

# Stealing Souls

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Death is supposed to be the end; the end of life and the end of existence on this world. When you die, your soul goes on to the next world, or at least it's supposed to. Sometimes, however, love can be stronger than death. Though this has been said many times before, you don't hear about what happens when it is. Harold had just such a love for Melissa.



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# Chapter 1

## The Fall

Harold was sitting in his favorite chair, watching his favorite show, thinking to himself how good this day was. Then, he heard a knock at his door. “Great, just great” he thought to himself. Slowly, he got up and made his way to the door. At least it wasn't a total loss, though; it was his best friend, Mitch.

Mitch was there to talk Harold into going to a party. He really didn't want to go, but didn't have anything else planned for that day other than watching re-runs of his favorite show. Still, he was trying to find some kind of excuse for not going.

“I don't know, Mitch, I'm just not feeling it today.” Harold said, obviously trying to get out of something he simply didn't want to do.

“Aw, come on, it'll be fun, we can have a drink or two and maybe you'll get lucky and meet another woman.” Mitch was trying to sound upbeat.

“Nah, I'm not looking for another woman yet.” Still, Harold was just trying to get Mitch to just go without him.

“Harry, it's about time you got over Liz.”

“...hmm”

“Don't hmm me, you two weren't right from the start and you know it. Come on, get your jacket and I'm not taking no for an answer.”

“Fine, let's go” Harold finally gave in sounding a bit

resentful.

Harold had a girlfriend for about a year. Liz was a beautiful young woman and Harold was very much in love with her. One day, however, he found out that she was seeing another man. When he confronted her about it, she decided to just break up with Harold instead of telling him who it was. He was still devastated by the break up almost a year after it had happened. Still, he knew Mitch was right and it was time to move on.

Harold changed his clothes then looked in the mirror. He was happy with what he saw. He thought his brown shirt looked good on him. He got his jacket and they got into Mitch's car. They talked about Liz the whole way there. Even though Mitch was getting tired of hearing about her, he was still trying to be supportive of his friend. While at the same time, Mitch was trying to convince Harold to just let it go and put it behind him.

They had been friends for most of their lives of twenty three years. They had been through many experiences together, from little league baseball to high school football. They were practically inseparable.

When they got to the party, Mitch knew most of the people there but Harold only knew a few of them. Mitch made every effort to try to get Harold to mingle with the other people there and introduced him to some of the women. Although



Harold found some of the women to be attractive, he simply wasn't interested in any of them.

It would have been easy for Harold to get a woman that night. He was easy on the eyes, about six feet tall, smooth black hair and tan skinned. He had bright blue eyes that most women seemed to be drawn into and was slim and fit. He also took care to dress himself with nice looking clothes. Appearance was important to Harold and it showed. Still, he was just not interested in any of the women there that night.

Mitch, on the other hand, was not quite so attractive. He was far from being bad looking, though. He was slightly overweight but was tall enough to carry it well. He had short, black hair and blue eyes. His clothing was usually just whatever he pulled out of his dresser drawer that morning as he hurriedly got dressed for work. Still, what Mitch lacked in appearance, he more than made up for with personality. He was very outgoing and friendly. That was the main reason he and Harold became friends years ago. Harold was the bashful one and Mitch wanted to be friends with everyone. Their friendship just kind of stuck for life.

The party went on until about midnight and there were a few that were getting drunk. Neither of them typically drank much, but today was the exception for Mitch. He was so drunk

that he couldn't remember what happened to his car keys. Everyone looked for them for a while but then they decided it would be best if he just stayed there and maybe when he was sober the next morning, he would remember where his keys were.

Harold decided he would just walk home since it was only a couple of miles back to his apartment. Several people offered him a ride home, but he just wanted to be alone that night. He was practically counting the steps as he slowly strolled home. About half way there, he saw a cafe on Main Street. He thought to himself that a hot cup of coffee sounded good right about then.

That's when he first met Melissa. She was the waitress that was working that particular night. Harold couldn't stop looking at her. Melissa was, for a woman, tall. She was about five feet ten inches tall. She was thin but not extremely so. She had what Harold thought was the perfect amount of curves to her body. She was well proportioned and her long, wavy brown hair stopped just above her waistline. Her clothes were form-fitting but not so tight that it looked tacky. Her brown eyes had a hint of mystery behind them that Harold was drawn to. Her skin was fair colored, smooth and soft looking and Harold just couldn't help but to imagine what it would be like to touch it. As she moved, she had an energy level that Harold was amazed with, it could only be described as effervescent. Her voice was as beautiful as she was.

It was very feminine and also sounded very energetic.

Melissa walked up to Harold and asked in her energetic voice, “what can I get for you?”

Harold was a little startled and took a few seconds to respond. “Just a cup of coffee. Regular, please,” Harold replied, almost as though he was on autopilot and the words just came out.

“Sure thing, be just a second. You sure that's all you want?”

“Yeah, that's it. I'm on my way home and just wanted to sit down for a minute.”

“You're walking home?” Melissa asked, almost embarrassed by asking something that was none of her business.

“Yeah, it was either that or stay the night with a bunch of drunk people I didn't know” Harold said, rather sheepishly.

“Oh, I know what you mean,” Melissa said then realized she shouldn't be talking personally to a customer. She then added, “but I don't want to bore you with the details.”

“No really,” Harold said, “go ahead and tell me.”

Melissa smiled and said, “see, what had happened was, my friend dragged me out to this party where everybody got drunk. She ended up stumbling out to get a taxi and completely abandoned me with a bunch of people I didn't know.”

“Really? Well, mine was my buddy. He's kinda like my

brother, though,” Harold said, his spirits starting to lift as they had this little conversation.

Melissa sighed a little. “Well, that was before I moved here to go to school.”

Harold noticed her sigh and tried to cheer her up. “Well, that's what friends are for, right?”

“Yeah,” Melissa giggled a little. “To get you out of trouble, but also to get you into it.”

Harold laughed, too. “Amen to that. Hey, if you want, you're welcome to sit down and join me.”

Melissa thought for a second and figured it couldn't hurt. Business was dead this time of night and nobody would care if she sat down for a quick break.

They continued to talk for a while as Harold drank his coffee. When he was done, Harold paid his bill, stood up and told her “Well, I need to get home, it's almost one now and I've still got about another mile to go.

“Well, which way are you headed?” Melissa asked, hoping not to offend her new friend.

“East, a few more blocks,” Harold answered almost too quickly.

“I'm headed that way myself, and I get off work in about five minutes. If you can wait, I'll be glad to have the company for

my walk home.”

“Yeah, I can wait. I'd be glad to have some company, too.”

As it turned out, they both lived in the same building, but because of their normal work hours, they never met. Melissa was a little nervous when Harold followed her up the sidewalk to her apartment building.

“You're not following me, are you,” Melissa asked nervously.

“No, not at all, I live in apartment one forty-five.” Harold realized how that must have looked to her and was a little red in the face from the situation.

“Oh, my God, I'm so embarrassed.” Melissa's face was turning red also. “I can't believe we've never seen each other here before, how long you lived here?”

“About two years now, you?” Harold was hoping not to make her uncomfortable by asking anything too personal.

“About six months for me. “Wow, I just can't believe it,” Melissa said. “We've both been living here this long and not even once run into each other.”

“Well, who knows,” Harold said, “maybe we've seen each other, but just didn't realize it.” Though, in the back of his mind, Harold knew if he had seen Melissa before, he would have

remembered her. There's no way he could have missed someone like her.

“I guess that could be,” Melissa replied, “but I've got to go to bed, early day tomorrow. Again.”

“All right,” Harold said with a grin on his face, “but I hope it won't take six months for us to run into each other again.”

Melissa smiled at that thought and said, “I certainly hope not, too.” Then, not wanting to end the conversation, but knowing she had to get up early, Melissa said slowly, almost hesitantly, “well, good night to you,” then paused for a moment of realization, “hey, I don't even know you name!”

“Oh yeah,” Harold said, laughing, “I guess I forgot all about little things like names. My name's Harold, but most people call me Harry.”

“Harry, eh? Well, my name's Melissa. Some people call me Missy, but I hate it.”

“Then I'll make sure not to call you that.” Harold smiled as a very friendly look came across his face. “Well, good night, Melissa.”

Harold put his hand out in a gesture to shake hands.

“Harold,” Melissa said, “what are you doing?”

“Well,” he nervously said, “isn't that what you do when you meet someone new?”

“Well, maybe that's what you do, but for me, I do this.” Then she put her arms around him for a friendly hug. With her arms still around him, she continued, “good night to you too, Harold.” Melissa then took a half of a step back and looked at Harold rather intently, as if she were studying him then continued, “I don't know, you just don't seem like a Harry to me, so I hope you don't mind if I call you Harold.”

“No, not at all. In fact, that's what I prefer, but some nicknames really stick with you through life.”

“Bye,” Melissa said as she started up the stairs to her apartment. She thought about telling him which apartment she lived in, but thought it best not to seem too anxious like that. She could tell she had just met someone special and was hoping to see more of him in the near future. She just wasn't sure how to arrange for that to happen.

“Bye,” Harold said then headed down the hallway that headed to his apartment. They both paused before the other was out of sight and turned to look one last time at the other. They smiled again at each other, and then waved a good bye gesture before they left each other's sight.

Harold went into his apartment also thinking about Melissa. He liked her and in fact, for the first time since his break up with Liz that he found himself not thinking about her. That

night, there was only one person on his mind, and that was Melissa. He didn't know what it was about her, but there was something that he almost fell in love with that night. He was even having thoughts about this being the one for him, but he didn't want to get too excited. After all, they had only just met. Still, he knew they worked different hours and it would be hard for him to see her again without looking like he was trying to.

As luck, or fate, would have it, there was no need to try to arrange anything. She met up with Harold again the next morning.

“Hey stranger, remember me,” Melissa said with an excited tone in her voice.

“Of course I do, you're Melissa. My memory isn't great but it's not that bad either,” with those words, Harold let a shy little grin show through. He was trying to be calm and collected, but it was really hard to do with her.

“Well, Mr. Harold, where are you off to so early?”

“Oh, I'm just going for a walk around the neighborhood, then to get breakfast. What brings you out so early?”

“Hey, you know what they say, “the early bird gets the worm.” Melissa was a morning person, and this was her favorite quote.

“Yes, yes it does, but the second mouse gets the cheese.”



This was Harold's favorite quote about mornings. He wasn't really a morning person but didn't like to sleep too late either. Besides, his favorite place to eat had a breakfast special that day.

After that wisecrack, they both started laughing. Harold couldn't believe he just said that. Such a tasteless joke to a woman he had just met the night before. Then he realized she was laughing at his tasteless joke, or was she just pretending to so he wouldn't feel stupid. Now he was second guessing himself. Frustrated with his own mind, he tried to pull himself back together and managed to say “so, what does bring you out this early, anyway.”

Melissa said in a not too excited tone of voice, “actually, I'm headed to class.”

Harold, interested in what she had to say asked, “oh, really, what class is that?”

“Today, it's biology, then physics, a short lunch break, then back for English composition.”

Harold's eyes widened at the thought of what Melissa had said. Then, with a very surprised tone, said, “whoa, that's a busy day for a Monday.”

“Yeah, then I go to work afterwards until about seven, get back up at seven tomorrow morning and repeat,” Melissa said, still with a bored tone in her voice.

“Wow, that's a rough schedule. How do you manage?” Harold couldn't believe anyone could handle that kind of day and was quite impressed with how well she seemed to be handling it.

“I'm all about coffee. It's how I survive, in fact some people have told me I have blood in my coffee stream.”

As hard as he tried not to, Harold couldn't help but to laugh at that. There they were, standing on the front steps to their apartment complex just talking again. That's one thing they seemed to be able to do very well so far. Harold wasn't much of a talker, but he felt completely at ease around Melissa.

Harold asked, “so, if you don't mind me asking, when is your first class?”

“Oh no, not at all, my biology class starts at ten.”

“Well then, since it's only eight, maybe you have time to join me for breakfast?” Harold couldn't believe what he just did. He managed to ask Melissa out, and with ease. Now, he was quite nervous as he waited for her answer, which she gave almost immediately.

“I'd be glad to. In fact, that's where I was headed myself.” Melissa answered with a hint of excitement in her voice. “So, what did you have in mind?”

“Oh, I was thinking the little place just around the corner from here. It's close enough to walk to and not take hardly any

time, and I do love to walk.”

“Oh, me too, that sound great. Let's go, I'm starving.”

They kept talking the whole time they walked to the restaurant. Then they talked all through breakfast and again the walk back home. Still, Harold couldn't believe how easily he could talk to another person, let alone a near stranger. In fact, it almost seemed like he was a completely different person with Melissa. That was fine with him, though, since some days he didn't like the person he was normally.

They got back to their apartment building and said good bye to each other. Melissa held her arms out looking for a hug from her new friend. Harold was quick to do accommodate. As they hugged, they were both trying to hide their excitement from each other.

Melissa got into her car and drove off to school. Harold took his walk around the neighborhood that he was planning when he woke up. Anyone could have told he had met a woman just by the steps he was taking. His steps were high and almost a leap into the air. If it could be said that anyone actually walked on air, it was Harold.

There was still an annoying, nagging voice in his mind telling him not to get his hopes up, and that he would screw things up, just like he did with Liz. Liz, that name had almost

escaped his mind completely until that moment. Though, now, he was thinking of her in a different light. He thought of her more like the lying, two-faced heartless person she really was. Now, he was starting to understand what his friend, Mitch, was trying to tell him.

Then he wondered if Mitch made it home all right. So he decided to give his friend a call. He hit the speed dial button for Mitch's cell phone.

“Hello,” a sluggish sounding voice answered.

“Mitch, Harry here.”

“Harry, hey, how's it goin'?” Mitch was still a little groggy sounding from the night before but was slowly waking up.

“Oh, great with me, I was just hoping you made it home all right.”

“Yeah, once I woke up this morning I remembered where my keys were.” Mitch heard something in his friend's voice, a kind of excitement but wasn't quite awake enough to ask about it just yet.

Harold asked, “so, where were they?”

“I gave them to Staci so I wouldn't try to drive home.”

“But didn't she get drunk and have to have someone take her home?”

“Yeah,” Mitch laughed a little about it, “but when she

woke up this morning, she remembered having them so she brought them back to me. Well, then one thing lead to another and now we're going out tonight. We were thinking, if you're not busy, maybe you'd like to join? She's got a friend who's looking for a date."

"So, how's things going with Staci? Last week you were thinking you might be breaking up. But no, thanks, I've kinda got a date tonight. You guys have a good time, though."

"WHAT?!" Mitch almost yelled at the shock of what he was hearing. "A date? You? Wait, what's that mean, kinda?" Mitch couldn't stop asking questions but Harold finally interrupted.

"Well, see, there's this girl I met while walking home last night and it turns out she lives in my building. We had breakfast this morning and had a great time and I'm thinking I'm going to stop in at the cafe where she works tonight and try to talk her into having dinner with me."

"Wow, I just can't believe what I'm hearing, Harry, with a date. I knew I heard something in your voice."

"I don't know, but there's just something about her. I haven't stopped thinking about her since I first met her. I've only known her for about twelve hours but I think this is the one. Sounds crazy, doesn't it?"

“Yes it does, but Harry, if you really think so then go for it, buddy. So what's this gal's name anyway?”

“Melissa.” As Harold spoke the name, he felt his heart start to flutter.

“Wait, Melissa? And she lives in your building?” Mitch asked in a serious voice.

“Yeah, her, you met her?” As Harold kept talking to Mitch, his spirits were starting to fall just from the tone in his friend's voice.

“Harry, you sure you want anything to do with her?” As Mitch asked this question, Harold could feel his hopes plunging again but didn't want it to show.

“What's that supposed to mean?” Harold was starting to get defensive about her, yet still trying to fight that urge and listen to what his friend was telling him.

“I don't know, but I've heard stuff about her, that's all,” Mitch said sounding like he was trying to avoid the question.

“What kind of stuff?” Harold was getting more depressed as they spoke.

“Just rumors, I'm sure. Still, if even half of what I've heard is true, then you really should think twice about this.”

“What's going on, Mitch?” Again, Harold was getting more defensive and depressed at the same time.

“I’ve heard she’s been around and that the last guy she was with, she was also seeing three other guys at the same time.”

“But she doesn’t seem the type to do that, I mean, she’s just too nice.” Harold just couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“Yeah, that’s what Steve said, too,” Mitch said, with a very serious tone in his voice. As he spoke, he was almost looking proud of himself, yet looking serious at the same time.

“Steve? He was dating her?” Harold was starting to feel his heart sink. This sweet, kind girl he had just met was starting to look like another two-faced lying woman. Still, he wanted to just see for himself just what was going on. Then he added, “Mitch, if you see anything of her, well, you’re the one that told me about Liz and I can only hope you’ll watch my back again.”

“My friend,” Mitch said, “you’ve got nothing to worry about. I’ve got your back. That’s what friends are for, right?”

“That they are.” Harold was sounding relieved.

“Well, Harry, I gotta go, I’ll see you later.”

“All right,” Harold said, “later.”

That day, Harold went through his afternoon in serious thought. On one hand, he thought Melissa was the one for him. After all, he was already starting to feel himself falling for her. Still, the same pattern happened with Liz. He fell hard and fast for her, only to be crushed barely a year later. He just couldn’t

stop thinking about the what-ifs. Every part of him was telling him not to believe what the rumors were. The one person that could tell him anything for certain was Steve.

Unfortunately, Steve was killed a few months ago in a car crash. The icy roads made travel dangerous that day, but Steve's buddies wanted pizza and he was the host at the party. He made it in to town and picked up the pizza, but never made it home. A careless driver was going too fast and lost control, causing a head-on collision. Steve was killed instantly. The other driver survived and made a full recovery.

Everyone in the area loved Steve and hated the other driver. Still, they tried to forgive him since they all knew that's exactly what Steve would have wanted. He was a very forgiving person. He also believed everyone was basically good. Usually, he would be the first one to stand up for those who had done wrong. So by forgiving the other driver, the people of that area believed they were honoring Steve's memory.

Harold made up his mind, he was going to follow through with Melissa and see just how things went. He had his buddy to watch for anything that could be a sign of her cheating on him. With that to help his confidence, he went to see her that evening. Since it was only about a mile, a short walk for Harold, he decided to walk there to see her.



“Harold!” Melissa almost sang his name “I’m so glad you came!”

“Melissa.” Harold couldn’t say her name without smiling. Anyone listening as he said her name could hear how much he really liked her. “I was really hoping you would be here still.”

“Yeah, I’ll be done working in a half hour. You think you could hang out for a while?”

“Yes, of course. You think I could maybe get a drink?”

“Yes, yes, I’ll get that right now, what would you like?”

“Oh, a cola, whatever brand you have here.”

“I’ll be right back.” At that, she was so excited she almost forgot she had other customers to take care of. She went in the kitchen to get a drink when her boss saw met her.

“Melissa,” her boss said “Is that him?”

“Yes, please don’t be mad. I didn’t ask him to come and I don’t think...”

“Just go on and get out of here,” her boss told her “we’re really slow right now and Jenny can cover for you.”

“Jenny, you mind?” Melissa asked, practically begging.

“Not at all, get out of here. You’ve been talking about this guy all day. I’m getting sick of hearing about him. So get lost!”

Melissa couldn’t contain her excitement anymore and was even starting to get a little misty-eyed. “Thank you both, thank

you, thank you, thank you..."

Her boss interrupted "Get before I change my mind."

Melissa came back out and headed straight for Harold and told him "Hey, they just told me I could get out of here early, so you got any plans?"

"Well, actually, yes" Harold told her with a sly grin on his face.

Melissa was crushed by those words but was trying not to show it. She wasn't doing a very good job of it, though. Harold saw that his joke wasn't funny so he was quick to add "my plan was to come here and try to talk you into having dinner with me."

As quickly as she started to head for despair, Melissa's spirits were lifted strait to the clouds with those words. "Well," she replied "I'd love to, but can we get out of here?"

"What were you thinking?" Harold asked

"Well, I was thinking we could head across town to this little place," Melissa said, barely able to control her smile. That was fine with Harold, though, since he loved to see her smile. She knew she should be going home and get to bed soon, but couldn't resist the chance to spend the evening with Harold.

"You've got it, lead the way," Harold told her.

They had their dinner and started with small talk. As time went on, their talk got more serious but not very personal still.

They kept running into each other over the next few weeks and occasionally, they would go out to breakfast, lunch or dinner, whatever they had time for. After almost a month from the day Harold walked into her cafe, they were starting to feel something real for one another.

Harold decided it was time to say what he was feeling. He asked Melissa to dinner at an Italian restaurant not far from where they lived. Of course, Melissa was starting to feel the same things, and as much as she wanted to tell him, she was afraid still. She decided when they went out that evening, she would let him know.

They went to an Italian restaurant. The waitress couldn't help but to think it was adorable how they both sat on the same side of the table so they could be closer together. As they ate their dinner, Melissa was having a hard time not just blurting out the three words she was excited to say, but afraid of at the same time. It was getting harder for her to control something that she, in fact, believed would never happen to her again. She had fallen in love with Harold. She tried to hide that fact, but it was getting harder to do every time she saw him. Even though she was afraid of her feelings, she was also quite comfortable with them. Still, at this point, there was no way she would even think about telling Harold about what was going on inside her.

For his part, Harold was also doing his best to hide what he was starting to feel. He had, by now, completely forgotten about Liz. In fact, the only person on his mind anymore was Melissa. Everything was happening so fast, he thought to himself. Still, he knew this was exactly what was meant to be.

Their conversation during dinner was almost nervous, both of them afraid of what could be said. They were choosing their words carefully, both of them measuring every word the other said, looking for a sign that the other one felt the same way. Melissa finally took the first step to relieve the tension.

“Harold, you're acting a little strange, is something wrong?”

Harold could hear the genuine concern in her voice. He thought for a few seconds about how to best answer her question without giving himself away. Finally, after a long awkward silence, he came up with the best answer he could think of.

“No, Melissa, everything is just perfect.” Then Harold's face started to turn red. He was hoping he hadn't just said too much.

Melissa heard what he meant with the tone in his voice. Still scared to show her feelings, she thought for a few seconds herself before her next sentence. The tension between the two was almost as strong as what they were fighting at this moment.

Finally, the moment they had both been trying to avoid happened, they glanced into each others' eyes. They had done this several times before, but neither one had seen what they saw right then. That glance turned into something close to a studying stare. By now, everyone else in the restaurant could see what was happening.

They had both just realized a love so strong that it could be felt by everyone else in the room. Even the oldest couple there fell in love all over again, just by the spillover from the two of them. Then, the moment they could no longer resist, Harold took Melissa's hands in his. Then they kissed.

It was a quick kiss at first. They pulled their faces apart briefly, looked at each other then quickly kissed again. They kissed for so long that every person there couldn't help but to see. They kissed so passionately that they believed their souls had just united. They were pressed so firmly against each other that they could feel one another's heart beating. They both knew every heartbeat the other person had was just for them. They were beating in perfect unison, almost as if reaching out of their chest trying to touch the other. They had fallen in love and there was no denying it.

After that, Melissa just looked at Harold, not sure what to say anymore. All she could think was “wow.” Still she didn't

dare say a word, afraid she would spoil the moment as she had done too many times before.

Harold was the one to say the first words. “That was amazing,” was all he could say.

“I was thinking the same thing, I was just afraid to ruin the moment with words,” Melissa said.

“I don't think anything could possibly ruin this.”

“That's what I've thought before, and too many times, but I manage to do it, just the same,” Melissa said nervously. Her voice was shaking and she was talking way too fast. She was breathing so fast, she thought she was going to hyperventilate.

“You love me Melissa, I could feel it, there's nothing you could say or do to ruin that.” With those words, Melissa started to relax. Her voice returned to normal and she started breathing normally again.

“And you love me too, Harold, I can tell. Still, I've been here before.”

“Shh, Melissa, not now. Let's just leave.”

“Good idea.” Though she did wonder where they would go from there, Melissa didn't want to ruin the moment by asking.

Harold paid the dinner bill, then they got into his car and left. They made some small talk on the way back across town. When they got back to their apartment building, they headed back

to the front door. Harold wanted to make sure he didn't come on too strong so he didn't say what he first wanted to say.

“Melissa, I'll see you in the morning?” Harold said in a questioning tone. He thought he would leave the next move up to her. He was actually a little proud of himself for what he said.

After pausing a moment to think, Melissa wanted to ask him up to her place, but didn't want to be too forward. “We don't have to go anywhere just yet, do we?” Melissa asked, her heart breaking from the idea of leaving Harold so soon.

“Did you have something else in mind,” Harold asked trying not to sound too excited.

“Actually,” Melissa said after a short period of thought, “I was thinking, we could just take a walk for a while.”

That was the perfect compromise, Harold thought to himself. He didn't feel like they were ready for what they were both thinking, but didn't want this night to end so soon. “Sure!” he said, breathing a sigh of relief at the same time, “it's not that late, let's do that. I love to take walks.”

“Oh, me too. So few people do that these days.”

So they walked all around their area of town. They talked about anything they could think of, and sometimes, absolutely nothing at all. They talked about everything from their childhood to the world of today. Finally, as they got back to the road

leading to their building, it was Melissa who took the initiative to bring up the obvious.

“Harold,” she said “Something happened earlier. Something we can't ignore.”

“Melissa, what happened earlier, I don't want to ignore. I just didn't want to try to push anything.”

“I've never felt this way this fast before. I'm scared.” Melissa was again starting to talk and breathe faster.

“Of what?” Harold was trying to seem like he didn't think there was anything to be scared of, but he felt the same way.

“Of you, me, what I feel, what you feel, everything. I'm scared of everything that's happening between us.”

Finally, Harold had to admit he felt the same way. “I know, Melissa. I'm scared, too. I guess that's just one more thing we have in common, isn't it?”

Melissa almost laughed at that. She definitely smiled, but it was exactly what she needed to hear. She wasn't sure how, but Harold could say exactly what she needed to hear and exactly when she needed to hear it.

“But, Harold, we've only know each other for a few short weeks. Doesn't that bother you, too?”

“A little, yes, but I love how I feel right now. Besides, there's nothing wrong with feelings, right?” Again, Harold was



resorting to trying to make it sound like there was nothing to be scared of.

“I guess not, but still, you know...”

Harold interrupted, “don't worry about it. Just enjoy it.”

Again, that was exactly what Melissa needed to hear. Harold's words were perfect for the moment.

That evening ended all too soon, for both of them. They were both a little nervous about how fast things were happening between them. They also both made up their minds to just let things flow and see where it all leads. They knew they were in love with each other and that was all they needed to know.

# Chapter 2

## The Secret

The next day, on his way to work, Harold ran into Mitch again.

“So,” Mitch couldn't help but to ask, “how're things going with Melissa?”

“Great, I think, no, I know, I'm in love with her.”

Mitch couldn't believe what he just heard. “What!? You've only known her for what, like two weeks now.”

“More like four,” Harold couldn't believe he was saying it himself, “but yeah, isn't it crazy?”

“That's not the word for it, what the hell are you thinking? That girl can't be trusted, I tell you.” Mitch's words were sounding much more serious now.

“I don't know about her past, I only know about her now. Besides, I don't know what your problem with her is.” Harold was trying to not pay attention to his friend's words, but it was hard to do.

Mitch had a great deal of concern in his voice as he said “I don't know what else to say, I just don't want to see you get hurt again.”

“I'm all right, Mitch, you just don't need to worry about me this time, I trust her.” Harold was starting to sound defensive by this time.

“Ok, but I'm still going to keep an eye on her myself.”

Harold didn't really understand everything that was just said, but Mitch was his buddy and that meant a lot to him. They had been friends for as long as either of them could remember and Mitch had never steered Harold wrong before.

Harold went to work after that conversation, thinking nothing more of what was just said. After work, he ran into Staci. By now, Staci and Mitch had been dating for about six months. In fact, she was also friends with Harold. They would usually talk quite a bit when they ran into each other.

Staci was excited to see Harold. "Hey, Harry, how you doin'?"

Harold was also happy to see Staci and sounded happy as he said "Oh, fine, how about you?" Harold thought rather highly of Staci and was always happy to see her.

"Wonderful, thanks for asking!" Staci then continued "Hey, Mitch told me about you and Melissa. That's the greatest news I've ever heard."

"Well, I think it's pretty great myself," Harold said, sounding confident.

Harold was a little confused, however, when Staci said "hey, even Mitch thinks she's a great girl, so that's gotta mean something to you."

"Uh, could you run that past me one more time, I thought I

just heard you say he thought she was great.”

Melissa confirmed what she has just said, “yeah, that's what I said. What's so weird about that?”

“Just that he keeps telling me she can't be trusted and that I need to watch my back with her.” Harold had a funny look on his face.

As Staci kept talking, Harold was getting more confused “I don't get it, he keeps telling me how great she is, how he likes her and all kinds of stuff like that. I almost think he likes her better than me.”

Still, Harold was trying to justify what Mitch was doing. “Well, I guess maybe he's just trying to watch out for me.”

“Yeah, I guess so. Still, I think I'm going to ask him about this myself.”

“Don't worry about it, Staci. I'm sure he means well.”

“No, I'm not worried, just confused, and I don't like to be confused.” Even as she said these words, Staci was getting worried. Why would her boyfriend be telling two different stories?

“Well, if you think you should, that's up to you, but I'm not going to think anymore about this.” Harold was fine with just trusting Mitch.

Looking to end this conversation and start her

investigation, Staci said, “all right, well, I’ll see you later.”

“Right, later,” Harold said back to her.

Staci and Harold went their own separate ways. Harold put little thought into what was just said, at least for now. Staci, however, couldn't just let it go. She had to know what was going on. She thought to herself maybe Harold knew something about Mitch that she didn't. Still, she absolutely had to know what was going on with her boyfriend.

Staci went home to get ready to go see Mitch. She changed clothes and put on her makeup. Staci looked in the mirror to check to make sure she looked her best. Staci was quite beautiful. Her hair was blond and came to just below her shoulders, even in the ponytail that she normally wore. Her blue eyes seemed very bright and full of life. She was slender and stood about five foot, six inches. Although she had a very nice figure, she normally dressed to not show it. Today was the exception to that. She wanted to look her best for Mitch. After all, she had a few things to discuss with him.

Staci waited until after Mitch should be home from work then went to his apartment, as she does most days. Still, she couldn't stop thinking about what she and Harold talked about earlier. What could all this mean? She decided not to wonder about it and just ask. After all, Mitch was her boyfriend and she

trusted him. He had never lied to her before so why shouldn't she trust him?

As she was getting out of her car, Mitch was doing the same. "Mitch!" Staci called out to him.

"Hey Staci!" They hugged and they kissed, several times, in fact. Their normal hello usually took at least five minutes to complete. Everyone else who saw this couldn't help but to think it was incredibly romantic of the two of them to be this affectionate. They went inside and sat down on the couch.

Staci decided she would just ask the question that had been on her mind all afternoon.

"Mitch, I have a question for you. It's something that's been bothering me all day now and I have to ask."

"Ok, sweetie, you know you can ask me anything." Although Mitch was trying to hide it, he was always worried when she said something like that.

"Well, the thing is, I ran into Harry today and..."

"What do you mean ran into him? Are you two up to something behind my back?" Mitch said with a very serious tone in his voice.

Staci was a shaken by this accusatory tone in his voice. She didn't know what to think now. "Of course not, what's the matter with you? You know Harry and I talk sometimes and,

well, what is the matter with you?” As she spoke, her voice became more serious as well. She had gone from shaken to hurt to angry about what he had just said.

“I’m sorry, Staci, I’ve just had a really rough day. I didn’t mean anything, I mean, I just, I don’t know what else to say, I’m really sorry about that. I know I can trust you and I know I can trust Harry. I’m just really tired right now. Please don’t be upset, I have no right to say anything like that.”

Staci couldn’t stay mad at Mitch anymore. The look in his eyes told her he was truly sorry for what he said and she could tell he was tired and upset about something. She decided it would be best if she just changed the subject and asked him what was wrong.

“Mitch, dear, don’t worry about it. Do you want to talk about something? I can tell you’re really upset about something so come on, baby, talk to me.”

“Well, here’s the thing, at work today, we got the news that they were laying off fifty of us. The thing is, they’re going by volunteers first, but if they don’t get enough volunteers, I’m on the top of the list of people to be let go.” Mitch let out a depressed sounding sigh. “You know I can’t pay my bills on unemployment and I’m really worried about getting kicked out of my apartment and, well, I’m sorry to be bothering you with all this, I know it’s



my problem, not yours.”

“Mitch, Mitch, Mitch,” Staci said, while shaking her head at him, “don't you know me by now? If it's bothering you that much, you know it's going to bother me as well. I love you, Mitch. You have to know that anything that upsets you is going to affect me. I think I have a great answer to your problem, though.”

“I know sweetie, I know, I'm still sorry about what I said. So, what's this great answer you've got anyway? I'd love to hear it.”

“Well, we've been together for over six months now and things are still going great. I can easily see us together for a very long time and...”

As Staci was talking, Mitch interrupted “Whoa, hold on a minute, are you...”

“Mitch, it's rude to interrupt when a girl's talking” Staci said back to him, with a huge smile on her face.

“It sounded like you were going to, well, propose to me.”

“Well, I kinda was.”

Mitch was shocked. He stumbled for the words but couldn't come up with quite what he wanted to say. “I was thinking the same thing and I had this great plan in mind to, and now I don't get to...”

“Mitch! Oh my God! Oh my God! That's, Oh my God! I was going to say I was going to propose that I move in with you. Then we could share some of the expenses.”

Now, Mitch was even more embarrassed than before. “Wow, this is awkward. Um, wow, um, I'm not sure what to say right now.” He fumbled for the words but just couldn't get his thoughts out.

“Ok, well, let's just kinda forget that conversation happened right now. That way you can still do your thing later when you're ready.” Staci tried to soothe the awkward moment over as best she could.

“Staci, I'm, um, well, yeah, that sounds like a good idea. I do love you and I see us together that way, but, ok, like you were saying, but what about your roommate?” Mitch was doing his best to just pretend the whole thing didn't happen.

“Yeah, we haven't been getting along very well and I think it's time one of us moved out before we end up killing each other. Besides, that neighborhood is a dump and I'd be glad to get out of it.”

“Well, if you're ready to take that step, that's great, I'd be glad to have you here with me.”

For the rest of the evening, they chatted about moving plans and how they were going to split the bills up. They both

felt really good about this. They were actually very excited about the idea. They were both really each other's first serious relationship and they were hoping to be together for the rest of their lives.

Still, Staci couldn't help but to wonder why Mitch was giving her and Harold two different stories about Melissa. It also still bothered her how upset he got about her and Harold talking earlier that day. She really wanted to bring it back up again now that Mitch was in such a good mood but she didn't want to ruin that mood. So she just let it go for that day. She was not, however, going to forget about it.

That night, Staci started getting herself ready to head back to her old apartment to tell her roommate about what just happened when Mitch crept up behind her and put his arms around her. He started kissing on the back of her neck.

"Mitch, you know when you do that, I can't leave." Staci told him, trying not to give into the temptation she was feeling.

"I know. That's my master plan," Mitch whispered in Staci's ear, trying to sound as romantic as possible while wrapping his arms around her even tighter.

Staci giggled and squirmed, "but I still have to go home to tell Carrol."

"But you don't have to do it tonight, do you," again, Mitch

was whispering into her hear.

With that, Staci turned around, still in Mitch's arms. Her tone had changed from playful to more serious. "Mitch, I love you and you know it but I'm just not quite ready for what you're asking for. I will, but just not yet." Mitch opened his mouth to say something but Staci put her finger on his lips. "Please, if you respect me as much as you say you do, please don't ask me to. But I want you to know that I want to, and I will, but just not yet."

Mitch felt bad for making her feel uncomfortable and so he quickly changed his tone as well. He put his head on her shoulder and told her "I'm sorry Staci, I didn't mean for you to think I was trying to pressure you. I know after what happened to you that, well, I do love you and I do respect you. I just thought by this you meant you were ready to, that's all. I'm sorry if I came across any other way."

"Don't worry about it, I know you didn't mean anything, I'm just still a little sensitive, that's all."

"Do you want to talk about it, sweetie?"

"No, I'm fine. Hey, I just want you to know I really appreciate how patient you've been with me." She tried not to, but Staci couldn't help but to pull a little away from Mitch. Now, they were standing at the door, just holding hands.

"Staci, I love you, so I don't have a choice. You know I'd

do anything in the world for you. You didn't ask for what happened, and you certainly didn't deserve it."

"Yeah, but the last couple of guys that I went out with, when I told them I wouldn't, they just moved on."

"Then you deserved better." Mitch was very pleased with his choice of words. He wasn't normally good at finding the right words, but this time, he got it right.

"Then I deserved you," Staci told him, with so much love in her voice that Mitch couldn't help but just give her whatever she wanted.

"I don't know about that, I think you deserve better than me, but I'm just glad to have you. I want you to know this, even if you're never ready, that's fine with me." Mitch paused to just look at Staci for a moment." I want to be with you, in every way possible. If that one way isn't possible, I'm still glad to have you anyway."

"I love you, Mitch. But I have to go now. I'll start bringing my stuff over, when?

"Any time you like. You can start tomorrow if you want."

"Great! I'm looking forward to this. I feel really good about us."

"Me too. Good night, Staci."

"Good night, Mitch."

Much like when they meet, they take at least five minutes to say good bye. Several hugs and kisses later, they part ways. That night, Staci told her roommate, Carrol, about moving.

Carrol wasn't overly excited about it, but knows they've not been getting along very well lately. They had a major fight about a month ago and things haven't been the same since. The fight was actually over who was supposed to do the dishes that night but it was really months of friction between the two of them that simply exploded that day.

"Staci," Carrol said to her, "I know we've had our problems, but I want you to know I do care very much about you. Please remember that no matter what happened in the past, if you ever need anything, just let me know. No matter what, I'll always be your friend."

"I know, Carrol. I'm sorry things didn't work out here and I still love you to death, but I guess, sometimes, people just can't live together. What do you say we get together this weekend and have ourselves a little good bye party?"

"Sounds like a great time, I'll meet you back here Friday night?"

"Sure. Could you just make it the two of us. I like Mitch and all, but I want to spend some time with just us girls."

"Good with me, sounds like a great time. I'll be looking

forward to it. Hey, most of the stuff in here is yours anyway, so I'll just be getting my clothes out tomorrow. You'll be at work, so I won't see you until Friday. So, I guess I'll see you then.”

“Ok, well, I'm getting sleepy, so I think I'll go to bed now. Besides, like you said, I have to go to work early tomorrow. Good night, Staci.”

“All right. Good night to you, too, Carrol.”

Staci went to bed and tried to get some sleep, but she just kept having nightmares all night. Every time she fell asleep, she was taken back to the night she was raped. It was almost a year ago now, but it still felt almost like it was yesterday to her. She still remembered every detail from the clothes he was wearing to the smell of his deodorant.

Smell is an extremely powerful memory stimulant and this was certainly no exception. In fact, to this day, whenever she smelled that same brand of deodorant, she broke out in cold sweats. It took her nearly a month in counseling just to be able to buy herself deodorant because she would smell his on the shelves or even just see the brand and almost have a nervous breakdown.

Even though Staci filed the police report, the man who did it was never caught. The police officers tried to assure her they would do everything in their power to catch him, but the reality is that so few rapists are ever caught that she had little hope of

seeing him arrested. So she went through counseling for several months and attended many group support sessions and slowly, life for her was returning to normal.

She truly loved Mitch and wanted to give him the physical pleasure she knew he wanted. Still, she knew that when the moment came that she finally gave herself to him; it was going to be very hard for her not to panic. What Mitch didn't know is that for the last month, Staci had been going to a therapist for that very reason. The fact that he had not pushed her in any way to become physical with him meant a great deal to her and made her that much more comfortable with the idea of doing so.

Staci had also made up her mind that she was going to give herself to Mitch the next night. It was going to be the first night of their lives together and she believed that would be the perfect way to celebrate. After many sessions with her therapist and much anticipation, she finally believed she was ready for this.

Though that was probably the main reason for her nightmares, she was determined to do this for the man she loved. So she tried to sleep and finally, the nightmares gave way to more pleasant thoughts. She tried to focus on other things like Mitch, their future together and even thoughts of children went through her mind. Though she wasn't ready for that yet, she did want them at some point in the future.



The next day, Staci packed up her clothes and what few belongings she had in her and Carroll's apartment and started moving them to Mitch's place. It didn't take long, just a couple of trips in her car and she had everything. She wasn't sure what to do with everything just yet so she just kept it all in suitcases and boxes until he came home.

When Mitch did get home from work, he was in an unusually happy mood. "Staci!" he called out "This has been the best day of my life. I found out that I'm not getting let go from work, and the best part of it all is that I now get to come home to you!" He didn't even try to hold in his excitement.

Staci didn't either when she told him, "That's great news! I couldn't be happier for you, but your day is about to get even better yet."

"What do you mean, how could it?" Mitch was confused by her words.

"Come into the bedroom and I'll show you," Staci said with a coy smile on her face.

So they went upstairs to what was now their bedroom. Mitch was a little confused about how seeing her clothes in boxes in the corner of the room was supposed to make his day better. Though he thought about it for a second and thought she meant her living with him was supposed to make him happier. Maybe

that's just what was supposed to make it real to him, he thought.

"I don't get it, Staci, what's up here that's supposed to make my day any better?"

"I am, silly," Staci told him, as she started running her hand down his chest.

"But we were just downstairs, what's up here?" Mitch thought he knew what she was saying, but didn't want to sound too excited about it.

Staci decided to stop talking and now let her actions speak for her. She wrapped her arms around Mitch and started kissing him. They kissed for a while, becoming more and more passionate when she did something that was extremely surprising, she took his hand into hers and guided it up to one of her breasts. At this point, Mitch was sure he knew what she was doing. One part of him wanted to stop her and make sure this was ok, but at the same time, another part didn't.

Mitch had to do the right thing with Staci and stop to ask, "Staci, you know I want this, but are you sure you're ready?"

"Just, please, go slow with me. That's all I ask," Staci whispered.

"Of course. If you need me to stop, just say the word. You are in complete control." Mitch wanted to make sure she wasn't going to regret what was happening.

“Thank you, Mitch.” Somehow, having him tell her she was the one in control made her relax about what was happening. She was ready and knew he was as well.

Though she had moments of hesitation, whenever she seemed to tense up, Mitch asked her if she needed to stop. This made it possible for her to give herself to him. Afterwards, they were both completely relaxed and closer to one another than they had ever been before.

“Mitch, that was amazing,” Staci said, with tears in her eyes, “thank you for being patient with me during this.”

“Staci, I told you before, you don't need to thank me, besides, what just happened is more than thanks enough. I know that wasn't easy for you.”

That night, for the first night since the rape, Staci slept well. She didn't have any nightmares about it and she felt safe. She curled up in Mitch's arms and slept better than she ever had before.

They both had the next day off from work so they had an entire day to spend together. As happy as she was, she couldn't help thinking about a couple of days ago and the conversation she had with Harold about Mitch and Melissa. She thought she'd try to bring it up with him again.

“Mitch, there was something I started to ask you about a

couple of days ago, but we changed the subject and never got back to it.”

Mitch started feeling nervous again, “what is it, sweetie?”

“Remember when I said I ran into Harry,” Staci asked.

“Yeah, I'm still really sorry for what I said about that.”

Though he tried to hide it, Mitch was feeling a little awkward about the topic.

“No, that's fine. It's just that we were talking about Melissa.”

“Yeah,” Mitch sighed. “I know he talks about her all the time.”

“Well, he was telling me you keep telling him all these bad things about her and how he shouldn't trust her. Well, I don't get it, because when we talk about her, you really seem to like her.”

After a moment of thought, Mitch told her “Yeah, well, see, the thing is, um, I don't want Harry to get hurt again, you know that.”

“Yes, I know, you two have been really close for many years. I understand that, but why the two different opinions?”

Now, Mitch's tone had changed from thoughtful to indignant. “Well, just don't worry about it, I've got my reasons and that's all I want to say about it. It's just personal.”

“So, what you're saying is you don't want to talk about it?”

“Yes, that's what I'm saying.”

Staci could take a hint, especially when it's that obvious. Though Mitch said he didn't want to talk about it, she didn't understand. If he would have given her any kind of believable reason, she would have dropped it. That is, after all, what she wanted. At this point, she would believe anything Mitch said.

Later that day, Staci went out to do some shopping. While she was out, she called Harold.

“Hey, Harry, can we talk for a few minutes?”

“Yeah, sure, Staci, what's up?”

“Well, remember the other day and I told you I was going to talk to Mitch about his different stories about Melissa?”

“Yeah, and you did,” Harold asked.

“Yes, but he wouldn't talk about it. I don't understand what's going on with him and I don't like it in the least.”

Harold didn't really want to push it. “Look, Staci, don't worry about this. I'm sure he has his reasons. I trust him and I think you should too. So, I hear you two moved in together?”

“Yes, I'm really excited about it, too! It just happened so fast, we were talking about his job and the next thing you know we were making arrangements for me to move in and I think we're going to be getting engaged soon!” The more Staci talked,

the faster she talked. She was just so happy about everything that she forgot what she called to talk about.

“Whoa, slow down, girl, I can barely make out what you're saying. That sounds great, though. I'm really happy for the two of you. You guys make a great couple and if you do end up getting married, you better make sure I'm invited.”

“Are you kidding, Harry, you would be the best man. Hey, I've only got a couple of minutes so I have to go. I'm still going to find out what Mitch's deal about Melissa is, though.”

“Ok, Staci, I'll talk to you later...”

“Ok, bye Harry”

With that, they hung up. Staci wanted to just take Harold's advice and let this go, but she couldn't. She could only think of a couple of people she could talk to about this that might be able to help. Steve was the first choice, but since he was dead, that left only Jimmy. The problem was that she and Jimmy dated a couple of years ago and she wasn't sure if she could talk to him without causing problems.

Still, she knew Jimmy and Mitch went way back also and thought he just might be able to help her answer her little puzzle. “How awkward is this?” Staci thought to herself. Torn between her need to find out what was happening and having to speak with her ex-boyfriend.

She decided she was just going to have to talk to him, but to keep it as quiet and short as possible. She didn't want Mitch to know she was talking to an ex-boyfriend. Still, she had to know and Jimmy was the only one who even might have her answer.

So, she called Jimmy and got an answer right away.

“Staci?”

“Yes, how did you know?”

“I never deleted your number so it showed up on my caller ID.”

“Hey, this isn't a social call, I have a question for you.” Staci said, in a hurried voice, almost sounding panicked.

“Are you ok, Staci?”

“Yeah,” Staci answered and went on to explain what was going on with Mitch, Harold and Melissa. She told him about the two different stories and everything else that she could think of. Jimmy listened quietly, occasionally asking questions just to make sure he understood things right. That was something Staci always loved about Jimmy, how well he listened.

There was no way Staci could be prepared for what Jimmy had to say in response. “Look, this sounds a lot like this other girl Mitch dated once. See, Harry was seeing her and had been for about a year. I can't quite remember her name now, but I guess that doesn't matter much. Anyway, Mitch had it bad for her and

just kept hitting on her and telling her how bad Harry and her were together and how they should be together and eventually, he won out. They didn't last too long, though. I never knew what happened between them, just that they were only together for like a week or so.”

“Jimmy, was this girl's name Liz?”

“You know, I just don't remember anymore. I guess that was too long ago.”

Now Staci couldn't help but to think the love of her life broke up his best friend's relationship just so he could get together with his girlfriend. There really was only one way to find out for sure. Staci had to ask Liz. That's another conversation she knew was going to be awkward and she probably wouldn't get the truth out of her. Still, she felt like she had to try.

Staci looked Liz up and called her. She simply asked Liz if she and Mitch ever went out. She tried to emphasize to her that she didn't mind if it were true, but that, for Harry's sake, she needed to know.

Much to her surprise, Liz actually answered her question. She even told what she believed to be the truth. Liz admitted to her, that, yes, she and Mitch went out. Well, it was more like a one night stand. She felt so bad about it that she couldn't face Harry again. She didn't want to destroy a friendship so she never



told Harry why she was breaking up with him, only that she was. She went on to say that it was the worst thing she's ever done to another person in her life and if she could ever do anything to take that back, she would.

Now Staci had a dilemma to deal with. On one hand, she could just keep this secret and everyone else stays happy. The problem with that is she knew her boyfriend was a serious traitor. On the other hand, if she told Harold about this, it could cause him problems with Melissa because he could start hoping to get back together with Liz. One thing was for certain, she was going to tell Mitch that she knew.

When Staci got home, she was empty handed after what she said would be a day of shopping. Mitch couldn't help but to notice this lack of purchases so he asked "What did you go shopping for, sweetie? I see you didn't find it."

"Oh, actually I found it. See, I went shopping for some truth. You might want to try some on for yourself for once in your life."

"Whoa, what's going on? What's this all about?" Mitch looked nervous, even scared. He knew what Staci found out, but was trying to keep up some form of denial.

"You could say I did some digging about why you keep changing the subject whenever I ask why the two different stories

about Melissa.”

“What are you talking about?” Still, Mitch was trying to keep up his show but knowing, inside, it was hopeless at this point.

“See, there was two people that know you and Liz's little secret, and I managed to find them both today.” Staci was starting to sound indignant about the whole thing.

“So, you're telling me that you can't just trust me, is that it? After everything we've been through and after last night, now you say you don't trust me?” Mitch thought for sure if he brought that up, she would fold and just let it go. He underestimated Staci, however.

Staci was furious at Mitch. She was screaming, tears running down her face. “I did trust you, you could have given me a bad lie and I would have been happy, but you couldn't even do that. It's like you think I'm just not worth even trying for now that you've apparently gotten what you want from me.”

“Look, the truth is I made a horrible mistake. What more do you want from me?”

“Well, at least according to Jimmy, he thinks you want to make the same horrible mistake again.”

“How could you? You know I'm not ok with you talking to him, yet you did it anyway. You want to talk about trust, let's

talk about that.” Mitch was again trying to change the subject. He knew he was caught and the only thing left for him was to try to deflect the topic.

“NO! We're not changing the subject again. It's worked too many times now and I'm not letting you get away with it this time. Tell me the truth, do you want Melissa?”

“What do you want me to say? Yes, I think she's beautiful? Or no, I can't stand her? What?”

“You could start with the truth, Mitch. The simple truth.”

“You're not interested in the truth. In fact, I'm not sure what you are interested in. Maybe you're the one that got what you want from me.” This was new territory for Mitch, to try to turn the tables on Staci, to make her feel like the bad guy, or gal as the case may be.

“I told you this isn't going to work again. In fact, nothing is going to work for us again. I'm leaving!”

“Baby, please don't go,” Mitch begged, but to no avail.

Staci was still mostly packed from moving in with Mitch so she hurriedly grabbed her belongings and threw them back into her car. As she drove away, she realized she was now homeless. She was sure if she called Carrol, she could go back there so that wasn't a major concern right now. Right now, her biggest concern was what to do about Harold. She really believed he had

a right to know that his best friend destroyed his last relationship and might be trying to do it again with this one.

Staci did the only thing she felt she could do. She took out her phone and called Harold. All she got was his voice mail so she just left a simple message of “Harry, this is Staci. When you get the chance, I need you to call me. I have some stuff I need to tell you.”

# Chapter 3

## Retribution

After Staci and Harold talked for what seemed like all day, he thanked her for the info. He was too shook up to really know exactly what to say about everything he was just told. A million thoughts went through his mind. Things like should he even believe Staci. Still, he did believe her, partly because everything she just told him made perfect sense.

“Now what?” Harold thought to himself. He thought he should at least give Mitch a chance to tell his side of the story. Still, at this point, he would probably just lie about it to cover himself. So, the question remained what to do from here. So, he called the one person he knew he could talk to right now, Melissa.

“Melissa, can we get together for a while, I need to talk to someone about some stuff.”

Melissa would never say no to a request like that so she told him “Of course, Harold, come on up, I'm home right now.”

So he went upstairs and she could tell he was deeply troubled by something.

“Go ahead, Harold, if you don't know where to start, just start talking. I'll listen for as long as you need me to.”

So Harold started talking. After somewhere close to three hours, he managed to get through everything. Bouncing around from subject to subject, he felt like a rambling idiot but Melissa just sat quietly and listened.

“I'm sorry, Melissa. This isn't your problem, but here I am just basically dumping it out on you.”

Melissa, with her kindest voice told him, “Harold, don't you know anything about me by now? You should know at least that I am glad to do this for you anytime you need me to. I don't always know what to say but I can at least listen.”

“Yeah, I know, but you can't possibly be happy hearing me talk about Liz.” Harold felt a little bad talking about Liz to Melissa.

Melissa tried to sound as compassionate as she could. “I don't mind. She's part of your past and that means she's part of you.”

As they talked, Harold was starting to calm down and collect his thoughts. Then he paused and said “you know, Melissa, I don't know how you know exactly what to say, but you do.”

“I guess it's the same way you always know exactly what to say to me. You just do. Harry, I know how you felt about Liz. That's not something you just stop doing. I want you to know if you think you need to talk to her, I'm ok with that. If you think you need to go back to her, I'll understand. I just want you to be happy.” Melissa was trying to hide the fact that the thought made her very uncomfortable. Still, she would rather have Harold with

someone else and be completely happy than with her and not be as happy as he could be.

“Melissa, I don't know what I need right now. I'm over her, I want you to believe that. I'm in love with you. She might be part of my past, but you, you are my future.”

Still, somewhere deep down inside, Harold wanted to call Liz and talk to her about this. He knew better, though. Besides, he really was over her. He knew he would always have some kind of feelings for her, but she was not the one for him. He was now with the person he wanted to spend the rest of his life with.

Harold took Melissa's hands, looked her in the eyes and told her, “Melissa, my dear, sweet Melissa, I am completely, hopelessly in love with you, that's all that matters to me.” Harold had the same look in his eyes that he had every time he told her this.

With those words, Melissa's heart melted all over again. “And Harold, I feel exactly the same way about you. Still, if there is any doubt whatsoever in your mind, I want you to face it now. I want to have all of your heart completely and totally.”

“And you do. Please trust me on this, I am yours completely.”

“I do,” Melissa said, thinking to herself how she liked the sound of saying those words to Harold.



So Harold and Melissa continued to talk the rest of the day. The longer they talked, the more in love they were with each other. The problem remained that he was going to have to face up to Mitch sooner or later. Knowing what he knew now, he couldn't just let things go. He also knew the longer he waited, the less likely it would be that he could actually do it. So, that night, Harold made up his mind that the very first thing the next morning, he was going to call Mitch.

For the rest of the night, Harold thought about what he would say to his old friend. After everything they had been through, all the hard times they'd shared, and especially all the fun times they've had, he didn't really want to end things this way. Harold went to bed that night and dreamed of the phone call he was going to have to make the next day.

Then, the next day came. Harold picked up his phone and pulled up Mitch's number up on his cell phone. Everything seemed to be happening so slowly, it was almost as if the world had come to a near stop during this process. He kept trying to think of what to say. Finally, he pressed dial. With each ring, Harold was hoping nobody would answer. Then, on the third ring, just as he was expecting to hear the voice mail message, he heard Mitch's voice

“Hey, Harry.” a very dreadful Mitch answered.

“Mitch. We need to talk.” Harold said, slowly and calmly.

“Yes, we do. I was almost hoping you wouldn't call. I don't know what I can say...” Mitch was trying to come up with some kind of way to just talk to his friend, but the words were simply not to be found.

“Are you home now? Can I come over,” Harold asked, still almost hoping the answer would be no, but he knew they had to talk about this.

“Yeah, I'm here. You'll be here in what, about ten minutes? I'll be home,” still sounding dreadful, Mitch answered.

So Harold went to Mitch's apartment. He was almost on autopilot for the drive. Still, what could he say, what should he say? He just decided to go over and let the conversation go where it may. He arrived and knocked on the door. That was strange since he had never knocked on that door before. They always just walked right into each other's place and made themselves at home.

Mitch answered the door, still trying to recover from what had happened over the last couple of days.

Without even saying hello, Mitch started in with the speech he had been working on in his mind since this came out. “Harry, I am so very sorry for everything...”

Harold cut him off. "Mitch, sorry isn't going to work. I don't even know if I can forgive you. Right now, I'm not even sure we ever were friends. I mean, this isn't something you do to a friend, and you know it."

"I know it. Believe me, there isn't a day I don't kick my own ass for what I did to you." Mitch looked like a dog that had been beaten. "I just hoped and prayed that you would never find out. I want you to tell me, what can I do to make this up to you?"

Harold doesn't want to end this friendship, it's meant too much to him over the years. Still, he can't get over the fact that he and Liz both were played by this man.

"I don't know if you can. Come on, let's go for a drink."

Mitch was a little surprised by the offer "wow, it's only ten in the morning. Even I don't normally start drinking this early."

"Well, I think we could both use one right now."

The two of them went to a sports bar in the neighborhood, there they start serving alcohol at nine in the morning. They had a couple of beers and just spent the rest of the morning reminiscing of the good old days.

Finally, Harold had to ask "So, tell me something, why did you do it?"

"I don't really know. She was just so beautiful and I was completely in love with her."

“Don't you think I was?” Harold was asking for some kind of answer, anything at all that would make him think there was a good reason for what happened.

“I know you were. Believe me, if I could take it back, I would. Harry, I've been kept awake many nights because my conscience was eating at me for what I did.”

Harold still wanted to know one thing. “You know, it bothered me almost as much to find out the two of you only had a one night stand. I mean, it would have hurt no matter what, but you just used her for sex.”

Mitch hung his head in shame. He didn't really know what to say so he just started talking. “No, it was more than that. We wanted to stay together, but I broke it off because I felt so bad for what we'd done to you. I told her to just keep her mouth shut and go back to you, but she said she couldn't face you again after it happened. I told you, I loved her, but I couldn't stand to do that to you.”

“Mitch, after all the times we've had, good and bad, I can't just let our friendship end like this,” Harold said, feeling a little better after having heard the reasons.

With his spirits lifted a bit, Mitch said “I'm glad to hear that. I mean, you've been like the brother I never had and, well, let's get out of here. We've both got better things to do than cry in

our beer. I've got a girlfriend to try to fix things with.”

“Man, good luck with that. She was pretty upset when I talked to her.”

“So, we're good?” Mitch asked, nervously.

Harold thought for a few seconds, and then said “honestly, I'm still hurt, but we will be. Tell Staci that I forgave you and that might help a little.”

“Thanks, I hope so. I really don't want to screw this up. For the first time in my life, I'm in love. I'm actually scared I'm going to lose her.” Mitch said.

Harold said, “hey, tell her exactly that. No woman could resist what you just said.”

“Seriously, you think so?” For the first time since the whole ordeal, Mitch was starting to sound hopeful.

Harold gave the best advice he could think of. “Just tell her how you feel. Don't hold anything back, just say exactly what you feel for her.”

“Ok, I'll do it,” Mitch said.

The only problem is that Harold knew it wouldn't work. For all of what seemed to be good advice, it was doomed from the start. Once in a great while, Harold would actually let out the cruel mean side of himself that he usually kept well under control. This was one of those times. He really just wanted to get his

buddy's hopes up as high as possible, knowing all the while that he was headed for a giant crash.

That afternoon, Mitch called Staci. He had the biggest lump in his throat he had ever felt, he was so nervous that he thought he was going to throw up. At the same time, he was also filled with hope. His fingers were clumsy as he dialed her number. It took him three tries to finally get them right. On the third try, her phone started ringing. Doubts were racing through his mind. Still, he was acting on trust that his friend knew what he was talking about and this would work. Finally, he heard the voice on the other end.

"Hello," A familiar voice answered, but not Staci's. It was Carrol.

"Hey, Carrol? Is Staci there," Mitch asked, trying to fight off the fear and excitement going through his mind.

"So, calling to beg, are you, Mitch?" Carrol's voice sounded indignant as she spoke.

"Yeah, hey, I really need to talk to her. Please put her on," Mitch said back to her.

"Well, she's here but she said if you called, she didn't want to talk to you," Carrol said, still sounding indignant to him.

"Please, Carrol, I need to talk to her." Mitch was almost begging now.

“Look, I'm just the messenger but that's what she said.” Carol was starting to hang up the phone now when Staci started to say something to her.

Mitch heard Staci's voice in the background asking “So, is that him?”

Mitch's heart skipped a beat, he knew that voice. Just to hear her perked him up just a little.

“Yeah,” Carol said “It's him. He's beggin' like a little dog, too. He says he 'needs' to talk to you.”

“Carol, please tell her... tell her I'm sorry for everything, I'll do anything in the world, anything, to make this up to her. Tell her...”

“Look, Mitch, she said she doesn't want to talk to you. That's that, buddy, it's time to move on.”

“Tell her,” Mitch cleared his throat, “tell her I can't move on. Not without at least hearing it from her.” Mitch was a little devious by nature. He thought these words would at least get her on the phone. Once he had her there, maybe, just maybe, he had a chance.

Carol turned back to Staci “Staci, he says he wants you, needs you, and all that crap. He says he can't move on without you telling him yourself.”

Finally, he had his first glimpse of hope when Staci said

“Fine, give me the phone and I'll tell him myself.”

Hoping his plan had actually worked, he was practically in tears during the silence of the phone hand off. What could he say at this point? He knew he may have ruined the best thing that had ever happened to him with his stupid secret. After what seemed like forever, he heard Staci on the other end. This wasn't the same Staci he was used to. She was cold and unemotional; or at least the emotions she had were something he wasn't used to.

“Mitch, what do you want?” She said sternly

“Staci, please, just listen to what I have to say.” Mitch was in a position he had never been in before. A very delicate balance had to be maintained. He knew one wrong word from him would cause her to hang up and he also knew if she hung up, he had no hope with her anymore.

“Fine, you've got exactly one minute. I'm watching the clock so talk fast.”

“Look, sweetie...” Mitch had just made another mistake with that word.

Staci interrupted him. “Don't call me that anymore, I'm not your sweetie or anything like that. Fifty seconds.”

“Ok, Staci, I know I screwed up. I've done terrible things in the past. If I could do one thing in life, it would be to go back and change that. I just want you to know, I've never done



anything like that before then or since.”

“That doesn't change the fact that you did it.” Still, Staci's voice was sounding stern and Mitch was having a really hard time dealing with this side of her.

Again, Mitch was almost begging, “No, it doesn't, and I know it. Look, I talked to Harry about it and he has forgiven me. That has to mean something, doesn't it?”

“Something, yes, but not enough.” Though her voice was still stern and cold, it was starting to soften just a little after she heard Harold had forgiven him.

“I just want you to know you are the most important thing in my life. Without you, I have this giant empty space in my heart. I'm in love with you, Staci, and I'm terrified right now.”

Now, Staci was starting to let him talk, “so, you're scared of what, losing your newest toy?”

“Of losing the only woman I've ever truly been in love with.” Mitch was surprised by his own words as they came out.

Staci's cold stance started to melt a little with those words. She wanted to just forgive him now but she was still too hurt by everything that had happened. Still, those were the words she had been waiting all her life to hear. Still, the question remained of whether or not she could ever truly trust him again.

Staci was starting to sound gentle as she told him, “Mitch,

I don't know if I can really trust you now. I need time. I need to think and I need you to give me that.”

“Staci, I just want you to say one thing to me,” Mitch said, with a very sad tone to his voice.

“What's that?” Staci sounded just as sad as she spoke.

Mitch's voice started to crack a little as he said “Tell me it's not over.”

“I don't know. I'm sorry, but I just really don't know right now.” Though Staci didn't want to hurt Mitch, she felt he should be told the truth.

“Then I'll wait for you to decide. For as long as you need, I'll wait.” Again, Mitch was surprised by his own words.

“I wouldn't wait if I were you.” Staci was still trying to sound stern.

“I can't help it, Staci, I love you.”

“I have to go now, Mitch. I'll talk to you more later.” She had to hang up before she gave in.

“Ok, just please don't give up on me.” Mitch barely managed to get those words out before she hung up the phone.

Staci hung up the phone and started crying. Carrol tried to offer some kind of comfort but that was no use. Staci knew she had a very special man but didn't know if she could be with him after finding out what he had done.

Carrol could see how much Staci was being torn apart over this. She continued to try to offer some kind of support. Staci, however, was simply too distraught over this to be calmed down.

“Staci,” Carrol said in a gentle voice.

“What,” Staci answered through the tears.

“I can see how hurt you are over this. I just want you to know I don't think you should make any kind of decision right now.” Carrol said.

“But, why shouldn't I?” Staci asked, almost in an argumentative way.

“Has he done anything to you?”

“No, I just can't trust him.” Staci wasn't even sure what she was arguing about or why, but just felt like fighting with someone right now.

“But has he done anything to you?” These words that Carrol spoke came from the experience of losing the best man she ever met over something much more petty and she had regretted it ever since.

“Well, he accused me of seeing other men and sneaking around behind his back. Then he kinda yelled at me when everything blew up.”

“He was mad, upset, hurt and this list can go on. He was

also scared of you leaving him and you know it.”

“Carrol, who's side are you on anyway?”

“I'm on yours, you just can't see it right now. I think the best thing for you is to just go to bed right now and try not to think about this anymore tonight.”

“That sounds like a good idea to me. Thanks girl.”

“Hey, I told you I'm here for you.”

“Yeah, I know. Good night.”

“Night, Staci.”

They went to bed. Staci dreamed many different kinds of dreams. Even one of them was about Mitch being the one who raped her. She woke up almost screaming and soaked in sweat over that one. Eventually, however, she calmed herself down and got back to sleep again. The next dream helped her get through the night. It was again about Mitch. Only this time, the two of them were married with a couple of kids playing with their little puppy in the back yard on their perfectly manicured green lawn. Yes, this was the life she wanted to have.

The next morning, Harold called Staci. She was a bit surprised about this but figured it might be important so she answered her phone.

“Hey, Harry, what's going on?”

“Oh, just wanted to see how you were. Mitch told me

yesterday he was going to call you.”

“Yes, he was just the sweetest guy in the world. Then again, he always is. I’m so confused about the whole thing, though. I mean, he did this terrible thing to you and you forgave him and I guess if you can, so can I.”

“What are you talking about? Forgive, I couldn’t do anything like that. In fact, it was all I could do to stop from wanting to kill him after what he did to me.”

“So, you’re still mad at him? What’s going on here?”

“Well, we had it out pretty good, and after a while he stormed off and said ‘at least maybe I can still save my piece of ass.’ I told him I would tell you he said that. I think you deserve to know. I guess he didn’t believe me from the sounds of things.”

“No, I guess not. And I was actually going to call him today and tell him I would come back to him. Harry, thanks for the info. I owe you for this.”

“No, Staci, I owed you. So now you can just call us even.”

“Hey, thanks. I guess from the sounds of things, you’re the one who was the real friend. Well, I have to go. Busy day today, you know.”

“All right, I’ll see you later.”

After that conversation, Staci knew what she had to do.

Mitch was not going to be anywhere near her again. She had made up her mind never to speak to him again. If he called, she would just not answer her phone. No, even better, she was going to just block his phone number. So, that's just what she did. She couldn't stop thinking about how lucky she was Harold called her to let her know what was really going on.

Mitch tried calling their apartment several times but simply got a message that he was not able to call that number. He tried being sneaky and calling from other phone numbers. Just as soon as either of them recognized his voice, however, they hung up on him. He was utterly crushed. The love of his life had simply brushed him aside, like he was just an unwanted piece of old trash. Too bad for him, he never knew exactly why.

Harold also slowly phased his way out of Mitch's life. He had his payback and was happy with it. He continued to talk to Staci, though nothing more than a casual level of conversation. Strangely, he knew he had just destroyed two lives, but felt no remorse for what he had done.

# Chapter 4

## Disaster

Harold and Melissa were becoming closer than either of them thought possible. They had become so deeply in love that neither of them could stand the thought of living their lives one day without the other. Though they had only been together for a few short months now, they both believed the other was their soul mate. Ironically, neither of them believed in a soul mate until they met each other.

“Melissa.” Harold said to her in a very serious tone of voice. He made her a little nervous with the way he sounded.

“Yes, Harold?” She answered, sounding a little timid but trying to hide it.

“I know we’ve only been together a few months now, but I know we were meant to be together. I know this is early but, well, what I’m saying is this: Melissa, will you marry me?”

“Harold! Yes! Yes, I will!” Melissa was excited; tears were starting to well up in her eyes as she said these words.

“We don’t have to do this right away. I don’t want us to rush into anything and ruin what we have. I just want to know that we are getting married.”

Melissa was still amazed at how Harold said just the right thing at just the right time. “Right, I agree completely. I don’t think we should hurry, but, oh my God, I love you so much



Harold. Melissa Ramus, I like the sound of that.”

“So do I.” Harold had the biggest smile ever as he said those words.

So, they started making their plans. They knew it would probably be over a year before the wedding actually happened. As they had agreed, they didn't want to rush into a marriage. They were madly in love, but neither of them had lost their sense of reality. They also knew they would be just as much in love in a year as they are today so there was no need to hurry.

Harold was at the store one day and ran into Mitch.

“Hey, Harry!” Mitch was happy to see his old friend.

“Mitch, hey, how you been?”

“Oh, ok. I guess I'm still getting over Staci, but after what I did, I suppose I didn't deserve her. Hey, I heard the news about you and Melissa. That's great. I'm really happy for you two.”

“Well, I'm glad to hear it. So, what happened, first you hated her and now you think it's great that we're getting married?”

“Well, I guess even I can be wrong at times. Hey, I've been meaning to give you a call, see if we can get together sometime and get caught up. It's been a while, you know.”

“Yeah, I know. It's just been crazy for me. Work's been insane and now the wedding planning. It's just crazy, I'm tellin' ya.”

“Well, hey, what do you say? Can you make a little time for an old friend?” Mitch asked.

“Of course, I'm not going to be busy this Saturday and Melissa has her Saturday classes. So, I'm not going to be doing anything until at least one. What do you think? You want to try our old Saturday morning bowling game?”

“That sounds great. I'll see you then. Say around ten?”

“Yeah, see ya then.”

Once Harold got home, Melissa came immediately down to see him. He almost wondered how long she had been watching for him to get back. It was endearing to him to know that this woman actually waited anxiously, watching for his return.

She came through his door, almost dancing, singing a song under her breath. Harold wasn't surprised by this, not even in the least. In fact, if she doesn't act like this, then he starts to worry about her.

“Hey, Melissa, what's up?” Harold was always much happier when he saw her, no matter how happy he was before.

“Not much, I just heard a song I like and I can't stop singing it. You know, one of those songs that just make you happy.” As Melissa talked, her words were in time to the song she was singing.

“Yeah, I know what you mean. Hey, Saturday, me and

Mitch are going bowling in the morning. That ok with you?"

"Of course. We still going out to look at that reception hall later?"

"Yeah. We'll be done by the time you get out of your class so you won't even know I was gone."

As they talked, the two of them made their way to the sofa and sat down. They just sat there, holding hands as the conversation continued.

"Ok," Melissa told Harold, "I hope you guys have a good time. I know you haven't seen much of each other lately."

"Yeah, we just kinda drifted apart. You know how that goes sometimes." Harold was sounding a little sad by it or maybe a little sad about what he had done.

"Unfortunately, yes. I've had some friends over the years that, we never really had anything go wrong with us, we just kinda drifted."

That started a conversation between the two that lasted most of the night. They talked about old friends, new friends and people they just couldn't forget.

The next morning, Mitch and Harold met at their old favorite hangout, the bowling alley that was basically between where the two of them lived. It wasn't a great place but wasn't bad either. Besides, neither of them could bowl very well, they

just used it as an excuse to get together and catch up on what's been happening in their lives.

As usual, that's exactly what they did this time. They were bowling, talking, laughing and just all around having a good time until the sixth frame when Harold's phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Hello, Harold Ramus?”

“Yes, that's me.”

“Mr Ramus, We found this number in a cell phone of a Melissa Gerdson.”

Harold's heart skipped a beat or maybe several. He could feel it sinking in his chest. He had heard of people getting calls like this and he knew something was wrong with Melissa. He couldn't help but to think the worst had happened and it was up to him to identify the body now. So many thoughts went through his mind in the few seconds silence on the phone. Then he finally got himself composed enough to ask the question.

“Is there a problem?”

“Mr. Ramus, there's been a terrible accident and she's in the hospital. This was the only number stored in her phone so we called it. I take it you know Melissa?”

“Yes, she's my fiancée. Is she all right?”

“Well, sir, she's in critical condition right now. I'm just a

cop, though, not a doctor, so they would know that answer better than me.”

“Ok, thanks.”

Harold hung up quickly. Mitch could tell what the call was for. He didn't need to ask what was going on, he only said “You need me to drive?”

“Yeah, you mind. I don't think I could right now.”

So Mitch drove to the hospital. When they got there, he stopped at the emergency room entrance to let Harold out. Harold then took off running into the building, frantically asking everyone he could find where Melissa was. He finally got an answer from one of the nurses. She was in the intensive care unit on the second floor. Not even waiting for the elevator, he took off running up the stairs. With each step he took, it was getting harder for him to see through the tears in his eyes. By the time he got to the second floor, he was all but blinded by them.

Harold tried to compose himself as best he could before going to the nurses' desk to ask where Melissa was. “Could you please tell me where Melissa Gerdson is?” He was surprised by how he was actually able to ask.

“Are you family, sir?” The nurse asked in a disturbingly calm voice.

“No, I'm her fiancée.” Harold was frantic, but trying to

hide it.

“I'm sorry, but only family members are allowed to visit patients in the ICU.”

Mitch came walking up the hall just in time to hear the conversation. “It's ok, I'm her brother and he's with me” he told the nurse.

“If you say it's ok, but I'm going to have to ask you to keep your visit to under ten minutes at this time. She's in the second door to the left.” Again, the nurse was speaking very calmly. Then again, it was her profession and she had to be.

“Thanks Mitch,” Harold whispered as they started to walk away.

“Just go see her and let's both hope nobody finds out about this. I'll be waiting in the lobby.”

As Mitch walked away, he had an idea. He went back to the nurse's desk and told her “Is there any way I could get his name on some kind of list so I don't have to be here for him to see his future wife? I'm her only family in the area, you know.”

“Yeah, we'll put the name in the computer. That does make things much easier for is.”

Fortunately for the both of them, the hospital didn't ask for any kind of proof of relationship. They just took Mitch's word for it.

Harold walked into Melissa's room and saw her laying there, wires and hoses hooked to what looked like every inch of her body. He couldn't stand to see her this way, but knew he couldn't do anything about it. She looked so bruised and cut up that he could barely recognize her. At this, he could no longer hold back his emotions. He didn't want to take the chance of her hearing what he was about to do. He stepped back out into the hall and started crying.

After he managed to compose himself, Harold went back into her room. He almost started in again, but the doctor walked in right then. Right away, he asked "Is she going to be all right?"

"Well," the doctor replied, "she's in pretty bad shape right now. It's going to be pretty touchy for the next few days. We had to do surgery to stop the internal bleeding and we had to drill a hole in her head to relieve the pressure. All in all, the fact that she's still with us right now is a good sign."

"So, what, do you think she's going to make it? Is that what you're saying?" Harold was just searching for any kind of hope right now. He was trying to read between the lines of what the doctor said to try to find anything that sounded positive.

"I really can't say right now, Mr..."

"Just call me Harold."

"All right, Harold, I'm sorry I can't say much more than

that, but, we're going to do everything we can to see Melissa through this.”

That was a small amount of comfort to Harold. He knew this looked really bad. He spent the rest of the time he was allowed to visit just setting there, holding her hand that didn't have anything attached to it and trying not to start crying again. He mostly just talked to her, about anything he could think of but mostly to keep his own mind off of what he was looking at. He kept talking to her for as long as the nurse would let him stay.

“Sir,” the nurse interrupted, “sir, she needs her rest now.”

“Ok,” Harold said as calmly as he could. Then he looked down at Melissa and told her “I'll be back as soon as I can. You just rest and get better. I love you.”

Finally, Harold came back down to the lobby where Mitch was still waiting. They didn't say a word during the ride, Mitch just drove Harold home and dropped him off. Mitch broke the silence and asked, “are you going to be ok?”

“I think so, thanks. I'm just ready to get some rest right now.”

“Well, if you need anything...” Mitch wasn't sure what to offer, so he just let his buddy know if he needed anything, anything at all, he was there for him.

“I know, thanks, Mitch. I'll see you later.”



That night, Harold tried to sleep, but dreams of Melissa kept him awake most of the night. He tried taking a night time sleep aid. That didn't help; he just couldn't get the image of Melissa out of his mind. When he did finally get to sleep, he dreamed of the car crash she was in. He tried, but couldn't wake up from this one. He saw, with vivid detail, what happened to her. Finally, the next morning, he woke up. Drenched in sweat and still shaking, he tried to clear his head from the nightmare.

Harold called in to work and told them what had happened. They told him to stay with Melissa for as long as he needed to. He had three weeks of vacation to use still and if he ran out of time, they would still let him stay off work if he needed to. Harold thought to himself how lucky he was to have such a great boss as he got himself dressed to go see Melissa.

Still, nothing could have dropped his spirits as fast as when he saw her laying in the hospital bed. She looked even more lifeless than the night before. Her skin was clammy and almost gray. He stared at her for the longest time just to make sure she was still breathing. The nurse walked in behind him and put her hand on his back in an attempt at comforting.

"I'm so sorry," the nurse said, "we tried to catch you before you came in here to let you know she took a turn for the worse early this morning. It doesn't really mean anything just yet,

you have to remember people in this condition usually have good and bad days before we know how they're going to be long term.”

It took Harold several seconds to snap back to reality. After processing what the nurse said, he told her “thank you, nurse. I know you guys are doing your best. I'm just scared to death of losing her. We were going to get married and have a family and now, I just don't know what I'm going to do without her.”

“Don't start talking like that. She needs to hear positive words right now,” the nurse told Harold.

Harold was ashamed of what he had said. He looked at Melissa, then back to the nurse and said, “I'm sorry, I know. Could you just please leave now so I can talk to her?”

“Of course.” The nurse said politely.

The nurse left and Harold started trying to talk to Melissa. He didn't really know what to say so he just rambled on for about an hour before the nurse interrupted.

“I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to ask you to leave the room for a few minutes while we change her dressings.”

“It's ok, I need to get some fresh air. I'll come back after lunch.”

Harold left the hospital to try to eat. Everywhere he went, and everywhere he looked, he couldn't stop thinking about

Melissa. He was certain she was going to die, and soon. He couldn't stand the thought of living even one minute without her but he was trying to prepare himself for that very thing.

When Harold sat down at a restaurant for lunch, he saw another young couple having a meal together. He couldn't help but to think of the time they sat quietly, eating, but knowing they were falling for one another. It was all he could do to not lose himself right then. He knew he had to do something, but he didn't know what. So he sat quietly, eating his lunch.

# Chapter 5

## The Stranger

After Harold finished his lunch, he got up, payed his bill and walked out of the restaurant. As he walked out, a stranger followed him out the door.

“Excuse me, sir!” the stranger shouted out to him. Harold either didn't hear him or didn't pay attention to him, but that didn't stop him from pressing on. “Excuse me, Harry!”

Startled by hearing his name, Harold turned around. “Oh, I'm sorry, I'm kinda in my own little world here. Um, do I know you?”

“Not really, we've met a couple of times before at parties and I just happened remembered your name.” The stranger said.

Though this man made him nervous, Harold didn't want to be rude to him. “Oh, well, what can I do for you?”

“Say, you look like your best friend just kicked your dog. I just wondered if I could do anything for you?”

Try as he might, Harold just couldn't help but to feel more at ease with this person as they talked. The next thing he knew, he was setting on a park bench, pouring his heart out to this person that he couldn't even remember.

“Look,” Harold said “I'm really sorry to be pouring my problems out on you, I've just had a really bad last couple of weeks, that's all.”

The strange man was able to ease Harold with just his

words. "Look, I'm here to help. Anything I can do, I'm glad to help you."

"Why would you say that," Harold asked, "when we don't even know each other."

"Harry, I'm not just a person, I was sent by God to help you."

Harold sat in amazement, now he was fairly certain that this man was an escaped lunatic who was stalking him. He finally managed to say something in response "yeah, sure, and, um, did you forget to take something this morning?"

"I know it sounds crazy but, really, I'm an angel. I'll prove it to you. Remember when you were four and took the candy from the store by your parent's house? You thought nobody was watching, but someone was."

"Sure, who hasn't taken candy from some store once," Harold asked, sarcastically.

"It was a Snickers bar, and even though you did have the thirty five cents, you were planning to use it to buy an ice cream from the truck later that day so Mitch talked you into just taking it."

Harold was a little nervous now, but knew this could still be just a lucky guess, or maybe someone who knew them from the younger days. There were still many explanations for what

just happened.

“You still don't believe me, do you?” The stranger was trying to come up with something else that would prove his story.

“Not in the least. You're going to have to do better than that.” Harold started to get up to leave, hoping something terrible wasn't about to happen.

So, then the stranger said “well, I also know this little secret about what you did to Mitch and Staci just recently.”

Harold was shocked to hear that. He told nobody whatsoever about this. He hadn't even stopped to consider how there was one person who was watching over everything he said and did. So, he thought to himself, this just might be the real thing.

“So, angel, what do you come to me for?” Harold wasn't extremely religious, but did believe such things were possible.

“I come to help you.”

“Help me with what? And by the way, which angel are you?”

“Melissa is going to die and no doctor can save her.” The angel told him, with a matter of fact tone in his voice.

Harold's world came crashing down around him with those words. Was this the angel of death, he thought to himself. Then, it came to him that maybe this angel was sent to help.

Maybe this angel would save Melissa for him.

“But you can?” Harold was excited at the thought.

“No, but I have a way to keep her with you.”

“Tell me, angel. How can I keep her?” Harold thought to himself that maybe he should be nervous now, but he just let that thought pass.

“Come with me and I will show you.” Then the angel stood up and started to walk down the sidewalk. He didn't even take time to look back and walked in such a quick pace he was several yards away before Harold even stood up to follow.

Harold hurried to catch up to the angel as he walked away. “Angel, you still haven't told me your name,” he called out, almost hoping it would at least slow him down.

“Does it matter?” As he had been doing, the angel was keeping his answer as short as possible.

“No, I guess not, but I want to know what to call you.”

“Abaddon.”

As he heard the name, the hair on Harold's neck stood up. He simply ignored it. “All right, Abaddon. Where are we going?”

“You talk too much. Just follow me.”

They walked for what seemed like miles to a rundown old house. Harold felt a little uneasy about going inside. Not



especially because of some religious moment, he just felt like if he stepped into this house, he would fall through the floor and plummet to his own death. Harold followed the angel into the house. It was just as run down looking inside as it was outside. He stepped very carefully to make sure the floor wasn't going to collapse as he walked across it.

“Abaddon, why would an angel live in a place like this?”

“I don't really live here. I just chose here because I knew we wouldn't be bothered by anyone. Now, here is the crystal that you will need. Here are the words you must speak while the crystal is touching both of you.”

“Both of us,” Harold asked.

“Yes,” Abaddon answered, “it would be best if you can put it between your hands but her forehead would work also.”

“And she will be healthy again?” Again, Harold was sounding excited, but his excitement was quickly crushed.

“No, I told you she is going to die. With this, she will remain alive inside of you. You will hear her voice and feel her presence. Her soul will become part of yours. In this way, you will never be apart again.”

Harold took the items from the Abaddon and looked down at them. He questioned whether this was right or not but thought if it was from an angel, it must be ok to do.

The angel spoke to Harold again “Now, you must sign this promise to only use these items once and never again. By signing this, you are bound through this life and the next and if you break this agreement, you will be sent to the place of fire and Melissa with you.”

Harold was horrified by the thought of sending himself to hell, but even more so by the thought that he would be dragging the love of his life with him. He paused to think about what he was doing. He looked up at Abaddon. Abaddon was looking back at him very impatiently. He looked down at his feet. Then, he looked at the floor around his feet thinking again how it's a miracle in itself that the floor hasn't collapsed.

“I promise.” Harold said as the angel handed him a very old parchment paper with writing on it he could not understand. “Why should I sign what I can't read?”

“It's in Hebrew. Don't you trust an angel?”

“But why me?” Harold was still overwhelmed about everything that was happening.

In his soothing voice, Abaddon said “Let's just say I've seen something in you that I've taken a liking to.”

So Harold took the pen. As he put his fingers on it, he felt a pinch in his thumb. He immediately dropped it only to realize he was bleeding.

“What's this,” Harold demanded, “your pen made me bleed!”

“These must be signed with your blood. Take the pen again, it will not stab you twice, it already has all it needs.”

Harold nervously took the pen again, afraid it would stab him a second time, but as he was promised, it did not. The pen wrote a dark red color that he was sure was his blood. His stomach was churning, twisting into knots upon knots as he wrote on this paper. He felt cold as the ink made from his own blood flowed onto the paper. Just before he finished signing his last name, he paused to consider whether he was doing the right thing or not. Abaddon watched in suspense as this happened. He looked up and asked “Is this right? I mean, really, should I be doing this, it just doesn't seem natural.”

“Would an angel come to you and offer this gift to you if it weren't meant to be. If you don't want it, I'll just go now and I'm sure I'll find someone else in five minutes who wouldn't think twice about this.”

Harold looked back down and slowly formed the last letters of his name on the paper. He handed it back to the angel who quickly rolled the paper back up, looking curiously proud of himself. Again, he questioned if this was the right thing to do or not. He stumbled with his words a little as he tried to speak. He

looked down while he thought of exactly how to phrase his one last question, but when he looked back up, Abaddon was now gone. Just as quickly as he came into Harold's life, now he was gone again. A cold breeze blew through an otherwise closed house. Harold thought that was a little strange, but figured it was just gaps in the wall or something like that. Still, in the middle of summer, he shivered from the breeze.

Harold carried the crystal and piece of paper back to the hospital. It took him what seemed like all day to walk back there again. He was both nervous and excited at the same time. He knew the two of them were meant to be together, but it never occurred to him that even God himself believed it too.

On his arrival to the ICU wing, the nurse on duty stopped Harold to make sure he wasn't surprised when he saw Melissa. She had taken yet another turn for the worse. The nurse told him she was a little better earlier that afternoon but as the day went on, her vital signs had been getting weaker. They were sure she would not make it another day. Harold thanked her for warning him and went into the room, intent on what he was about to do.

He almost charged into her room, not even stopping to think anymore. He was afraid that every moment that passed was the one moment that may mean it's too late for this to work. As he looked at his beloved Melissa, he knew he had to free her from

the pain she had to be feeling right now. He pulled the crystal and the paper from his pocket. He placed the crystal in her hand and then placed his hand on top of it. Then he read the words on the piece of paper:

“With the will of the one below  
The one from whom all powers flow  
Our hearts and minds become entwined  
Our souls are to be combined  
To be not dead, nor be alive  
Within this body you shall survive  
Your spirit in me be restored  
By the power of the darkest lord”

With the reading of these words, Harold knew what he had just done. Abaddon was an angel, but not sent from God. Harold had just made a deal with the original fallen angel, the devil himself. He now knew the words on the agreement were intentionally written so he could not read them. “What have I done?” He thought to himself. Just then, Melissa's heart monitor went flat. Quickly, he shoved the items back into his pocket.

The doctors and nurses worked for several minutes trying to revive her, but it was hopeless. They chased Harold out of the

room as they tried shocking her heart back into beating. When that didn't work, they performed C.P.R. for several minutes before declaring her dead.

The doctor came out into the waiting area to talk to Harold.

“I'm sorry, but there was nothing we could do. It was just too much damage to her body.”

“I know, Doctor. I know you tried and thank you all.”

“Do you want to say good-bye to her?”

“Yes, I think so.”

Harold slowly walked back into the room. He knew what he was going to see was her lifeless body, but he couldn't stop himself from being swept away with emotions when he did. First he couldn't do anything, just frozen from the sight. Then he cried for several minutes. Then he became angry with life and the world in general for taking her away so soon. Finally, as he calmed down, he thought about what he had done just before she died. He wondered if it even worked.

Mixed emotions were all around him. Was this really just the workings of a crazy man? If it didn't work, then he hadn't just doomed himself to hell. If it did, then he was going to have her with him, but at what cost? He just stood there, staring at Melissa, not sure what to think anymore. He decided he would

hold her hand one last time. As he did, he leaned over to give her a good-bye kiss. As his lips touched her forehead, he felt dizzy. Then the world went dark.

He opened his eyes to see a nurse kneeling beside him, shaking him and asking “are you all right?”

“Um, uh, yeah, I think so,” Harold finally managed to mumble out an answer.

“We came in here, you had collapsed on her. We laid you down here and I've been trying to get you to wake up for about five minutes now.”

“Oh, I'm sorry, I guess, just the stress and all.”

“Don't worry, you're not the first this has happened to and I'm sure you won't be the last,” the kind sounding nurse assured him.

Harold went home after leaving the hospital. He was exhausted, devastated, and felt like he had nothing left to live for. He even considered killing himself because he couldn't take the loss. Without even bothering to change, he laid down to go to sleep.

# Chapter 6

## The Afterlife



As Harold came to his senses the next morning, he felt very strange, almost as if everything was even more real than before. He was more aware of his surroundings than he had ever been before. "What's going on here?" he thought to himself.

"I don't know, but it feels really strange." He heard someone answer.

"What? Who said that?" Harold asked.

"It's me, Melissa, why do you ask? Don't you know my voice anymore?"

Harold was sure he had just gone insane. The whole bringing her spirit into his body couldn't have actually happened, he thought to himself. Maybe he was still unconscious and this was just some kind of bizarre dream he was having.

"Harold, what's going on? Where am I? Why can I hear what you're thinking? I must be dead. No wait, I can't be, I still feel the pain from the crash, am I hallucinating? I'm..."

"No, Melissa" Harold interrupted, "you're not dead. I've got quite an unbelievable story to tell you."

For several hours, Harold tried to explain what had happened. Back and forth they talked, only inside Harold's head. Melissa didn't really understand, but tried to go along with this.

"So, what you're saying is you made a deal with the devil to keep me alive inside of your body?"

“Yes, that's pretty much what I'm saying.” Harold thought to himself how crazy that all sounded.

“Yeah, it does sound crazy, except here I am trapped in your body with you.” Melissa thought for a few seconds then continued, “so,” asking nervously, “that stuff you said and did right before I died, that wasn't just some kind of dream?”

“No, like I said, I was desperate and couldn't stand the thought of losing you and...”

Melissa interrupted “and you did this without even thinking about me?”

“I was thinking about you. I thought you would be happy. We're together now, and even closer than we've ever been before.”

“There's one little problem, though.”

“What's that?” Harold was trying to stay positive, but having a hard time doing just that.

“I'm in pain. I still feel everything from the crash. Don't you feel it, too?” Melissa was sounding more distraught as she spoke.

“Yeah, I guess so, but I just didn't pay any attention to it.”

“Well, here's the thing,” Melissa was sounding angry, “as the medicine wears off, it's going to get worse. My leg and arm were both broken, my skull had a hole drilled in it and I had

several fractured ribs. Don't you think that's going to hurt just a little?"

"I never thought about that," Harold said sadly, "I just figured your soul or spirit or whatever would stay alive in me, I never thought anything else would come along, too."

"Yeah, well, maybe you should have read the fine print on that paper you signed."

"I'm so sorry, Melissa. I just assumed you would want this, too."

"It's ok, I'm just a little freaked out right now. The question is, what are we going to do now? We're going to need pain medication and they're not going to just give it to you."

As they spoke, the pain was steadily becoming worse for them. It had become unbearable for Melissa and nearly so for Harold. They thought about what to do about this when Harold decided he would just go to the emergency room and complain of the pain they were feeling.

Harold walked into the emergency room and explained to the nurse in admitting that he was having unbearable migraines, chest pain and pains in his leg and arm. He didn't know anything about why, it just suddenly started happening that day.

Just to get him to calm down, the doctor gave him a shot of pain medicine. Then he was given every test he could have

thought of, x-rays, scans, blood tests, everything imaginable. Finally, after several hours, the doctor came in to talk to him.

“Harold, can we talk?”

“Yeah, doctor, what is it? Can you help me?” Harold was nervous but tried not to show it.

“Well, what we think is you're feeling some sympathy pains for Melissa. This should, hopefully, go away soon, but to help it along the way, I'm going to prescribe you some antidepressants.”

“Doctor, I can assure you that's not it. I'm in serious pain. The shot made me feel much better, but I'm afraid of when it wears off.” Harold was starting to have a hard time talking. It must have been a pretty powerful shot they gave him.

“I know you feel it, but every test we've done keeps showing nothing's wrong with you. You're just going to have to trust us about this.”

“Please, when the pain comes back, I'm afraid of how bad it's going to hurt.” Melissa added, though only Harold could hear her.

“I'm trying, but they won't help us,” he replied to her.

Harold thought for a moment about telling the doctor the truth about what was going on, but decided that wouldn't be the best. Melissa added “you're right about that; they would lock us

up for sure.” So he tried coming up with a plan. The problem is the plans that make sense in unbearable pain don't make nearly as much sense when it actually gets implemented. Then, as they knew would happen, the shot he got at the hospital started wearing off. They hoped it would at least last them through the day, but it barely made it through the afternoon.

That night, Harold tried to fight their pain with over the counter medicines, but that didn't help much. Finally, he got to sleep, only to find Melissa was in his dreams as well. As it turns out, they now shared dreams as well as thoughts.

It was a dream about a playground where Melissa was on a swing, swinging back and forth as a small child.

“Harold” she spoke as she saw him come into her view “why are you here?”

“I don't know, I guess there's just no place we can hide from each other.”

As Melissa came to a stop on the swing, she said, “isn't that going to make going to the bathroom a little awkward. I mean, I see what you see and I hear what you hear so I'm going to see and hear it, you know.”

Those were the words it took to wake Harold up to do just that. He stumbled into the bathroom and looked down at the toilet. “Melissa, can't you not watch this?”

“Sorry, but you're the one who put me here. I can't help what you see,” She shot back, sarcastically.

So he tried to do what he came into the room to do. Unfortunately, nothing would happen for him. Then he had a brilliant idea, he would sit down. That way, he could take care of his needs without looking.

“Man, I've never seen anyone quite so bashful about this as you” Melissa said after he finished.

“I can't help it; you should have seen my family.”

As hard as they both tried, they were having an extremely hard time adjusting to this new situation. They could hear exactly what the other was thinking so there was no privacy. As hard as Harold tried, he couldn't help but to bring some of his most private moments into mind. One such example was what he had done to Mitch not too long ago.

“Harold Ramus, I would have never thought you to be such a person to do something like that. I'm disappointed in you and ashamed to even know you right now,” Melissa scolded through the anger and pain she was feeling.

“I had to, you just don't understand.”

“You're right about that, I don't understand. You know, had I known you were like that, I never would have gone out with you in the first place.”

“That's why I never wanted anyone to know about this.”

As the pain increased, Melissa's fuse got shorter. “Well, maybe you should have thought about that before you sold your soul? Now, what the hell do you plan to do about this pain we're in?”

“Melissa, I'm trying. Please, just hold on a little longer. I'm supposed to meet this guy today who has some stuff.”

“Oh, so now we're going to buy street drugs?” Melissa was trying, but she couldn't stay friendly in such pain. She felt bad for the way she was talking to Harold, but couldn't seem to help it.

“No, it's legitimate medicine, just from a guy that doesn't need it anymore.”

“Ok, ok, whatever, as long as it helps.”

When they met the person with the medicine, it was just an ordinary looking man who happened to have a bottle of pain pills leftover from when he had some dental work done.

“Ok, here's the deal,” the man said to Harold, “it's forty dollars for the bottle and there's about forty left in it.”

“Wow! A dollar a pill! You probably only paid twenty for the bottle of fifty.”

“Well, if you don't want to pay it, I'm sure some other junkie will,” the man said condescendingly.

“I'm no junkie,” Harold insisted.

Melissa interrupted with “I don't care, just take it. He can think whatever he wants.”

So Harold bought the pills from the man and looked at the label on the bottle. “Take two every six hours, so two it is” he thought to himself. Without a moment's hesitation, he swallowed the pills. As they went down his throat, he thought to himself again “I sure hope these really are pain pills.”

“If they're not, at least you better hope they aren't something bad,” added Melissa.

After about thirty minutes, the pain started to subside. Even though it wasn't complete relief, at least it took away enough for them to function again. What remained was tolerable. As the pain continued to subside, they both started to relax a little. “I think I'll go home and lay down now,” Harold thought to himself.

“Yeah, I think you should try to sleep now.”

“So, what about you, Melissa? What do you do when I sleep?”

“Well, I just kinda exist. If you have a dream, I'm in it, too, but otherwise, I'm just here. I don't have a body that needs to rest anymore, so I'm just here, trying not to think too loudly or I'll wake you up.”



“That's just strange. Melissa, I truly hope you can understand had I known this would turn out like this, I never would have...”

Melissa interrupted sounding a little short-tempered, “I know. I can hear your thoughts, remember? I know every thought you have and I'm starting to see what's in your memory as well. I guess this bonding is getting stronger.” Then her voice changed, becoming more serious and sad sounding when she continued “Harold, I don't want to stay like this. I want to move on. I want you to release me.”

“I-I don't know how to do that.” This was the moment Harold knew was coming but dreaded it anyway.

“Please find a way. This pain I'm in isn't going to just go away. At least I don't think so. Since my body can never heal now, we're going to stay this way for as long as you live.”

“I'll fix this, I promise.”

With those words, Harold drifted off to sleep, or more like he passed out. He and Melissa continued their conversations all through the rest of the day and that night as he continued to sleep. She was in his every dream, whether it was good or bad. She was starting to see his darkest secrets as well as his pain he was hiding from the rest of the world. As this bond grew stronger, they both realized complete and total honesty wasn't necessarily the best

policy after all. People should be allowed their secrets.

The next several days, Harold continued taking the pills he bought from the stranger, but realized he was going to run out quickly. He moved from one supplier to the next, acting like an actual addict at this point. The people that knew him thought he was just having an extremely hard time dealing with Melissa's death and was turning to drugs to ease the pain.

Mitch came to his house and tried to confront his friend about his drug use. "Harry, we need to talk."

"About what?" Harold knew what it was about, but was trying to deny everything and just avoid the conversation.

They went inside and sat down. Mitch was looking at Harold with a great deal of concern. As close as these two friends were, they had a special kind of love for one another, but neither one could ever actually say it. They both knew it just the same.

Mitch composed himself before starting, "Harry, I know you're buying pain pills from people and I know you're taking a lot of them, so I'm worried about you. I mean, you're my friend and I care and I think you should talk to someone."

"Oh, you mean I should talk to you?"

"Anyone. I hate to see you throw your life away with drugs. I know how easy it is to start down that path and..."

"Mitch, I know you're worried about me, but trust me, I

need this. I'm in pain," Harold said in a demanding voice.

"I know you are, but the pills are only temporary, what happens when you come down from them? The pain is still there."

"No, really, I'm in pain, my chest, my head, my arm, my leg, pain, pain you couldn't believe. The doctors can't find anything wrong and they think it's in my head but I know better."

"Harry, maybe you should listen to what the doctors are telling you."

Melissa spoke up for the first time in this conversation "Harold, maybe you should tell him what really happened."

"He already thinks I'm crazy, that won't help my case here." Fortunately, their conversation happened inside Harold's head so Mitch didn't hear what they were saying. All Mitch could hear or see was a pause in conversation.

"But if anyone would believe you, he would," Melissa said.

"Exactly, and I don't think he will either," Harold added.

Mitch noticed the rather long silence and started to wonder what was going on. "Harry? Did you hear me?"

Harold snapped back to the present conversation with Mitch. "Huh, yeah, I heard you, I was just thinking."

In fact, the more they talked, the more Mitch noticed his

buddy was having long pauses at times, sometimes even in the middle of a sentence. If he wasn't worried about Harold before, he certainly was now.

“Harry, I've got this card I want to give you. It's the same woman that helped me through my problem a few years ago. I talked to her about you and she said she wanted to see you.”

“Ok, I'll go. But just to get you off my back.”

“Any reason at all, I don't care, I just want you to talk to her.”

The next morning, Harold picked up the phone. He had no real intentions of actually talking to this woman; he was just going to call her to shut his friend up about his drug use. As he dialed the numbers, though, he couldn't help but to wonder if this whole thing was just some insane delusion he was living in.

“So” Melissa spoke up “now you think I'm just a figment of your imagination? What next, you going to try to just wish me away?”

“No, not at all, I mean, if you had someone come up to you and tell you everything that's happened here, wouldn't you think they were crazy?”

“Yeah, I guess I would, but that doesn't mean you are.”  
Melissa was trying to offer some kind of comfort to Harold.

“I can't help but wonder, as many times as I've been told I

am lately.”

The phone started to ring “Hello,” a pleasant sounding voice on the other end answered.

“Hi, My name is Harold Ramus, I was given this number by a friend of mine who said I should call it.”

“Oh, Harold, I was hoping you would call. My name is Alyssa. Mitch told me about what you've been going through and I really think it would be good for you to come see me.”

“Look, Alyssa, no offense, but I'm just calling you to get him off my back about this.”

“I understand that, do you mind if I call you Harry?”

“No, I guess not, most folks do.”

“Well, Harry, I really think you should come in and set down with me and let's just have a good talk.”

Even though he didn't want to, Harold was finding himself feeling comfortable with the person on the phone. Alyssa had a reassuring tone to her voice. He thought it had to just be part of the requirement to be a therapist.

“Ok,” Harold told Alyssa, “I'll come see you on one condition.”

“What's that?”

“That you don't try any kind of psycho whatever on me. I'm just going to come in one time to make Mitch quit bugging

me.”

“That sounds fair enough. I have a pretty open schedule for the next two days. Can you make it in?”

“I’m not supposed to go back to work until next week, so I guess I have today and tomorrow open.”

“Say, why don’t you come on over now. Let’s just get this over with and you can get Mitch off your back and everyone’s happy, right?”

“Ok, give me about thirty minutes and I’ll be there. I’ve got the address off your card and I know where that is.”

“Great, I’ll see you then.”

Harold and Melissa talked things over for the next few minutes while he got himself ready for the meeting. He took more pain pills and headed out the door. During the drive there, they didn’t say much to each other. Melissa was a little concerned about Harold, but she knew if she thought about it, he would hear her. Just the same, Harold had to keep the thoughts he was fighting out of his mind to keep her from hearing how he thought he had gone completely crazy.

Once he got to the therapist’s office, Harold walked through the door and was greeted by Alyssa. She looked as reassuring as she sounded on the phone. She was a very pleasant looking woman in her mid thirties, somewhat tall and slender.

This made it very easy for him to talk to her.

They talked for at least an hour about mostly nothing. Small talk would best describe it. Finally Alyssa asked Harold “I can see there's something troubling you. It's not going to just go away and I really think you need to let it out.”

“Alyssa, you're right, there is. The thing is, you're going to think I'm crazy if I tell you what it is.”

“Actually, Harry, if you are aware of that, it's a good sign that you're not as bad off as you think you are.”

“Really? So, if I think I'm crazy, then I'm not?”

“Something like that,” Alyssa said with a pleasant smile, almost laughing at the statement.

“Ok, here goes,” Harold said, then continued to tell her the story of himself and Melissa. Everything from how they met to how he now had her soul trapped in his body. Alyssa listened very intently, rewording and repeating what he said from time to time just to make sure he knew she was listening. Harold couldn't believe what he was saying, let alone expect someone else to. Still, as he was speaking, Melissa didn't say a word, just listened as well.

After he was done, Alyssa didn't have much to say. She wasn't sure what to say. She had never heard a story like this, let alone with such detail. Usually, when someone is having a

delusion, they speak to her with less details, the story is more generalized. This, everything right down to the cool breeze in the rickety old house was too graphic to just be some kind of trick his mind was playing. It was her opinion that he was telling the truth. Either that, or she was just as crazy as him.

“Harry,” Alyssa finally broke the silence, “I think there's someone else you should talk to about this.”

“Who might that be? Are you going to lock me up?”

“No, I don't think that's what you need right now. I think spiritual guidance would do you more good than anything I can give you.”

“So, you want me to talk to a priest?”

“Yes, actually, I do. He's a very special priest. He and I were in psychology school together. We graduated together, now he remains a priest, not too far from here. The Holy Conception church. He's very good with matters of religion and I think he can help you.”

“So, you're prescribing me church?”

“I just think you should talk to him, that's all.”

“Well, I guess it couldn't hurt.”

They talked a little bit more before Harold left to go to the church she gave him the name of. Just before he left, Alyssa called Father Pinsky to make sure he would be available. She



explained briefly what the two of them had talked about. Father Pinsky told her to send him over right away, that he would be waiting.

Harold left the therapist's office and went directly to the church. When he arrived, he was met at the door by a kind looking elderly gentleman who introduced himself. Father Pinsky was a rather small man with gray hair and yet an inner strength that put Harold at ease.

“Harold,” the priest said in a questioning voice, making sure this was the right person.

“Yes, that's me.”

“Hi, I'm Father Pinsky. I've been expecting you. Please come with me. My office is this way.”

Harold followed Father Pinsky down a series of hallways to a small open area that connected to more hallways and finally Father Pinsky's office. Harold was halfway expecting to find cheese in the office after going through the maze of hallways.

“We've added on to this church so many times, we've made the office areas kind of complex. Don't worry, I'll show you the way back out.”

“Oh, good. I was starting to wonder how I was going to find my way back out of here.”

“So, Harold...”

“Just call me Harry, that's fine.”

“So, Harry, Alyssa told me you're quite troubled. She sounded like she was very concerned about you on the phone. I'm not sure I really understood her that well, so why don't you tell me what's going on, right from the beginning.”

Harry again told his story, this time to Father Pinsky. The priest listened to him and looked as though he was studying him. This made Harold feel a little uncomfortable about talking to him, but he continued.

“And, this man, or rather, this angel,” the priest asked, “what did he call himself?”

Harold had to think for a while before he remembered, “Ab something, Aba, Abaddon, that's it, Abaddon is what he called himself.”

“Ah, just as I thought. You see, Harry, Abaddon is one of the many names Satan has been called. Though he didn't exactly tell you the truth, he didn't lie either. That makes the contract you signed binding.”

“I don't get it” Harold said, perplexed.

“You see, when Satan makes a deal for your soul, he can't lie to get you to sign it, otherwise, it is voided when you discover the lie. If, however, he tells the truth, then it is binding.”

“So, you don't think I'm crazy?”

“No, I don't. I think you've been tricked. I believe there is this other person living inside of you and I believe she needs to be set free immediately.”

At that, Melissa finally started to feel some kind of relief. At the same time, Harold did as well. Finally, he knew he wasn't just crazy. Still, now he knew what he had done was a terrible, terrible mistake. He had doomed both of them to a life of agonizing pain. He never wanted for his beloved to live like this, he only wanted to have her close to him.

“It takes a while for everything to sink in, doesn't it?” Father Pinsky asked Harold. Harold nodded a yes then Father Pinsky asked, “are you talking to her now?”

“Yes, we were talking about what you said. Father, is there anything I can do about this? I didn't realize what I had done would mean she, rather we, would be trapped with the pains of her injuries for the rest of our lives.”

“You see, when you took her soul, she was in terrible pain. The medications she was on in the hospital kept her from feeling it. However, she was damaged spiritually as well. You could say her soul was hurt. Then, when it leaves the body, it is cleansed of all pain. At least that's how it's supposed to happen. That's why everyone looks so peaceful right as they die, the pain has been cleansed away. You didn't let that happen because you

pulled her soul out before the cleansing could take place. Now, her body can't heal and she's trapped with that pain. Since she's part of you, now, you also have her pain.”

“You sound like you've given this speech before.” Harold was confused by how Father Pinsky could say these words with such calmness.

“More times than you realize. In fact, sometimes, the people with multiple personalities are people just like you.”

“They really do have two people living in them?”

“Exactly, but they go absolutely crazy from it, and, after some time, the bond is permanent and they can't be helped. Usually, by the time someone gets them help, it's too late for them. You, however, the bond can be broken still and Melissa can still be set free, but you have to do exactly what I say and right away before it's too late.”

“Melissa, is this what you want?”

“Harry, I love you, but, yes, I want to go.”

“So, what do you want to do, Harry?” Father Pinsky asked.

“I want to set her free. Rather, she wants to be set free,” Harold said but he didn't sound very sure of himself.

“You have to want to or it will not work,” Father Pinsky said rather sternly, trying to emphasize this point.

“I want to give her the release what she wants,” Harold said, sounding very sure of these words.

“Then do you still have the item Abaddon gave you?”

“The crystal? Yes, it's right here.” Harold pulled it out of his pocket. In fact, Harold had been carrying that crystal with him just to remind himself that he wasn't crazy.

“Come with me,” the priest insisted. “But I have to warn you, this isn't going to be easy for you. She is going to feel like she's drowning and you're going to feel like you're the one drowning her, but you have to do this to set her free.”

“Drowning? I can't drown her!” Harold was getting scared already and the process hadn't even started yet.

“You won't be, she's already dead so you can't hurt her.”

As they walked to another room, Harold felt nervous, almost scared of what he had to do, but he knew it had to be done. The room was dark, but for a few candles. There was what looked like an altar in the center with a crystal bowl on it. Other than that, the room seemed empty. It looked like it had to be part of the original church. The walls were very old stone, as was the floor.

“Melissa,” Harold said, with a very gentle tone to his voice, “you've heard everything that's been said. Are you sure?”

“Please, Harold, if you truly love me, do this for me.”

“I do love you,” Harold was fighting the tears already. He knew he was going to miss Melissa, but he also knew he had to do this for her.

Father Pinsky interrupted “Harold, take the item and place it in this bowl. Keep your hands on it at all times. It's going to burn and you're going to feel like you're killing Melissa. You're going to panic, you're going to feel more doubt than anything you've ever felt before but when it's over, you will feel her one last time, as she is cleansed of her pain and released.”

Slowly, Harold began to reach for the bowl with the crystal in hand. He paused, “what's in this bowl,” he asked the priest.

“Water. Just plain water, but it's symbolic of death for her,” Father Pinsky answered.

Harold again started to move his hand toward the bowl of water. He paused again. This time it was Melissa who gave him the nudge to move again. “Please Harold,” she begged, “please do this for me. I need to move on; I can't go on like this. I'm begging you to do this.”

“Ok, Melissa. For you,” Harold said in a sad voice. He wanted her to stay, but he knew deep down inside that this had to be done.

So he ever so slowly began to submerge his hand, with the

crystal tightly in his grasp. As he lowered it further into the bowl, Father Pinsky said a prayer in a language that Harold couldn't understand. Then he started to feel Melissa, as if she were being choked, drowned. Exactly as the priest told him, he felt as though he were the one drowning her. He began to cry as he felt this happening.

“I can't do this,” Harold said in a panicking voice.

“You have to,” Father Pinsky tried to assure him, “for Melissa, you have to do this. It's the only way to set her free.”

So he continued to fight through the fears and doubts and held the crystal under the water. His hand felt like it was on fire. When he looked down, the water was bubbling.

“It's boiling” he screamed at the priest as he writhed in agony from the burning sensation in his hand.

“No, that's just Satan playing tricks on your mind. Pay no mind to it,” Father Pinsky said in a very stern voice.

Harold kept his hand in the water, trying to just think to himself that this is what she wanted. After what felt like the longest time in his life, the burning began to subside. The thoughts in his mind began to calm to a nearly reassuring feeling. He began to feel peaceful about what he was doing. He thought this must mean it's working.

Finally, Father Pinsky placed his hand on Harold's

shoulder said a few last words in the language Harold didn't understand and told him he could let go of the crystal. As he did, he felt Melissa's soul being released from his body. He could feel her presence once again, only this time, she was at peace. He closed his eyes and saw her one last time, more beautiful than he ever remembered her looking. She was even more beautiful than he could have ever imagined anyone looking.

“Melissa,” Harold said, questioning if it really was her.

“Yes, Harold, it's me. The pain is gone, and I'm at peace now. Thank you, for what you've done for me, thank you.”

“I-I will never be the same without you.” Harold was sad, but happy at the same time.

“Just please don't forget me. I have to go now,” Melissa said, with a gentleness to her voice like Harold had never heard before.

“I never could. Good bye, Melissa, my love.”

“Good bye, Harold. I will always love you.” Melissa said in a fading voice.

With that, her image faded completely out of sight and Harold returned to present reality. He had a relaxed look on his face, yet he was sad. Father Pinsky gave him a strong hug and said lightly in his ear, “my son, you did what you had to do, out of love. There is nothing on this Earth or beyond with a greater



purpose than that.”

Harold stood still for several seconds, his head hanging from exhaustion, before finally speaking. “Thank you Father,” he said in a sad tone.

“You're welcome.” Father Pinsky said.

Father Pinsky lead Harold back to the entrance to the church. Not a word was said as they walked from one corridor to the next. It was Father Pinsky who broke the silence. “Harold,” he said, “you should come back this Sunday.”

“I think I'd like that,” Harold said, with little energy left in his voice by now.

Although, in time, he moved on with his life, got married and had children, Harold never forgot Melissa or the days they spent with her soul merged into his body. He also never stopped loving her. Many days, he thought back to her and what they shared. He never was, however, able to tell anyone else about what happened.