

HACKING HEAVEN



Book Proposal

GJ BARBATO

Finn is perfectly happy in heaven until he meets the love of his lifetimes and she and his Guardian Angel, Clarence, invite him to join her in her next round of life.

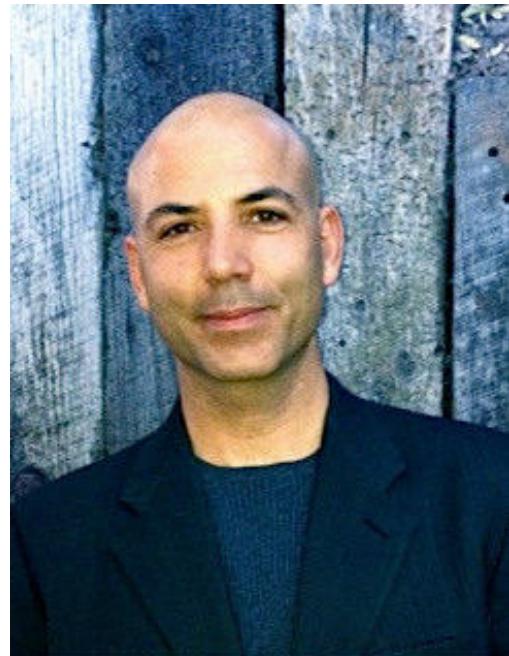
The Author

Jonathon Barbato has leveraged his over twenty-five years in television to focus now on delivering the mainstream audience stories that leave a positive impact on the planet. He is Co-CEO of Best Ever Channels, with five streaming channels on seven platforms, including the COMMUNE channel on VIZIO and PLEX. He is the recipient of multiple marketing awards, a regular speaker and panelist at entertainment media events and a founding member of Jack Canfield's Association of Transformational Leaders. Prior to this he was Head of Marketing for MGM-TV and STARZ movie channel among other executive positions within the entertainment universe. He also has stories published in multiple anthologies and several other books in the works.

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The Book

Shot down and killed in France during World War II, Finn is finds himself marveling in the joys of Heaven. But even his fondest discoveries pale in comparison to the spark he feels when he meets Jessica, his soulmate. She and his Guardian Angel, Clarence, spend the book explaining to Finn how a lifetime works, taking him on a journey through past lives and an adventure in planning his next. It won't be all fun and games, lifetimes are about learning, and Finn must find the courage and perhaps a *hack* or two to face some tough lessons if he ever hopes to meet back up with Jessica.

The Target Market

Hacking Heaven is a novel with spiritual overtones and life-lessons all rolled into a romantasy that takes place in Heaven. *Hacking Heaven* is a franchise to satisfy the mainstream's growing hunger for meaning, substance and hope related in terms relevant to today's world. The sequel is already mapped out. A platform to support the thinking and form a fanbase is being developed. And this audience, now primarily women 35-55 is expanding into millennials, Gen Z and even Baby Boomers rapidly.

The Structure of the Book

The book is a character-driven story with its main characters, Finn and Heaven, set up to be relatable and comfortable for the characters, who engage in past and future life sequences to add to the relatability, realism, and action in the story. It is a love story within an adventure within a spiritual novel which innocently answers some of life's most puzzling questions as the characters must traverse the plot, and overcome the conflicts within, to get to the surprising conclusion.

The Value to the Reader

Readers today want to find meaning to their reality, which is true for the Millennials and Baby Boomers alike. *Hacking Heaven* provides answers to many of the questions we all ask in our lives without seeming forced or preachy. Its relatable characters bring normalcy to the otherwise esoteric idea of Heaven and leave the reader pondering how their life might be happening FOR them, vs. TO them.

Author Bio

Jonathon was born in Los Angeles, California to a second-generation Italian father and first-generation Croatian immigrant mother in the French Hospital in Chinatown. He spent much of his career in International TV Marketing, is conversant in several languages and is inherently infatuated with culture.

Clear since gradeschool his purpose in life was to write and relate to the general public his inherent understanding of the spirit/human balance, Jonathon chose a career in entertainment to learn how to reach millions.

Rising to the top of the echelon of corporate entertainment culture, Jonathon realized as Head of Marketing for MGM-TV, and then STARZ movie channel, that if he wanted to have a real effect on the stories being told from Hollywood it was time to venture off on his own.

Jonathon eventually became the Co-Founder of Ripe Digital Entertainment, a Hearst and Rho Ventures funded enterprise with three channels pioneering the OnDemand space when it was still nascent. From there he spent several years as Founder and President of Apricot Corporation, a digital agency responsible for sending hundreds of millions of visitors to over 22 different entertainment sites (including Lifetime, OutdoorTV, Pluto, Tubi and others) as well as to online marketing thought leaders (including Mind Movies, Revealed, Jack Canfield, Les Brown, and more).

Now he is Co-Founder and CEO of Best Ever Channels, with five ad-supported streaming channels on multiple platforms like VIZIO, LG, PLEX and more. Two of his channels, COMMUNE and MORE U devoted completely to conscious media and including a comedy channel with The Stand in NYC and a music channel with SPIN magazine.

Full-time entertainment / full-time writer (he's a busy boy), Jonathon has a daily practice to pen his works, which include a number of other novels in the works (Proposals available upon request, a book of short stories, his published anthologies, photo/poetry books and more).

Jonathon is a founding member of Jack Canfield's inspired Association of Transformational Leaders SoCal and has an impressive "rolodex" of friends and colleagues in the entertainment, public relations, marketing, media, and personal transformation industries. Jonathon's ability to develop and market brands, his affiliation with like-minded published authors and high-level speakers and podcasters will be priceless as a novelist when collaborating with agents and publishers to promote his own projects.

Marketing Plan

Jonathon's conscious streaming networks, the perfect place to promote his books, currently reach over 30 million active users monthly, and he can create advertorial on the channel to promote the books. The founders of COMMUNE have an active email list of 1.2 million targeting the book's demographic, and they will endorse the book in their weekly newsletter. Jonathon's close association with Mind Movies also affords him access to their active email list of an additional 1.3 million people with proven interest in the Law of Attraction and this category.

Jonathon will hit the podcast circuit hard, including interviews already promised from Yasmeen Turayhi ("Gateways To Awakening" ranked in the top five worldwide of spiritual podcasts); Lisa Garr ("Lisa Garr show"); Natalie Ledwell ("Inspiration Show") and others in the categories of spirituality, personal transformation, near-death experiences, book reviewers (including "Soul Ascend," "Seeking Center," "Raising A Powerful Girl," "Where Money Meets The Could," and more.

Jonathon is ready, willing and able to hit the speaker circuit and do book signings at strategic locations to further the other efforts along. He is a founding member of Jack Canfield's Association of Transformational Leaders and can access multiple authors, speakers and coaches in the personal development and wellness space to assist and support the book launch.

Additionally, Jonathon is developing a website, social presence, and potentially mobile app for Hacking Heaven fans to dive deeper into the novel and author's life; converse (via A.I. with Clarence) on their own life's mission; and engage in like-minded other content, including the upcoming sequel: "*Hacking Heaven On Earth*."



Advanced Praise

“An imaginative spiritual fable following two soulmates planning their upcoming lifetimes and grappling with unconditional love. As the producer of another afterlife fable ‘What Dreams May Come,’ I enthusiastically recommend ‘Hacking Heaven.’”

Barnet Bain |Author, Director, Producer

“What Dreams May Come”, “Celestine Prophecy”, “Milton’s Secret”

“This is a page-turner full of inspiration, wisdom and clear guidance. It is also a powerful love story. If you want to be enthralled and can’t wait to see what’s next afterlife... this is the book for you.”

Cynthia James | Author; Thought Leader

“Does My Voice Matter”, “I Choose Me: The Art of Being Phenomenally Successful”

“Hacking Heaven is a journey of love, destiny, and self-discovery!”

Nina Boski | Author; Filmmaker

“LifeBites Global”

“Filled with loving Guardian Angels and humorous guides, ‘Hacking Heaven’ explores the purpose and meaning of life, both on Earth and in Paradise (and spaces in between). This captivating book explains the magic and mystery of reincarnation and manifestation and most importantly, it’s a love story about soulmates that will appeal to all genders.”

Arielle Ford | Author; Book Publicist

“The Soulmate Secret”, “The Love Thief”, “Wabi Sabi Love”

“Hacking Heaven offers a delightful and essential lesson in spiritual growth. It inspires one to ask: ‘What might be missed when living on auto-pilot?’ It provokes reflection on what one could create by attuning to life’s lessons. Barbato has offered up an invaluable gift to all who read it.”

Julie Morely, PhD | Author, Researcher & Ornithographer

“Future Sacred”



Comparable Titles



***The Midnight Library* by Matt Haig (2020) • Over 10 million sold**

The Midnight Library by Matt Haig is a novel about a woman on the threshold between life and death who visits parallel versions of her life. Nora Seed, the protagonist, is a depressed woman in her 30s who, on the day she decides to die, finds herself in a library full of lives she could have lived. Each book in the library represents a portal into another variation of what her life could have been.. The novel explores themes of regret, depression, and the value of life.

***The Measure* by Nikki Erlick (2022) • Best-Seller**

A story of love and hope as interweaving characters display how all moments, big and small, can measure a life. From suburban doorsteps to desert tents, every person on every continent receives the same box, the contents of which tells you the exact number of years you will live, thrusting the world into a collective frenzy.

***A Court Of Thorns & Roses* by Sarah Maas (Series 2015-21) • Best-Seller**

A fantasy romance series by American author following the journey of 19-year-old FeyreArcheron after she is brought into the faerie lands of Prythian.

***The Invisible Life of Addie LaRue* by V.E. Schwab (2020)**

A beautifully written novel about love, destiny, and the consequences of our choices across time. Its mix of romance and supernatural themes makes it a compelling comparison.

***"The City in Glass"* by Nghi Vo (2024)**

This fantasy novel spans several centuries, telling the story of a demon and an angel and their relationship with the fictional city of Azril. It explores themes of grief, retribution, and love, evoking the best of Italo Calvino and Ursula K. Le Guin. The novel received critical acclaim and was named one of the best speculative fiction novels of 2024 by Publishers Weekly.



Synopsis

What happens before we are born? How much of our life is fate and how much is choice? *Hacking Heaven* dares to answer these questions in the backdrop of an enchanting love story between its main characters. It's philosophical fiction with a sense of humor and a whimsical exploration into man's search for meaning, told with a skeptical edge. It's "*Conversations With God*" meets "*Way Of The Peaceful Warrior*" with a flare all its own.

Finn is in Paradise. He arrived there after his unexpected death in his last lifetime and he's perfectly happy there now. Things get even spicier when he meets Jessica, his eternal love. It couldn't be better. But Jessica is planning another lifetime and now Finn is being invited to join her by his Guardian Angel, Clarence.

What will he do? On the one hand, his desire to join Jessica is all encompassing. But when he's faced with the lessons he must learn to get there, he has serious doubts that leaving Paradise makes any sense at all. He enters *The Hall of Whys* to start planning his life and its lessons. The time to choose will soon be upon him. To aide in the process, he's taken on several journeys through past lives and even the lifetime to come. All of them answering age-old questions as to why we are born into a lifetime and what happens after we die.

We're introduced to his parents, spouse, and children to be, and the process to which they are all joined in their mutual goal of a lifetime together. Besides Finn's Guardian Angel, Clarence, the lifetime planning angel, Prudence, offers a comic relief and additional insight into what this lifetime planning is all about. Together they plan race, riches, challenges and talents, all with the intent of aiding Finn and his lifetime-to-be comrades in the lessons they must learn to make it to the next level.

But the prospect is daunting, and Finn is conflicted between his feelings for Jessica and his reluctance to engage in the challenges of the lifetime to come. Both he and Jessica must face this conflict and make the choices, well, of a lifetime. They have

conversations with Christ, Buddha and others in their search for a “hack” to make it easier.

Hacking Heaven explores the meaning of fate, the source of *déjà vu*, the question of why some suffer while others thrive, who chooses our race, religion, sex, culture, and why. And it does it with characters readers will relate to and grow to love. Whether you agree with all it contains or question every page, it’s a compelling read with universal appeal. And, while it’s unlike any other story out there, it’s also oddly relatable and familiar.

A perspective view of a grand, ornate hallway, likely in a Baroque or neoclassical setting. The ceiling and walls are highly decorated with intricate moldings, stucco, and gold leaf. The floor is a classic checkered pattern of grey and white tiles. At the far end of the hallway, a large, ornate doorway is set into a wall that features a prominent coat of arms or crest. The doorway is flanked by two large, fluted columns and leads into a bright, sunlit space, possibly a garden or a room with large windows. The overall atmosphere is one of grandeur and historical elegance.

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Prologue

The birthing process. The end at the beginning.

Chapter 1:Welcome To Heaven

Finn arrives in Heaven after his plane is shot down over occupied France in World War II and he is taken in by the French Resistance and tracked down and killed by Nazi's. He introduces us to Heaven, not too unlike earth.Only here he finds relatives, angels, and all the desires he can imagine fulfilled.

Chapter 2:The Meeting

When one of Finn's Heavenly explorations inadvertently gets him chased by a Grizzley bear, he meets Jessica upon his narrow escape...and there's something special here. She's planning another lifetime, isn't he?

Chapter 3:Clarence

Finn meets his Guardian Angel, Clarence, who explains he'll be Finn's guide, in Heaven, in his last life review, and beyond, but first there's his funeral to attend.

Chapter 4:The Funeral

Finn attends his own funeral, is invisible to the crowd gathered, but not oblivious to their thoughts and emotions.

Chapter 5:Life Review Begins

Finn begins his Life Review in the Past Life Theater with Clarence. He discovers Heaven isn't a destination, but rather a weigh station between the lessons of lifetimes...and he still has some lessons to learn.

Chapter 6:The Lake

On a beautiful lake walk, Finn meets Jessica again. She's looking forward to her next lifetime, where she expects to fight for more rights as a woman. Finn is put off by the idea of another lifetime, but his attraction for Jessica compels him to consider it.

Chapter 7:Playing It Safe

Once again on Finn's iconic porch and Adirondak chairs, Clarence counsels Finn in the merits of taking chances and the role fear plays in the lessons of a lifetime...acted out like a movie. "But who directs, writes and acts in the film?" Finn asks.

Chapter 8:Poverty

Finn unexpectedly wakes up in a dark, medieval setting, and not a comfortable one at that. In the same way that a movie draws us out of our comfortable theater seats and into the drama on screen, Finn finds these past life glimpses draw him out of the comfort of heaven and into the truth of who he is and what is unresolved from the past. This undeniable attraction to Jessica is because she's his soulmate, and if Finn wants a lifetime with her Clarence is his way to get there.

Chapter 9:Popcorn

Jessica and Finn meet up again and have a charming interlude. She's a bit further down the path of this whole Heavenly-prep-for-another-lifetime thing and has none of the reticence that Finn does. But as Jessica expounds on her enchantment with going back into a lifetime, all Finn can focus on is her smile and the way she pulls that strand of hair behind her ear.

Chapter 10:*The View*

Clarence takes Finn to the top of Everest, for the view, and expounds on how a soul is on a constant journey of expansion. He then takes him back into his last life review, and how he somehow missed the opportunity to fulfill that life's path. That bit of courage would have changed his whole life trajectory. It was his free will to do so, but it also meant he skipped a lesson of that lifetime.

Chapter 11:*Seed Planted*

Finn and Jessica are together again, and well, in Heaven there's no limits. Why not jump into the river naked together or fly around on magic carpets? And there's no hiding feelings or even thoughts from each other in Heaven. They are clearly falling hard for each other. But while Jessica speaks of her next lifetime with excitement and anticipation, Finn is harboring doubt and reticence.

Chapter 12:*Diving In*

Drawn by Jessica's enthusiasm, Finn speaks with Clarence about how this whole "planning another lifetime thing" works. Clarence also introduces the concept of reincarnation. It's like a school...choose the curriculum in Heaven and go to class in the lifetime...and if you fail, there's always eternity to try again. When Finn broaches the subject of "good and bad" or "hell" Clarence takes him on a journey to watch himself as murderer and murderer to drive the point home about karma.

Chapter 13:*Sex*

It got a little heavy with Clarence, so Finn opts to see Jessica again. She's just as excited to see him. What's confounding him is embraced by her and she shows him some past lives of hers where she was perpetrator in one and victim in the other. She's looking forward to another lifetime spin, but Finn's interest is her present curves and lovely shape. We learn what sex is like in Heaven.

Chapter 14:*Where's This All Going?*

Clarence interrupts Finn's private moment of post-colloidal bliss and shows him the lifetime he earned the ability to love so fully. We viscerally enter the lifetime scene where Finn was captain on a ship doomed to sink in a storm and sacrificed himself to save his crew. This spurs a conversation about predestination, free will, and next steps in planning a lifetime.

Chapter 15:*The Roadmap*

Jessica and Finn meet up again and it begins to dawn on Jessica that Finn is seeing some of the past life lessons they have in common differently. They get into a discussion about how it all works, and how a new lifetime is planned with some committee. Clarence joins in the discussion and adds in the factor that, even in a lifetime, Heaven interacts behind the scenes, if asked.

Chapter 16:*Hall Of Whys*

Finn's curiosity leads him to the Hall Of Whys, the place where lifetimes are planned. And we meet Prudence, the flippant and brash overseeing angel who runs the place.

Chapter 17:*Hall Of Whys Continued*

Back in the Hall Of Whys we meet the crew preparing to join Finn in his next lifetime. Finn meets Becka, who carries a strange allure and is connected in past lifetimes, and Prudence explains how there is a group of "influencing souls" in every lifetime. Jessica suggests she and Finn join up as lovers in the lifetime to come.

Chapter 18:*Harsh News*

Finn is told by Clarence and then shown in a lifetime as a puppet king that he has a lot to learn in the area of self-confidence and self-love. The Problem: This may get in the way of him even being able to meet Jessica in the lifetime to come.

Chapter 19:*The Choice*

Finn and Jessica discuss the news they might not find each other in the lifetime to come. Their discussion leads them to a joint discussion with Christ. Christ is a bit more optimistic...maybe there's a way...but it won't be easy. They'll have to accelerate the program for Finn, involving a "warrior training" dose of courage and trust.

Chapter 20:*What's Next*

In the Hall of Whys we meet a few more of the characters to play in Finn's lifetime. His parents-to-be, Don and Martha. His children-to-be, Hannah and Paul. And a few others yet-to-be-decided, including Linda, a fiery and sultry woman of mystery. Prudence makes it known if Finn is going to undergo this "warrior training" she needs a volunteer to be his antagonist.

Chapter 21:*The Volunteer*

Linda shows up at Finn's house to volunteer for the antagonist position...only he'll have none of it! Still schooling Finn on what's needed, Clarence takes him on a past life journey through the day he died. From the choice not to needlessly kill his adversary to his chance meeting of...wait for it...Jessica, then called Beatrice.

Chapter 22:What's Past Is Past

Now Clarence shows Becka and Finn a past life where they were together where Becka was an angry mother to Finn. There's some unresolved feelings between them, and there's an opportunity to heal some of that in the lifetime to come...maybe as a married couple?

Chapter 23:What If

Finn let's Jessica know they met at the end of their last lifetime, but also that he may need to have another relationship or more before meeting her in the next one. Jessica embraces it as an adventure, but Finn is reticent. A bit of tension forms between them.

Chapter 24:Shall We Continue?

Finn is shown a lifetime as a self-flagellating monk and then as a slave driver, all in an effort to demonstrate the roots of his sense of being "not good enough." Don and Martha, as his parents-to-be will help propagate this in his upcoming lifetime to set the stage for his growth. Prudence reiterates the need for a volunteer to help Finn through.

Chapter 25:The Volunteer 2

Becka invites Finn to a walk in the forest to tell him she wants to volunteer to be the antagonist in his next life. Not just for him, but for herself to get closer to unconditional love.

Chapter 26:The Seven Steps

Clarence reveals to Finn if he is to succeed in getting where he wants to go in this next lifetime, there are seven steps he must learn.

Chapter 27:Becka's Past Connection

Becka shows Finn a past lifetime of hers where she is living a harsh life on the streets and he is her father. There's karma from this lifetime to be resolved in the next. Clarence reveals the first step: *Life is happening FOR you, not TO you.*

Chapter 28:The Hunter

We enter the sensory experience of a Native American hunter, one with the elements and the rhythm of his life. This is Finn in past lifetime, and Clarence demonstrates this is the type of rhythm he'll be seeking again. He demonstrates to Finn how he missed this lesson in his last go-around...free choice gone array. Clarence then introduces another lesson: *Once you're on path, life comes to you, no more reaching.*

Chapter 29:Big Wedding & Kids

In the Hall of Whys all the characters in Finn's life-to-be begin jockeying for position. But Prudence informs them it won't be all fun and games. Things get "messy" in a lifetime when choices and life purpose cross. That's when Heaven throws you a "breadcrumb" she explains, complete with examples. Some we get, some we miss.

Chapter 30:*The Glimpse*

To further demonstrate the connection between Heaven and a lifetime, Prudence shows Becka and Finn a not-so-pleasant glimpse of their lifetime to come and a “breadcrumb” to remind them who they are at a critical moment.

Chapter 31:*Hummingbirds*

Jessica is excited about the lifetime to come, speculating how she and Finn might use hummingbirds to remind them of each other when they meet. Meanwhile, Finn is having serious second thoughts...he's not so sure about all this anymore.

Chapter 32:*Shadow & Light*

Clarence shows Jessica and Finn a lifetime where Finn was in the Inquisition and Jessica almost became his victim. The lesson: *To truly see your path, you need to embrace both the shadow and the light.* The vision leaves Jessica put off by the realization and Finn ashamed.

Chapter 33:*A Demonstration*

In a lifetime-to-come glimpse, a man living on the streets shows Finn the difference between homeless and hopeless.

Chapter 34:*Contrast*

Utilizing more past life glimpses, Clarence demonstrates to Finn in the grand spectrum of things, there really is no “good” and “bad,” only contrast on the spectrum of duality. With no good or bad, judgment takes on a whole new meaning, and so does forgiveness. Lesson number four: *When you face your shadow, you can find your true purpose.*

Chapter 35:*Feed The Hungry*

Finn meets up with Buddha and Christ again for a discussion around karma and what's fair in a lifetime of learning and free will. If someone chooses to learn from hunger in a lifetime, do you feed them? And where does forgiveness come from? Finn will need that in his next lifetime.

Chapter 36: *Flow*

Prudence teaches about *flow*, that almost magical force in a lifetime that let's you know when you're on path or not. She uses the room's past lives to demonstrate when flow was heeded or missed. Leading to the fifth lesson: *When you stay in flow in a lifetime, the path is clear.*

Chapter 37: *Time Is Of The Essence*

An exploration of the timelessness of Heaven and the role of time on earth. Ultimately, what matters is “now,” are you getting this Finn? (Cause he missed it last time).

Chapter 38: *Living With The Lesson*

Finn and Jessica dialog on the upcoming lifetime. She's ready, he may not be. She drills him a bit on the past glimpses they've been given...is he getting the lessons? Jessica can see he may not be, and tension mounts between them.

Chapter 39: *Day Of Choosing*

Hall of Whys and time to choose cultural origins, skin color, prosperity levels and more...but Finn can't concentrate. Jessica is missing (and angry), Becka calls him out, and Prudence emphasizes his need for forgiveness...of himself.

Chapter 40: *Choosing Your Life*

Back to the Hall of Whys and choosing attributes for the upcoming lifetime. Meanwhile Jessica and Finn meet again, tension around his readiness still in the forefront. Tension between the two of them still high.

Chapter 41: *Moving On*

Finn is back in the Hall of Whys and can't focus on the choices there or anything other than the riff between Jessica and himself. Clarence shows him another past life where he tries to make up for the lifetime in the Inquisition, explaining he has an eternity to reach ultimate connection, and how it's all forgiveness all around.

Chapter 42: *And If I Wander?*

To restore some semblance of hope and focus, Prudence takes Finn on a journey to demonstrate how Heaven interacts with us in a lifetime to guide us when we wander. Your lifetime is a blueprint, but how you make your choices is your free will.

Chapter 43: *Talents & Attributes*

Back to the Hall of Whys and planning a lifetime. From artistic talent to good parking Karma, it's all planned. But even though we may choose bravery as an attribute, courage in the face of opposition is a matter for free will. Clarence demonstrates this with a glimpse and the sixth lesson: *We are all one*.

Chapter 44: *He, She*

Finn and his lifetime family must choose their sex, birthplace, and more in the lifetime-to-come.

Chapter 45: *Reunion*

Finally, Jessica rejoins Finn to talk and find some resolution with the riff between them, Jessica is afraid Finn won't make it to meet her in the lifetime-to-come and the possible ramifications of that in many lifetimes to follow.

Chapter 46: *Glimpses*

Jessica, Finn and their Guardian Angels Astara and Clarence in the Past Life Theater together. Jessica as a nun, a Joan of Arc-like figure, a Middle-Aged mum. In every situation we can see Jessica's evolution. She seems to have found the courage Finn can only still imagine. She's ready. Is he?

Chapter 47: *Harsh Reality*

Finn is overwhelmed by what he saw in the last chapter, retreating to his home in Heaven, questioning his ability to navigate any of what's to come.

Chapter 48: *Becka's Circle*

Finn wanders into Becka's lifetime planning circle hoping to make sense of it all, only to find himself more confused and put off by what he experiences. He can't reconcile why any soul would intentionally put themselves through a lifetime of struggle? It becomes very clear to him that on his journey toward unconditional love he may stumble and lose the chance to be with Jessica...indefinitely. He leaves in a huff.

Chapter 49: *I See You*

Jessica and Finn talk about his feelings. She tries to console him with the positive view she has of him and his struggle. In an attempt to ease his tension, she admits she's willing to let go of their meeting in this next lifetime – if that's what he needs. She's embracing her lesson, to detach, can he face his – the courage to go on anyway?

Chapter 50: *Where Is The Love?*

Numb, Finn shores up and blocks out everyone. Clarence eventually breaks through, explaining the difference between unconditional love and the karmic love in most relationships. He's hoping to motivate Finn, but Finn's fear only grows.

Chapter 51: *Scrap The Whole Thing*

Finn finds it hard to focus ahead now, imagining alternative realities and not paying attention to his life-planning session. Jessica tries to help, but her newfound courage to accept whatever is, even if that means letting go of Finn for as long as he needs to be ready for them, is more devastating than comforting to him. He throws in the towel.

Chapter 52: *Castles In The Sky*

Completely overwhelmed, Finn abandons the lifetime planning and retreats to a castle he imagines where everything is geared toward ease. Only it's not working too well. He checks in with Clarence, who confirms the lifetime family has moved on without him, just as he wished.

Chapter 53: *Testing The Limits*

In a final attempt to reconcile things, Finn puts himself into the airplane of his last lifetime and pilots it to the brink of disaster. Only, in that final moment of challenge, instead of ending it all he regains control and a sense of Self.

Chapter 54: *The After-Flight*

Having rediscovered his sense of self, Finn attempts to reunite with Jessica, only Jessica is gone, she's about to be reborn. He encounters Clarence instead, who explains about prayer and he begins to find the courage to embrace a lifetime, with or without Jessica.

Chapter 55: *Glimpse Of Hope*

Clarence is inspired to help Finn. He shows him a glimpse of his lifetime to come and shows him how to instill hope in his next-lifetime persona, as a tool to aide in him getting to where he needs to go. It's another hack, but it just may work. The last lesson: *God is inside of us all, there is always hope.*

Chapter 56: *What Now?*

Finn takes his newfound courage back into the Hall of Whys to beg to enter his lifetime again, as planned. Only now there's a twist. Jessica is giving up her attachment to meeting him completely.... He is devastated by the news but realizes he must go on with this lifetime with or without her...it's his growth. It's what he must do, whatever that means.

Chapter 57: *Together Apart*

Jessica lets go of Finn, for love of him and detachment from her need for their reunion. Finn lets go of Jessica for his courage to face his lessons, no matter how long it takes before he's ready for Jessica...and wait, might that be all they needed to find each other in the lifetime to come?

Chapter 58: *Final Preparations*

The souls are all given their final instructions on jumping into their next lifetime. Their Guardian Angels will be with them, first clearly as infants, and through coincidences as they grow older. They get the order to "embark," and am born.

CHAPTER ONE

Welcome To Heaven

Have you ever seen a sunset so dazzling you just forgot everything else? The colors, the way they brightened on the horizon and became more spectacular just as you thought it couldn't possibly get better. Clouds framing the colors like so many canvases. The moment captures you and holds you and there is nothing else. No thought of yesterday or tomorrow. Just the sunset and now.

It's like that when you arrive in Heaven. Dazzling, perfect, all encompassing. Each moment inspiring your heart to sing. Each moment cradling your soul in a blanket of love you always knew should be there, but which somehow remained just out of reach in a lifetime.

That's Heaven.

I had a lifetime, just like you, before arriving. I wouldn't say typical. Is it fair to call any lifetime typical? But it seemed normal enough to me at the time. I was a fighter pilot for the allied troops in World War II. War is not typical either, but I managed somehow from day to day to find some good in it all. I liked my buddies in the air force. We joked and teased each other when things were tense. We were always there for each other when tense turned into terrifying. We made life seem normal, even though we were thousands of miles from home fighting a war that didn't make sense. We all had a mission, a purpose, and one thing was certain. We were on that mission together.

So, when my plane was gunned down over France that summer it was one of the most frightening experiences of my life. But it was also surreal somehow. There was a sunset that day, a dazzling one, and as I ejected and drifted to earth it was really all I could think about.

When I landed it was dusk already. I heard voices and got nervous. I recognized they were speaking French and the tension released from my body. The French Resistance fighters had seen me go down. They were about to find me now. Maybe this day would end better than I had thought.

I remember looking at their faces, when I came out from the bushes I was hiding in, hands raised, and muttering in my best attempt at a French accent, “Baguette, American, French Fries.”

One of them, he looked like the leader, muttered something so fast in his native tongue to another I was mesmerized and stunned by how much he could say with so little opening of his mouth. The other smiled and replied.

“Il a dit des pommes frites. Il est Américain.” They all smiled then, and embraced me the way the French do, with kisses on the cheeks and even cheekier hugs. I was one of them now, and we traveled together most of the night.

At dawn we walked by a small-town plaza, all the buildings made of stone. The church had a huge boulder as one cornerstone. I thought that was odd. We passed through the town and went to a farm in the country. We found some cheese and half loaf of stale bread in the barn, and all relaxed a bit. I had the most amazing conversation with an absolutely stunning French girl. It seemed odd, a woman with soldiers, but it was the resistance. They were all just former citizens fighting to get their country back. There were women and men side by side, one even had a baby strapped to her chest.

This particular French girl wore fatigues, like the men, and no make-up, but her eyes dazzled and even though I understood very little of the French words she spoke, I don’t think I had ever felt so close to a stranger before. Her friend joined us and pulled

out a small flask of wine to go with our makeshift meal. It was sour, but it was heaven on my lips after the day I had.

We buried ourselves in the hay of the farmhouse and fell into a dead sleep, at least I did, until the sound and thunder of multiple trucks awoke us later that morning. We were surrounded in our barn by a Nazi division of soldiers.

The rest is somewhat of a blur. It happened so fast. They nudged us all to standing in the center of the barn and yelled in German before shoving us against one of the walls. They just started shooting. The last thing I saw was the barrel of a gun and the lemon-yellow hair of the man holding it.

When I opened my eyes again it was like that sunset I described. Too colorful for words and a sense of uttermost peace permeating my entire being. Everything felt, smelled, appeared fresh and new.

As things came into focus, I realized my army buddies were all around me. My grandfather was there as well. That's when I began to realize I wasn't just waking up in France. My grandfather died ten years earlier. And my sister, Melany. She was there. We were like bees on honey growing up. We loved each other and did everything together, Meli and I. She had drowned the Winter when I was eight, yet here she was.

It was a festive atmosphere. They were all smiling and happy to see me. The mood was contagious. And my body. I realized right away how good I felt. I hadn't felt like this in years. I was in perfect shape, no aches or pains whatsoever, and energy coursing through my veins to do...to do anything.

My collection of family and friends, past and present, got me acquainted with life in Heaven. They briefed me on the fact I wasn't in a lifetime anymore. Showed me the

lay of the land...well, it's not land really, but seems like it. You see, Heaven is a place, sure, but it's also more of a state of mind - a continuous dream you're awake inside of, meant to experience.

It's like a Sunday morning all the time here, in Heaven. Nowhere in particular to be. Nothing in particular to do. It's like a Sunday morning when the house is clean and the chores are done. You feel a freedom to just enjoy the day.

Oddly, I felt like fishing. Next thing you know, my granddad and I are fishing, reminiscing about our lifetime together. Him catching me up on all the relatives in Heaven I could meet.

The more time I spent in Heaven, the more I realized this Sunday morning freedom wasn't going away. No matter where I would imagine, I would instantly arrive there. No matter what I wanted to do, I could do it. Sickness, age, these have no meaning or place in Heaven. It's like that dazzle of that sunset never ends.

I was always sort of a loner, so once I got reacquainted with everyone and felt more comfortable, I'd find myself just wandering through nature a lot. I always loved that, and here the nature was brighter and locked in some type of eternal Spring. I wished it Winter once, and it came, but that was enough. Now Spring was fine for me.

There are angels in Heaven. Souls who never were on earth. They have a glow about them. No wings. They look human. Although once I mentioned this to one and she sprouted wings right there in front of me. Said she could appear however I wanted. You get the sense that the bliss of Heaven is all they've known. And they guide you. Answer questions, tell you how things work.

One explained to me Heaven is personalized. My experience wasn't necessarily the next person's. Although they all worked harmoniously together. She said it was that way in order to make it more comfortable while we rested there.

Point is, a soul just knows that it's in the right place, everything is fine, all needs are met. It's a place where you can imagine something and instantly experience it as real.

And it is marvelous, let me tell you. Once I realized I wasn't restricted to an earthly body or lifetime any longer. Once my buddies explained how it can work. I went a bit crazy testing it all. I'd imagine elaborate foods and sweets and meals and suddenly they'd appear for my enjoyment. I'd gone to classical concerts. I met Beethoven. I traveled to amazing spectacles of beauty. Walked through fields of the most amazing wildflowers imaginable. It is an awesome place, in so many ways.

When you have a question in Heaven the answer just comes to you. Sometimes in the form of a person, having a conversation. Sometimes it just pops into your head. The answer I received as to why things, why people looked the same as they did on earth, was that they wanted us, me, to be comfortable. Have comfortable surroundings and points of reference.

After a while, I found myself spending less and less time with my friends or family and more and more time by myself or exploring whatever I could imagine. It's an odd thing to say, spend time, because even though it seems like time passes in Heaven, you have a sense that there is no end to it.

If there's day or night, morning or evening, clouds or stars it's because I want there to be, or sometimes the weather or time of day reflects my mood. I can rest whenever I want. I've always liked nature, so I'll sit by a brook or lay down in a

hammock on the beach of some ocean. I relax, all the time. There's just no end to it. No need to have an end to it. I mean, you don't get tired. I always feel good, so relaxing is more of a pastime than a need, no sleep really, unless you decide that'd be nice to do.

Occasionally I bump into others. Same as with everything else, I only have to think about someone or a conversation I'd like to have, and that person pops out of nowhere and next thing you know we're talking.

God?

Well, let's get to that one a bit later.



CHAPTER TWO

The Meeting

Once I had played around in Heaven a while, you know, had all my favorite foods and visited all the people I loved. I got an urge to venture out. Meet new people. Have new experiences. Something inside of me was, I don't know, was 'hungry' for more. I wanted an adventure. I was on a trail to one of my favorite spots when Heaven answered that urge.

Suddenly, there in front of me, was a huge Grizzley bear. I stopped in my tracks and started backing up slowly. He lifted his head and sniffed. We both sensed danger. Then he saw me. I turned and ran. Fortunately, I was on the crest of a hill, so when I came over it, I was out of sight. But it wouldn't be long until the bear caught up.

I dove into the bushes, hands in front of me. I could feel the skin on my palms tearing under the gravel as I hit the ground, but all I could think about was getting under the leaf cover as soon as possible. The muscle memory in my right shoulder threw me into a Jiu Jitsu roll and my body cleared the branches as it passed under them. The branches whipped back into place after I passed. I was hidden.

Quickly maneuvering to peer from under the branches. My belly was pounding like a tambor drum against the ground, driven by my lungs, hungry for air. Could he hear me?

The bear lumbered intentionally close. Snout raised, sniffing the air. Eyes black and piercing the horizon, searching. They were angry eyes. I shuddered. A cool draft blew from my forehead to behind me, teasing the air. "Good," I thought. My scent is being carried backward.

An eternity passed before the bear moved, first a step toward me, then a step to my right, further down the path, away from the bushes. Then he burst into a run. It was a

run down the path, away from me. My heart beat harder, but my lungs let out a silent burst of relief. It looked like I was safe again.

How had it gotten to this point?

When I arrived, they told me, make a home base for yourself. It will make Heaven feel more inviting and you'll have a reference point.

“You can adjust anything you like,” my sister from the life I had just led told me when I arrived. “Just imagine it and it will be so. Imagine anything. Skies the limit!”

I imagined a small house, two stories, two beds, two baths. Wooden frame and wooden siding. Modest by city standards but comfortable for me and familiar. I grew up in a similar style home in Illinois in my lifetime. The familiarity was what made it mine. It had everything I needed and everything else that I wanted. All I had to do was think about or reach for something and it was there.

I put my mind to remembering my past lifetime on earth. I could muster up a sort of general memory of certain events and moments, a concept of what it was like, but it all seemed so inconsequential now. Who needs to ponder details of a past life when life in Heaven makes imagining new details, pleasant ones, even more powerful? I found myself trying to understand more fully how this whole Heaven-Lifetime thing worked. How do they interact with each other?

That's when I started thinking about adventure. A house was nice and all, but let's have some fun with this conjuring. Let's conjure up something unexpected...something a bit more challenging.

Next thing you know I'm in the woods and this Grizzley bear appears out of nowhere.

After the bear left, I lay there staring at the path. I didn't move for some time. I could no longer see the bear; he had rounded a corner. But I wasn't going to move until I was sure he wasn't coming back. My hands next to my face, braced against the ground, I could sense the metallic smell as they bled. The tension in my body slowly beginning to ease as I lay there, under the bush. The slight burning from my torn hands and ache in my muscles telling me the adrenaline was slipping away. I was out of danger. I could relax.

I waited a bit longer and then, hands on the ground under my shoulders, I pushed myself up and back from under the bush. I noticed the twinge of pain only minutes before was gone and the palms of my hands were smooth, no sign of tear or blood. Healed completely.

"Enough adventure!" I yelled into the air. "I was looking for something unexpected. Only, not dangerous unexpected. Pleasant, unexpected, for goodness sake!"

I stood upright now and brushed myself off. I walked slowly back toward the picnic spot I was at when the bear saw me. As I crested the hill and my spot came into view, I could see there was someone else there now. My whole body tensed, then relaxed. It wasn't another bear; it was a woman.

The picnic table was still at least a hundred feet away, but the woman turned toward me as if she knew I was coming. She wore a silken gown, like everyone here, only it took on a glow with the sun behind it. The silhouette of her body, visible through it, startling my senses.

She smiled. Such a welcoming smile. My body tingled. I didn't recognize this woman, or did I? She radiated a warmth that would have drawn me in closer anywhere. The fact that she was at here, now, greeted me so warmly, captured all of my attention.

I continued toward her, and she continued with whatever she was preparing. As I drew closer, she looked up again, flashing me another one of those smiles, and said:

“Where have you been? I feel like I've been waiting lifetimes for you.”

I awkwardly lifted my arms and pointed behind me while stuttering, “There was this bear, and...he chased me into the bushes...and, well, I was in danger...only now I'm not...and...who are you exactly?”

“I'm Jessica, of course,” she said.

“Of course,” I said, awkwardly smiling, now close enough to offer her my hand to shake.

She took my hand in both of hers only pulled it toward her and somehow maneuvered it around her waist. Next thing you know we were in a hug, her arms around my neck and mine around her waist. Her head rested on my chest, mine found the nook between her neck and shoulder.

My eyes closed involuntarily, and as our bodies pressed up against each other I was taken away. First, my body tingled with an indescribable comfort. It was like diving into a pillow comforter on a feather down bed at the end of a cold day. Then I had the sense that I had no body at all. The sensation of my body pushing up against hers becoming the whole of both of us, and this energetic whole then lifting into space and traveling beyond worlds to a void of thought, sensation, and definition. We went to

oneness is the only way I can describe it. Oneness of each other, oneness with our surroundings, oneness with...everything.

I stayed there with her, in this oneness, for what seemed an eternity.

We broke the embrace, and I fell backwards a bit. From oneness to comfort, to softness between us, to my body against hers and the embrace at a picnic table, in a forest, somewhere in Heaven.

I opened my eyes.

“Well, that was amazing!” she said, pulling softly back for emphasis, just arms distance, eyes scrunched in an assessing amusement.

“Amazing,” was all I could manage.

“We’ll have to do that again sometime,” she said, now pulling away and back to the food she was preparing on the picnic table. “But for now, do you prefer turkey or pastrami...or something else altogether?”

“Who are you? Are you even real, or...” I asked again.

“Jessica, your soulmate,” she said. “Didn’t you request to meet me?”

“Soulmate?” I said in answer to Jessica. “Is that stuff real? Pastrami, by the way.”

“You tell me!” she answered. “Don’t you recognize me?”

I was about to reply ‘no,’ but as I looked into her eyes that feeling of utmost familiarity washed back over me and my mouth sort of froze, half open, before I could utter the word.

She dropped the sandwich she was making as she pulled her hands to her mouth in astonishment, her eyes opened wide. The sandwich disassembled on the ground in front of her.

“Oh, my goodness!” She said. “You didn’t call me in here. You haven’t even been watching our past lives together, have you?”

“Well...uh...no...what?” I replied.

“I am so sorry,” she said, pulling her hands from her face, wiping them on her gown and extending her right hand to shake. “I’m Jessica...but then I said that already.”

“Finn,” I said, shaking her hand, “does this mean we can’t hug again?”

Jessica turned around in a slow circle, hands over her mouth again, laughing to herself.

“I just assumed since I asked to meet my soulmate that you’d have done the same,” she said. “Are you planning your next lifetime?” She asked.

“What? Why would I do that?” I said, “I’m loving Heaven.”

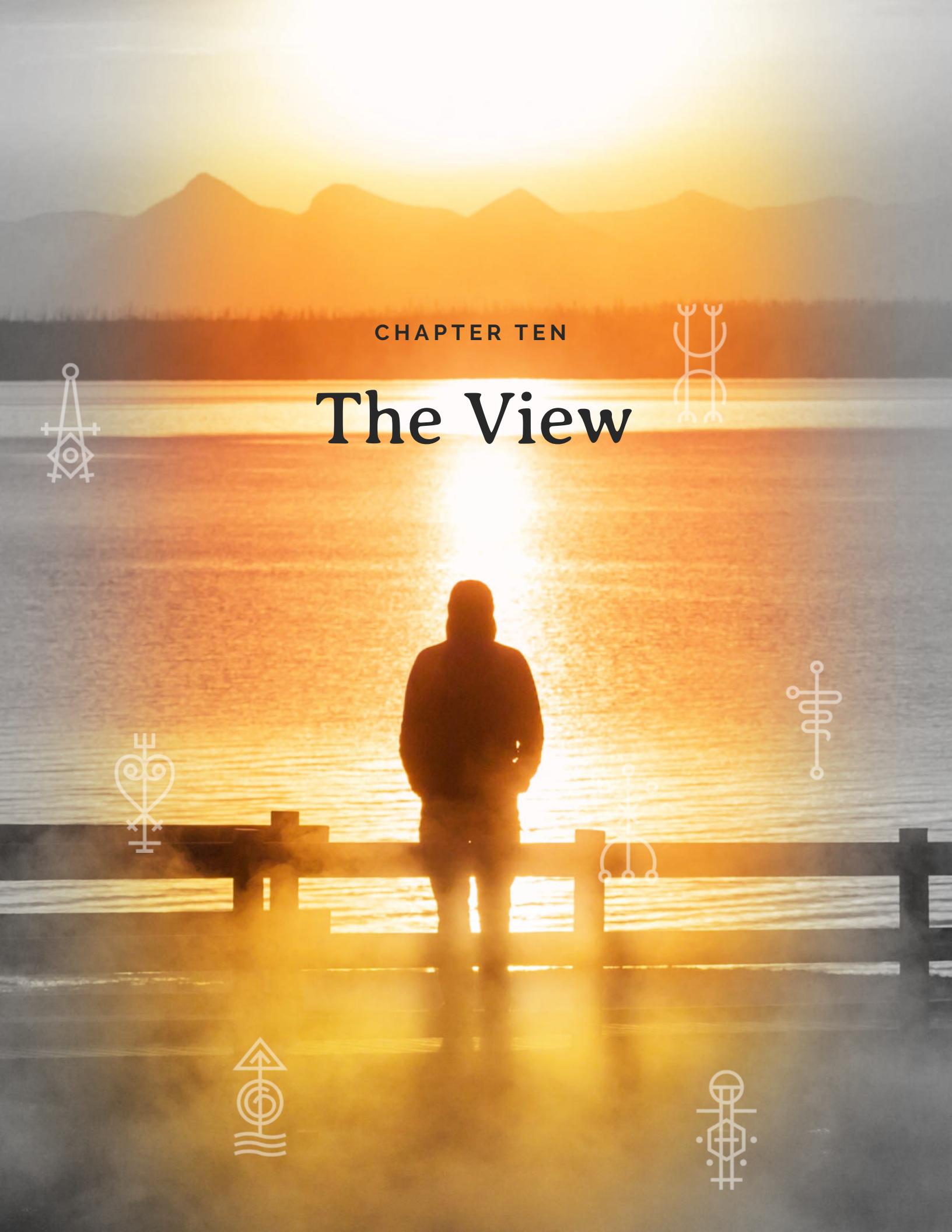
“Oh my, you must be thoroughly confused,” she said.

“Well, yes,” I admitted. “But it’s a nice confusion. I mean that hug...amazing! And you do seem so familiar.”

I then told her about how I was still new to Heaven, enjoying the lay of the land. How I had gotten a bit bored and then about the bear. She laughed hysterically about that little incident, but she didn’t seem interested in continuing our little picnic anymore. The whole matter of me not having called her in distracted her it seemed.

“Look it,” she said. “I think what’s best is if I go, for now. We’ll meet again, for sure. But my sense is that it would be better if you checked out a bit about our past lives together. Go to the Past Life Pavilion. Talk to your guardian angel. You know, check it all out.

“I’m fine,” I protested. “I’ll have the turkey if that makes you more comfortable. Here, I can make it.” And I started grabbing bread and turkey to assemble a sandwich. Jessica just stood there, in front of me, shaking her head slowly and smiling. She then began to lighten and the trees behind her began to come into view, through her. She continued fading and was gone.



CHAPTER TEN

The View



I was on my porch, leaning on my balcony and looking out at the forest a hundred feet or so from where I stood. I was thinking of my conversation with Jessica, the idea of another lifetime. I had the thought that living a lifetime was like pushing a boulder up hill. Up a very big hill in fact!

The railing shook under my grip and the entire porch was engulfed in earthquake-like movement. Then there was a loud rumbling noise, and the porch disappeared with the railing I had been leaning on. I stumbled forward and fell into a massive emptiness now engulfing everything around me. Everything went black for a moment, and then bright white as I landed in a thick, cold snowbank, sinking deep, deeper into it. It was freezing and difficult to breathe.

Then, as if a massive hand was lifting me, I popped out of the snowbank and onto a granite rockface. The sky cleared all around me and I could see I was on top of a mountain. The highest mountain in the range all around me. The sensation of cold and shortness of breath disappeared, and I was floating more than sitting on top of the granite face with the most incredible and beautiful view imaginable. I was no longer part of the elements, rather, I was suspended in a protective bubble of sorts and could observe them all.

“You may want to watch those thoughts young man,” Clarence said, suddenly floating on the rock next to me, “everything’s possible here. Welcome to Everest!”

I took a moment and looked out in front of me, then rotated my body 360° to take in the entire view.

“Awesome!” I said.

Clarence smiled. We both just stood there silent for several minutes taking it all in. Clarence took in a deep breath and when he did, I noticed his body faded translucent for just a millisecond.

“Always freaks me out a bit when you angels do that...that fade out and back thing,” I commented.

He looked over at me. “I was just absorbing the scene,” he said. “Blending with it in a way.”

I smiled back at him and we both stood there, looking out over the vista.

“Beautiful view and all,” Clarence said, eventually, “but we’ve got some more work to do.”

“Work?”

“Life review. Haven’t you noticed your soul is hungry?” Clarence said.

I thought about it. Looking over the view on Everest, I was content. The beauty mesmerizing. And some part of me was wondering what would be next. Some part of me was yearning for something more.

“What is that?” I asked Clarence. “That constant nudging along for what else is there? I thought that would go away, here. It is Heaven and all.”

“That, my dear man, is life.” Clarence replied. “Life is a constantly changing, creating, a growing thing. Growth comes from yearning. That yearning, dear man, is what makes existence, well, existence! Makes life, life. It’s what draws us forward. We are in a constant state of yearning, expanding.”

“But why?” I asked.

“You enjoyed the beauty of this view just now, yes?” Clarence asked.

“Yes.”

“That beauty inspired you. Yes?”

“Yes.”

“That inspiration created wonder. Wonder for what else? What more? Yes?”

“Yes.”

“That’s love, true love, in its purest form,” Clarence said. “Recognition of all that is in its perfection while recognizing it’s equally unlimited. The result, is creation, life...which is really an inspiration to create, find, more of the same, love.”

“Okay,” I said. “That’s nice and all, but what does this all have to do with me? Why am I always...how did you say it? Hungry?”

“You are love, life, Source, experiencing itself in the form of Finn,” Clarence said. “You are currently hungering to explore all aspects of Finn-ness. To know Finn inside and out. To be Finn-full.”

“And then?” I asked.

“You’ll be Finn-ished.”

“I don’t think I can forgive even a Guardian Angel for that one.”

Clarence raised an eyebrow and smiled.

“But after Finn, your soul will have all kinds of other ways to experience itself. Limitless ways in fact. You are limitless Finn. You’re simply perceiving it all from Finn-ness for now.”

We were both silent then. Clarence touched my arm and in a swirl of the air around me we left Everest and ‘landed’ back on my porch, in the Adirondack chairs.

It took me a few moments to settle into the transition. Clarence waited, and then said:

“May I show you something Finn, from your past life?

I agreed, closing my eyes.

When I opened them again, we were in the past life theater, sitting next to each other, empty seats all around us.

“Before I immerse you in this next scene, I want to remind you why we’re doing this.” Clarence said, putting a hand tenderly on my arm. “Remember no one is judging you here. This is a review. We’re looking at what happened, at what choices you made, and how they did or did not coincide with your purpose in that life. We’ll talk about what you could have done differently, of course, but only in the context of what you did being perfect for you at that time. This life review is a step-by-step process, Finn. Remember that. We’re just tracing the steps here. It’s much more about how to move forward than it is about the past.”

Clarence paused, his hand still on my arm. “Ready?”

“Ready.” I said, not entirely sure I was. I closed my eyes again.

When I opened my eyes, I was in my former life, sitting at the corner table at Sally’s, my small town’s favorite diner. The town’s only diner to be completely accurate. What you’d expect of a diner in the forties, before diners became popular. It was a small restaurant with beat up wooden tables and chairs; run by Sally, the owner, cook, widow, and local therapist all rolled into one. She was taking our order. I was there with Betty.

Sally wears a knee-length, A-line, pastel-colored dress. The high neckline and Peter Pan collar exude a look of forced modesty. Betty is my age, late teens. She also wears an A-line dress, but one that fits more tightly around her slender figure. The small top button of her lace square-collared blouse is open.

“What is it today kids?” Sally asks.

Only Betty and I have our eyes locked and barely notice Sally. We’re in a deep discussion. I know that we’ve been in a deep discussion a while now. I’m going to war early and Betty doesn’t like it. She wants to get married and suddenly doubts our time together matters to me. I’m defending myself, but not successfully.

Sally looks from Betty to me and back. She can tell we’re not paying attention to her, that the tension is preventing us from ordering. Her arms, holding the order pad and pen, drop to the sides of her crisp white half-apron tied around her waist. She surrenders her mission, turns on one heel, and walks away from our table.

I reach across the table to take Betty’s hand, only it recoils before I can grasp it. I look up to meet her eyes, but they are downcast. I watch as the fingers of her hand now trace a loose splinter of the table.

“Honestly Finn,” Betty says, “I don’t know what to say.”

“Say: ‘good luck Finn. Say: ‘I understand how important this is to you.’ Say: ‘I’ll write.’”

I’m still looking to meet Betty’s eyes and now they look up into mine, only they’re glassy and the look is predatory, deep, probing.

“Write? That’s all you care about. That I write?” Betty’s other hand grabs up the hand tracing the splinter and clasps it so hard the knuckles turn white. The angry glare in

her eyes drills into me deeper. Her voice raises an octave and Bud and Sally inadvertently look in our direction, he's the only other one in the diner, now giving his order to Sally. They look away quickly, to not be rude, but the corner of my eye catches something more than menace and concern in Bud's glance.

Betty's chair scrapes the wooden floor when she raises herself a bit in it, not quite ready to go, but preparing. My chair scrapes as well. I'm up now, reaching out to her again, trying to de-escalate the situation. She pulls away, she's having nothing of it.

A moment of uncomfortable silence.

"Betty, please," I plead, beginning to reach again, but pull back as I see Betty's eyes scour at me. "I'm not leaving town for good, just to do my duty. Can't you see that?"

"No!" Betty's voice is yet another octave higher, and intense. Bud's chair scrapes as he rises a bit in it, his stare locked on our table. Sally is twitching nervously as she also turns in our direction.

"Betty..." I begin to say. I want to suggest we go somewhere else to discuss this, to not make a scene. But the words are like marbles in my mouth and never make it out before Betty is up, out of her chair and out the door with a clashing ding from the bell attached to the knob, an audible crescendo to what is clearly an end to our date. And to possibly more.

Bud is fully standing now, between me and the door, holding his hand up in a gesture to say 'let the poor girl go.' My eyes are pleading when they meet his. His eyes suggest I sit down and cool off. He's Betty's brother. He will not be having her upset this way. It's clear I will not be running after her, not without a scuffle.

Then I can see Bud's face and entire body becoming more and more translucent as the door behind him begins to appear. There's a white flash and I'm back in the Past Life Theater with Clarence.

I bring my hands up to cover my mouth and sigh heavily, the emotion of the scene with Betty still lingering deep in my psyche.

Clarence's hand is on my shoulder.

"Quite a moment there, eh?" he says.

My eyes widen and I look at him, comforted by his hand on my shoulder.

"Yeah," I say, "I forgot how intense that was."

Clarence's grip tightens and then releases my shoulder and begins to pat it affectionately.

"What was that, Finn?" He asks. "What were you hoping would happen?"

I look over at him, tears forming in the corners of my eyes now.

"I wanted Betty to know I'd be thinking about her. That I cared for her, even if I was going off to serve my country."

Clarence's teeth glimmered in a smile.

"I'm not sure she got that message young man."

"No," I said, "I don't think she got that message at all."

Clarence shifted a bit in his seat to be more comfortable, and I did the same.

"Why do you suppose that is, Finn?" He said, "Why do you suppose you weren't able to tell her how you actually felt?"

"I...I tried," I said.

“Yes,” Clarence continued matter-of-factly, “you may have meant well, but I’d say the communication was...lost.”

Silence.

“What were you feeling, then, exactly?” Clarence asks.

“Confused,” I say. “I thought she’d be happy for me.”

Clarence lifts an eyebrow.

“Well, if not happy,” I continue, “at least understanding.”

“Is it possible you were so focused on what you wanted from her that you forgot to think about what she might have wanted from you?” Clarence said.

“Yeah, I suppose.”

“Is it possible you were afraid, Finn? That you didn’t tell her how you felt because you were afraid to commit to those very feelings? Is it possible you were resisting your life path in order to try and assuage that fear?”

I looked away from Clarence. This was getting uncomfortable. I was afraid of my feelings for her, was it that obvious that Clarence could see it? How had I managed to keep that so far away from my own awareness?”

“Not only obvious to me,” Clarence responded to my thoughts, “I’d say it was obvious to Betty, Bud, Sally, everyone...everyone, that is, but you.”

I took this in.

“Curious to see what could have happened if you had chosen to be courageous instead?” Clarence had the twinkle in his eye again. He waited for my response. I was curious.

The movie started playing again, only this time I was watching, not in the scene.

“What is it today kids?” Sally asks.

Betty and I have our eyes locked and barely notice Sally. We’re in a deep discussion. I’m going to war. Isn’t she my girl? What has all our time together meant and how could I just run off, even before called to duty?

Sally looks from Betty to me and back. Her arms, holding the order pad and pen, drop to the sides of her crisp white half-apron tied around her waist. With a huff she surrenders her mission, turns on one heel, and walks away from our table.

“You’re right Betty,” I say, “it’s not right for me to run off and leave you here hanging. We have something precious here. I love you, Betty. I intend to come back to you and show you that love in a big way, every day. I intend to make you my wife.”

I reach across the table to take Betty’s hand, and she grasps it in both of hers. A smile washes over her entire face and her energy lifts, although a worried look remains.

“Oh, Finn, really?”

“Really,” I say, “we’ll go out and pick a ring tomorrow. Heck, I should have done it already. I love you Betty, let’s do this!”

“Oh Finn, yes, yes, yes!” Betty says. Then she looks down at the table a moment. “Can you just join up a bit later? For us? So, we can have a proper wedding. Oh please. Please, could you?”

The Finn on screen seems to be surprised by this, but not entirely put out. Betty looks at him hopefully.

“I suppose...,” he says, “I suppose I could consider that.”

Clapping is heard and we see Sally and Bud across the restaurant smiling and putting their hands together in congratulations. Their bodies go translucent, the door behind where they stand appearing through them and the lights go back up in the theater.

“Quite a different result,” Clarence says to me in the theater. “What a difference a bit of courage makes.”

“I wasn’t sure I was ready to propose,” I say, “that’s why I didn’t.”

“And yet, look how happy you were when you did.” Clarence adds.

I look to the screen, frozen on my face in that scene. I did look happy. There was a certain resolve to the look on my face.

“Further to that,” Clarence adds, “your life trajectory would have changed. In that version of your life, you go to bootcamp six weeks later, are trained as a pilot, but have an accident and damage one of your eyes for a couple months. You’re recommissioned to the radar tower and your commanding officer learns you have a special knack for calm under pressure. You get permanently stationed in the tower and never go into the battle that day. The day you were shot down. Finn, in that version of your life you survive the war, all because you found the courage to propose, even though you weren’t sure.”

“Really?” I say in disbelief, wondering suddenly what that would have been like.

“Really,” Clarence reassures me. Then he lifts his hand and snaps his fingers. In a flash we are both sitting on my porch again, in the Adirondack chairs.

“That’s enough life review for today,” he says, “quite a bit to take in.”

I sit there stunned. Clarence snaps his fingers again and a chocolate chip cookie appears in his hand. He leans over and hands it to me. A glass of milk appears then in my other hand. I almost drop it out of surprise.

“Enough with the stunned look young man, have a cookie,” he says, “that’s what a life review is all about...the choices you made and the courage you showed. You see, courage is just another form of trust. Trust, well that’s one of the roots of love. Some call it faith or belief, it’s all love really. And love is everything, literally.”

“I wouldn’t have died in the war?” I ask, eyes wide.

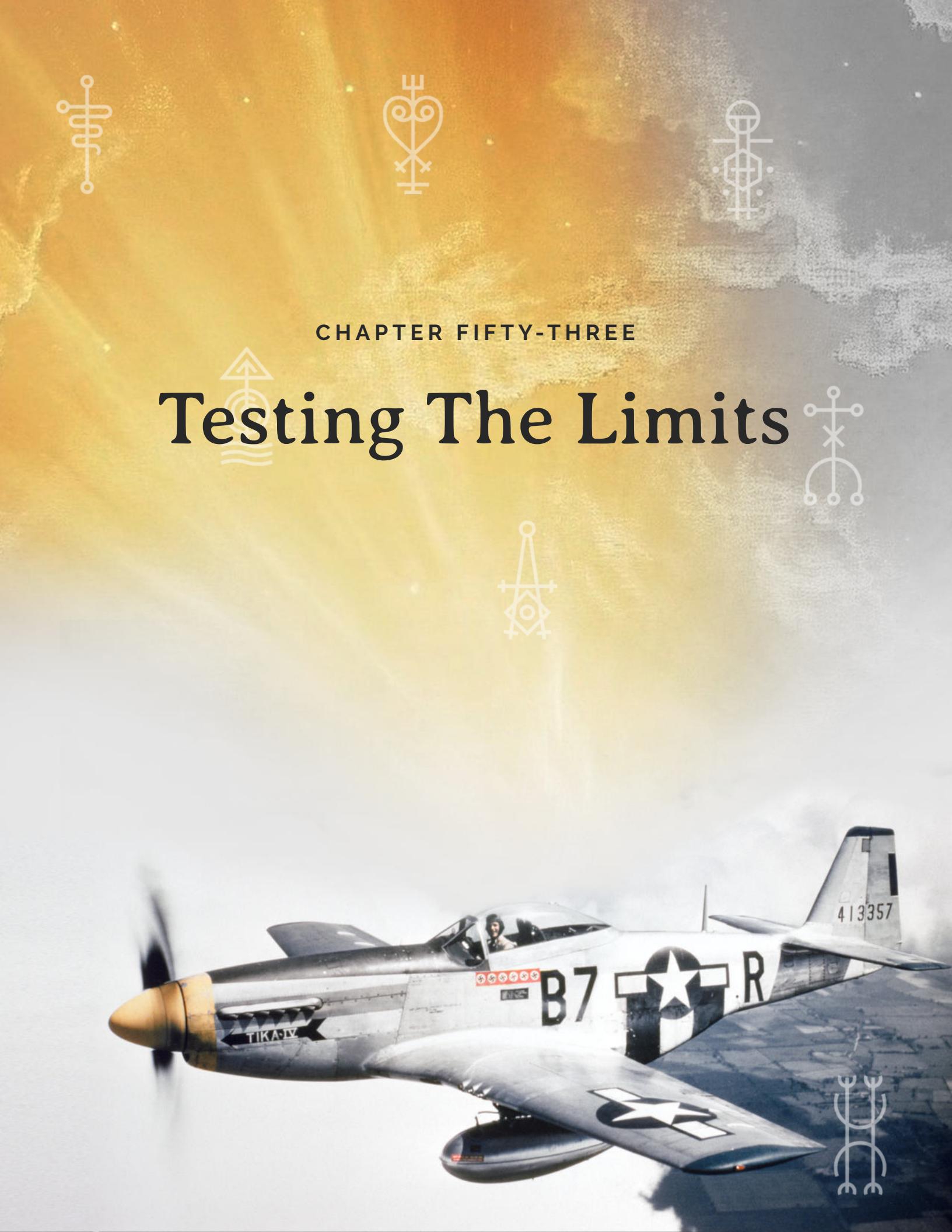
“That’s right,” Clarence says, he’s manifested another cookie in his hands, and he squints his eyes with pleasure as he bites into it now. “You had planned to learn a bit more about courage in that lifetime, before, you know, returning here. There was a plan.”

Clarence popped the rest of the cookie into his mouth and continued. “But no bother, you’d have ended up here anyway, and here you are now. You are an eternal being after all. I told you. We’re not here to judge your decisions, simply to review them. Lifetimes offer all kinds of opportunities for courage, and courage expands the love a soul can access. That’s why souls enter lifetimes in the first place, to expand their capacity to love. We’re just reviewing the choices you made and showing you the outcomes courage produces, so that you take that wisdom into your next lifetime.”

“My next lifetime?” I look at Clarence incredulously. He notices my glance and pauses a moment from savoring his cookie.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Clarence says, “just ponder on courage and the choice we showed you. How a bit more courage could have gone a long way. Till next time...”

And with that, Clarence faded slowly into nothingness.



CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

Testing The Limits



After Clarence left, I restlessness crept into my castle. It lost all its magic and charm, and I found my soul searching for an essence I couldn't quite place. I realized the place I had found that meaning in my past lifetime was when I was flying. I craved that thrill, that boundless freedom trapped within an illusion of control over space and time. This was Heaven. I could will myself anywhere. And, so, I willed myself onto the airstrip I had learned to fly on, in the plane that I had learned to fly. The one I had my last dogfight in.

My fingers danced over the cold metal switches in the cockpit of the P-51 Mustang. This was my sanctum, a place where the chaos of my world melded into a symphony of gauges and gears. Today, I was not a soldier but a man flirting with the edge of his own existence, seeking an answer to a question I didn't even have.

I turned the key, and the Rolls-Royce Merlin engine roared to life, a primal growl that shook the very air around me. The plane trembled like a stallion, eager to break free, the vibrations coursing through my veins, mingling with my own life force. I could feel the hum of the engine in my bones, and I forgot everything else. This was home.

Pushing forward on the throttle, the Mustang lurched ahead, the landscape a blur as the plane and I galloped down the runway. My heart raced in tandem with the propeller's furious spin, the world narrowing to a tunnel with only the sky as the exit. I pulled back on the stick, and the plane responded with the grace of a dancer, lifting into the air, defying gravity with a brazen confidence that mirrored my own.

Up here, the earth, Heaven, everything was a distant memory, and the sky was an ocean of blue and vast possibility. I pushed the plane, feeling the G-forces pressing me

into my seat, a physical reminder of the laws I was challenging. I rolled and dove, the wind a constant howl in my ears, the only voice I cared to listen to.

The Mustang was an extension of my will, responding to the slightest touch, a wild creature that could either save me or send me plummeting to...to 'what' I wondered. I knew the risks, every pilot did, but those were on earth. Everything seemed to obey the rules of a lifetime here in the cockpit. Hadn't I wanted it that way? But what would happen if I pushed those limits. Wasn't I already dead? Would I die again? Start over?

Climbing higher, I tested the limits of both my courage and the plane's capability. The air thinned, and the engine's growl became a strained symphony, pushing against the ceiling of its design. The Mustang shook with effort, the sky darkening as I soared closer to the heavens, tempting fate.

For a moment, the engine sputtered, a cough in the roar that sent a cold spike of fear through my spine. The plane stalled, and for a breath, everything was silent. The earth below was a canvas of greens and browns, indifferent to the drama unfolding above. A moment of truth. What would I do now? If I could will myself into this plane, into this sky, couldn't I will it to end? Couldn't I will myself to forget my Heaven journey and begin again?

And what about Jessica? Couldn't I will it such that, that I wake up from the crash, in Heaven, and forget completely that she even exists? Forget warrior training and enigmatic lessons I must learn to meet her in a lifetime. Forget it all and just move on, somewhere, anywhere, else?

The Mustang went from airlessness to sudden weight, tremendous weight, G-forces I had only experienced before my plane crashed in my last lifetime. I knew where

this was going and if I was going to eject or turn things around, I had seconds to react.

This was the moment.

Jessica wouldn't mind...she wouldn't be affected...she was going on with her lifetime anyway, meet me or not. This was my choice. But wait a minute. Hadn't she and everyone else structured their lifetime to include me...their lessons to incorporate my lessons. I was feeling alone, but wasn't I part of this whole bigger picture?

Now my head was being driven into my chest by the G-Force. It may be too late.

What was I willing to do for her? What was I willing to do for me?

Pressure on my head and shoulders increasing, it took all the strength I could muster, all the will I had, to grab the control stick with both hands and pull, pull, pull it back. I had to right the plane.

Movement. The flaps on the Mustang's wings began to cooperate, ever so slightly, and the plane maneuvered just enough from the free fall to pull air into the lungs of the engine, desperate to reignite.

Then, with a shake and a shudder, the Mustang regained its voice, and me, my heartbeat. I descended in a wide arc, the ground rushing up to meet me, but the plane in control and the thrill of survival flooding my senses. This was not a dance with death but a celebration of life, each maneuver a defiant claim to my place in the sky.

I touched down with a gentle kiss to the tarmac, the Mustang rolling to a stop as if it too were catching its breath. I sat for a moment in the quiet aftermath, the echo of the engine like a ghost in my ears.

I climbed out of the cockpit, my boots hitting the ground with a solidity that felt foreign after the ethereal flight I just experienced. I walked away from the plane, wavering a bit, while at the same time feeling more balanced than ever before. "Enough," I whispered to the Mustang, to the sky, to myself. "Enough already."



GJ BARBATO

