



The
Gift

STEPHANIE M.
MATTHEWS

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paperback ISBN 978-0-9953132-0-0

To my mom and brother who didn't call in a "missing person" report when I disappeared for weeks at a time into my work hole.

To my "Nicholas" whom I will always trust with my life.

But modesty and circumspection are required in pronouncing judgment . . .
since there is always the risk of falling into the common fault of
condemning what one does not understand. And, if it is necessary to err on
one side or the other, I should prefer that the reader should approve of
everything than that he should disapprove of much.

Quintilian, *De Institutione Oratoria*, X.1.26

PROLOGUE

The dining room was thick with the curling smoke from thinly rolled cigarettes and it smelled of new liquor, stale sweat, and mud. There was one electric light in the dining room, another in the adjoined kitchen, and a few candles on window sills extending the light's reach to expand the feeling of hospitality. The house was heated by a central fireplace where a fire was licking at the brick hearth and, while it wasn't much, everyone inside the house, including Lars Dreschler, was grateful just to have the wind off their back.

Dreschler peeked at the hand he'd been dealt, then carefully eyed the black, dented helmet collecting the bets of the other four men who were also assessing their hands. Across from him sat Johanne Schmidt, the eldest man at the table at thirty-five, and he tapped his cards twice on the table—his tell of a good deal. Dreschler tossed his bet into the helmet.

The youngest of their squad, Franz Fitschen, who'd lied about his age and was only fourteen, was flipping through a box of records nearby as the serenading bells of Rosita Serrano's voice crescendoed to an end. An unlit cigarette hung from the corner of his mouth and the straps of his helmet swayed across his smooth and dirtied cheeks as he held up his newest find, grinning, "Lili Marlene!"

The popular song was met with enough approval by the table for them to break their concentration and voice it, and the kid didn't wait for Rosita Serrano to finish before he flicked the gramophone's needle to one side and

swapped one record for the other. Within seconds the warm sounds of an accordion crackled to life and Marlene Dietrich's husky voice sang to them through the cigarette smoke.

"I haven't heard this since basic training," Fitschen reminisced, closing his eyes to the song. Dreschler rolled his eyes. "She was one of the cooks and she gave me the dance." Fitschen sang back to Marlene Dietrich with love in his blue eyes as he joined the table. He slung his gun off his shoulder and hung it off the back of the wooden chair, stealing von Gottberg's matches, which had been lying unclaimed on the table beside his poor winnings.

"How long has it been since Dolfo and Fuhrman were supposed to be back?" Schmidt asked as he dealt another round. He was a short man and had to reach to sail the cards to the far end of the table.

"An hour, maybe more," von Gottberg said, casually scratching his scruffy face.

"If they're not back in ten, take Dreschler to find them." Schmidt said to Hausser who nodded.

Dreschler didn't appreciate being picked for the job. There wasn't any real danger in this village and his jacket still hadn't completely dried out. More important, he was comfortable. "They'll be back in nine," he said.

His company had been en route to join up with the regiment at Bastogne, touting their good luck charm, a Panzer III tank and its driver whom they found separated from his company. It was a welcomed diversion when orders came to reroute to this village and pick up more forced labor. Dolfo and Fuhrman had been chosen to be part of the recruitment team.

"The Hauptmann probably has him braiding the hair of all the pretty blondes," Fitschen said with a long, sad drag on his cigarette, and Dreschler wondered why Schmidt hadn't picked him to go back outside. "I should be babysitting them; I'll braid their hair so pretty..." Fitschen let his thoughts hang as he lost himself in his dream.

Von Gottberg snorted, "And then what, hündchen, question and answer period to help you learn what happens next?"

Dreschler laughed and decided to fold. Dolfo had first called the kid hündchen a couple days earlier, puppy, and Fitschen hated it. After abusing

him with the name all afternoon they'd dropped it but, apparently, it wasn't ready to die just yet.

"My German naughtiness is better than anything these sprouts have ever had," Fitschen said stiffly.

That made the rest of the table break into laughter, and von Gottberg almost fell off his chair, a quick grab on the table's edge stopping him. Dreschler recovered his voice first. "Your naughtiness is stealing cake from under your mother's nose."

Before Fitschen could show his youthful offense, the front door slammed open. Dreschler jumped; von Gottberg and Schmidt were the fastest to grab their guns. "Frohe Weihnachten, boys!" Dolfo strolled in with a pleased grin on his face and Schmidt swore at him in welcome. Dreschler relaxed and sat back down. Dolfo's helmet was upturned in the crook of one arm and overflowing with pastries, while he grasped two dead chickens in his other hand, and a bottle of wine was barely secured under his armpit. "The Führer sends his Christmas greetings."

"Where'd you steal those from?" Fitschen asked, running his hand through his pale blond hair to get it out of his eyes. "A pretty girl gave them to you, didn't she?"

Everyone ignored the puppy and listened instead to the debrief Dolfo was giving Schmidt for why he'd shown up with supper instead of his partner. "The Hauptmann wanted Fuhrman to finish questioning one of the villagers. He'll be back when he's done. As for these"—Dolfo shook the dead birds in the air—"these will make a nice Christmas meal to complement all the canned vegetables and barley bread these people live off of. You know how to cook, right?" Dolfo aimed the question at von Gottberg.

Dolfo dropped the chickens on the kitchen counter, which still had a small stack of dirty plates left by the house's owners, who'd been taken to the town hall for holding along with two hundred other men and women. They'd be shipped out in two days to work in Germany's factories. Their honor of contribution to the war effort was driving the German war machine, and more of their weak blood in the fields and on production lines meant more Germans, like himself, could spend Christmas in a lovely Belgian's home

rather than on the march or in a foxhole.

Dolfo grabbed the half-empty bottle of brandy from the table, took a long swig, then went into the kitchen to rummage through the cabinets and drawers. He laughed for joy when he found a giant can of coffee but then swore when he opened it to find it empty and hefted it with annoyance down the hall. Hausser laughed at his false hope and Dreschler decided to offer him some more brandy and a chair instead. Dolfo slid himself down with a happy sigh, the coffee apparently already forgotten, and half unbuttoned his shirt, breathing more freely.

“What about that sprout Fuhrman is talking to?” Fitschen asked, excited, “Is he a part of the Belgisch verzet, the Resistance? Are we going farming, digging up those sprouts?!”

Mirroring the opposite of Fitschen’s enthusiasm, Schmidt turned to the young soldier. “There’s no S.S. watching your back here, boy. If you live to see next Christmas, it won’t be in a place like this—so forget about those stupid Belgians playing hero. My god, why did they have to send you as the replacement?”

“The man was telling ghost stories,” Dolfo said to answer the first question, watching as von Gottberg tossed his bet of two cigarettes into Schmidt’s helmet. “He was half-crazed with his story, but his German was the best of them all and Fuhrman has the best French. The villagers were all saying the same thing, telling us to leave them alone for our own safety. Pretty sure that’s the first time anyone’s tried to scare us with ghost stories. Though they were kind enough to suggest a few empty buildings and houses to wait in until the morning. Apparently ‘death’ comes out on Christmas Eve around here.” That got a couple of snorts.

Schmidt dryly added, “and here we are.”

“Why is the Hauptmann even listening to these stories?” Hausser asked as he flipped another card face-up only to promptly fold too.

“One man’s superstition is truth for another,” Schmidt replied, “and I’m grateful for the Hauptmann’s caution, preferring us alive,” he added, though the words were nearly lost to the neck of the bottle he lifted to his lips.

Hausser and Dolfo soon wandered to the living room to nap on the couch and chair, respectively.

They finished the hand and started to get hungry, so Dreschler finally kicked von Gottberg to the kitchen to work his magic with the chickens while he dealt the next hand.

They were about ten minutes into it when a clangor went up from the kitchen; von Gottberg came shouting and running back to the table, to grab his gun. Dreschler jumped up, ready and waiting for what would happen next, though Fitschen's cigarette smoke was drifting into his nose. Dreschler grabbed the cigarette from his mouth and tossed it naked on the table.

Von Gottberg cocked the gun, glued himself to the side of the wall, and poked his head around the corner back into the kitchen. His gun was quivering from his uneven breathing and his face had blanched of all color. Schmidt prodded him in a loud whisper, "What did you see?"

"Outside," the answer was laborious, "The window over the sink, I only saw one, maybe more . . . it . . . it was . . ."

Hausser was not impressed and he lowered his gun. "It? Not a he or she, but an it?"

"You're drunk, von Gottberg." Dolfo was equally unamused. "The schnaps has gone to your head."

Hausser kept the complaining going, "So help me, if you woke me from my nap for some bitch dog looking for scraps—"

"Shh!" Schmidt shot Hausser an angry glare and ordered everyone to blow out the kitchen candles. Easing himself past von Gottberg, Schmidt edged into the kitchen; Dreschler stepped out and followed behind. The barrels of their guns led the way, and the floorboards squeaked protest as they inched into the kitchen. Schmidt gingerly stepped over the fallen roasting pan and crept up on the window with his gun aimed straight, his eye never leaving the sights. A white-washed cabinet blocked Dreschler's view of the window itself, but it was impossible for him to miss a faint iridescent green light reflecting off Schmidt's face.

"What the—" Dreschler was caught off guard by the loud crack of Schmidt's gun firing a single shot, shattering the window. The sound of five other guns cocking behind him picked up where the ringing from the shot echoed off.

Schmidt lowered his gun, turned from the window and brushed past Dreschler back into the dining room. His face was set hard, but the quivers from his mouth told a less sure story.

“Board up that window; it’s cold out. Curtain the rest of them; light every candle you can to brighten this place up.”

“Did you kill it?” Fitschen asked, flipping his hair out of his eyes again.

“Just do it. Now.”

The order had barely left Schmidt’s mouth when another gunshot echoed from outside. That one was quickly followed by a dozen more shots being rapidly fired, and it sounded like a fire fight had broken out. Schmidt dumped out the forgotten bets from his helmet, and Dreschler raced for his, throwing the rest of his gear on, too.

The fire fight grew louder as more guns joined the battle, but Schmidt held the men inside as he listened to it drawing closer. Dreschler began to get antsy. Peeking through the window curtain, he saw soldiers madly retreating from their base camp at the town hall.

“I only hear the Mauser,” Hausser said, “Unless the Belgisch verzet got a cache of our guns, no one’s shooting back.”

“Then, why are we retreating?” Fitschen asked.

Dreschler, who had crouched beside the puppy, answered in a tone that made the kid hug his gun even closer. “They said the village was haunted.”

Heavy boots stormed up the steps outside, with Fuhrman yelling his arrival and a command not to shoot, before he banged open the door. A gust of wintery air followed him in. Fully dressed and armed, his helmet’s chin strap was fastened. His gray fatigues were as muddy and worn as the rest of theirs.

“We have to go. The Hauptmann said to regroup at the basilica.”

“What’s happening? What’s going on out there?” Fitschen again.

Fuhrman, only a young man himself, bore an age on his face that was beyond his years. “I don’t know. No one knows. The man I was interrogating, I can’t explain it. He just . . .” Fuhrman trailed off as he ran out of words.

“You will explain. He just what?” Schmidt pressed him.

“I don’t know, he just . . . everyone we rounded up, all the villagers, within

a few minutes just . . . like the bodies in the field left unburied for too long, but, but they weren't dead," Fuhrman had the confidence of a sane man. A scared one, but a sane one. "I went and looked in the holding room myself. Kleist shot our man, I shot him. He didn't fall."

"Then you missed."

"The bullets landed in the wall behind him, there was an entrance wound! He—it—came after us. The whole lot of them, all the villagers. There was a, a green fire, jellyfish-like, I . . . I . . . don't even know, it squeezed them like a bellow. The Belgisch verzet planted gas canisters on these people to poison us. That's what the Hauptmann said."

The gunshots arrived outside their house, and Schmidt finally gave the order to move out. "Save your ammo and just get to the basilica. Green is not a Christmas color this year."

With Schmidt leading the way out, Dreschler took the rear, and their small group joined the stream of men from their company falling back, shooting behind them into the chemical-green haze growing on the streets' horizon.

Schmidt hollered at the dozens of men fleeing past to save their ammunition. Some listened, and others were too wide-eyed with fear to hear anything other than the sound of their own gun. Someone was shouting for the radioman; another was demanding to know where the driver for the Panzer was—the streets had become a mad retreat. The spires of the village's basilica could be seen from anywhere, and men ran to it like a lost ship to a lighthouse. Some went down one street only to come running back shooting their guns and yelling; others were shooting out windows as they ran past.

It quickly became clear to Dreschler which men had come from the town hall, as they wore their gas masks and sprinted past everyone else without looking back. Those coming up from the rear shouted that the Hauptmann changed their rendezvous to the North city gate, while others said that the basilica was still the place. The chaos was growing. Dreschler joined his voice with that of Schmidt and a few other seasoned souls angrily yelling for men to hold their fire.

He watched as two men tackled a third who was raving madly, tearing at his ribs with ten fingers glowing green. Another soldier began shooting at

anything that moved, which meant his fellow soldiers. Five, then six men dropped to the ground, one of them screaming like a woman in labor, rolling around clutching his shoulder. A *pop*, then the wild man's body went limp, fell, and his gun was snatched up by another man.

Men cried out "GAS ATTACK!" as they scrambled for their gas masks. The newer soldiers stopped in the middle of the street to untangle the mask while others just ran faster. Dreschler grabbed one of the boys by the coat and dragged him along. "Figure it out as you run!" Word came along that the villagers had escaped, and Dreschler didn't care. No one did.

He found the radioman, crouching in the entryway of a building trying to raise a signal, his partner standing guard nearby. He kept repeating his call signs trying to pick up a response, but none was coming.

Dreschler, Fitschen, and von Gottberg arrived together before the small Gothic basilica to no more sense of order than there had been on the streets and no sign of the Hauptmann. Schmidt came running in, only a few seconds later, with two others and started calling the men to him and commanding everyone coming in who hadn't yet put their gas mask on to do so.

And then, in the midst of all the madness, the beautiful, simple musical notes of "Stille Nacht" began to drift out from the cracked doors of the basilica and penetrate the dark and chaotic Christmas Eve. Singers skilled enough to sing for the Führer himself sang, their voices reaching out like the soft touch from a loving mother. It was peaceful and it clashed with the war and fear being battled outside of those wooden doors. It was an odd thing, Dreschler thought, his thoughts slowing down. Not everyone was paying the song attention, but those who were seemed as bewildered as he; it was hard to tell through the alien-looking masks.

Schmidt was doing his best to calm the frightened boys and to rein in the veterans as their little formation grew and grew, his booming voice carrying. Those who had been close enough to see what chased them couldn't coherently describe what they had seen, and the stifling gas masks didn't help. One said that the graves of the Celts had been opened, another that the nightmares had left his head, or that the ghosts of the killed Belgisch verzet had returned to the fight.

“We can’t wait much longer,” Schmidt announced, unimpeded by a mask since he had traded it months ago for a bottle of smuggled Russian vodka. “Has anyone seen Fuhrman?”

The only answer Schmidt got was the shaking of heads. “Dreschler, von Gottberg, wait here to pick up any stragglers. I’m taking these men to the North gate to the Hauptmann.” It was a statement of conviction. “Leave in five minutes, meet me there.” Looking around at the group they had, there were maybe ninety men, a third of how many had come into this village. “Whatever the Hauptmann wants to do next, I’m sure he’ll want more than this.”

But Dreschler saw the men who were with them, and they were in no condition to do anything but put as much distance as possible between themselves and this place.

With one last threat to waste no more ammunition, Schmidt headed out with his group. The luminescent green shadows grew larger and larger on the building walls as though the light itself was the monster. The gunshots became less frequent, the shouting men not as loud, and a few more stragglers sprinted in, the radioman and a medic shouldering a limping man between them. The medic pointed his bloody fingers into the crowd and volunteered someone to help him stretch the wounded man.

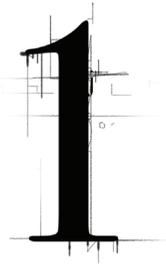
Von Gottberg took the moment to ask, “What did Schmidt see in the window?”

“What did you see?” Dreschler asked back.

Von Gottberg grunted. “A rotting head.”

Dreschler nodded, his focus averted just then by telling the stragglers to get ready to head out. “He shot his reflection between the eyes. Dark magic or the devil, either way, bullets won’t matter.” He looked back to the basilica doors. Was it ignorance or idiocy that kept them singing? And how did they escape the roundup? “They won’t survive the war acting like that,” he murmured.

They were out of time. Dreschler gave the order and their little group of stragglers fled.



Thump, thump.

Thump, thump.

Thump, thump.

The subtle bumping of the train car lulled Fae Peeters awake from the nap she had slipped into. Her eyes sleepily opened to the sound of the train's rhythmic thumps, easing her into passively taking in the landscape rolling by.

The Google image searches she had done before she had set out hadn't lied—southern Belgium was beautiful. The land extended out from the tracks for miles until it rose into rolling mountains. Coniferous trees were the only real color in the snowcapped landscape as their naked deciduous counterparts melted seamlessly into the bright gray sky.

Having lived in Belgium for over a year now while studying for her Masters in architecture, Fae had found a piece of her heart in this little country. It wasn't saddled with the same expectations as England, Italy, or France and, because the country was often overlooked next to its flashy neighbors, its people were free of any expectations other than to deliver a beautiful country and amazing chocolate. So far she hadn't been disappointed in either.

A small town appeared on the horizon, and she lazily watched it as the

train rolled by. As much a part of the landscape as the mountains, the town was neatly defined even though it sprawled across the land. She saw only one building outside its perimeter in the middle of a snowy field; a barn no doubt. Tall, slender houses with pointed roofs picketed the sky, and the always present church with its tall spires came and went, leaving Fae wondering how similar her destination would be to that place.

With a muffled groan, she stretched out in the upholstered seat, then settled into a proper sitting position. The car was about half full; two days before the Holidays, most people were already home with their families getting fat off too many sweets, drunk on too much warm wine, and exhausted skiing or hiking the hills.

Fae took stock of her fellow passengers. A bottle-blonde sat kitty-corner to her in the facing seat with her fashion magazine. Across the aisle, a middle-aged man was passed out next to his wife. Chatter from three elderly women who hadn't stopped gossiping since they sat down kept a soft buzz in the air. Then there was the man just up the aisle whose gaze she kept interrupting. As soon as she caught him he would look away, and then vice versa, making for an awkward game. But he smiled the last time she caught him, which she returned, before she'd drifted to sleep. He was handsome, and her grandmother had made no small show of expecting her to return home engaged to a good Belgian boy. She briefly flirted with the idea that maybe this man was her fairy tale.

Only, she knew he wasn't.

Fae reached under her seat and wiggled out her travel bag. Plopping it on the empty seat beside her, she took out one of the two letters carefully placed in the front pocket alongside her tickets and passport. The one she left was from her best friend, Analyse, back in Vancouver. She had sent a picture of herself in a pumpkin patch posing with a scarecrow. The scarecrow was dressed up to look like Fae, and the picture had the words "a poor substitute" scripted across the front.

The other envelope was a letter from her grandmother, and this was what had chased her out of her Brussels apartment to her grandparents' village.

For the most part, the letter was everything expected from a grandmother:

lighthearted complaints about preparations for the annual family Christmas feast, how she hoped Fae was having a good time at school, an update on her friends' knitting projects, et cetera, but it was the last part of the letter that Fae had read over half a dozen times and which she read again.

Fae, few people know that I was adopted as a young child. Having been found wandering the roads near the village I was soon to call home, inquiries discovered that my birth parents had been killed in an industrial accident; I was left with no relatives. While I was blessed to have been taken in by a wonderful family, not everyone would agree to call me blessed for being taken in by my village. Every old settlement has its secrets. When I was twelve years old and mature enough to see those secrets and mysteries for myself, I understood firsthand that I could never truly be one of the villagers; it would be impossible to share by adoption what they carried by birth. But even so, the life I lived in that village was a good one full of love and laughter and I was never bitter nor felt outcast.

As time passed there were those of us who saw Adolf Hitler for what he was. Despite the difficulties in the decision, I begged my husband to move us away. It was difficult for him because the secret he shared with the other villagers would isolate him anywhere else, but he understood, and so we fled Belgium in wake of the German destruction across the East, bribing our way onto the first boat that was leaving across the Atlantic. The rest of the story once we landed in Halifax, you know. Leaving a childhood home is not easy, even less so in those days, but eventually your grandfather was able to live a normal life and celebrate Christmas, our favorite holiday, without incident.

Fae, I want nothing more than for you to come to our village and learn what I did when I was twelve. It is the world's greatest secret and, as such, its greatest gift. Knowing that you will have it will be gift enough to for me, so please don't spend any of your small student budget on me this year. I have already arranged everything for your stay. You must follow my instructions perfectly or risk serious consequences . . .

The sway of the train slowed and the pressure of the brakes grinding steel on steel pushed Fae forward. This was going to be her stop. Glancing out the window she could see that, like the previous villages they had passed, this one sprawled across the land like spilled milk, the spires of the church rising above the troubles of life below. Unlike the other villages, however, this village was wrapped in a wall and that made the story of the German invasion her grandparents told even more fascinating. The thought brought her back to the letter.

It was cute, really, how her grandmother tried to be so serious as though she were still a little girl easily scared into obedience. What gift was so secretive and so intense that deviation from the treasure hunt led to serious consequences? She had taken bets from two of her Brussels friends as to what her present could be. A puppy and a stash of old family bonds were up against Fae's throwaway vote of the village being the keepers of the Kraken's bones. The guesses were lighthearted but the small knot, which appeared in Fae's gut whenever she thought too much about the gift, wasn't. The only reasonable answer was some sort of hidden relic from the Knights Templar, booby-trapped a la Indiana Jones, and that idea was just as silly as the Kraken's bones. That her usually levelheaded, sweet grandmother would tell her so much without telling her anything was out of character.

She put the letter back into her travel bag and stood up to collect her things: a black felt winter jacket, blue plaid scarf, faux leather and fur gloves, and her duffle bag.

The train ground to a halt and Fae dipped her head to see through the window and confirm the name on the station. Then she claimed her spot in the main aisle even though no one else got up. The handsome man looked up at her and smiled.

"Good luck," he told her in English with a thick French accent.

"Merci. Ciao." She smiled back hoping he might say more. He didn't.

Hauling her small load behind her, she trudged through the car and with a small push on the exit door, descended the three steep, steel steps to the platform. She shivered with the sudden change of temperature. As the train slowly rolled away, Fae saw she was completely alone.

“What a warm and welcoming place,” she said, assessing her location. Extending outward from the station was a plain brick wall that quickly joined up with a stone wall that wrapped around the perimeter of the village. It wasn’t adorned with decorative battlements or nicely dressed stones. It was just a plain, functional wall with equally bland turret towers. There was only one prominent piece of graffiti near the platform: a picture of a snow-covered gravestone with a dove sitting on top. It read, “You must die to leave alive. Joyeux Noël.” She frowned at the art but dismissed it as nothing more than the dark thoughts of a disturbed teenager.

The only thing that welcomed her was a lonely Christmas tree, standing beside the glass door leading into the station. It was nicely decorated in gold, silver, and red but was also littered with advertisements masquerading as ornaments in the form of words such as, “joyeux” and “amour.” She passed by the tree. She could respect people’s attempts to force the Christmas season to bring love and joy, but Christmas wasn’t a yearly reset button for humanity. People only gave during the season because they were told to and not because they genuinely wanted to; otherwise, they’d do it all year long. Good people did good things with love, joy, peace without looking for a reward or a seasonal validation.

Posted on the station door was a temporary sign written in all four major languages of Belgium—Dutch, French, German and English. At the bottom was the official crest of the village: *Visitors welcomed December 25th - December 23rd. The provincial and federal governments are not responsible for visitors during non-visitor hours.*

Again, Fae frowned. Today was December 23rd. Her grandmother said she’d arranged everything, did she know about this rule? She wondered if she could actually be kicked out of a village for a single night. What could possibly demand that non-residents leave for Christmas Eve?

She pressed through the station door with a shrug. She’d embrace the village holiday scene for what it was worth; she really did enjoy the holiday; and they would have to embrace, or endure her, just the same. On her last call with her grandmother, she’d said it might be possible to wave down someone in a car to drive her to the hotel but if not she would have to walk.

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Apparently, the people who lived here were nice enough to chauffeur visitors around but kicked them out at the most giving time of year.

But as she was shifting her thoughts to figuring out how to get around and settle in, the words from the graffiti crept back into her mind, *You must die to leave alive*. Why would someone write that?

2

There were no taxis outside the station, and Fae wasn't comfortable with flagging down a stranger. The streets were pretty quiet anyway, and the hotel wasn't far even by foot. Pulling her phone out Fae saw that, just as her grandmother had predicted, the data coverage was too poor to be effective, so it was a good thing her grandmother had been smart enough to include a hand-drawn map. Repositioning the bag on her shoulder, she headed out.

The train station was fronted by a plaza, which was little more than a roundabout with a memorial to the Second World War standing in the middle of it. A block of concrete rose like an industrial stain on an otherwise quaint scene, on top of which stood a German war tank, the Panzer III. She knew that thanks to her grandfather. There were enough bronzed Karabiner 98k rifles, otherwise known as Mausers, and iconic Stahlhelm helmets haphazardly stacked beside it to arm and outfit a platoon of men, but her grandfather told her it was actually a company that had failed here. He said a miracle had forced the Germans to flee so quickly that they had left half their equipment behind. He always thanked God whenever he talked of that event.

Fae had no problem finding her hotel, as it stood above most other buildings with its true three stories. Once a house, the entire bottom floor

had been renovated to provide a real hotel feel rather than show itself as a bed and breakfast. The décor was a fusion of modern and turn of the century, wallpaper and wingback chairs with Ikea-styled footstools and a Zen water fixture. It somehow all came together for a satisfying welcome at journey's end. Christmas carols escaped from hidden speakers to greet guests in the lobby, and it was tastefully decorated with modern glass balls and a glittery forest theme, accented with porcelain heirlooms that looked generations old. There wasn't an artificial Christmas tree to be seen. Even the miniature tree standing on the desk was real. Fae breathed deeply, relishing the smell.

There was no attendant at the desk and no other guests were relaxing in the lobby, but the service bell brought a woman in her late twenties out from the back room smiling warmly. She was thin and wore a skirt suit, her dark hair tidily pulled back in a claw clip.

"Bonjour, hallo," she said with a welcoming smile. "Joyeux Noël, how can I help you?" she continued on in French, a language Fae was fluent in thanks to her grandparents. Fae responded in kind.

"I have a reservation under Peeters."

The woman, Elise according to her golden nameplate, immediately began looking it up, though Fae couldn't imagine she had many reservations to sort through.

Elise looked up from the monitor, her face a blank slate. "I am sorry, there is a problem with your reservation. It says you want the room from the 23rd through the 26th but we are closed tomorrow night. The whole village closes down Christmas Eve. There is a train that passes by tomorrow. I can book a ticket for you."

"No, that can't be right," Fae said, resting her forearms on the counter. "This reservation was confirmed. I was told to ask for Eva Lemmens if there were any problems."

Elise's face softened. "She is the owner. Please excuse me for a moment while I confer with her." Elise disappeared into the rooms beyond and soon returned, accompanied by an elderly woman leaning on a cane. She was tall and thin like Elise, her white hair pulled back in a housewife's bun. If it wasn't for the cane, she looked healthy and strong for her age.

“This is Mats and Maria Peeters’ granddaughter! So lovely!” The older woman was delighted as she came around the counter and grabbed Fae up in a deep hug as though she were her own family. Her cane slapped Fae in the back as she was pulled in. “Maria has written to me often of her family and no less of you. We were best friends since we were little girls.” Eva released Fae from her embrace. “Elise told you there is a problem with your reservation. It was my fault for forgetting to tell her. There is no problem. You are more than welcome here for the duration of your stay.”

“Thank you. I know my grandmother did a lot of planning for me to come.”

“Of course she did, child,” Eva said solemnly. “I invite you to share Christmas dinner with my family, naturally, though you probably have been claimed by your own relatives already. They are so excited to meet you, too! But if not, then my table is open.”

“She is to stay then?” Elise asked Eva, her eyes betraying immediate alarm. “Misseur . . . it is not allowed—”

“It has been *arranged*,” Eva interrupted. Elise said no more but kept her eyes on Fae, the distanced look of mistrust unmistakable.

“Here, dear.” Eva went behind the counter and reached up to the pegged wall with a perfect grid of well-marked skeleton keys. “Room 3A. It is the best room we have. You will pay only regular room rate, of course.”

Elise opened her mouth to protest but Eva held up her hand. “The granddaughter of my dear friend has come to visit and we will be the best hosts.” To Fae she said, “There are no elevators here like the big city hotels you must be used to, but if you have need of anything, please, I will make it my personal cause. Are you hungry? I have a delicious meat pie in the fridge.”

“No, thank you, I’m still good from breakfast.” Fae smiled her thanks as she took the skeleton key from Eva. She could see why this dear old woman and her grandmother were friends. “Your village is very charming, and I look forward to exploring it more.” And she meant it . . . the last part anyway. The letter had suggested enough things to check out to ensure that.

“You will learn much about your family history here. I promise.” As an afterthought, Eva added, “I’m sure Maria has already told you, but you

absolutely must see our church, the Basilique de Notre-Dame du Seigneur. Maria told me that you are interested in cathedrals and basilicas.”

Fae smiled politely and tried her best not to come off as rude. “I don’t want to give the wrong impression, I don’t know if my grandmother mentioned, but I really don’t care for the institution churches represent. It’s their art and architecture that attracts me.”

Fae watched as a little disappointment fell in Eva’s eyes as she spoke, and a small twinge pecked at her for coming off cold when Eva had been so warm. “No one will be forcing you inside, dear,” she replied with a smile, making it easier for Fae to shove aside the creep of guilt. “We don’t have much for tourism, but we’re proud of what we do have.”

Fae returned the smile, thanking Eva again for her hospitality, and picked up her bags taking herself to the stairs. They were steep and in short angular flights, three flights per floor. The same renovations that had transformed the first floor hadn’t yet reached the green carpet, threadbare from constant wear, and the old wooden stairs tended to creak. Small rectangular stained glass windows marked each floor. By the time Fae rounded the corner to the second floor, her heart was beating faster than she would have liked—the result of spending much more time in the books and on the drafting table than the gym, but the short-term physical sacrifices were worth it. She knew she was a talented designer and so did the firm where she had an internship. It was just too bad for them that being a landscape architect wasn’t an exciting prospect.

Room 3A was directly on her right once she reached the top of the stairs. The door itself was made of carved wood, bearing years’ worth of scratches and dents, and Fae wondered how many stories lay behind it. How many kids once ran up and down these stairs? What happened to them? Did German soldiers steal in here for a night before they turned tail and ran? Oh, if the wood could speak.

Jiggling the skeleton key in the lock, Fae let herself in and tossed her bags to the bed. She walked to the shuttered window and flapped aside the thin, white cotton drapes, dramatically throwing open the shutters just like she had seen any number of Disney princesses do, to behold the beautiful sight of . . . the roof of the neighboring house.

Fae's heart sank. The best room in the hotel and her view was another building's roof. Deflated, she shuttered the window and turned her attention to the rest of the room.

A second door led to a private bathroom, which was probably what made this the "elite" suite, though it still didn't give her too much to get excited about. The bathroom was compact, as most things in Europe were, but it was so small that she could almost use the toilet, wash her hair under the shower, and brush her teeth in the sink all at the same time. But still, it was a small luxury. It wasn't uncommon for similar lodgings to have a shared bathroom, or even the bathroom split into different rooms—the toilet in one, the sink in another.

Her room was clean though, and appropriately decorated for the Holidays with a small pine Christmas tree in the corner. Underneath its green boughs, lovingly arranged on the tree skirt, was a beautifully crafted Nativity scene. Kneeling, she took a closer look at it. Porcelain, hand painted. The humans had skin as white as snow and the animals had almond-shaped eyes. The three Wise Men were there with their heavily laden camels, as were two shepherds, one with a lamb wrapped around his neck and the other standing beside a cow peeking under his shoulder. Mary and Joseph had their eyes stoically cast downward to the straw-laced crib where a newborn Jesus stretched his arms above his head. His expression was as emotionless as his parents'.

"Not too excited about this whole 'Jesus, God with us' stuff, are you?" Fae said out loud. "I guess you guys were smart enough to know a myth when you heard one. But did you know you were living one?"

The Nativity scene would have to go. Despite her years in academia, she sometimes still found it difficult to look at religious icons as just art; they had the ability to spark an emotional response, to say it nicely. She'd ask the front desk for a simple exchange. It was a lovely enough ornamental set that it deserved to be appreciated by someone who could. Carefully gathering up all the pieces, Fae placed them near her jacket to take downstairs. She wouldn't make a special trip for it.

She took her time settling into her room and cleaning herself up before finding the remote for the old television hanging in the corner. Fae turned it

on and dug out the letter again to plan the rest of her day. Her grandmother had practically written a tour guide, from arranged meetings with relatives, to naming old friends she should meet if time allowed, and even where to find the best baked goods. As she moved through the pages her eyes caught a paragraph she had already read multiple times. It was a paragraph that continued to mystify her even though it was borderline insulting, so she read it again hoping maybe another pass would help make sense of it.

My dearest Fae, to my last breath I will always tell you how I daily contest for your soul on my knees; every miracle begins with a prayer. The refusal of God's existence which you say grants you religious neutrality, and the judgment you pass on those who can't agree with your assertion, has led to a life I pray will not leave you in eternal regret. This is not new for you to hear from me. The offenses and hurts you suffered growing up can no longer define your worldview. You have a talent in your art that touches people, so it is for the souls you will inspire that has brought me to this point, this point of revealing to you, my dear, the most closely guarded secret. Your father does not even know everything that will be made known to you, and your grandfather took it with him to his grave, as must you, and yet even beyond it.

She loved her grandmother but sometimes she just couldn't let a sleeping dog lie, as her grandfather loved to say. The paragraph had gotten her mind turning again about the nature of her gift. It was both a secret taken to the grave and the pinnacle of a breaking point toward Fae's worldview, which apparently was dragging a few people down to Hell with her. And yet it was a Christmas gift, which meant it had to be a good thing. But it was a village secret that the world couldn't handle. She shook her head. It still made no sense.

A documentary about Frankie Valli was on TV and she watched it for a few minutes until they cut to a clip of him singing, "Can't Take My Eyes Off You" and had to turn it off. That had been her mother's favorite song. She'd play it when doing housework or anytime she needed to feel happy again, or when she was happy, and when Fae's father was home the three of them would dance to it together. But that was back when Fae still thought of them as having a functioning family, or, at least was still in denial about it.

It had been over seven years since her mother had been killed. Hearing the song was still too soon. Naturally, she had included the song in the list for her mother's funeral, and later the same day she had submitted the playlist, Pastor Blake had paid her and her father a visit.

"Fae, thank you for getting the playlist to Sam in time for tomorrow. Look, I don't know how to say this, but I'm sorry to say we won't be able to play the Frankie Valli song. You know church policy—"

"Excuse me?" Fae asked, indignant. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Blake," her father quickly interrupted, "you have to let us play the song."

"I'm sorry, Luc, but this isn't a personal decision. It's a mandate from God that our church is to be a holy place and secular music doesn't fit the bill. It's a place to lift Him high, not ourselves."

"You wrote that policy," Fae told him, "not God. It is your decision. How do you know what music is secular or not? Half that music on Sunday could be sung to anyone. God is love? This is a song about love."

"Physical love. Fae, I don't want to make this time any more difficult for you—"

"Then play the song. It's the only thing left to this family that means something." She glared at her father, didn't mean to. He seemed similarly inflexible, and this was a rare time they were on the same side. But she was just hurting so badly right now . . .

"Blake, it's innocent . . ."

Fae's fists tightened as she stared down now at the pile of Nativity figures. Pastor Blake didn't relent. Instead, he once again showed the true colors of his religion.

Fae smothered a yawn and despite her anger she suddenly felt crazy tired. It was still before noon and so she decided to slip in a short nap to help erase those memories she'd rather forget. She laid her head on the pillow and let the sleep wash over her.

She was in the back of a taxi. The driver had a messenger's hat on, but she couldn't see his face in the mirror. The landscape outside was charcoal gray, desolate and overgrown by twisted, harsh-looking weeds. Her grandparent's village suddenly came upon them, the hundred-foot-tall blackened walls

crumbling in spots. The only entrance was through two spiked iron doors. As they passed through, gargoyles at the top of the doors turned their heads to watch them enter, tracking her with their beady stone eyes.

They arrived at her destination but it didn't feel right. She tapped the driver on the shoulder and told him as much. He didn't respond. She showed him the paper with the address and again asked the driver to take her there, and again he didn't respond. A third time she prodded the driver and she could feel him getting annoyed. He snapped his head around 180 degrees and met her with a full-toothed grin from a fleshless skull. Fae didn't scream, she just dove for the door handle only to find that she had been manacled in. A deep, rumbling cackle came out of the driver's skull. His messenger cap morphed into a lopsided World War II German helmet. A few stray wisps of dehydrated hair escaped from beneath it and he lifted an arm off the steering wheel and reached for her. His fleshless bony fingers were like little spears and she pressed herself back against the seat as far away from him as she could. It wasn't enough. The arm knew no limit and kept coming for her. *I've brought you to your gift*, the skeleton driver said, *it's been too long since the Peeters family has celebrated the Holidays here. It's nice to finally meet you in person. Let's go for a ride.* The head snapped forward and the car lurched forward. Fae wrestled with her fetters trying to reach the door handle, only to find that the handle was now gone and the window had been barred over. "You didn't bring me to my present! Where is it?" Fae demanded with rising panic. The driver said nothing but his bony hand kept stretching out for her. It just kept coming and coming while they kept driving. There was no way to get out . . .

Fae awoke with a jolt and bolted up, breathing hard. She never had nightmares, so what the heck was that? Gripping her head between her hands as though by physically grasping her brain she could better control it, she tried to slow her heart and forget everything she'd just seen. It had been so real; she could still feel the weight of the iron fetters dragging her down. She looked at her hands and found only her watch, the same one she always wore.

Looking up she found herself in the giant mirror. She was white and panicked; so much for freshening up. Why was she even here? Honestly though, what did her grandmother have stored away for her after seventy-odd

years that was such a big deal? She could still leave on the train tomorrow and go back home to Brussels. Her good friend Yanna had left her with an invitation to join her family for Christmas. But that would be letting her grandmother down.

“What are you doing, Fae Peeters?” she asked her reflection.

Fae sighed a heavy breath and half-heartedly fingered through the knots in her hair. A little fresh air would clear her head, and the lingering haunted feeling was already starting to be crowded out by the resurging words from her grandmother’s letter.

You must open your eyes to see that there is more than one world inhabiting Earth. When it comes to your soul there is no neutral ground, and by trying to live there you’ve become dangerously skeptical to this battle between life and death, which you are unable to see as a result. I pray that you will be able to, soon enough . . .

Fae was staring off into space and she began to feel so heavy. Her mind was stuck on repeat and she felt terrible looking at herself in the mirror. When had she gotten such bags under her eyes? This must be what the start of depression feels like. Either that, or madness.

You must die to leave alive.

Fae groaned. “Just everything shut up.”

I’m in your head . . . That wasn’t her voice! *I’m in your head . . .* She wasn’t thinking those words, they weren’t hers! The words repeated through her mind in a singsong taunt. *I’m in your head, I’m in your head, I’m in your head . . .*

She started to panic. First nightmares and now voices. She paced the room trying to talk herself back to reason. “I am smart and strong. I don’t have mental issues. I am a normal, levelheaded human being. I am focused on my goals and I achieve them.” *I’m in your head, I’m in your head . . .* “I am amazing at what I do, I am focused. I am grounded with a good life, good friends, good . . . things!” . . . *I’m in your head, I’m in your head—*

Gritting her teeth, Fae shot her eyes upward into the mirror to drill some sanity back into herself. But what she expected to see reflected there, wasn’t. A humanoid horror, repulsively disgusting was staring back at her instead.

THE GIFT

She yelled and tripped backward over the bed, falling onto the floor. She covered her head defensively and buried her face in the floor, trying to smother the sounds of her own panicked breathing. She was still dreaming, she was still dreaming, this was still the dream, that mirror wasn't real, it wasn't real . . . !

I'm in your head, and you're dead.