

AWAKENING TO SUNLIGHT

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THE SHADOW ON THE STONE

I went by the Druid stone
That broods in the garden white and lone,
And I stopped and looked at the shifting shadows
That at some moments fall thereon
From the tree hard by with a rhythmic swing,
And they shaped in my imagining
To the shade that a well-known head and shoulders
Threw there when she was gardening.

I thought her behind my back,
Yea, her I long had learned to lack,
And I said: 'I am sure you are standing behind me,
Though how do you get into this old track?'
And there was no sound but the fall of a leaf
As a sad response; and to keep down grief
I would not turn my head to discover
That there was nothing in my belief.

Yet I wanted to look and see
That nobody stood at the back of me;
But I thought once more: 'Nay, I'll not unvision
A shape which, somehow, there may be.'
So I went on softly from the glade,
And left her behind me throwing her shade,
As she were indeed an apparition—
My head unturned lest my dream should fade.

—Thomas Hardy

PROLOGUE

Lizzy's heart raced and it seemed to pause every few seconds, causing the muscles in her chest to contract, but she dug her clammy fists even deeper into her pockets and concentrated on walking down the gray-floored corridor.

When she'd first made her way down this corridor, just a few months ago, she had recognized the interior designer's attempt at making the place seem friendlier and less daunting by hanging colorful pictures along the pastel walls. She had initially appreciated the improvement of man's sensitivity since medieval times and yet it had still felt patronizing to her, somehow. As if cheerful surroundings were in some way supposed to make things better. Then, as pain and despair became the constant thread of each day and hope quickly faded away, she had come to resent the implication. Now, as she headed down the familiar corridor for the zillionth time, all that she could see were her feet and the space they would soon no longer take up.

Her whole body burned with fear for what she knew to be true, but would not, could not accept. She'd been asked not to come until the evening, and while others had been called for throughout the day, she had had to wait patiently, enduring long, agonizing hours for the moment she feared most. As she placed her hand on the doorknob she paused; her chest felt like it was slowly tearing open. She tried to muster up a smile, but the contradiction was too much

for her tormented mind to cope with. She took a deep breath, prayed for strength, and opened the door.

After all the pain and the bombardment of deadly foreign toxins, her lover's weakened body had withered to no more than a shadow of its former self, but to Lizzy she was still beautiful and her heart seemed to calm a little at merely being in the same room as her. For the first time in months Maurice's body was free from the web of sterile tubes and wiring that had helped keep her prisoner to the bed. Even the monitor that had stood next to the bed for endless days and nights diligently recording the ebbing pulses of her life was now dormant. Only one line of tubing remained for the morphine, the only thing that had been of any help. She didn't dare move as she listened to the only sound that filled the deafening silence of the room, Maurice's shallow, labored breathing. Lizzy wished with all her heart that she could just wrap her up in her arms and take her home. All she wanted was to hold her and never have to let go. Maurice stirred and slowly opened her eyes.

"Is that you, dear?"

Maurice's voice was so coarse and weak that it tore at her heart, but she did her utmost to try to sound lighthearted. "Yes, gorgeous, it's me." She walked over to the bed and gently kissed her on the forehead. "I missed you today."

"I missed you too."

Lizzy reached for a chair and pulled it up close to the bed and gently took hold of Maurice's pale hand. It felt cold and she cupped it tighter, willing the warmth back.

"How's the pain today?"

"Not as bad as it normally is."

Lizzy managed a weak smile. "That's good."

She felt so lame, so goddamned useless, and she searched for words that would somehow make a difference.

Maurice slowly lifted her arm and gently stroked the side of her head.

"We need to talk."

Lizzy didn't want to listen, she didn't want to hear the words, she just wanted to feel Maurice's touch.

"It's time, sweet pea. I can feel it."

Lizzy fought hard against the tears intent on falling and struggled to keep the anger she felt at bay.

"I can't. I can't do this."

"Yes, you can. You have to."

Maurice's words made no sense in Lizzy's universe and all she could do was shake her head in response.

"You have to promise me something, sweet pea. I want you to live your life for the both of us. I want you to keep your heart open..." She paused and inhaled a long, labored breath. "Don't be scared to love again."

The words were beyond Lizzy's comprehension and yet she knew that these painful words were bravely spoken, meant as a precious gift in a final act of selfless love, but she didn't want them. The mere fact that Maurice could even think that someone else would ever be able to take her place or that she could ever want anybody else tore into the very depths of her soul. The tears she had tried so hard to hold back rolled down her cheeks and anger pulsed through her veins.

"Please, please, don't do this, I can't do this."

"Listen to me, Lizzy. You were the best thing that ever happened to me. I consider myself extremely lucky. I've had love in my life, I've had you. I've made peace with my fate and you have to do the same."

Lizzy could hardly breathe, her insides were so constricted that her words came out as mere whispers between her tears. "My life means nothing without you."

"Yes, it does. Your life had meaning before we met and now you have to find a new meaning to it. I have loved you with all my heart and I ask this last thing of you. Promise me, Lizzy, promise me, please."

What she was asking was unbearable, but so too was the anguish

in Maurice's fragile voice, and so Lizzy dug deep inside her soul to find the strength to give her what she wanted. "I...I promise."

Maurice's eyelids fluttered and she sighed. "I can feel it, Lizzy, I can feel the peace spreading through my body."

The lines of pain that had cast shadows upon Maurice's delicate features turned soft with tranquility.

"Kiss me one more time, Lizzy, for the journey."

Wordlessly, Lizzy leaned forward and gently kissed the only woman she had ever loved. Maurice made the familiar soft sound she often made when they kissed in private and the warm air of her breath caressed Lizzy's skin as it passed between them. Then she felt Maurice's lips relax and her hand slowly slip off her back. At that moment she felt oblivion take hold of her, and as her chest ripped open, her mind exploded into nothingness. The whole world stopped dead in its tracks and all that breathed was the black hole inside her chest.

CHAPTER ONE

Judith stood in front of her wardrobe frantically trying to decide what to take. She knew she couldn't take everything, but couldn't make up her mind what would be the most sensible. The doorbell rang and she dashed out of the bedroom, nearly tripping over a pair of shoes she had only moments before set aside ready to pack. Chris looked immaculate as ever in his suit and tie, but it was clear he was feeling very uncomfortable standing on her doorstep. She hadn't known him for long, but there hadn't been anyone else she could turn to and when she'd called him earlier in desperation to ask for his help, he hadn't hesitated. He'd promised to leave work and come for her as soon as possible, and he had. She stepped aside to let him in.

"Thanks for doing this. You have no idea how grateful I am."

"No problem." He stepped into the hall and nervously glanced around. "I take it he isn't back yet?"

"No."

Chris's shoulders seemed to relax a little. "I think we'd better get a move on and avoid any chance of a confrontation."

"I'm nearly ready, but I'm finding it difficult deciding what to take."

"Just try to think practical."

Judith pulled a face. "That's what I've been trying to do."

"Is there anything I can take out to the car already?"

"Well, Emily's things are already packed. There's this bag

here.” She pointed to a children’s backpack resting against the wall on her left. “And the rest is in her bedroom, the second door on the right.”

“Okay. I’ll take them out to the car while you finish up.”

Judith rushed back to her own bedroom repeating Chris’s words to herself. *Think practical.* She walked over to her underwear cabinet and scooped out whatever her hands landed on, then threw the pile of clothes into the suitcase that lay open on her bed. She then turned back to her wardrobe and frantically grabbed two of everything off the hangers and threw them in as well. Her once neatly ironed and folded clothes now lay in a jumbled heap in her suitcase. She grabbed the book she’d been reading from the nightstand and threw it on top, pulled the lid down, and with somewhat of a struggle, zipped it shut. She took a step back and blew a strand of hair off her face and wondered if there was anything else she would need. She stared at her neatly made-up double bed with her bulging suitcase on top and a question thundered through her mind: *What on earth am I doing?*

Chris appeared at the doorway. “Are you ready?”

Judith didn’t turn to face him, but instead picked up the framed photo she had kept on her dresser, a snapshot of what once had been better times.

“Am I being an idiot?”

Chris didn’t hesitate. “No. You’re doing the right thing.”

“You really think so?”

“Absolutely.”

“You don’t think I’m overreacting?”

“I think you should have left the jerk years ago.”

Judith plopped herself onto the bed and rested her pounding head in her hands.

“But it seems so final, so sudden, and so drastic!”

Chris entered the room and knelt in front of her.

“It’s not sudden, though, is it, Judith? Things have been building up for a long time now and maybe it is final, I don’t know, maybe it’s not. Maybe when he comes home and finds you gone he’ll sit down

and realize what an ass he's been. Either way, you need to get out of here for a while, if only to get things straight in your own head."

She knew Chris was right. Things hadn't been right for a long time and she did need time to think and get her thoughts straight, but she was scared. Deep down she knew her life was about to change in a big way. She just didn't know if she could handle it. She felt weak and a failure. Wasn't she just running away from her problems instead of trying to solve them? Had she tried hard enough?

Chris took her hands in his. "Judith, I know it's hard, but you know that this is the right thing to do and not just for yourself, but for Emily too. Now I do think we should get going. He could turn up at any moment." Chris stood again and reached for the suitcase. "I'll meet you out at the car."

Judith chewed the inside of her mouth as she watched him lift the bloated suitcase off the bed and stagger with it out of the room. Then she took a deep breath and surveyed her bedroom one last time. It was all so quiet and surreal. She knew she should be doing something like peeling the potatoes for dinner or doing some washing, but instead she was in the process of walking out on her life as she knew it. She thought back to yesterday and how she had felt when Menno had arrived home from work. Like every other day, she had grown anxious as the hour drew nearer for his return, and like every other day, she had not known whether he was going to come home indifferent or angry. Regardless, she knew there was going to be something she hadn't done right to set him off on one of his relentless, belittling monologues.

Yesterday, though, something had changed. She couldn't remember what it was he had been accusing her of, but instead of crumbling at his words she had felt an unexpected calmness and had known at that moment, she had to leave. She didn't quite understand it, but just thinking it had made it the only way forward and now she was going to have to be strong, for herself and for Emily. *Emily!* She checked her watch. It was a quarter to four. Without a second glance she raced out of the bedroom, down the hall, grabbing her coat from the coat rack on the way, and opened the door to the outside world.

As she pulled the front door shut she quietly prayed: *Dear God, please let me be doing the right thing!*

Fifteen minutes later they were waiting outside Emily's school. Judith was trying to think of a way to explain it all to Emily without hurting or confusing her, but it seemed impossible to explain something that she herself didn't yet understand. She looked out the car window at all the other parents waiting and wondered what they would say if they were her.

"I'm sorry you can't stay with us. It's just that we do this every year. Tom's family flies over here from Australia and stays at our place while we fly over there and stay at theirs. Otherwise it wouldn't have been a problem."

Judith turned to face him and tapped his leg, appreciating his concern.

"Don't be silly, you don't have to apologize. You're doing more than enough already."

"You'll like it at Lizzy's anyway. The apartment has got lots of original features in it and it has a roof terrace."

"I haven't even asked you where it is exactly."

"It's on the west side of town. Marnixkade."

"And you're sure she's okay with this? I know I wouldn't like the idea of having strangers stay in my home."

"Lizzy's cool. She won't mind."

Judith turned to look out the window again when it dawned on her what Chris had just said. In shock she turned back to face him.

"You made that sound as if she doesn't know yet!"

Chris winced. "Well, she doesn't."

"Chris!" Judith's anxiety turned to panic.

"Calm down. I tried to call her, but I kept getting her voicemail."

"So she hasn't given her consent and doesn't even know we're coming?"

Chris winced a little at Judith's question. "No, not yet, but—"

"Oh God, Chris, you said it was okay!"

"It is okay. I promise you, Lizzy won't mind."

“How can you be sure if you haven’t spoken to her? I can’t just camp out in someone’s home without their consent!”

“Trust me! I’ve known Lizzy since we were kids. It won’t be a problem.”

Judith spotted Emily coming through the school doors surrounded by other energetic seven-year-olds and knew she had no choice now but to trust that Chris was right. She got out of the car and waved to Emily, who excitedly waved back as she came running full speed toward her. Judith knelt and caught her in her arms and gave her a big hug.

“Mommy, guess what we’re being painting today?”

“What’s that, sweetheart?”

“Our own faces.” Emily’s beaming smile soothed away some of the panic Judith was feeling.

“Wow, that must have been hard.”

“It was, because we had to do it from memory, but Lisa pretended to go to the bathroom so she could look in the mirror.”

“Did she now?”

Emily leaned to one side to get a better look at the car parked behind Judith.

“Whose car is that, Mommy?”

“It belongs to a friend of mine. His name is Chris and he’s going to give us a lift.”

“How come?”

“Well...” Judith hesitated and tried to continue in a casual tone. “You and I are going to be staying somewhere for a few days and Chris is here to help us with our bags.”

Emily took on that familiar frown she always made when she was trying to work something out.

“Is Daddy coming?”

Her words pierced like a knife. How many times had she witnessed Emily’s hurt and her sadness as he rejected her time and time again, and how hard had Emily tried to win his love and attention only to be shunned and pushed away?

Judith tried hard to hold back the tears that welled up. She loved

her daughter so much and all she wanted to do was to protect her. “No, darling, Daddy’s not coming. It will just be you and me.”

Emily stared into her eyes and Judith held her breath. She desperately wanted to say something reassuring and to give her the explanation she was owed, but then, to her relief, Emily’s frown disappeared and she simply accepted it with an even, “Okay, Mommy.”

Judith felt too choked with emotion to speak, but pulled Emily in close again, hugging her tightly, and silently promised she would do whatever it took to make things right.



Chris weaved his way across town through the hordes of meandering tourists, tooting cars, and local Amsterdammers peddling with death-defying expertise in between and around everything in their path, before finally turning off into a quiet narrow side street. It was a charming street typical of Amsterdam. It was lined on either side with tall traditional narrow seventeenth-century houses all boasting elaborate decorative stone gables, revealing the occupations of the industrious trading merchants who once owned them. A quiet narrow canal, lined with lush green trees, ran down the middle of the street, separating one side from the other. At each end was a low wooden bridge with black decorative railings stretching across the canal, enhancing the quaintness and overall tranquility of the street.

Like everywhere else in Amsterdam, all the parking spaces were filled with cars that never seemed to move, but Chris spotted a small space at the end of the street and decided to try to squeeze the car into it. Parking in Amsterdam was not for the faint-hearted. People often drove their cars into the canal while trying to park, and Judith held her breath while Chris carefully maneuvered the car until he finally managed to squeeze it in, albeit at a weird angle.

Chris finally pulled up the hand brake and sighed victoriously before speaking. “It’s only four doors back.” He turned off the

ignition and turned to her with a slight grimace. “I have to warn you, though, it’s also four flights of stairs we have to climb.”

Some minutes later they all stood on a small landing panting and sweating. Chris plonked the bulging suitcase on the ground.

“I have to do something about my condition.”

Judith dropped the sport bags she was carrying. “That makes two of us.”

“It’s harder for me because I have shorter legs,” Emily quipped.

Both Chris and Judith burst out laughing at Emily’s statement. Then Chris dug out the keys, unlocked the front door, and led them inside.

Judith was certainly impressed. The apartment was surprisingly spacious without being cavernous, and she especially liked the living room. Tall wall-to-wall windows allowed an extraordinary array of light to penetrate and fill every corner of the room. The walls were painted a soft cream color that contrasted beautifully with the warm oak floor. In the center were three big, comfortable-looking couches deliberately placed around a welcoming authentic fireplace. At the far end of the living room was an open kitchen, and off to the side was an alcove that functioned as an adequate dining area. The whole setting was simplistically elegant, yet cozy and warm. They followed Chris around as he showed them the rest of the apartment, which Judith found to be tastefully decorated. He pointed out Lizzy’s bedroom and study without entering before finally showing them the two guest rooms they could use.

“This place is great.”

“I knew you’d like it.” Chris smiled knowingly.

“It must have cost a ton!”

“Well, the place was in a pretty bad shape when she bought it, so she got it for a good price and she did most of the work on it herself. Come on, there’s one more thing I want you to see.”

Chris led them back down the hall and through the living room and opened the two bay doors leading out onto the roof terrace. Chris had been right; it was gorgeous. It was like a private oasis

hidden in between the rooftops. The terrace was built of wood and was about six yards by six yards. It had a garden table and chairs tucked away to the left and lots of plant pots and hanging baskets all around. Although there were no flowers in them, Judith could easily imagine how beautiful it could be. The terrace owed its privacy to the surrounding rooftops, but ahead the view was clear and Judith could see quite far into the city's center.

"Chris, this is lovely. It's like a secret hideaway from the world."

"I knew you'd like it. Everybody does. Look, I have to get going if I'm going to finish my packing on time."

Judith accompanied him back to the front door listening to further information, like where to find the clean linens and such.

"Oh, I nearly forgot." He took out his bunch of keys, unhooked two, and passed them to her explaining that one was for this door and one was for the downstairs door. Judith accepted the keys and studied them resting in her palm. Her earlier apprehension rushed back.

"Chris, I really don't feel comfortable staying in this woman's house without her permission."

"Judith, you must believe me, Lizzy won't mind, and besides, she won't be back for another three weeks."

"But still, I—"

"If it makes you feel better, then I promise to keep calling her."

Judith nodded taking some comfort from that. "Thank you, Chris, for everything you've done for us today."

"No problem. I'll try to call you in a few days, to see how you're doing."

"No, don't. I don't want you thinking about me while you're on vacation. I'll call you when you get back and let you know where I am."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Don't worry. I'll be fine. You just go and enjoy yourself. I'll see you when you get back."

Chris gave her a hug, wished her luck, and then left. As she listened to his footsteps disappear down the stairs, she wondered what on earth she was supposed to do next. She headed back to the living room and watched Emily playing on the terrace.

She felt completely out of place and utterly alone.