – fighting that would eventually combust when we found ourselves in each

other's arms again.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:49 am

It was push and pull, give and take, love and hate for a number of years. Despite how bad we would get on each other's nerves, how vicious we could be with our insults, how miserable we could make each other, it never dampened the unending, all-consuming love I felt for him. The fire that roared in my loins, my heart, my soul. I believed that he felt the same way too, why else would Ludie stick around if he didn't love me the way I loved him? I was so naïve and blind that I never really considered any other reasons.

I discovered the reason in person one fateful summer day between shows. Her name was Hanna and she was Anne's new understudy. I was cleaning up around the theatre, believing Ludie to have gone to a café with Peter and Lisbeth, when I heard some noises coming from his dressing room.

To his credit, Ludie had locked the door. It was my curiosity and concern that kicked the door in anyway, especially after hearing a female's high pitched giggles from inside.

What I saw...I can't even describe. I don't even want to think about it, it still destroys me, burns my heart to this day. All these decades later and I can't...well, all you should know is that I found Ludie with his pants down around his tanned ankles, with blonde and vivacious Hanna attending to him.

The rest was a blur, thank the Lord. Instead of cleaning up his dressing room, I messed it up, throwing chairs, tossing about clothes and makeup. I slapped Ludie repeatedly until Hanna tried to intervene, then I hit her right in the lip. I was livid, beyond this plane of existence, I was somewhere else trying to breathe and hold onto the belief that I had love on my side. In one second it was all over. Everything I had,

that was important to me, was gone. Ludie was my life and the reason my heart kept beating, the reason my soul kept soaring.

Sadly, even after all that, even after finding out that he had been carrying on with Hanna and a few other women from time to time, he still continued to be my all. I was doomed by my love.

I called in sick the next day and the next day after that. Anne took care of me when she could but she had to go to work – she wasn't going to let that horrible woman take her place on stage, not after all of that. In fact, Anne was just as mad as I was, also feeling duped by Ludie and she made a vow to make his life and Hanna's life a living hell.

I never figured out if she did or not. Oh, Anne would tell me how she tripped up Hanna one day after rehearsal, or she openly mocked Ludie during one of their scenes. But I never saw it for myself because I quit my job. My wonderful, promising job. Oh, it wasn't my dream of all dreams – it hadn't got me up on the stage yet. But it kept money in my pocket and hope in my life, and I was good at it, damn it all. I was good at my job and I had to go and fall in love with a self-centered actor and spoil the whole thing.

For the second time in my life, love had ruined me, only this time it was my own love that was at fault.

I am more than aware of how dramatic I sound. Let's face facts, Ludie was not the only actor here. I wasn't on stage but I had all the desires of the craft and unfortunately the same tendencies as he did. I am sure I was as much to blame for the end of our relationship as he was. But it was a terrible ordeal nonetheless.

Because I quit the theatre and the life I had built up steadily over the years, I had to find work elsewhere. I stayed with Anne because I had no other choice: she was my

best friend and confidant and let me live with her rent free until I found a new position.

At first I applied to other theatres, not even caring if I ended up putting makeup on Frederick again, but soon the search proved to be fruitless. It was after the war and money was still tight. Businesses were closing and people were learning how to prioritize in the wake of global turmoil. I eventually found work at a coffee shop near the ferry terminal, serving pastries, cake and caffeine to passengers bound for Finland or Denmark.

It was thankless work but with tips it brought in more money than the theatre position, particularly as tourists would ditch their remaining kronas with me. But despite the steady income, it did nothing to fill the void in my heart.

I worked there, feeling empty and joyless, for a few years. A year can feel like such a long time when you are young and living it, but looking back, I don't remember a single event or day of my life during that period. Just occasional evening with Anne, listening to her talk about the newest man in her life, as we both drank more than we should. All my work days blurred into each other, an endless sea of hot brown coffee and faceless people. Such a waste of my life. Life is such a precious commodity when you're done living it.

Then I met Karl. Karl who was kind and warm and gentle. Karl who was tall and built like a small bear. Karl who had a dark beard and dark eyes but possessed the sunniest, lightest disposition in Sweden.

Karl was a frequent customer to the café as he was often taking the ferry over to Tampere, Finland, to do business. He would sit at the counter and make small talk with me, always tipping generously, and when he would return from his voyages, no matter how early in the morning or late at night it was, he would bring me a Finnish Moomin toy as a present.

As I didn't have much going for me, I started looking forward to those visits from Karl. And I started to find Karl more and more attractive each day. It wasn't the burning desire I felt for Ludie, nor was it the brotherly indifference I felt with Stäva. It was somewhere in between and that was finally sounding smart to me.

Karl's intentions were pure, honest and obvious. We started courting each other with the caution I should have taken with Ludie and soon we were an agreeable and happy pair. Karl had his own business importing caviar to other European countries and he did quite well for himself. I quit my job as he took care of me and eventually I moved out of Anne's and into his house on the outskirts of town. We were married shortly after.

The wedding was a very small, civil ceremony in a courthouse. Anne was my maid of honor, Lisbeth was there too and so was Peter. Karl had his older sister Lulu and a few of his employees and army buddies. I wore a simple white gown that matched the ease of the event and for our honeymoon we sunned ourselves for a week on the beaches of Spain.

We frantically tried for a baby. I felt that because my career was a now distant dream and I had security and a reliable sense of love, that having children would be the most logical step. I felt ready for them, more than I ever had before.

But though Karl and I were intimate as much as possible, nothing ever "stuck." I was left feeling useless and ashamed. I worried that the abortion I had all those years ago had done some permanent damage to my body and I blamed myself day in and day out as my monthly redness kept coming like clockwork.

Being the good man that Karl was, he never blamed me. He was over ten years older than I and often made remarks that perhaps he was too old to become a father. I told him it was nonsense – he was older but he was still a man and in fine shape and health. I knew it was because of me, because of the horrible choices I had made when

I was younger.

We kept trying though, year after year. The goal eventually became less important as we got older and we focused on other things in our life – for me it was watching films and sewing skirts in the latest fashions, for him it was sailing his new sailboat around the archipelago. But the urge to have a child kept building and building inside me, like tiny flames that would never fully go out.

Eventually though, I had to give up on that like I had given up on so many things in my life. Oh, I know I sound selfish complaining about a life that most women would have been happy to have. I had a husband who loved me, whom I loved too, I didn't have to work ever again and spent most of my days toiling around our house in the countryside or on the sailboat. But I was lonely and loneliness can do so much damage to even the hardest individuals. Anne had married a film director and had moved to Hamburg, Germany and I had lost touch with my other friends. Only Karl's sister Lulu would come by but even though she was pleasant company, she was too plain for my liking. There was still that part of me that craved the drama and excitement that life used to have.

To tell you the truth, there were some days where I would pray to see Jakob again. My meetings with him had happened so long ago but there was excitement and adventure in the ghostly boy and it saddened me to think that might all be over too.

As it was, in 1959, when I was 34 years old, my past finally came back to haunt me. Only it wasn't Jakob. Not at first.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I was strolling through the open air market down by the docks, perusing the stands for the freshest shrimp for that night's dinner when I heard someone call my name. It was a male voice, deep and rich but ripe with uncertainty.

There was no guessing whose voice that was. I could tell from the way the hairs on my arms stood up, from the hot, pooling feeling in my stomach, from the way my heart skipped a beat and staggered on.

Despite feeling frozen to the ground, I turned on the spot and saw Ludie through the maze of shoppers.

He was pushing forty now and looked even more handsome than he did when he was younger. His hair had thinned out a little bit and had lost a bit of the sheen but it was still colored like gold and honey and his eyes were that sharp, calculating blue.

I didn't know what to do or what to say. All those feelings of betrayal and heartache came rolling back just as if it were yesterday. A part of me wanted to hug him in the joy of seeing an old friend. Another part wished I could have taken the nearest fish and battered him over the head with it then kicked him over the side of the docks until he hit the water below and drowned.

Ludie didn't seem to be too concerned with how I was going to react. As soon as he saw my face, he raised his hand in a slight wave and his lips parted to show those show business teeth of his.

I wish I could tell you that I told Ludie to go straight to hell and that he wouldn't deserve anything more than that, but I didn't. I was a fool, again. A weak, sad woman.

I returned the shy wave and within minutes we were walking together out of the market and to a nearby park, the sun sparkling off of his hair and the buildings and his smile and the light in my heart.

"Listen, Pippa," he said taking hold of my hand in his, adjusting himself on the park bench to face me. "I was a terrible fool."

I gave him a slight smile, not disagreeing with him at all. “You were. But so was I.”

“No, my darling,” he said, reaching up for my cheek. “You were magnificent. You were the love of my life and I threw you away. I was young, stupid and out of my mind. I didn’t know how to handle my feelings or my fame or anything of that nature. I spent the last few years regretting what I did to you, wondering if I’d ever get the chance to redeem myself in your eyes.”

“It has been almost fifteen years,” I told him, trying to take my hand back. “A lot has changed since then. You can’t blame yourself for your past.”

“But I can and I do,” he said. His eyes explored my own and I was shocked how little they had changed. It made me wonder that if the eyes were windows to the soul and his reflected the soul of the selfish boy I once knew, was that person still inside of him?

“I’m married now.” I flashed him my ring.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:49 am

“Are you happily married?”

I sucked in my breath through my teeth. He was so bold with his questioning, asking me things I didn’t want to think about.

“I think so,” I answered and looked down at my thighs.

“Are you happy in life?”

I bit my lip and slowly shook my head, no. I wasn’t happy in my life.

“I’m not either,” he said. “I never have been since I hurt you. Since I lost you. I want to feel that happiness again and I need you.”

He continued on like this for a while, saying his promises and declarations of love and other lovely things. If I were a stronger woman, a good and righteous woman, I would have told him to forget it. I would have left him in that park and I would have gone right home to my loving husband and I would have continued living the life I carved out for myself.

Alas, I did not do that and I am sure you knew that was coming.

I didn’t go home to Karl. I went with Ludie to the hotel room where he was staying (as he had been performing in England until a few days ago) and we made passionate love until I absolutely had to go home.

It wasn’t a so-called “one night fling” either. This lasted for the next year. I was out

of the house every other day, pretending I was going to fabric stores or meeting new friends or just exploring and all the while I would meet Ludie at the hotel, and eventually, as he found theatre work again in the city, his house. I was a woman living two lives and though I was happier in Ludie's arms, I still felt miserable in both. I was the opposite of an honest woman. I had no idea if my parents were alive anymore but if they weren't, they'd be rolling in their graves.

It was amazing what fifteen years of growth and life would do to a person, however. Though he was still self-centered and short-tempered, I detected a sense of peace in him that I hadn't seen before.

"You're amazing, you know that," he told me one night as we lay sprawled across the sheets of his bed.

I blushed as he still had the ability to bring color and heat to my face and smacked him lightly with my hand. "Oh, stop that."

"I'm serious," he went on, reaching for my hair and brushing it out of my face. "You are. I've never met anyone like you in my entire life."

I wasn't sure what he was talking about since I was as ordinary as everyone else.

"You have this...way about you. I can feel you from across the way, like you give off this energy. It's...a sadness."

I looked at him sharply. Sadness?

"It's a like you have so much life and potential somewhere deep inside, some greater purpose that is dying to come out. But you don't know what it is or how to reach it. So it festers in this blue pool. I think of blue when I think of you Pippa. Blue, cooling, calming, like the sea, like your eyes. It soothes me to be with you."

“What do you think I’m meant to do?” I asked quietly. It felt foolish to even humor his ramblings. What could I, at 35-years old, offer the world anymore? What was my purpose if it wasn’t to be a great actress, if it wasn’t to have children?

“I think you’re meant to save people,” he said. His eyes flashed with something like pity. “Let’s start with me.”

That night I cried for the first time during our love making. It was like the damn burst in my soul and I wept for the love I felt and the life I never had.

A week later I was leaving the public library with a stack of books about makeup and fashion design, feeling strangely inspired for the first time in years. Ludie had gone to Gotland to see his sister and I spent the last few days keeping busy, waiting for his return. It was winter and dark out at three in the afternoon, so I was acceptably cautious as I left the library and made my way to the nearest tram station.

This is why when I sensed someone walking behind me, I didn’t turn to look. I kept my eyes forward, my head high. There were a few people on the street but they were hunched to the cold and it was dark as anything. I was paranoid but in this situation I thought it would suit me well.

Wherever I walked though, the presence followed me, until finally I had to spin around and glare at whomever had appointed themselves my stalker.

I saw a shimmer of wavering air and then before my eyes, it became Jakob.

My books went crashing to my feet, sending the snow everywhere.

Jakob was a few paces away and staring at me hard. He looked exactly as he did all those years ago, still a teenage boy, but the expression on his face had changed. His eyes were cold, his smile, what was left of it, was tight.

“Jakob,” I said. I looked around to see if anyone was about, anyone who would catch me talking to myself.

“Follow me, Miss Lindstrom,” he commanded with a soft voice. He walked past me and headed in the direction of a nearby alley. I picked up the books and followed him, feeling as if I had no choice. I was scared but enthralled and let myself go with the strange pull he had over me.

We entered the alley. It smelled of urine and snow and cold pipes. It was dirty and narrow and a dead end and the flakes that fell from the sky disappeared quickly into the darkness. Only a rusted fire escape filled the area, hanging a few feet off the ground.

This would be the perfect place to lose your life, I thought to myself and eyed Jakob carefully. I never thought the boy could or would hurt me but the grim expression on his face didn’t do anything to dissuade my fears.

He didn’t say anything any first, he just stopped in the middle of the alleyway and let his eyes roam all over the bricks, his head cocked slightly as if he was listening. I knew better than to interrupt him, so I kept my mouth shut and licked my dry lips anxiously.

Finally he looked at me and that hard gleam returned to his eyes. “I’m sorry I didn’t come by sooner.”

I was caught off guard by that understated remark. “I...”

“I don’t have too much time to explain Pippa,” he said. He took my hands in his and I was amazed at the strength and warmth of his touch. He looked past my shoulder and nodded. I turned my head and saw the end of the alley ripple and pulse, the door to the Thin Veil, the Otherside.

“I have to go back there soon, and it’s not safe to take you there right now. Not in your state.”

“My state?” I asked, my heart slowing down by a few beats.

His hands squeezed mine and he kept his eyes on me, serious and grave.

“Pippa, you’re pregnant,” he said. His words sounded colder than ice and as impossible as it was, I knew it was true.

I could barely form words so my lips moved soundlessly. I was pregnant. Most likely by Ludie, my one true love. I was finally going to have a child. His child. The notion should have filled my heart with joy, but though it was beating faster, wanting to drum in the possibility, the look on Jakob’s face made me pause, made me stifle the expanding feelings.

“What’s wrong?” I asked him. “Shouldn’t you be happy for me?”

He smiled and his eyes crinkled at the corners, but they weren’t happy at all. Once again he looked years older than fourteen and I had a feeling I was about to receive some very bad news.

“You are a special woman,” Jakob said and I was instantly reminded of what Ludie told me in bed. “And being special makes you at great risk for others who want to use you.”

I brought my coat in closer and stamped my foot impatiently. “I haven’t seen you in sixteen years. When I last did, you were talking about this Otherside. You told me you weren’t alive. I don’t even know who you really are or what you are. Please, don’t think you’ll get away this time without explain absolutely everything that you know. I deserve that much.”

“That could take some time and I don’t have time.”

“You have the time to tell me I’m pregnant!” I said, raising my gloved finger at him. “Now you’re going to finish telling me why I’m special, why I’m at risk. Why does it matter if I’m pregnant? It’s what I’ve always wanted.”

Jakob placed his hand at my stomach and I blanched at his touch. “The baby is not safe.”

My heart sank. Could this all be over before it has even begun?

“What do you mean?”

“You need to get rid of it.”

I was dumbstruck by his cruel words and searched his face for some sort of answer. He was not joking with me, his grey eyes were glinting like steel and his face was robbed of all its color.

“I will do no such thing,” I said quietly and made my gaze match the intensity of his.

“Please,” he said and his eyes darted quickly over to the Thin Veil and back. “I don’t wish to show you so you just have to believe me.”

“If you think I will give up this child growing newly inside me because you said so, you must be as crazy as you are dead.”

“You’re the one who will end up crazy,” he hissed at me. “Or dead!”

He let out a sigh, his breath failing to create steam in the frigid air and grabbed my arm. “Come on.”

He began to lead me toward the shimmering air. Panic bubbled up in my throat and I stopped my legs, keeping them locked to the ground. Jakob tugged again.

“You told me it wasn’t safe to go there,” I said. I started to shake all over, from the cold, from the fear, from the unknown.

“It isn’t,” he said, his grip tightening. “But you aren’t giving me much choice. I can explain things better over there than I can here. The ones that are looking for you are already on this side.”

For the second time that night, I was speechless. And scared out of my wits. But Jakob pulled at my arm again and I let him lead me toward the air.

It was fantastic up close. I felt like I was looking through a cool pond and instead of seeing the bottom, I saw the rest of the street, the snowy sheen of Stockholm, albeit filtered as if it were tinted with grey gauze. The air was constantly moving, rippling back and forth, and it sparkled too.

“What will happen to me?” I whispered, my eyes hypnotized by the sight that danced before me.

“Hopefully, nothing,” Jakob said. “But if you want the whole truth, you have to come with me.”

Then he walked forward into the air, which shimmied and stretched around him. He looked faded now, half transparent, as if he was close to disappearing completely. His hand reached through toward me, into my world again, and became solid. The snow fell and collected on his sleeve as he went for my hand. I took it gingerly in mine and then I was yanked forward into a shimmering wall of pressure.

The first things I noticed were a distinct lack of sound and smell and sight, like

everything around me ceased. Then my eyes adjusted and sound filtered back in and my nostrils flinched with a vague scent of burning. It looked like I was back where I was, on the street, except it was completely empty, the snow had stopped falling and lay undisturbed at my feet. Colors were dull and de-saturated.

Jakob cleared his throat and I whirled around to see him standing behind me. His red hair was now a very dull shade of grey. His eyes remained the same.

“What do you think?” he asked and I saw that flash of little boy hopefulness in him. He wanted me to like this place, his home.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:49 am

“It’s different,” I said simply and looked around. It was different. It was like an unpopulated version of my world.

“We are in another layer,” he said and walked toward a bunch of crates that were stacked up at the entrance of the alley. He sat on one and patted the other.

“Sit down and I will tell you what you need to know. And many things you’ll wish I didn’t.”

I did as he said, noticing that my feet made no marks in the snow as I walked, feeling no chill in the air at all.

“All right,” I said. I adjusted my position on the crate so I was facing him and waited patiently for him to continue.

“This place, the Thin Veil, the Otherside, the Black Sunshine, is a parallel world for the dead. It is a place of transition, the world where souls first step into before they travel above or below or to the other places I have not seen yet. My name is Jakob but it wasn’t always Jakob, that is just my name when I am here. All us guides are called Jakob. We help souls cross over to where they need to go and some of us, some of us are guardians. We keep this place free from monsters and special people such as yourself.”

That was an awful lot for my uneducated brain to take in.

“You keep this place...free from...people like me? Monsters? How...”

His voice dropped to a lower register. “Monsters are real, Pippa. I know you’ve seen them when they cross over. Sometimes they look like ordinary people. At other times, they look like the demons they are. Or faceless shadows. They come from the underworld, a place of blood and sorrow. The Thin Veil is the closest point for them to break through. They look for souls to possess, for bodies to have, for lives to devour. They are very, very dangerous. And they tend to go after people like you. That is one reason why people like you are a threat to this place.”

“Well, my goodness. You know I would have never come here had you not dragged me here. It’s not like I can step into this place anytime I want.”

“Oh, but dear Miss Lindstrom, you can. You can come here anytime you want, now that you know. And if you’re really powerful, which I suspect you are, you can create doors whenever you wish.”

I was powerful enough to create doors to another world? It was too unbelievable for my ears, despite the fact I was sitting with a spirit guide in what appeared to be another dimension.

“So they want me...”

“They want you because you possess this power. It is very attractive to them. You also attract other beings, not just monsters and demons. You attract ghosts, spirits who remain here because they are unable to move on. They can see the world they left behind and roam among it but others do not see them. Except for you. Can you imagine an eternity of loneliness, of being ignored, and then finally being seen, being listened to?”

Oh, I didn’t have to imagine that feeling. I had experienced it many times before.

“So why am I safe here? Why am I not safe on the other side?”

He looked around him. “The guardians are out doing their job, keeping the demons at bay. They can’t do anything for the spirits who spend their time here and in your world, but the demons they can control. However, if they slip past, and it does happen, they are free to cause destruction. The guardians cannot come to the other world, and even guides shouldn’t.”

“Will you get in trouble for coming to see me?” I asked, wondering who exactly Jakob answered to.

He shrugged. “I might. But I’m pretty stealthy. This world is as vast as yours and they can’t be everywhere at once.”

“And in my world?”

He chewed on his lip before speaking. “In your world, it’s...easier to be watched. From here, you can conjure up doors or windows that will open up anywhere you please. It’s how I’ve been able to watch you while you were a child, then watch you now. When I’m in your world – the living world – I am aware that at any moment one of the guides or guardians, or even demons, can find out where I am or what I’m saying. It’s like a mental and physical leash that keeps me tethered to the Otherside.”

I rubbed at my temples, feeling a bout of pressure on them.

“You’re in pain,” he said and began to get off the box.

“No, no.” I waved at him to sit back down. “It’s just a lot to handle.”

“That’s why no one should ever know. You knowing you’re special was always enough, you never needed to know it all, to come here. That’s why I tried to keep it from you. That’s why we aren’t allowed to tell.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose and the pain subsided a bit. “You said there are others like me out there...people who can see ghosts. Are they in danger too?”

He nodded. “Some more than others. You have this ability, this light inside you that promises power that few have. A power that will only worsen from here on in.”

I gave him a sharp look. “What? Why?”

He pulled anxiously at the cap on his head and didn’t say anything. I put my hand on his leg and squeezed. Hard.

“Is this about the baby?” I asked, my voice trembling.

He sucked in his breath and nodded. “I know I won’t succeed in preventing the child from being born. I can see that you’d never let that happen. But I will tell you this much, that child will bring pain to your life and to others.”

“How could you say that about an unborn child!” I shrieked, the words coming out of my mouth in a hot fury. “About my child!”

Jakob remained nonplussed. “Any woman who carries life carries a great power within her. You already have a power, a life force that others want, need, crave even. With a child growing inside of you, you will be more susceptible to...other forces. You’re putting yourself in great danger. Not to mention your child. If she manages to emerge unscathed, untainted by dark spirits, you may be subjecting her to a life just like your own. A life that will end in pain and misery.”

For all the frightening and horrible things that he had just told me, my brain froze and fixated on the little, minor detail he let slip: It was a she. I was carrying a baby girl.

“Yes, it’s a girl,” Jakob admitted, quite literally reading my mind. “And maybe you

won't pass your powers onto her. Maybe it will skip a generation. But you're dooming someone to a life just like yours."

I felt weak and was glad to be sitting down. I shook my head lightly, feeling tears creeping up behind my tired eyes. "My life isn't so bad. I have Ludie. I have a child. I have a home and I have money. I have what I've always wanted."

I didn't know if I was trying to prove something to Jakob or to myself.

"But those things won't last, Pippa, and you know it," he pointed out with a gentle tone, as if that could soften the blow. "Ludie is just an ordinary man."

"He's more than ordinary," I spat at him.

"But he's not like you."

"So you're saying I can't love him because he doesn't have this wretched power, this disease?"

"I am not saying that. You will continue to love him, no matter what happens. But he isn't like you, he won't ever understand the real you – this you - and when things get hard in the future, he will run. He will always run."

I looked down at my gloves and absently picked at them. I felt low and ashamed. "He thinks I'm special too."

"Of course he does. But Ludie is just a man, Pippa. He's a perceptive man and more in touch with his feelings than others, he is more open-minded and he can feel that energy you give off. It attracts him like all other living and non-living things. But his heart isn't drawn to yours like yours is to his. Very few people with these abilities can find each other in all the worlds. When it happens, you know. It's a magnet affect, a

sense of finding your missing half, someone who gives off what you do and draws you in like they do to you.”

“Let me get this straight. I’m doomed to be alone until I find someone like me?”

“I can’t answer that,” he said.

I glowered at him. “You seem to know my future very well. I’m going to assume my heart won’t be acting like a magnet with another anytime soon.” When he didn’t say anything to that I continued, “And my daughter. What’s to come of her since nothing looks very rosy anymore?”

“I do not know,” he said. “In my vision, you wouldn’t have the daughter at all.”

“Because you told me to?”

“Because it’s not your husband’s. It belongs to another man who will leave you as soon as he gets word of your pregnancy. Because it’s dangerous and you are not in the best health and are getting old.”

The nerve of him. I was not that old.

“Why are you telling me all of this, Jakob? Why didn’t you just let me be? You didn’t have to follow me today. You could have stayed away like you had been doing all this time. I would have never known any of this. Why did you do it?”

He looked sheepish as he stepped off the crate and walked away.

“Because I’m selfish. I’m lonely.”

I was caught off guard by the honesty of his answer. He stopped and shot me a shy

look.

“It’s true. This is probably why we aren’t allowed to interact like this. You draw me to you just like everything else is drawn to you. I like watching you. I like talking to you. And I have reason to believe it will be easier for us to converse now.”

I squinted at him. “How?”

He raised his hands to sky. “Now that you’ve seen this place, you’ll be able to come here whenever you like. You can see me or choose not to. You’ll step out of this and feel changed. You might notice other abilities about you that you hadn’t noticed before.”

“Like what?”

He strolled back over to me and held his hand out for mine. “I do not know that Pippa. But I am certain you will once you leave this place.”

I placed my hand in his and let him raise me up.

“You say that by choosing to have my baby, I’ve chosen a path different from the one you saw,” I told him. “So how do you know that everything I am supposedly doomed for will still happen. You don’t know, do you? I could find someone else like me. Ludie could stay by my side. I might divorce Karl, maybe Ludie and I will get married and live somewhere wonderful. You don’t know anymore.”

His smile was small. “I do hope you prove me wrong, Pippa.”

He kissed my hand and then gestured back to the darkened alley.

“Now, we shall see what you can do already. Concentrate on that air, on that space,

and imagine a door opening. Will it to be true.”

I looked to the grey, stale air above the alley and tried to focus my eyes on the nothingness that was there. I thought of the shimmer, I thought about walking through a portal, a door, and stepping back into a land of noise and color and people and life.

It took a few seconds of silence and concentration but before I knew it, there it was. The way out of the Thin Veil. The way back into the world I belonged.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:49 am

I looked at Jakob.

“Are you coming with me?”

He shook his head. “I don’t want to press my luck. But I’ll see you again.”

“Anytime I want?” I asked.

He pursed his lips in concern. “I’ll let you know first, how about that?”

He sounded uneasy, like there was something he wasn’t telling me, but I was so tired from getting all the other information out of him. There had to be some secrets left and I was OK with that.

I was OK with everything now. I was pregnant after all.

With a small wave, I held my breath as a precaution and stepped through the pressured air until I was engulfed by cold and snow and exhaust and colorful books that lay at my feet.

I turned around to see a car putter past the alley. That was it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jakob ended up being right about everything he warned me about. It started with the increased abilities, these changes in myself. Before visiting the Otherside, I was vaguely aware of the world around me. Oh, I paid attention all right, but never

enough attention it seemed, for now I was seeing ghosts everywhere. But perhaps it wasn't a matter of my eyes opening, maybe I was giving off a stronger energy now that I had been to their world and back.

Either way, it didn't matter. There were ghosts where there weren't ghosts before. No longer did I contend with random boys in my classroom or drowned girls, but people, all the time, from all walks of life. They never approached me or talked to me, but they watched me. They always watched me.

I don't have to tell you both how god damn unnerving that is. It was no wonder that my sanity would crumble one day and crumble it did. Another point for Jakob's perceptiveness.

But I'm getting ahead of myself here, as we all know how that story ends. The visit to the Otherside brought about seeing ghosts but it also brought about a strange...I don't know the term for it. Kinetic ability? I found that under periods of extreme duress, I was able to manipulate objects by my emotions. One day, after a particularly rough fight with Ludie, I thought about smashing the plates in my kitchen. I was so unbelievably mad. The next thing I knew, the plates in the good China cabinet came crashing down. At first the actions were uncontrollable and random but as the years went on, I began to assert some aspect of power over them. They were still unpredictable when my emotions were high, but when I was calm I could do minor things like move chairs and make books float in the air. It was a rather pointless ability to me, but it was mine now.

Of course, the other things that Jakob was right about were more life-altering. I could handle ghosts and rattling pans, but I couldn't handle Ludie when he skipped out on our life together.

I know I shouldn't have been surprised, but there was a part of me that wanted to prove Jakob wrong, and desperately so. I wanted Ludie to love me like I had him, but

his heart was no magnet at all. When I told Ludie I was pregnant and that I was going to keep the baby, he withdrew from me. At first he told me that he would be there for me, support me emotionally as he assumed I would still be with Karl and raising it with him. But when I said to Ludie that I was going to admit to our affair and request a divorce from dear Karl, he panicked. Ludie loved me but only in that noncommittal way that suited his lifestyle just fine.

When I was seven months pregnant, Ludie sent a letter to my house. I cried and cried as I read it at the kitchen table, grateful that Karl wasn't home. Ludie told me he had found work in a popular off-Broadway play in New York and that he was going. In fact, as I read the letter, I realized he was already there. He signed off by saying he'd think of me always and our child, but that he was doing the right thing. He would go and make more money, get famous, and come back for us one day.

I don't need to tell you that the one day never came.

The only thing that kept me going during this time, this second round of heartbreak, was looking after the baby and waiting for her to be born. I had decided to call her Ingrid, after Karl's mother. It was the least I could do, considering she wouldn't ever be his child.

Did Karl ever suspect? I am sure he did. Looking back, he had to have known I was having an affair. Near the end I was quite careless and on the days when I had been with Ludie, I noticed Karl could barely look me in the eyes. And of course when Ingrid was born, that was another sign right there. Ingrid had pale blonde hair and bright blue eyes, just like Ludie. She was a gorgeous, lithe-like creature and grew to have no resemblance to Karl at all.

But Karl, good, sweet Karl, he never said anything to me and he loved Ingrid as if she was his own. When he was around, he would dote on her as often as he could.

However, because there was an extra mouth in the family to feed now and caviar wasn't what it used to be, especially when a company such as IKEA opened up, Karl had to start another business (marine instruments) and spent the majority of his time working. He felt bad for never being around and told me we could hire a nanny, but I didn't want to do that. Ingrid was all I had and I wanted to spend every minute with her, doing everything for her that I could.

Oh, I loved that girl so much. She was so beautiful that people would stop on the streets and stare at her. I couldn't help but marvel at her big sapphire eyes, her perfect nose, heart-shaped face and high cheekbones. Her hair was white blonde and stick straight with just the right amount of thickness and shine. She was stunning, just as her father was, and I dressed her in outfits I created myself, indulging in my wardrobe cravings again.

Ingrid was the belle of the ball and fairly smart too. But there was something about her that was slightly off-putting. I felt just the tiniest bit afraid of her. It was completely irrational, but there were times that Ingrid would look at me, even at four years old, and I felt...judged. It was as if she was looking down at me, at her own mother. At other times, it's like I wouldn't even show up on her radar and she was looking through me, as if I were a ghost.

Sometimes I would lie in bed at night and wonder why I never saw any love from her eyes. Ingrid seemed to take interest and delight in other things. She liked fashion and must have gotten that from me. She liked being on her father's knee and pretending she was riding a pony. She had friends, she giggled over boys and laughed at cartoons. But when it came to me, it was like a switch went off. Smiles disappeared, laughter stopped. Oh, she was a polite girl because I raised her to be and she would talk with me about her day and tell me stories. But she was missing something crucial. She was missing the mother/daughter connection.

Because of this, I often wondered if something had gone wrong with her. I thought

about accessing the Thin Veil and seeking out Jakob, asking what he knew. The pregnancy had been fine, Ingrid seemed like a normal girl with everyone except me. Just because I hadn't experienced the dangers, I never saw any demons or monsters coming for her, did it mean she emerged unscathed? Or was she cursed in some way to never love me?

Perhaps it was none of those things and I was just unlovable. I never did find out. I just had to accept it was the way it was. Some girls never had a close relationship with their mother and that seemed to be the case with Ingrid and I.

As she grew up and became a young lady, I wondered if perhaps did have some things in common.

One day when she was eleven, we were strolling down a busy shopping street and enjoying the sunshine. I spoiled Ingrid rotten and gave her everything she asked for. On this particular day, she wanted to get new headbands because there was some boy in her class she wanted to impress.

I obliged, of course, and as we were coming out of a store, I decided to test something on her.

"Ingrid," I said and pointed across the street to where an old man was leaning against a shop window. He had blank eyes with no pupils and was absently twirling a pocketwatch. "Do you see that man over there?"

She looked, squinted, then shook her head. "What man?"

My heart sank. "The man twirling the pocketwatch, leaning against the window."

She gave me a funny look. "Are you drunk mama?"

“Ingrid,” I admonished her. “Of course not.”

“But there’s no one there,” she said smartly. “So you must be drunk or crazy.”

I narrowed my eyes at her and looked back at the man. I was foolish to test my theory. Of course there was someone there, but he was dead. Ingrid couldn’t see him. She wasn’t special like me.

That should have made me feel better, but it only made me feel alone.

“Never mind,” I said to her and pulled her along to keep walking.

“You’re often drunk and crazy,” she said in a sing-songy voice.

I stopped, my breath paused, placed my hands on her slight shoulders and turned her to face me.

“Why do you say that?” I asked uneasily, leaning over a bit so I was more at her level.

She rolled her eyes, a gesture I found infuriating. “Because you are. I hear you all the time, telling people to go away, or acting like things are coming after you. There’s never anything there.”

A flush crept on to my cheeks and I straightened up. “Don’t lie, sweetie.”

“I’m not lying!” She pouted. “You scare me mama, you always do. You see things that aren’t there. You’re like those people in the crazy places. Perhaps we should lock you up there one day.”

To hear those words coming out of my daughter’s mouth hurt me more than anything

in the world. She said them with such venom, such hatred. I wondered what I ever did wrong, why I deserved to be treated like this by someone whom I did nothing but love.

“You will do no such thing, Ingrid,” I whispered, straightening out my dress. “You will love me as I love you.”

“You love me too much,” she replied under her breath. It surprised me. I opened my mouth to say something but her eyes lit up at the sight of another clothing store. “Oooh, I must go in there! I saw a darling dress that Erika was wearing the other day and I need one much better.”

She took off for the store and I was left on the street. It took all of my strength to not collapse into a heap of tears.

CHAPTER NINE

As much as it hurt to hear my little darling daughter tell me those things, she was right. I was losing it. The ghosts became more and more frequent and whereas they used to just watch me, now they were stalking me. Talking to me. Touching me.

I tried to ignore them but it often made things worse. There was an old Asian lady with bound feet who would appear in my bathroom while I was in the tub and she would take all my items off the shelves and the medicine cabinet and throw them in the bath with me. I would scream and I’d hear Ingrid telling me to shut up, or Karl would pound on the door and demand to know what was going on.

Sometimes there was a little boy of about five or six who had half his face blown off by a shotgun accident. He would appear before me during my morning coffee, often sitting in the chair across from me and whining about how his brother knew where their father had hidden the gun and that he wanted to play with it.

One time I was felt up by a greasy-haired man in tight pants. He smelt like sewage, had coal black eyes and freezing cold fingers that rammed themselves up my skirt during a ferry voyage to the Åland Islands. It took all my self-control not to scream but even then I could tell the people around me were getting concerned.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:49 am

Karl was especially worried and would insist I needed to go to a doctor. I told him I was fine, that it was just stress and being an older mother instead of a younger one. Ingrid, on the other hand, used my relapses as an excuse to further push me away.

At fifteen she had started modeling for local catalogs and magazines and began to pull in some money. She was gorgeous and she knew it and so did everyone else. Eventually her career picked up speed and she was soon offered a contract with a big modeling agency in New York City. At sixteen she decided to drop out of school and do it.

Now, I say she decided because although Karl and I were her parents and in legal control, we had a hard time saying no to her. We agreed to her following her dream, provided she only went for a year and that I would go along.

Naturally Ingrid balked at the idea. She was adamant that I not be there, convinced I would further embarrass her with my “kooky” ways and that I’d ruin her “best chance at happiness.”

That was the way it was though and Karl had a business to run. He was getting much older too and had hip problems and wasn’t one for long distance traveling.

So despite Ingrid’s protests, I made up my mind to go with her to New York.

She wasn’t the only one who protested, however.

A week before we were set to fly over, I was sitting in the back garden enjoying my last days there in the evening sun with a cup of tea. I felt a familiar chill brush across

my skin and knew that I wasn't alone. Jakob came up behind me and took a seat at the table.

As usual, he hadn't changed. But I sure had.

"Do you only come every sixteen years or so?" I asked, my hand shaking slightly as it grasped the porcelain cup. I was nervous and excited to see him.

His smile was quick. "I only come when you're about to embark on something you shouldn't."

"Oh really?" I asked wryly and leaned back in my chair. My bones ached a little and I was reminded of how much older I was now, almost 51. "No dropping by just to say hello."

"You could have said hello to me," he said, leaning forward on his elbows, the same old white shirt he always wore.

"You told me to not visit, to wait for you first."

"I said that so you wouldn't start going into the Thin Veil and attracting attention to yourself. You saw what happened when you came back out. The abilities."

"Yes," I said, taking a sip of tea. It had cooled rapidly in his company. "How wonderful it is to make the room shake when I'm angry, how gratifying it is to be harassed by ghosts all day long."

"Don't say I didn't warn you."

"You didn't warn me!" I hissed at him and a bit of the tea spilled over the side of the cup. The saucer on the table rattled by itself ever so slightly.

I placed the cup down and composed myself. “You didn’t warn me. You brought me to that side knowing that things would get worse for me.”

“You wanted to know the truth and that’s the only way I could tell it to you.”

“I don’t know,” I mused angrily. “I think maybe you were testing me, to see what I was capable of.”

“Perhaps I was curious,” he said fidgeting with this shirt. “But that’s not why I’m here.”

“No, you’re here to warn me about something else, I’m sure. What is it this time, boogie man is coming after me? Perhaps there are some trolls who are going to pay me a visit.”

“Don’t go to New York, Pippa,” he said in a grave voice.

I studied his face, his sincerity. It rankled me to know that whatever he was about to tell me would end up being true.

“And why not?” I asked, too tired to protest.

“Because it will not end well for you. Because Ingrid needs to stay here. And you need someone who loves you, Karl, you need him to protect you from her.”

His words iced my veins. “Protect me from her? What do you know about Ingrid? What is she?”

He raised his red brows. “What is she?”

“She’s not right,” I said awkwardly.

“You’re not right either. Neither of you are. And if you go to New York, she will turn against you and fall in love with a man. She will leave you to your own devices, cast you aside like a sick dog and you will have no one.”

I looked down into the tea and managed a smile. “Oh, but I’ll have you still, won’t I boy. In spirit, of course, till another event threatens my life so.”

“I am being serious here.”

I glanced at him and saw that he was. Still, I shrugged. “I’ve made up my mind and I’m going. I’m doing this for Ingrid you know.”

“Not to see Ludie?”

I gasped even though it was partly acting on my behalf. I couldn’t pretend I hadn’t thought about tracking down Ludie while I was there. “No, not Ludie. This is for my daughter, not for me. I want her to be happy and it sounds like she will be.”

“This is about more than Ingrid. She may not have your abilities but it doesn’t mean her children won’t.”

“Children?” I asked with reluctant interest.

When he didn’t say anything, I continued, feeling more annoyed by his presence by the second. “So now this is about Ingrid marrying some man and bearing me grandchildren that will be cursed with this as I am. What am I supposed to do about that?”

“Don’t go.”

I stood up in a fury, knocking my chair back onto the lawn. “You are giving me too

much credit. Too much...power! This is ridiculous, to put this responsibility into my hands. This is Ingrid's life too and I am not about to ruin it because some guide for the dead thinks my future grandchildren are in danger. This is too much, can't you see?"

I shook my head and walked away from him, my arms waving at my sides, not caring if anyone in the house was watching. "No, I won't do it. I won't manipulate lives around for something that should be beyond my control. If she wants to fall in love let her. Fate has a way of finding people anyway, doesn't it?"

"You're right about that one, Pippa," he said, getting to his feet. "Fate will always find you."

He walked himself over to the garden gate and disappeared into a faint shimmer that appeared and disappeared in a blink.

He didn't even say good-bye.

My meeting with Jakob, the uncomfortable predictions he presented me, had me in a funk until my feet touched American soil. Suddenly that was all swept under the rug as I drank in the new country, the hot dog stands, the smell of butter and sweat, the sound of a million cars honking and jackhammers firing away.

New York City was like a tonic to me, and to Ingrid as well. Her face was constantly lit up by the vibrant pulse and life that the streets offered her. I could see the possibilities sink into her brain and I lived through that, that something I had only once, when I was young and Stockholm had been my oyster. My, that felt so very long ago.

Karl was constantly wiring over money into my bank account, so we were able to get Ingrid a small apartment on 53rd street next to a smelly Chinese food restaurant. We

spent the first few weeks with me on the pull-out couch, living out of my suitcase, eating Chinese food until we burst. At the time, Ingrid was still very thin and didn't give too much thought to what she ate, providing she remained the same size. That would soon change however, as the industry got a hold of her. Soon, everything changed.

It started with the modeling. I went with her on a few bookings, just to get the feel for things, but I knew I was making Ingrid uncomfortable and I stopped. It didn't help that the ghosts were back in large numbers. The city had so many of them, it was overwhelming at times and I had to do everything I could to keep them at bay.

Ingrid got a lot of work and soon she was hanging out with the wrong crowd. They were on drugs, no doubt, skinny little trainwrecks. She began to party, she stopped eating, her weight dropped off and she began to change. Her ability to tolerate me disappeared and one day I came home to find all of my belongings packed. Her boyfriend, Stew or Drew or something, was moving in and I was moving out. I had no say in the matter, either. She was making money now and the rent was pretty much being covered by her earnings.

I knew better than to argue. She was seventeen and unstoppable. I had no power over her, I never really had.

So with an extremely heavy, helpless heart, I let Stew or Drew move in with his ripped jeans and scaly leather jacket and I put myself up into a roach-covered motel until I figured out what to do with myself.

The answer came in the form of a Help Wanted ad in the paper. A family on the upper west side was looking for a nanny to look after their two young boys, aged six and nine, and in exchange the nanny would receive room and board.

I had a fluttery feeling in my stomach about this, like it was a good idea. Being in

another family would make me feel safe when I felt very much forgotten and alone. I knew I could have gone back to Sweden, to Karl and perhaps I should have. But even though I couldn't live with Ingrid, I couldn't leave her either. I would stay in the city and try and keep an eye on her when I could, be there for her if she should ever need me, as unlikely as it was.

The next day I took a cab from the hotel to the posh surroundings of a neighborhood on the rise and found myself in front of a narrow but tastefully decorated brownstone duplex. This was the home of the O'Shea's.

It had been a long time since I had a job interview and being in my fifties with a heap of unwanted life experience did nothing to squelch my nerves. I watched the cab drive off with butterflies in my heart and took a deep breath before I climbed the steps of the brownstone.

I rang the doorbell and waited, admiring the good shape of the small porch area they had outside, the relative calm and ease that the eloquent but tightly packed neighborhood gave off.

At first I heard nothing but the echo of the bell, then silence. No children laughing or crying, no stampede of feet. I checked my watch to ensure it was the right time and the right date and just before I pushed the bell again, the door swung open.

On the other side stood a man well over six feet, with the darkest brown eyes I'd ever seen and though he was around my age, his hair was remarkably thick and free from grey hairs. His posture was straight, his clothes neatly pressed and immaculate, and even though he gave me a very winning smile, there was something closed-off and strained about him.

"You must be Pippa," he said and offered his hand. "I'm Curtis O'Shea."

His accent was 100% Irish though he worked hard to make it more Americanized. I shook his hand in return and found it firm and quick.

I greeted him and he ushered me inside.

The house was very bare and tidy at the area around the door. There weren't any signs of children, no shoes or toys scattered about. Even the walls had pastoral scenes of Ireland mixed with modern art, but there were no pictures of the family or a child's art work proudly displayed.

"Thank you for agreeing to see me so quickly, we only put the ad out yesterday," he said, walking past me and down the hall. He looked over his shoulder to make sure I was following.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:49 am

I quickly took off my shoes, not wanting to disturb the austerity of the area, and walked quietly after him. It felt like a house you couldn't be loud in, a heavy feeling of tension sat in the air above our heads.

"Were there any other applicants?" I asked.

"A few. Come, let's sit in the living room."

He went through an opening to his left and I came after. As I neared, I snuck a look into the kitchen across the way. It was an utter disaster with pots and pans piled high in the sink, army trucks and dinosaurs scattered about the floor and dripping stains coming off the high-gloss counters.

Curtis caught me looking and I averted my eyes quickly. It was obviously something I wasn't supposed to see, but then I suppose it would be my job to deal with messes like that.

"I'm not a very good caretaker," he explained as I came in the room and he indicated I sit in on the sofa across from him. "You can see why we need a nanny."

I nodded, sitting down on the slick leather and folded my hands in my lap. I could see he was embarrassed. "Are you a single parent?"

He gave me a quick smile, still handsome and still strained. "No. I am not. I have a wife, Régine. But..." He trailed off and did a quick sweep around the room with his eyes. "I'm an investment banker. I work very long hours and I'm not home often. Your job would be to take care of the children, cook their meals, clean the

house...essentially do the job that Régine currently cannot.”

I didn't want to pry, but I had to know. “Is there something wrong with your wife?”

He let out a sharp puff of air and tugged a bit at his hair. I opened my mouth to apologize for my bold question but he spoke, “She's ill. Mentally. We don't know what's wrong with her. And she drinks too much. She's...she's been steadily going downhill and it's coming to the point that I can't even deal with my own family. I need someone else to deal with it for me.”

“Someone like me?” I asked. I was starting to wonder if I had applied for something that was well beyond my abilities. Certainly I was no spring chicken and had a hard enough time chasing after Ingrid all those years ago. Would I be able to handle two young boys and their alcoholic, mentally ill mother? It seemed like it was a bit too much for me.

Curtis caught the look on my face and as he twirled his wedding band around his finger, said, “I know I am not painting the best picture here but I want to be honest up front. My dignity means a lot to me and I need someone who will keep the image I have built up for myself. I am a good provider to my family and give them everything they wish to have. The boys, well the oldest anyway, are well-cultured and well-groomed. I work very hard to give them this life but I cannot be their mother. I don't expect you to be their mother either, but the help would be more than appreciated. It would be better than what we currently have: A deadbeat.”

I flinched at hearing him speak about his wife like that but he didn't seem to notice. “I must say, I don't know if I am the right candidate. I am in my fifties and have seen better days. Are you sure you wouldn't want someone fresh and new?”

He shook his head. “No. No, I saw quite a few fresh and new women this morning and I'm afraid they aren't cut out for the job. It is not about the energy here. I doubt

my boys will run you ragged, as I said they are, for the most part, very well-behaved. I need someone with the mental maturity to handle the situation with grace and class. For first impressions, you seem to have that.”

Curtis tugged at his hair again, a gesture that I realized was a nervous tick. I wondered how he still had such nice hair with such a habit. He looked up at me, his face very serious. “I’ll pay you handsomely you know.”

I didn’t want to assume as much, so I just smiled at him and ran things over in my mind, not really sure what to do. I didn’t know if such a household would be the right place for me, considering all I had gone through with my life. I certainly did not want to live it all over again. The fact that he would pay me well didn’t even factor into it.

“Jesus Christ,” he suddenly swore and I jumped in my seat. He got up and marched over to area between an armchair and the fireplace. He bent over and when he emerged he was holding a broken glass trophy in his hands. His eyes were wild with anger and I could feel it flowing off of him like it was steam. He looked to the mantel above the fireplace where I assumed the trophy once stood.

“That son of a bitch,” he said, his voice lowered, the full brogue coming out. As if I didn’t exist, he stormed past me and stuck his head out into the hallway.

“Declan Pierre O’Shea!” he bellowed, his voice echoing throughout the house. “You get your arse right down here this instant!”

I turned in my seat and watched Curtis. He was clutching the trophy so hard, I was surprised he wasn’t drawing blood.

“Is everything alright?” I asked him.

He shook his head, the anger never leaving his eyes, and waited by the doorway. I

heard a shuffling and a small boy reluctantly appeared in front of his father.

He was the youngest, the six-year old, skinny as anything, with a tuft of messy black hair that matched his father's. His eyes were downcast, staring at the floor, but I would have bet they would be the same mahogany brown too.

"Did you break Michael's lacrosse trophy!?" Curtis yelled at him.

The child, Declan, didn't move or say anything. I could see he was frigid with fear. I felt the same fear myself and my heart was catching in my chest.

"Look at me when I'm speaking to you," Curtis growled. He grabbed Declan's small arm and pulled him roughly toward him. "Answer me! Did you?"

He was right in the boy's face now, the power of his words causing his hair to fly. Slowly Declan raised his eyes to his father's. They were surprisingly hard. I had expected him to be crying but that was not the case.

"Yes," the boy said in a flat voice. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry doesn't cut it," Curtis said venomously. Declan tried to move out of his father's grasp but Curtis tightened his grip to the point where it looked as if he'd break his own child's bones and he pulled Declan in front of me. I gasped at the act, I couldn't help it.

"This is Declan. He's the only one who might give you trouble."

Curtis shoved him toward me. The boy kept his eyes to the ground.

"Declan, promise me you won't be a bother to this nice woman as you are to me and your mother."

“Oh, he’s just a young boy,” I began to say, but Curtis cut me off.

“It doesn’t matter. He knows how to behave and breaking his brother’s trophy is out of the question. Just because he’s jealous it doesn’t give him the right. You hear me Declan?”

“It was an accident!” Declan wailed, finally showing some emotion. I felt extraordinarily bad for the child. “I was throwing the ball and-”

“You know not to throw anything in this house!” Curtis’s face was now turning an ugly shade of crimson. “We have rules.”

Declan looked back at the ground and mumbled, “Mikey wouldn’t play with me and mum said I was giving her a headache. She told me to go away, to play inside.”

“Enough with the excuses.” He tugged at his hair again and sighed. Then he quickly patted Declan on the head, his face contorted slightly, as if he was petting a lizard instead of his own son. “You go get your brother. I’ll deal with you later.”

Declan nodded. Before he left, he looked up at me and in his big, dark eyes I saw a plea for help. That’s all it could have been. It was almost as if he shouted “Help me” inside my own head.

I nodded back, dumbstruck and frightened, and Declan left the room, shoulders slumped and head down. Defeated.

Moments later Michael, the nine-year old, came into the room. He was tall for his age and had similar good looks to his father, perhaps with less of an olive complexion than Declan had. His hair was lighter and cut short and he was wearing a neat shirt and khakis. There was no question that Michael was the favorite son. I could almost see him wearing that fact like a badge of honor.

After the meeting, Curtis quickly showed me around the rest of the house, except for the master bedroom where Régine was apparently sleeping. I got a glimpse, however, of the tastefully appointed room that would be my own.

“This will be your room, if you’re to take the job. Pippa, I really hope you do. We need you here,” Curtis had said. He had calmed down and though he wasn’t quite jovial, he was more pleasant to be around and was back to trying to win me over.

I wasn’t sold on the idea, so told him I would need a day to think about it, especially since he wanted me to start right away.

I got in the cab and gave him a short wave. Just as the cab was pulling away I caught a hint of movement on the second floor. My eyes traveled up to the window to see small, little Declan standing there. Not waving, but watching me leave. He was too far away to see clearly, but I felt a wealth of desperation and sadness in his eyes.

I didn’t know the full dynamic of the O’Sheas. I knew that my job would be a difficult one. But if I couldn’t be a mother to Ingrid, perhaps I could be to a little boy who desperately needed one.

Two hours later I called Curtis from the roach motel’s crackly phone line and told him I would take the job.

A day later, I was moved into the O’Sheas as Pippa Lindstrom, their new nanny.

CHAPTER TEN

I never regretted my decision to become Declan and Michael’s nanny. I hope you realize this Declan, no matter how hard it is to hear me rehash those troubled times. I never ever regretted a thing.

That said, as far as jobs go, I doubt you could find one more difficult. Especially at first as there was a large learning curve.

Curtis, as he had said, was rarely ever home. It wasn't my business to ask where he was, even when I wondered how he could be doing business when he left at dawn and came home at 11 o'clock at night. I also didn't ask where he went when he wouldn't come home at all and for several days at that. He was either a workaholic or he was having an affair. Perhaps several affairs. Sometimes I would catch perfume on him and I could tell it wasn't from Régine. The two of them never spoke, except in yells and slurs.

Oh, Régine. It's difficult for me to summarize the way I felt about your mother Declan. I certainly know how you feel about her. I can understand your shame and anger at having such a woman for a mother. But though Régine frightened me, disgusted me and angered me, I could see she was a victim of her own mind and uncontrollable circumstances. There must have been a normal, good-hearted person somewhere in her soul, it was just a pity that by the time I came to the family, she wasn't there anymore. In her place was an absolute monster.

Régine had two problems, the very ones that Curtis had warned me about, and they were so intertwined it was hard to see what problem came first. Was she mentally ill because she drank all the time or did she drink all the time because she was mentally ill? I suppose the same question could be said about us, too. Are we mentally different because we see ghosts or do we see ghosts because we are mentally different?

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:49 am

Notice I called her ill and us different. Maybe later the ill part could have been applied to me, but Régine was in fact a very sick woman. She couldn't function or she didn't want to. She spent most of the time sleeping in an alcohol-induced coma. She would then crawl out of her room around noon, wearing the same clothes she'd been for days, smelling like something awful. She'd walk unsteadily over to the kitchen and pour herself a small bowl of cereal and several cups of black coffee. This was the only thing she'd put down, other than booze. She rarely spoke when she was sober or sobering up. She would just mumble and shake.

Occasionally she would look at me and be confused, like she didn't know who I was. One time she asked me if I was a ghost who kept following her around. I wanted to make something of that remark, but I couldn't. She was just so lost in that head of hers and I was so desperate to find someone like myself.

She wasn't mean, however, when she was sober. She was just distant. Michael and Declan both competed for those rare slots of attention, but she never gave it to them. Her eyes would glaze over, her face would go slack, and the boys would have to busy themselves. Luckily, Curtis was adamant they be involved in a lot of activities as possible, so there was sailing, hockey, lacrosse and a whole range of sports to keep the boys busy and distracted.

When Régine was drunk it was a whole other story and unfortunately she was drunk more often than she was sober. As the years went on, her violence and depravity worsened.

I won't go into many details because I don't think it would do Declan any good to remember them, but to give you an idea what a night at the O'Shea's was like, here's

an example:

Declan was eight years old at the time and I was looking after him alone one weekend. Curtis was who knows where and Michael had gone to a science fair that was being held out of state. I normally would have gone with him and taken Declan with me but he was paired up with one of his classmates and his family wanted to look after him. I could see how much Michael wanted a weekend away from Declan and I. He wasn't overly fond of his little brother and at times I think he might have even resented me. Maybe it's because Declan had taken a shine to me and naturally I was overprotective of him. For whatever reason, Declan was the one his parent's rage would always be directed at, a living, loving target.

It was a warm spring and Declan and I were out in their small back yard until the sun went down and the early mosquitoes came out to play. I was enjoying a small cup of espresso and the new lights we had installed over the garden while Declan was reading a book with a flashlight. It was a mystery novel, I remember that well, and I asked him if he'd rather go inside to read as it was getting so dark.

He looked up and shook his head. I recognized the fear in his eyes, exaggerated by the flashlight's eerie glow.

"What is it?" I whispered.

"She's in my room again," he whispered back.

I got off my seat and knelt on the cool grass beside him. I smoothed the hair off of his forehead, thinking he was due for another haircut.

"Who is in your room?" I asked.

"Mum. She's tearing it apart."

I looked over at the house. I couldn't see his room from the back but all the lights in the house were off.

"How do you know that?"

He shrugged. "I just know. I get a feeling sometimes."

He resumed looking at his book for a few seconds. Then he put it down and his eyes were watering.

Even in the worst situations, when Curtis would spank him, or yell at him, or Régine would call him names, nasty, terrible names, I never saw Declan cry. To see those brown eyes filling with tears brought my heart to my knees.

"Oh, Declan boy," I said soothingly. "What's wrong?"

He tried hard to keep those tears back but his voice wavered. "She's ruining my stuff, I know it. I don't want her in my room, Pippa. It's my room. It's supposed to be safe from her."

I was breaking inside for him, filled with sorrow and building anger at having seen up close just what his family was doing to him over the years.

"You know what we'll do then? You and I will go together and we will make her stop."

He shook his head adamantly. "No, she'll hurt you. She'll hurt me."

"Your mother seems scary at times, but I've been through more than she has and I'm stronger. Mentally and physically. We will put a stop to this. I don't want you to ever be afraid. And I won't let her put a finger on you."

He wiped away at the lone tear that spilled down his cheek, seeming to think things over. There was something so old and mature about that wee little boy. He then said, “OK” with all the determinedness of a soldier going off into battle.

He gripped my hand, his palms already sweaty and we made our way into the house. I flicked on all the lights, steadied my nerves which weren’t as calm as the front I had put up, and we made our way up the stairs. Nearing the top, I could hear growls and little screams coming from Declan’s room.

The door was closed but there was no doubt Régine was in there. I heard her movements, her French mutterings and a strange droning sound. I kept Declan behind me and knocked at the door. I hoped his mother would respond to reason. I was stronger but I was still fifty-five and she was in her early thirties.

A spewing of swears and curse words came out from behind the door. I could only pick out half of them, the rest were buried in slurs.

I gave Declan’s hand a squeeze and whispered, “Stay here” to him and opened the door.

He was right. She was tearing apart his room. His mother was on her hands and knees in the middle of the floor, ripping the head off one of the few plush toys that Declan had left. The room smelled like urine and feces and I saw brown stains smeared on the walls and damp spots on the carpet. Régine looked like a wild, rabid animal, wearing a vomit-covered white nightgown that was half torn off. Her fingers were brown and red, her arms were scratched and dripped blood. Everything around her lay in ruins, including his bed which had a slit down the middle and stuffing spilling out of it.

She smiled at me, then quickly chucked the toy at my head. I ducked as it sailed past, even though it wouldn’t have done much damage, but it didn’t help that the headless,

bloodied thing came to a stop by poor Declan's feet.

"Get out!" she roared in her accented voice, staggering to her knees.

I was too stunned to move, I could only say, "I'm calling the police."

"But I haven't given my son his present! A wonderful present pour mon beau fils!"

I did not want Declan to receive anything from her so I found my strength and quickly shut the door on her. Then I scooped Declan up in my arms, and as hard as it was on my body, I carried him down the stairs, going as fast as I could. We were almost at the bottom when I heard the door to his room open and Declan gasp.

I turned around just in time to see Régine holding a beehive in her hands. It was a young hive that Curtis had taken down a few days earlier when he found it growing on the side of the house. The droning sound emanated from inside the white, papery exterior and before I could comprehend what was going, why she even had it to begin with, she threw it down the stairs and it bounced after us like heatseeking missile before it hit the back of my legs and then the tiled foyer. It cracked open and thank the Lord there were barely any bees or wasps left in the thing otherwise we might have been in big trouble.

I made it to the front door and out onto the street with only one sting at my ankle. Declan, with his allergy, was traumatized but fortunately unscathed. I headed to a house across the street where I knew the couple and used their phone to call the cops.

This wasn't the first time I had called the cops on Régine and it wouldn't be the last. There were many incidents similar to this one and I was powerless to stop it. I had expressed concern for my safety and the children's many times to Curtis but he didn't want word to get out that his wife was a drunk. He was against sending her to a treatment center and would get angry when he found out the police had gotten

involved.

After that incident, Declan slept in my room. I wanted to sleep on the couch, but he was too afraid to be alone, so I took to sleeping on a cot beside him. He had become more withdrawn and irritable. His grades at school went down, he was disinterested in the activities he once liked, he had a hard time concentrating and the differences between him and his do-good brother became more and more apparent. He was also becoming increasingly agitated by what I could only assume were ghosts. You see, to add to the horrors of his daily life, it turns out my dear boy was just like me.

A year earlier, Declan and I had taken the bus to Central Park as we often did. I invited Michael too, of course, but he said he'd be spending the day at a friend's. I didn't blame Michael for spending as much time as possible away from the house, from his family. Unfortunately Declan was still young and at the time, curiously friendless, so I took up most of his attention.

We were strolling along the path, the trees just sprouting new, fresh green leaves and I noticed Declan staring curiously at a woman who was standing out on the Great Lawn. I had seen her many times before. In fact, the woman in her 1920's attire, was always there, standing in the same spot and staring at the ground, never moving. I knew she was a ghost of course, but this was the first time I could see Declan noticing her.

"Declan," I said. "Do you know where people go when they die?"

He didn't seem too concerned over my odd question and ate a piece of caramel corn from the box he was cradling in his arms. "To heaven or hell."

"That is true, though no one can be sure for certain," I told him. "But I do."

"Where do they go?" he asked, his eyes glistening with new curiosity.

“Some don’t go anywhere,” I said. I kept my eyes on the woman in the field. “Some stay where you and I can see them.”

“They do?”

I stopped walking and pointed his body towards the wide green lawn.

“Yes, Declan. Do you see that woman over there, standing in the middle of the lawn?”

He nodded. A surge of pride ran through my old blood.

“I see her every time I come here,” I continued, so happy to be able to talk about it.

“It doesn’t matter what time of day it is, or what season it is, but I see her. And now that I know you see her too, it means we share the same gift.”

“A gift?” His dark brow furrowed in comic confusion.

“Yes.” I pointed over at a nearby bench where an old chap was feeding pigeons. “Go over to that man there, don’t be shy, and ask him if he sees her too.”

Declan looked even more puzzled but there was a side of him that was brazen and bold with strangers. He nodded and walked over to the man who peered away from his cooing birds with annoyance.

“Yes son?” the old man said.

Declan pointed to the woman. “Excuse me sir, I have to ask you a question. Do you see a lady standing right there?”

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:49 am

The old man followed his finger and gaze and then looked back to him with squinty eyes. “You pulling my leg?”

Declan sniffed and peered back at the woman. Satisfied, he said to the man, “No sir. But do you really not see the lady?”

“There’s no one there,” the man said gruffly after he sneaked another peek.

“But that’s not true, she’s right there, my nanny and I can see her!” Declan’s voice was raising a few octaves and he bit his lip, getting anxious.

“Your nanny is either a nut or she’s lying.”

“But I see her too.”

The man waved at him dismissively and turned away, looking back to the pigeons. “Then you’re both nuts or maybe having a bit of fun. Now scram, you’re scaring my birds.”

At that, Declan moved his little legs over to me.

“Well?” I asked.

He was wide-eyed as he spoke. “He says you are a nut and I am a nut.”

I crouched down and brought him close into me and looked deep into his eyes. “And that is why we must never tell people about the things we see. They can’t see it and

they won't understand. It's not safe."

"But she's standing right there. Why can't he see her? Is he blind?"

"In a way, Declan. In a way. You see, she's dead."

He jumped at that.

"Dead?" he asked incredulously and looked back over at her, his eyes filled with fear and wonder.

"She's a ghost," I said simply, trying my hardest not to scare him.

"But...ghosts are only in books and movies."

"And in Central Park," I said and ruffled up his hair. "Would you like to go talk to her?"

"Can we?" he asked.

I smiled at his bravery and took his hand. "Why not? It's what we are meant to do."

Together we walked across the lawn toward the woman. I could feel the eyes of the old man watching us as he threw seeds at the pigeons and knew he'd soon see us talking to no one, but I didn't care.

As we got closer to the woman, I saw that she was in her late twenties and pretty with a short, curled bob. Her dress hung off her in the Flapper-esque way that was so popular back then and she had on dainty white gloves that lay clasped in front of her. Her eyes continued to stare at the ground, lost in sadness, and she didn't acknowledge our presence until we stood right in front of her. She looked up at us, tired and

confused, and then looked away.

“Hey lady,” Declan said.

She was startled.

“Me?” she asked with a shaking voice.

“Yes, you.”

“Don’t be rude, Declan,” I chided him.

The woman looked back and forth between us.

“You can see me?”

“Of course we can,” I told her. “Why do you ask that?”

“Why, most folks ignore me like I’m not here. Even when I ask them for the time.”

Ah, that explained a lot. Normally all ghosts that I saw were very well aware of me. After all, I was attractive to them and gave off the attention and energy they craved. However, this woman did not know she was dead. That was a first for me.

“Do you want to know the time?” I asked.

She nodded. “Please. I’m supposed to meet my boyfriend here and I’m new to the city. I’m a bit worried, I shouldn’t be out here so late. The park is scary at night.”

Something told me it was this late night jaunt into the park that killed her.

“It’s not nighttime,” Declan said, looking at her strangely.

I patted his head and gave the woman a soft smile.

“Well, I hope your boyfriend comes around soon,” I told her. “You shouldn’t be out here by yourself.”

The woman returned a weak smile back and resumed staring at the ground.

I put my arm around Declan and led him away.

He looked over his shoulder at her. “Why did she think it was nighttime?”

“Perhaps that was when she died and it’s forever dark in her mind.”

“Why didn’t you tell her the truth?”

“I will, someday, but not now. We’ve both had a lot to comprehend for one afternoon, don’t you think?”

And I did end up telling the woman. I wanted to come back, without Declan, as I did not know how well she would take it. I thought perhaps telling a ghost they were dead was akin to waking up a sleepwalker.

I was partially right. When I returned to the park and to the woman, it took a lot of denial and yelling on her behalf. Had anyone else been able to see her, she would have created quite the scene. Then, as the truth finally sunk in after all these years, she broke down in tears, weeping for the life she once had, the people she once loved.

I wasn’t sure what I would do with the bawling ghost, but the Otherside answered that question. For the first time in a few years, the air warped and shimmered. My

heart leaped, thinking I might see Jakob again, realizing at that moment how fondly I thought of my guide, but what appeared was a somewhat heavy man in a suit. Really, I wondered just where these guides came from.

“Are you Jakob? One of the Jakobs?” I asked.

The man nodded at me and turned his attention to the woman. He held out his hand to her.

“Lorraine, come with me please. I can help you.”

I expected this Lorraine to balk at the idea of going off with a stranger, especially one who came out of thin air. However she took his hand without hesitation and at his touch, a smile and glow came over her face. My Jakob never brought me peace while I was alive, but Lorraine’s Jakob brought her peace in death.

And just like that, she was gone. It was a strangely beautiful and touching moment, one that I would think of often as my life started to disintegrate before my eyes.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Knowing that Declan had the same ability as I did, made me feel much less alone. However, though I would often confide in the young boy about the ghosts I saw, he never did the same with me. I would ask him but he wouldn’t say or he’d avoid the question. He liked to hear about it without acknowledging that it happened to him. Who knows, Declan, perhaps you never saw things the way I did. After all, my ability never really worsened until I went to the Thin Veil and back.

Regardless of Declan’s input, it helped to share with him as he was the only one who would and could listen to me without threatening to drag me away to the loony bin. Things were getting worse for me, with the ghosts and with my own family.

No, I hadn't forgotten my dear daughter, or Karl, but my relationship with both grew more and more strained. I admit, it was also I who was pulling back, devoting more of my time and energy into Declan and Michael, and in my increasingly fragile and paranoid state, I was afraid to talk to Karl and Ingrid.

Ingrid managed to pull herself out of the wrong crowd because she met Perry's father, Daniel. I met him a few times for lunch and found him to be far better than Stew or Drew or whatever new man Ingrid was shacking up with. I would never have pegged my daughter to be with someone like Daniel. It was almost a comical sight to see his short stocky demeanor beside her tall and willowy one. But Daniel was smart, driven and passionate and was spending a year at the Holy Trinity Roman Catholic Church as part of his graduate thesis. For whatever reason, Ingrid was drawn to him and he to her. He pulled out grace and goodness from Ingrid that I very rarely saw.

I suppose that's why I withdrew from them as I did. Before, I would have been adamant about spending time with both of them, but there were some days I was too afraid to leave the house for fear of the reaction I would cause. The dead kept coming for me, multiplying year by year, all wanting a piece of me, whether it was my ear to listen to their sob story, or, at times, my soul.

There was one particular ghoul whom I remembered from my past. The man with the shadowy face who I saw tormenting the girl in my garden, all those years ago in the Swedish countryside. At first I saw him prowling the backyard, then the streets outside the house. He would just stare, watching me. One night as I got up to use the washroom, I had a weird sensation I was being watched. With my nerves on fire, I crept through the house and felt this malevolent intensity rolling out from Declan's door. He was about twelve now and was a strong kid, back to sleeping in his own room. Some nights the door was locked but tonight it wasn't and as I quietly opened it, I saw the shadowy black figure standing above his bed. It was just for a second though and when I turned on the light, awaking the poor boy, the man was gone. Declan fell back to sleep unaware of what had been there.

The fact that I could feel the evil from the figure, who was constantly watching me in a most predatory way, made me believe that this was no ghost. No human. This was a demon, a creature. And as the years went on and the creature appeared more frequently, I knew it was true. Jakob had mentioned as much.

There came a point where the day-to-day fear of never knowing what this demon might do to me, or the ones I loved, finally took its toll on my sanity. I began to talk to myself and to the demons, to the ghosts, not caring who saw. Curtis and the boys became increasingly concerned about me. With Michael and Declan I knew the concern came from the worry in their heart but with Curtis I could see his disappointment and annoyance in finding a nanny who acted just as crazy as his wife.

I started to fear I'd be let go. But that didn't happen. No, it was Curtis who left. One day and without much warning.

Declan was thirteen and Michael was sixteen when Curtis pulled me aside in the kitchen and told me that he recently completed a huge transaction of sorts and that he was putting a large sum of money in a trust for the boys when they both turned eighteen. I never knew how much it was, but I assume it was a lot. Curtis then told me he wanted to thank me for all my hard work (oh, here it comes, I'm being let go, I thought) and that he arranged a trip for me and the boys to Atlantic City for the weekend. They'd both be allowed to bring a friend and that we were free to spend his money as we liked.

Naturally the boys were ecstatic. At this point, Declan was in a band with a few friends and invited his drummer, Joey, to come along. Michael had a beautiful girlfriend, Marguerite, and even though I had been quite strict with the amount of time they spent together alone (no young lady was getting pregnant on my watch), I relented and told him he could bring her, knowing the young ones would all be sharing the same suite.

That was one of the best weekends of my life. Even the ghosts and demons were kept at bay and I was free to enjoy the sweet salty air of the boardwalk, such a nice change from the harshness of the city. It was wonderful to see Declan truly smiling and enjoying himself. At this age he dressed in loose pants and flannel shirts, his hair was shoulder-length, wonderfully wavy and streaked with red. He begged me to let him get his eyebrow pierced with Joey at one of the beachside tattoo parlors but I had to put my foot down somewhere and said no. Ever the rebel, he and Joey pretended to go to a movie later that night and wasn't I surprised in the slightest when they came back and I saw matching rings on both their faces.

I knew Curtis would kill him for it (indeed, he would publicly lament Declan's long hair and grunge attire even though the boy was passed the point of caring), and he would most likely reprimand me as well. But I decided not to worry about it until Sunday night. For now, this time and peace and sunshine was all we had and needed.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:49 am

I am ever so grateful I let the boys be boys, even if it ended up with piercings and Michael and Marguerite sneaking away to the beach at night to canoodle. When we returned, no one would ever be the same.

The house was empty, save for Régine who was quietly weeping at the kitchen table. She was drunk, but not dangerously so, though she could not tell us why she was crying. The sight shocked us since Régine rarely showed any sadness, it was always anger.

On a hunch, I went upstairs to the master bedroom and found the room to be emptied. Everything that belonged to Curtis was gone. His clothes, his shoes, his books.

I ran down to his study and it was emptied too. His degrees and certificates, his computer and files, everything had vanished. There was no note, no anything. He just up and left that day and that was the end of it.

Suddenly I knew I was faced with a problem larger than myself. I had inherited a family but I had no money to support them as the breadwinner was gone.

I never knew the reasons why your father left, Declan. I guess we will never know. One can only assume that his image and pride was worth more to him than his family and rather than trying to maintain the cover up, he left it all behind. Maybe he ran away with a mistress, perhaps he was evading the police, loan sharks or taxes. It doesn't matter. The fact is he was a coward and he left a giant mess behind him.

I reached out to the O'Shea's family friends, those who had been pushed aside over the years. With their help we got Régine into a treatment center and while she was

there, I took care of Michael and Declan off of my own savings. Eventually I called Karl and he agreed to help me, then pleaded for me to go back home. I should have listened and I didn't.

The truth was, I needed the boys as much as they needed me. But there came to be a time when I couldn't look after them anymore. The shadowy demon was tormenting me. The pleas and touches in the dark never stopped. Even Declan was affected my actions - I could tell he was sometimes afraid of me and that hurt.

But how silly it sounds to say that for it was foolish of me to worry about my own feelings when it came to the boys. Michael handled it as well as he could and continued to excel at school and football. Declan started getting in fights after class, failing exams and fooling around with older girls from the wrong side of the tracks. He devoted all of his time to music and penning shocking poems that I found scattered about in his room, stuff I wasn't allowed to see. Though Declan feared his father and was never once close with him, he took Curtis's abandonment hard. He was an angry, frustrated young man and I could not fault him for it.

Finally, Régine emerged from the treatment center a somewhat new woman. She was prickly, skinny and stern but she was sober. For the time being, at least. She was able to get a job at a call center, which meant not only would my services cease to be needed, but she couldn't afford me anyway on her new salary. They ended up having the bank foreclose on the house and she and the boys moved to a tiny two bedroom apartment in Brooklyn. Michael was close to graduating so he was able to stay at his school in Manhattan but Declan had to start all over again.

Sadly, this is where my story and Declan's story part ways. Even after they moved, I still came and visited Declan when I could. I lived in Queens, renting the basement of a young family, surviving on Karl's generosity, and the journey wasn't very far. But after some time, as I deteriorated, Ingrid and Daniel came swooping into my life.

It was to my surprise when Ingrid and Daniel paid me a visit one day, showing up at my door unannounced. My small suite was a mess and I knew how it made me look. The dishes weren't done, there was garbage on the floor and all my favorite books were scattered about, their pages spread open and covers torn off. The dishes and garbage were because I was too tired and depressed to help myself anymore. The tossed books were the actions of a poltergeist that wouldn't leave me alone, however try explaining that to people.

Oh, maybe I'm kidding myself here. It has been a long time and there are some parts of my life that remain a haze. I am sure my apartment and the way I looked was far worse than I am describing to you. It was bad enough that Daniel insisted they would take care of me. They were now living in his small rented condo in the city and they were engaged to be married.

The next while was a blur. I fell into tough times. I'd react to things no one else could see. I was living in fear, too afraid to let my guard down for one minute, too paranoid to bathe, to eat, to sleep. The lack of sleep was the worst of all and it toyed with my health and sanity. But I couldn't sleep unless I was forced too – my dreams felt all too real and I was unprotected. I had begun to dream about things that were yet to happen, dreams about being locked away, dreams about being raped by faceless figures, dreams about smashing open a makeup kit, dreams of blood.

I didn't improve, even with their care, and Ingrid ended up having to give up her modeling job to take care of me. As if that child could not resent me more.

Finally, they had to call Karl and ask for his opinion on what to do with dear old Pippa. He couldn't come to me, so he insisted I was to go home where I could be given proper medical care. He would be there to love and take care of me while the Swedish mental health system would ensure I was treated properly and respectfully.

That never happened, despite all of our best intentions. We were close; I had the

ticket bought for me and had some things packed in my small suitcase. I calmed down in the last few days leading up to my flight, enough that I could feel the overwhelming sense of relief at getting help. Maybe with the right medication, the right people, I would be able to keep the ghosts solely in my nightmares. I was going to miss visiting my dear Declan though and hoped he wouldn't forget about me.

As such, I couldn't leave the country for good without saying goodbye to him and perhaps imparting some of the wisdom I had gleaned from Jakob and it was Régine's I was heading to on the day I fell apart.

I was going to catch the subway and was just about to head down the dirty stairs when I saw a familiar blonde head coming out of a ritzy restaurant.

It was no one other than Ludie and time stood still. I dropped the newspaper I was holding and let it fall absently to my feet. I stared at him enthralled, enraged.

He was finally showing some age, looking refined but tired. His smile was charming and aimed at a young redhead on his arm, but the sparkle was gone in his faded baby blues and his hair was greying and thin.

I can't tell you what happened exactly, but I lost it right there on the street. I approached him with boiling breath, asking why he hadn't shown any interest in our daughter.

He recognized me. I know he did from the fear and surprise that flashed briefly across his face. But, ever the actor, he covered it up and flat-out ignored me. He acted like he'd never seen me before and told me I didn't know what I was talking about. I ended up spitting in his face, attacking the innocent redhead much like I did to the understudy back in the theatre days.

I needed to be restrained. I was violent, hollering nonsense. Out of my sorry mind and

out of control.

I broke apart from the crowd that had gathered around us and in my blind despair I ran down the subway stairs. I fought my way past the greasy turnstiles like a panicked bird and in an unrelenting urge to leave my sad life behind, I ran for the nearest tracks, to the train that was just about to hit me head on.

I don't know who saved me from throwing myself in front of that train and ending my life, but I know someone did for the next thing I remembered was waking up in a psychiatric hospital, the very place I would spend my last years before I died.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I think if there was a hell on earth, it would be inside a state-run psychiatric ward. It is a hopeless place filled with people who are either empty shells of what they used to be or monsters of another making.

I never knew what I was. I felt like a shell of the woman I was and I felt like a monster too. All I did know was I was left alone and afraid and never saw my family again, not in the ten years I was locked up there.

To be fair, I was shown pictures of my family. Karl wrote to me often, which was nice when I was in the right frame of mind to read and not tear the paper up. He wished he was well enough to come visit since he was having hip problems still, but I figured it was all a lie and that he had moved on with his life and found other people to love. And Ingrid. My daughter, who once swore – with Daniel – that they'd never lock me up, my daughter who went and did the opposite. She lied for she was the one who put me away. She also wrote to me, first to show me her wedding photos, then her pregnancy photos, and then photos of her and Daniel smiling above a beautiful dark-haired child they named Perry.

I am ashamed to admit that I tore up those first photos too. I was wildly jealous that Ingrid got to have the husband she wanted, a child she loved, and I ended up here, with nothing. I hated Perry at first for no other reason than that.

Then, on my days when my delusions calmed down and I had enough strength to push through the medication (which, Declan, as you know, did help a bit), I realized that Perry needed me. Everything that Jakob said about my grandchildren being cursed with my gift ran through my ears. What if Perry were to grow up as I did, and with Ingrid of all people as her mother?

I felt utterly helpless and spent most of my time feeling sorry for myself. I should have listened to Jakob when he had warned me, I was just too selfish to listen. Then I realized Jakob might have the answers. Jakob might be able to help. Perhaps he could do for Perry what he did for me.

I tried to access the Thin Veil, to make the portal appear in thin air, but nothing worked. I was probably just some crazy old lady waving her hands about like some wizard. I almost gave up hope until I skipped on taking my medication for a few days. I had been a calm and pleasant patient most of the time, so the nurses weren't as watchful over me as they were over others.

It was then, on one rainy night with water and wind battering the tiny window of my room, that the air around me moved and glistened and I stepped inside.

That familiar pressure pressed down on my head and made my eyeballs feel as if they were about to burst. It lasted longer than last time but soon enough the pain subsided and I was in a grey zone, the parallel world. Here, Jakob was in the room with me, sitting on the uncomfortable stool in the corner.

“Pippa,” he said with a jovial nod.

Tears sprung to my eyes.

“Jakob,” I cried out. I got to my feet and found them to be sturdy and willing. Here in the Thin Veil I was more able, stronger and I used this change to embrace the young guide in my arms and sobbed all over him.

When my tears finally subsided, I begged Jakob to go after Perry and to help her.

“She might have someone at some point,” he said. “There is no need for it to be you.”

“But can I help her? Can I use this place to reach her?”

He didn’t say anything for a long time, weighing his options in his mind. But I could see the truth in his eyes and he knew it.

After a minute he said, “You can use this place for many things, but it doesn’t mean that you should. The most you can do, the most you should do, is just watch over her like I have watched over you.”

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:49 am

“I’ll never get a chance to meet my granddaughter.”

“That might be for the best.”

I nodded at that, a sinking feeling in my heart.

“I should have listened to you,” I admitted softly.

“Yes. But what is done is done. I can only guide you, I can’t make your choices for you. You made the decisions which you thought were best at the time, and I don’t blame you for doing so. And you shouldn’t blame yourself, either. Perry and Ada-”

“Ada?” My head snapped up.

He gave me a wry smile. “Yes, I had said grandchildren. Perry and Ada will have to make their own choices in life too and it’ll be up to them to handle the cards they have been dealt. There’s not much you can do or say to change that.”

I mulled it over. There seemed to be a loophole somewhere in what he was saying. I could do anything I wanted in the Thin Veil, including watching over people. What more could I do. Could I actually use it like a mode of transportation?

Jakob watched me carefully and I was afraid he was reading my thoughts. If he had though, he gave me no indication of it.

“Would you like to see her, Pippa?”

I nodded eagerly.

He put his hands together. “Very well, just do as you once did before. But instead of creating a portal, create a window and concentrate on that image of Perry you have in your mind.”

“But the picture I saw is a few years old now.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

I did as he said and concentrated hard on a window, willing myself to see a young toddler, one with giant stone blue eyes and long black hair, on the other side of it. I kept this rate of thought and power going until I felt more pressure inside my skull and before I gave into the pain and blinked, the air parted like the Red Sea and a glassy window was in place. On the other side of it, the real side of real life, was Perry. Now she was at least six years old, a little round thing but still so very beautiful. She had a type of beauty that was unique from her mother’s and Ludie’s and I cherished that I could look at her without feeling guilt or shame.

Perry was sitting in her room, surrounded by toys and reading a picture book filled with dragons. She chewed at her fingernails, more out of an anxious, excited gesture than one of worry. She was so young and so innocent and I knew it would be hard for me to stay away.

“Can I always come in here and do this?” I whispered even though I knew Perry couldn’t hear me...she couldn’t, could she?

The girl in the image shivered a little but that was it.

Jakob said, “You can...but...”

“But what?” I was afraid to take my eyes off of her.

“Time outside the Veil doesn’t stand still. You are not in your room at the hospital right now. If a nurse were to come in, you would see them but they would not see you. You must never give people reason to suspect the veil exists. Even though most wouldn’t believe it, it would be dangerous if the knowledge got into the wrong hands. It’s dangerous for you too. Not only would you cause attention to yourself but every time you visit, you will bring a different...disability back with you.”

I managed to look at him, only for a second, only to see how serious his pale grey face was.

“I’m not following...seeing ghosts? How can it get any worse for me?” I asked bitterly. “You’ve seen where I am. What I’ve become!”

“Things can always get worse,” he said. “I just know that a normal human body is not meant to continuously visit this world. One time might be enough to increase telekinesis or telepathy. It might be enough to create more energy within yourself, or attract others from the Veil. Or it might start to ravage your body and your mind, leaving you a little bit weaker. Maybe a lot weaker.”

I forgot about watching Perry for a moment. “You’re saying when I go back to my world, I may be in rougher shape than I already am?”

“It is possible. Pippa, I can only warn you.”

“Yes. And you have and I thank you.”

My attention went back to Perry who was now scribbling into a coloring book, her tongue sticking out of her mouth in concentration.

“I will be leaving you now,” he said.

“Where are you going?”

“I’ll be around. I have other people to help, you know.”

He started walking to the door.

“Wait,” I called out after him. He stopped and looked at me from over his shoulder.

“I met a boy...”

“Declan,” he said. He saw the wonder on my face. “As I said, I have been watching you.”

“What is to become of him?”

He shrugged. “I do not know.”

“But is he going to have a guide too, someone to look after him?”

“Not everyone gets someone like me. Your power has never been latent. Perry and Declan’s is and will most likely remain that way.”

“Most likely?”

“People make their own choices,” he replied rather ominously. “Declan is closed off to our world. Perry is just a young girl. Neither possess the power that you have, therefore neither of them would warrant it.”

“But how do you know that? What if their gifts develop and they end up just like me?”

“Just try and worry about yourself, Pippa,” he said. He smiled, waved then opened the door to the hallway and stepped out.

I was alone in the Veil version of my room, grey and stale-smelling. But I wasn't alone was I? No, I could see young Perry through the window in a lavender haze. I could see her. But was that all? Could I make her see me?

We all make poor choices from time to time and I believe they shape who we are. The Lord knows I have made so many in my long life. Standing in that hazy, dull room, in a world parallel to the one I was born in, I made a decision that I would regret ever since. It was a selfish decision that I masked as selfless one. I wanted to reach out to Perry to warn her of the difficulties to come, to let her know that I would be there for her, no matter what. And that was the truth. But the larger part, the selfish part, was that I didn't want to be alone anymore and I wanted her to know who her grandmother was, to love me like I loved her mother.

So, I concentrated, made the window into a door, reached into Perry's room and pulled her into the Otherside.

The shock of it working knocked me backward onto the floor, but sure enough there was little Perry beside me, her blue eyes grey. I wasn't sure how to make it look like she was in the Thin Veil version of her room and from her confused and frightened face, I knew she had no idea where she was.

“Mom!” she wailed, looking around her frantically, her long hair whipping past her. I quickly put both my hands on her shoulders, careful not to scare her any further.

“Perry, don't be afraid, it's me, it's your grandmother, Pippa,” I told her in hushed, soothing tones. “I'm your grandmother, Perry.”

It didn't matter what I said, Perry struggled to get out of my grasp and then the tears

began to spill down her round cheeks.

I really had not thought any of it through. Just what was I hoping to do with a six-year old girl? Did I think she would have a notion of where she was or, more importantly, who I was?

I bit my lip and looked at the portal I had just pulled her out of. I could still make out her room there, although it was fading and getting hard to see. The thought of never returning her to her family made my heart skip a beat.

“Perry!” I said to her. “I’m sorry, do you want to go home?”

She looked at me and nodded through the tears.

“Ok darling,” I told her and reached for her with my hand. “Don’t be afraid of me. I’ll take you back. You’ll go back to your room OK? You’ll go back and it will be like none of this ever happened.”

I didn’t know if I had the ability to control someone’s mind like that, to erase memories. It’s obvious that Perry never remembered the incident, even with her therapy sessions and regression. Either it had worked or Perry naturally blocked the traumatic event out of her head.

Perry wiped her tears on the sleeve of her plaid dress and gingerly put her hand in my outstretched one. My skin looked so papery thin and faded with dark grey smudges of age spots. By contrast, hers was as smooth as cream. I grasped it tightly and looked at her little face, thinking it would not only be the first time I saw her but the last. A tear spilled out of my own eye, which seemed to calm Perry down.

“Why are you crying?” she asked. The concern in her face was genuine and graceful.

“Because I love you and I have to give you back,” I said, choking on the words. For the first time I felt the blood of myself in another. It felt like I had known Perry for all her life.

Then, she did the sweetest, most wonderful thing. She took a few small steps toward me and wrapped her arms around my neck.

“If you don’t cry, I won’t cry,” she whispered into my hair. I was so shocked at her affection that I couldn’t move my lips at first.

“It’s a deal,” I said breathlessly. I squeezed her back and then composed myself. “Let’s put you back where you belong.”

So, with a gentle nudge I pushed Perry through the portal and back into her room. She stumbled a bit, falling to the softly carpeted floor but she seemed OK. I couldn’t bear to watch anymore so I closed my eyes until the portal faded and its place was the one back into my room.

I stepped through, succumbed to the horrible pressure, and everything went black.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I woke up days later in the medical ward. Apparently the nurse had found me passed out the next morning and completely unconscious. However, even when I came to, nothing was the same. Jakob was right once more. I was so far gone that there was no hope for me. My body was weakened, my mind was gone further than it had ever gone before and I saw demons everywhere I looked. Everywhere. Even in my reflection. I started acting out again, attacking nurses and other patients, until they had to put me on the strongest drugs they had.

It’s how I spent the next five years of my life. The last five years of my life. I don’t

remember any of it, except for brief flashes until the end. It skips around like an old roll of film. I see myself laughing alone. I see myself dressed up in drapes and funny clothes, and putting outlandish makeup on myself and on others. The nurses indulged me with that, letting me relive my times in the theatre, so long as I took my medication and did what I was told like a good girl.

There was no hope for me. No respite. Memories of my other life, of Karl and Ingrid, of Declan and Perry, of Sweden, even of Ludie...they all faded and became inconsequential in my haze. There was no way out but death.

One night, I smuggled some of the makeup back to my room. I took my chair and as quietly as I could I crunched an eye pencil sharpener underneath its heavy leg. The sharpener shattered, spitting out the shiny puzzle piece I lusted over.

The blade.

I picked up the tiny danger between my shaking fingers, and before I could give it any more thought, I sliced it up both my wrists.

I felt no pain – not physically. The blood ran a shiny dark red down my failing arms and I marveled at it with an eerie sense of detachment. It felt peaceful.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:49 am

At first.

Then, as I lay down on the floor and the life began to drain out of me in a stream of silken crimson, I felt immeasurable pain. They say your life flashes before your eyes but mine didn't flash. It crept along slowly and I was forced to relieve all the pain and the few fleeting moments of glory. I clung to those moments with Declan and Michael in Atlantic City, to me and Ludie making love in the theatre, to giving birth to Ingrid, to having my granddaughter's arms around me despite the impossible odds. I tried to let them live in my mind, to win out over the pain and sorrow that was oh so present and oh so persistent. And I don't know what side won. Was it the brief happiness I felt in the small things, the simple joys in my life? An accepting look or forgiving touch or sunshine in the backyard? Or was it the feeling of being deserted, abandoned, unknown and unloved?

Either way, I died with an aching heart for the things I suffered through and the things I loved. In the end, it's all the same.

In the end.

Oh, but my story doesn't end there, does it? I don't think anyone's does, I'm just one of the first people to tell you so.

Death seemed like an eternity of blackness but who knows how long the moment of emptiness and shadows really was. I opened my eyes and I was no longer on the floor of my room. I was no longer bleeding. I was standing beside the lake back in Sweden, back at my old house. It was grey here, it was dull and grainy but it was still home. I had gone home again.

I heard a throat clear from behind me so I took my eyes off of the shiny, beautiful lake and looked to the forest. Jakob was standing at the edge of it, leaning against a birch tree.

He smiled at me and held out his hand.

“Come with me, Pippa,” he said gently. “You’re not home yet.”

I grinned at him in return, pleased to see that I was no longer my incoherent self, but younger and able-bodied. I walked toward him up the slight grassy embankment that ran up the side of the house. My house where I grew up with its stone and wood and silence.

I was happy to see him, happy to go. But...

I stopped a few feet away and looked back at the lake. There in the middle of it, the water shimmered more than normal. A portal!

“Pippa,” he said in a warning tone.

I shook my head and looked at him apologetically.

“I can’t go yet.”

“There’s nothing you can do for them. They have their own lives to live.” He knew I was thinking about Declan and Perry. “You have yours to continue living. In another place. In your home.”

“No,” I told him, the lake holding my full attention. “If I can help them, at least help them find each other...”

“Fate will bring them together if it’s supposed to be that way.”

“Curse you and your fate!” I sneered at him, my anger surprising me. How had it followed me from one plane of existence to another?

His boyish face, forever young, showed no sign of annoyance. It’s like he expected it all along. Maybe he knew this to be my fate no matter what I said to him, no matter what I did. Fate would find me.

I looked down at the ground, at my feet that were no longer in the hospital slippers but in glossy, beautiful dancing shoes, ones I only dreamed of owning once upon a time. The sight of them made me smile again and I willed the anger to disappear.

I must remember these little joys, I thought to myself. Even in death.

“You’re not coming then?” he asked.

Somehow, even in the Thin Veil, I heard the call of birds across the water.

“No. I will not go. Not yet. I’ve made some mistakes that I’d like to make up for.”

I glanced quickly at Jakob. I could see he knew that I brought Perry across into this side all those years ago. I wasn’t sure if I ruined her life by doing so, if I made her see ghosts where there were no ghosts before, and I had to help her if I did. I had to help her anyway, because I cursed her to this life. As for Declan, I knew the potential he had and the life that knocked him around. He’d need me too. I just wasn’t sure how I’d make a difference at all.

But I had to try.

Jakob gave me a salute and walked into the woods. I knew I’d see him again. Until then, I wouldn’t move on.

I had to keep trying.

I'm still trying.