

# Chapter One

## After

Dog breath assaulted Alice's senses, stirring her from unconsciousness. She turned her head to fend off an onslaught of slobbering canine kisses. Claire lay next to her, sprawled on the rock. Alice shoved the dog away and scrambled on hands and knees to her daughter.

"Claire! Claire, are you OK?" She fought the urge to shake her awake, terrified she'd turn a bad situation worse. Oh, God! The plane crashed. Where are we? Grasping Claire's face in her hands, she used her sternest Mom Voice, the one that had always worked back in the girl's High School days when she'd never wanted to go to bed at night and resisted waking up every morning. "Wake up, Claire! Wake up!"

She tore her eyes away, searching frantically for help. Though she felt no pain, she must have hit her head quite hard. The whole world shimmered and wavered around her. The burning wreckage of the plane floated on the calm sea, a nightmare island of smoke and destruction on the distant horizon. A small group of people stood on top of it, frantically waving their arms, though no sound reached Alice's ears. Only the painful thumping of her own heart.

What could she do to help them?

Exactly nothing.

She and Claire must have been thrown out somehow, landing here on this craggy red-rock shore. She screamed for help, but no one came except the exuberant dog.

He lavished his love on Claire. Alice pushed him away. "Get off! Go! You're going to hurt her."

The creature only re-doubled his efforts, returning again and again like one of those annoying inflatable clowns. Alice blocked him with her own body, hovering over her daughter, looking for signs of injury. She examined the long, grown-up limbs exactly the same as she had when Claire had been little and fallen off her bicycle. Five years, twenty five, a hundred and five--it didn't matter. This was her baby.

Not a single scratch showed anywhere, and yet terrible thoughts of spinal cord injuries and internal bleeding tormented Alice.

The dog's snout poked under her arm and his wet tongue darted out to lick Claire's nose.

At exactly the same moment, a second nose snuffled at Alice's ear and a third brushed, cold and wet, across her left hand.

What in the world?

Alice focused on the dog for the first time and saw three panting mouths on three separate heads attached to a single body. The sight was so unexpected that when Claire shifted beneath her the movement startled a tiny scream from her before the tidal wave of relief crashed down. "Claire! Thank God!" She reached to pull her daughter close, but Claire was pushing to scramble away from the animal.

"What the hell is that?" Claire's wide eyes brimmed with panic. "Jesus!"

"Claire, don't curse." The words fell from her lips without her mind's permission. She reached again to lay hands on her child, to assure herself of the girl's wholeness and health, but again Claire scooted away, this time pushing herself to her feet. Her gaze never left the three-headed creature.

Two heads cocked in opposite angles stared back at her. The third watched Alice. All three huge mouths hung open. All three tongues lolled. The animal was the same size and shape as a large chocolate lab. The momentum of his whip-like tail swayed him from side to side. His toenails tapped out a jig of puppy-like hysteria on the rocky ground before he launched himself at the women once more.

The world shimmered and danced before Alice's eyes. She pressed a hand to her aching chest. How sad, to survive a plane crash and die from a heart attack now. She glanced over her shoulder toward the wreckage on the water, but it was gone. Not only the wreckage, but the entire ocean. Gone. Her mind filled with wild, panicked screaming, but her lungs refused to draw in enough air to release the sound.

"Down!" Claire ordered from behind her.

Alice turned to see the animal back off. He loosed a playful woof from the right-hand head and ran twenty feet away, stopped, came a few steps back, and yelped again, this time from the middle head. The other two heads both seemed to be listening to some approaching sound.

"Where are we?" Claire wondered.

They stood alone on top of a red-rock mesa. Strange, stormy, scarlet and grey clouds boiled across the sky. Where was the ocean? The plane? "Where is everyone else?" Alice asked in response. A graveyard silence covered them.

Alice shivered at the thought.

Claire took a single step toward the dog and he ran off again.

"Don't!" Alice called out to her. The child had been conscious for, what? Three minutes? Couldn't she sit still and let her mother hold her until someone came to get them?

Not a child, she reminded herself. A woman. An angry, stubborn woman who would let her internal injuries kill her before she gave into her mother's ministrations at that point.

There was a black box on the plane, right? Surely someone would come, right? Her eyes flicked to where she was certain she'd seen the plane, burning in the water.

No plane.

No water.

Where are we? Where is everyone else?

Hot, panicky fear slithered through her guts.

By the time she looked at Claire again, the obstinate girl's spine had stiffened and she'd taken off after the dog.

Alice called after her, incredulous. "Where do you think you're going?"

Claire kept walking. Alice threw her hands up. Had she really expected anything else? Terrified at the thought of being separated, she jogged to catch up.

The dog led them to the edge of the plateau and over the side where a steep path led down toward a cluster of ramshackle houses--little more than wooden shacks, weathered grey with drooping roofs and lopsided doors.

The landscape stretched wide before them now. Aside from the pathetic buildings, a vast expanse of nothing but lifeless rock covered the world as far as she could see. The path they were on led through the center of the town, if you could call such a place by so grandiose a name, and entered a tunnel cut into the side of a towering mountain. The top of the mountain disappeared into the murky sky.

Desperate to break the silence, Alice asked again. "Where is everyone?"

Claire peeked over her shoulder, rolling her eyes. "Mom, have you ever heard of a three-headed dog?" The lift of her chin and her square shoulders spoke of confidence and bravery, but the waver in her voice didn't escape Alice's notice.

The animal barked as if in answer. Two of the heads stared at Alice while the third led the body on down the path.

Alice strained to think of something else to say, anything that would distract her from the all-consuming terror threatening to burst from her in a fit of screaming far beyond anything old Janet Leigh ever dreamed of. Silent tears leaked from her eyes, blurring the surreal scene before her. She was ready to give herself over to her hysteria when she noticed a man walking toward them.

She couldn't fathom who he might be or where he might have come from, but the sheer, perfect, normalcy of his appearance shimmered like a golden lifeline. His black hair swept back from his face in thick curls. He wore a dark grey suit with a bright red tie and smiled at them with the kind, subdued smile of an undertaker.

Her inner voice chastised her. That's twice you thought about death, Alice. Stop it. You're alive. Not just alive, unscathed! It's a miracle! You just need to figure out where you are and how to get home.

It all sounded very logical, but it did nothing to stop her watery knees from threatening to buckle beneath the weight of her terror.

The dog took off toward the man. "Cerberus! Sit!" He ordered in a gentle baritone voice with a slight accent she couldn't quite place. The furry butt immediately planted itself against the rock, the tail sweeping a clean triangle behind him. "I'm very sorry," the man said. "He got away from me. I know he can be a bit overwhelming at times."

Alice latched onto hope and dug in. This man could help them! "Did you see the plane crash in the water? We were on it! We..." They what? Got thrown out? Fell? Swam? Somewhere behind her fear she had a vague memory of a flash of light and a moment of pain. The wreckage had been on fire. She'd seen it in the distance. Or had she? Her existence had suddenly become a jigsaw puzzle dropped on the floor and she could only make sense of tiny bits and pieces. "Can you tell us where we are?" She asked.

"You're in the Underworld."

Alice planted her hands on her hips, trying to imitate her daughter's image of confidence, preferring fake bravery over real terror. "You're hilarious, but we have had a truly awful day. We need some help."

"I'm sorry you had a hard day but, really, you're in the Underworld. There were no survivors on that plane."

Alice clenched her fists to still her shaking hands. "That can't be right. It's a sick joke and you're not funny at all. Where are the others? They'll need help, too."

His undertaker-smile never faltered, even as his eyes filled with pity. "I'm afraid it's no joke. The others have their own paths to follow. This is yours." He indicated the path they were standing on as though it were actually, literally their own personal path.

Alice put a hand on her daughter's arm. "Come on, Bee. We'll go find--"

Claire yanked her own arm away, glaring at her mother. Without a word, she stomped over to the stranger, slid her arms around his neck, and pressed her lips against his. He stood still in stunned surprise for a moment before responding with fervor.

Alice wedged her way between them, pushing them away from each other. "What do you think you're doing?"

"What? It's OK for you to throw yourself at a man but it's not OK for me?" Claire jabbed a long, slender finger at her mother. "You don't get to tell me what to do anymore. Not only am I a grown woman, but you lost any moral high ground you may have had when you threw yourself at a freaking elephant trainer."

Alice slapped Claire's hand away, heat blossoming in her cheeks--from anger or shame, she didn't know and didn't care to consider. She couldn't believe her daughter would choose this, of all moments, to throw a temper tantrum. Strong-willed stubborn mule of a child! "Get over it. You are too old to be this childish. Don't you think we ought to let this ridiculous argument die and figure out where we are?"

The man cleared his throat and they both shot daggers at him with their eyes. No funeral-home-kindness now. Rather, he offered up a tiny, nervous grin. "I'm not teasing you. You're dead. This is the gate to the Underworld."

For a brief moment, Claire had distracted Alice from her fear. Now it returned, redoubled. Her eyes darted around the barren land, toward the top of the mountain, and finally to the shacks clustered together beyond the man.

An elderly woman shuffled out of one of the pathetic buildings. Her long, ragged black cloak dragged behind her, creating a serpentine path through the dust. In place of hair, a nest of snakes writhed on her scalp. A creature resembling a large iguana with six legs, a barbed tail, and six heads perched upon stubby necks waddled along in her wake, dragged by a chain she clutched in one bony hand. The woman and her pet turned away from them, walked several

doors down, knocked, and disappeared into that place, just as a tall slender man dressed in an ancient Pharaoh's costume popped out of the door of another building and headed in their direction.

His skin was green. Not olive. Green. Like grass.

A tiny whimper of abject terror escaped Alice's lips. Her stomach turned as she spread her arms in front of Claire, keeping herself between her child and the bizarre scene. Her heart pounded a brutal cadence. "You tell me, right now," she demanded. "Who are you? Who are those people?"

"I'm Hades," the oh-so-very ordinary man said with a little bow of his head. His smile revealed deep dimples in his dark-stubbled cheeks. "And I know this is hard to accept, but you really are at the gate to the Underworld." He gestured toward the shacks. More doors had opened. More grotesque, mutated forms had emerged, congregating in pairs and small groups in the street. "The people over there are the trials one must face to move past death and into the afterlife: Grief, Anxiety, Disease, Fear, Hunger, Agony, and the Gorgons. They're my favorite. Super creepy." He rolled his eyes upward as though weighing out his words. "Technically, though, if you want to be fussy about it, none of them are people."

The green Egyptian arrived and stood next to Hades with his hands on his slim hips. A thick braid of dark hair, tied at the end with golden thread, hung from his otherwise bald head over one muscular shoulder. "Who's not people?" he asked.

"You, for one." Hades clapped him on the back in a friendly manner, chuckling at his own little joke.

The green guy shrugged. "Fair enough." He smiled, spread his arms wide, and gave a little bow, similar to the one Hades had executed a moment earlier. "Welcome to the Underworld, ladies."

Please don't let me faint, Alice prayed.

Hades tapped the other man on the shoulder and pointed at Claire. "That one kissed me."

The Egyptian raised his thin, arching brows and leaned to see the wide-eyed woman standing behind Alice. "She's pretty," he observed.

"Very pretty," Hades agreed. "Good kisser, too."

"Why'd she kiss you?"

Hades threw up his hands. "You have to ask? Why wouldn't a woman kiss me?"

The green man rolled his eyes at Hades and looked to Claire. "Why'd you kiss him?"

Claire pushed her way past her mother's trembling arm. "Who are you?"

His smile widened, showing perfect, straight, white teeth. "I'm Osiris, King of Duat. Who are you?"

"This is Claire and her mother, Alice," Hades said when neither woman spoke.

"How do you know who we are?" Claire demanded.

"Perks of being Lord of the Underworld," Hades said.

"Oh, God. We're dead." Alice legs finally turned completely to water. She stumbled a few steps and collapsed onto a boulder. "Both of us are dead? That can't be right. Claire still has time."

"I'm sorry, but yes. Both of you." Hades' warm gentle voice may as well have been a dragon screeching in her ear, so horrible were his words.

"It's not supposed to be that way. There's a mistake," she insisted.

He rocked on the toes of his polished leather wingtips. "We don't make many mistakes here. We've been doing this for quite a long time. Our systems are pretty streamlined."

Claire crossed her arms, a gesture of sassy defiance Alice was all too familiar with.

"Aren't there supposed to be... like... clouds and harps and stuff? Where are St. Peter and the Virgin Mary? What's with the snake lady and the three-headed drooler?"

Cerberus woofed. His tail started swinging again. It seemed he was happy someone finally remembered he was there.

Hades reached out absently to scratch one of the dog's heads. "Well, yes," he began. "See, not everyone goes straight to their final destination. It seems you have some unfinished business."

Alice stood and put herself between her daughter and the strange men once more. Behind Hades, the shack-dwellers crept closer. Among that group, there were more sharp teeth and jagged claws than Alice had seen in a lifetime of terrible nightmares. She stepped back, pushing Claire further away from them.

Claire shoved her mother out of the way again. "Would you stop?" She growled under her breath.

"Stop protecting you from these weirdos?" Alice asked, incredulous. "No! I will not stop. That's my job as your mother."

"You don't even know them," Claire said.

"Claire!"

"Mother!" She threw up her hands in frustration and looked to Hades once more. "What kind of unfinished business do we have?" she demanded as if she couldn't see the monstrous creatures coming toward them.

Hades shrugged. "That's for you to figure out."

"You don't know, or you won't tell us?" Claire asked.

Alice stepped forward and put her hand on her daughter's arm again. "Claire, don't antagonize him by being rude."

"Rude? Seriously, Mom? We're dead! I don't think we have to worry about good manners in Hell. What do you want me to do?" She gestured toward the green man. "He's the King of Do-it. Should I bow down and kiss his sandals?"

This child! I swear she'll be the death of me. The thought was like running into a brick wall. We're already dead. Both of us. Claire died. There has to be a mistake.

"Duat," the Egyptian said.

Both women focused on him. "What?" They asked, simultaneously.

"I'm King of Duat, not Do-it."

Claire shook her head. "OK, Your Majesty. Can you tell us what our unfinished business is?"

"I'm afraid I don't know. I'd like to help you if I could."

She huffed and rolled her eyes.

"You must find your own path," Hades said.

"OK. Assume we figure out what that means. Then what happens?" Claire asked.

"The Underworld is a holding place, an in-between. It's neither your world nor truly the next. Figure out your business and wrap it up if you're able, and you'll be free to move on if you wish to do so."

"How do we figure it out?" Alice asked.

"I can't tell you that," he said.

Claire stomped her foot. "Well, a big heaping lot of help you are!"

"Claire, really," Alice admonished.

"Can you just lay off, Mom?"

"Not while you're acting like an undisciplined brat. I won't have these people thinking I didn't raise you right." Bickering with Claire felt so normal she was almost glad when Claire took the bait and ran with it.

"They're not even people. He said so, himself. I'm just trying to get some answers."

"Sometimes you don't get answers. You have to have faith," Alice said.

"Well, the faith you taught me had rules attached--like not having one night stands with Carnies. And no one in church ever said anything about taking a journey through the freakin' Underworld, or working out any kind of unfinished business."

Alice chewed on her thumbnail. She believed with all her heart that the Bible was true. She couldn't think of a way to reconcile what she knew and what she was seeing.

Hades' grin lit his whole face. "I see a lot of people come into this place, but you two are a delight. No begging or bargaining."

"No begging or bargaining, but they may string you up and force some answers from you," Osiris said.

"If I had answers I swear I'd offer them up to these two fireballs."

Claire glared at him.

Osiris chuckled. "Well, good luck. I've got to go check on things back home. Have fun with these two." He bowed to the ladies again. "Good luck to you. Godspeed." In a whirl of green and white smoke, he was gone.

"I honestly haven't had this much fun welcoming newcomers in eons," Hades said as though a man disappearing in a blast of vapor was an everyday occurrence. "Your kiss brightened up my world, and your fierce spirits lighten my soul." He gestured to the gloom surrounding them. "As you can imagine, anything hopeful in this place is a welcome change. In return for what you've given me, I'll take you past the first trials. I can't finish your business or guide you all the way to your journey's end. As lovely as you both are, some rules can't be broken. What I can do is take you as far as the Fields of Asphodel. From there, I believe you can work the rest out."

"I don't understand what's being asked of us." Alice longed to drop back down on the rock and cry.

"We don't have anything else to go on, Mom," Claire said.

Alice had to admit she was right. She squared her shoulders and swallowed hard.  
"Alright, then. Thank you for whatever help you can offer."

He bowed from the waist. "This way, then. Follow close, please."

Claire strode off after him and Alice brought up the rear, keeping as close to her daughter as possible. They followed the Lord of the Underworld past the small crowd of nightmare creatures.

They were much more horrible close up. A stench of rot emanated from them. They hissed and taunted the travelers. Cerberus ran in circles around the two women and his master, yipping and barking at the monsters, baring the teeth of all three heads at any who came too close. His hyperactive tail never stopped its frantic motion, betraying his love of playing Brave Guard Dog.

Past the rows of buildings, the tunnel archway loomed. Hades led them into the velvety darkness. They tiptoed forward, clinging to one another until a hint of light reached out to them from the other side. On the other end, a meadow stretched to the horizon. Pink and white flowers on thick stems as tall as a child lent a weak splash of color to the landscape stretching beneath the pale, watery sun. In the distance, a handful of men and women stood motionless among the tall plants.

Hades stopped walking and faced them. "Well, here you go then. The Fields of Asphodel."

"Now what?" Claire asked.

"Now your real journey begins." He took Claire's hand in his own and lifted it to his lips. "Thank you for a joyous few moments. I wish you the very best fortune on your journey. May I leave you a bit of advice before I go?"

She nodded.

"Don't let your appetite get away from you. Time is tricky in this place, and humans need sustenance, even here. If you're hungry, find a way to eat. Eat anything you can. To eat is to live. Or... well... you know."

"Thank you," she said, and he gave another little bow.

"Are you sure there's no mistake?" Alice asked. She couldn't bear the thought of Claire's life being cut short. She still had so much living to experience.

He offered her a sad, kind smile. An undertaker smile. "Not this time, Ma'am. Good luck to you." He left her standing in the Underworld, sick at heart and alone with her daughter, whom she was quite sure was angrier with her in death than she had ever been in life.

## **THEY JOURNEY CONTINUES**

**FALL 2018**