

## Prologue

*The flames consume me. Tears pour down my face. Smoke creeps through every angle of my vision. Ambers fly through the air like the break of a new snow on a winter morning. The heat grows with every second I am still, like a furnace consuming the air. The gates of hell have finally opened, and the devil is welcoming me with fiery, open arms. My mind begins to play tricks on me; I see nothing and something at the same time. Too young to remember...too old to forget. Helpless...so, so helpless. A lovely tragedy. Pain takes me over. Flames consume my left leg. My pant leg begins to melt and conform into my flesh. Itchy, but still painful. Fire has destroyed the lower level of the Trapp home, my home. The flames of hell creep its way into my corner. No one to help. No one to hear me scream. No one to care. The closer the flames get, the closer I am to surrendering. I scream. I am finished.*

*“...breathe.”*

## Chapter One

Flower patterns. Old and new. Faded and chipped away. It encroaches the entirety of the damaged hallway. Once remembered and now forgotten. The once vibrant red has now developed into a fading pink, an unflattering shade of pink. The once mossy green leaves and stems died into a mud color, stained with fresh blood. Unappealing but very serene. The floral wallpaper falls apart slowly but surely every moment that I lay eyes on it. Ready to rot away like flowers during the winter.

The rotting wood, infested with termites and water damage after so many years of neglect has finally spoken. It's ready to crumble and give out. The red wood merged into a decaying skeleton of what it used to be. It creaks with every step, not knowing if one should confide in its support or proceed with caution. The nails torched to the wood boards spring up and bend like a hunched-back. Rust infests the grooves of the nail. In need of replacement but not too important to even consider trying. Like everything else in this complex, it's forgotten.

The floor I inhabit is shaped into a crooked L. I live on the short end, which sadly sums up my entire life. Once one walks their way to my doorstep, they see nothing but a desolate, green shell of a door; almost as if it were a charming log floating through a river bend. The squeaking number 13 falls face first onto the door. No peephole or extensive lock system...just a number 13. The 3 gives up and falls away from the 1. Detached but doable.

Stepping into the actual war zone of my life, one would see a bar cart being held in place by an old tennis shoe. Salvaged from the prison of a garage sale, the cart's rusting wheels begin to give out and lean to one side, making it a bit off balanced. Gold paint chips away from the metal bars that make up the cart. Fifty-two cents scatter its way across the top of the plastic rust. The once elegant ballerina keychain decays and reeks of copper and looks at you sad and faded...the keys along with it. An American flag lighter lays top open besides a crushed can of cheap strawberry margarita.

Eighty's style cabinets form a semi circle around the so-called kitchen; it almost looks like the decade entered the perimeter and died. Some doors held shut by old, sticky drinks that were thrown around and left to weep. The faucet leaks a murky drop of water. One after the other falls and follows the drop before. It's sometimes so slow, I can almost count them. Three drops in a 13

second interval. Stale boxes of fast food and takeout overflow the off-white tile counters. There's almost never edible food in the fridge. The garbage is taken over by the same sight. The only decently clean object being the stove; so often it goes untouched.

A tiny trinket tray made up of gold, Chinese embroidery sits calmly next to the stove. It carries six crispy, golden, still unopened fortune cookies. The best in New York if I may add.

A cold metal, coffee table painted in rose color sits helplessly in the middle of the living area. Accompanied by a cobalt blue couch with a velvet shell, the table supports the depressing sight of old and new water rings. Some from the night before and many from this morning; five to be accurate. An old newspaper from 2009 holds a peg in place to keep from wiggling around to anyone's discomfort. Red wax shavings are sprinkled evenly throughout the table...only serving as a reminder of what used to be. "Grandma *hearts* Me" shot glasses lay mouth down on the table with a ring of old tequila dripping from the rim. More crunched up cans of strawberry margarita act as cocoons. A half used bottle of drugstore tequila goes unfinished.

The blue gaze of the recycling bin highlights the wood floor as the sunlight shines through. Reflecting what should have been amongst the rotten furniture heads throughout the apartment; ironically it being the only nice thing I have on my floor. Overflowing with old cans of liquor.

One leg tucked under for warmth and the other bent over the window bench. Overlooking the cobalt couch. My head turns to the mess on the coffee table. My eyebrows crunch in disgust. The still glass of water sits adjacent to my leg, replicating the murky New York air. I pivot towards the window next to me and see the usual view.

Grey, dark, gloomy. Reflecting the sweet silence of fall. The leaves crunch with orange residue over the floor. The trees, once lush with life, decay into sad silhouettes: branches morph into mere twigs, potential fruits lay rotten on the floor, leaves blown away by the air of fall.

Perched on the fourth floor of the complex, a murky sea of people, young and old, stream along the streets like rotting carcasses. The grey cloud of smoke rises up and away from the mouth of the familiar red brick chimney. My eyes scan down to the neon sign with a blinking blue dragon breathing out orange flames. *The Blue Dragon* marches its way across the brick in Chinese calligraphy. The old

town laundry mat welcomes its batch of first costumers, in hopes of securing those willing to fight for clean clothes. The metallic archway opens like a mouth waiting to trap travellers inside. A local owner pulls open the security gates for the liquor haven on the corner. Open 20 hours a day for those who are willing to buy a cheap pack of beer and an expensive bag of chips.

I look towards the mustard yellow clock and lose my breath. Late again. No surprise. My cold feet drop onto the floor and carry me to the bathroom sink. Quickly, I applied the minty fresh off brand onto my toothbrush and glided it along my oddly aligned teeth. I rinsed and spit and looked at my sad reflection. Mousy brown hair pulled by a rubber band into a loose ponytail. Olive skin that was once vibrant but now has lost pigmentation. An old tomato sauce stain from the night before clings onto my \$3.47 crew neck. I look away disinterested.

I walk along my carpeted bedroom and notice the build up of old and new stains. Not clean enough, but not too important to care about. The decaying white closet fails to slide open after one pull and then a second budge. Third's the charm, and my hand reaches for the mud stained Adidas. Dresser drawers fly open as I search for my work uniform and a decent outfit along with it. I grab a dark pair of jeans and a white button up. Desperately, I search through an old pile of clothes for my lost uniform. Vest. Check. Bow tie. Check. Black slacks. Check. Name tag? Gone. I throw what I have into a duffel bag on my bed and head for the door. As I walk, I pull my mess of a hair out of the rubber band and into a tightly neat ponytail. I see my keys and name tag on the bar cart and waste no time. Phone and wallet in hand, and I'm gone.

The crude bang of the door echoes behind me and the squeaks of the loose 3 follow. My Adidas clank on the floor like bricks, as the hall grows deeper with silence. Apartment 10 is the first out of the floor to rattle with noise. The TV blares and the smell of burning toast and coffee overpower the smell of rotting wood. My hand reaches for the metal bar, and I make my way down the long, narrow stairwell. Elevators? I think not. They are no more real than singing fish. After what seems like an hour of cardio, I reach the bottom. The ceiling begins to lean at an angle, which makes everything feel smaller. The sad shell of a sign with *Manager's Special* written across it hangs by one nail as the other rotted away months ago. I continue my way down the rabbit hole and push the sign so I could at least pass through unscathed.

Fitzgerald and Merlot. Quiet and tamed but still very unpredictable. The brick red of the apartment is tainted with graffiti and what some may call art. Lifeless. Still. But screams teenage angst. The cold air slaps me across the face, and the mist of fall leaves its residue in my brown hair. *It's Freaking Cold.* The moist leaves scrunch under my feet. As some trees wither away in distress, others grow vibrantly with orange, reds, greens, and browns. Like watercolor paint, the tree acts like a canvas. The car engines and horns overlap with each minute that passes. Left over rainwater fills up big and small potholes from left to right. The break of a new rain fills the air as water droplets drip from the gutters of every building—one landing on my right cheek.

The gloom and fog subsume passing citizens as they each become mere silhouettes. As I walk along, the buzzes of the laundry machines send the entire building into a terrified rumble. The doorbells from *The Blue Dragon* chime in disbelief as if surprised that people eat Chinese food so early in the morning. The smoke from the chimney carries the sweet aroma of sweet and sour soup and general sauce chicken. Empty trashcans, shopping carts, and box tents lay empty and desolate; they either hide away the desperate and hungry or serve as coffins for those who aren't even there anymore. The metal bars lay as claws on every store, deli, and shop.

The clanking sounds of basketballs fill my ears as the early birds fly across the crappy rec center courts. Like hummingbirds, they glide a mile a minute. Fifteen minutes pass, and the subway mouth has already aggressively shoved thousands of people down its gullet. The metal railings graze along the fingertips of customers. Cold and steel. So much steel. The earthquake grumbles travel like a wave and the passing air along with it. The train is coming to a stop. Empty sleeping bags stick to the angle of the wall and floor. Shells of oysters. Long gone. Half empty trashcans are cheated and teased as they stare at wrappers and garbage merely inches away. Disgusting. The wall art and murals dance its way, like lyrics on a page, across the grid of the underground. The screeches of the revolving bars refuse to mask the hisses of the metal worm—in other words, the train.

The doors of the train open wide and release around 5-6 people at a time. I shove my way through and sit at the first available seat I see. I scan the crowd like a vulture. My eyes hiss to the furthest corner of the cart. Screaming child in one hand and a neglected pacifier in the other. Lips once full and beautiful now

enclosed within the obscurity of age. Soft eyes that were once vibrant and full of care-free now glazed with the worry of living a hard life. She works hard but she looks so under appreciated. A pity, really. The hardest working people sometimes go unnoticed.

I noticed a man right in front of me who obviously needs no more appreciation from others because he already believes he is a Godsend. A suit that can cut through the most awkward situations. Power and dominance. Charisma. Sexy but pompous. Definitely not from your local and cheapest suit shop. Blue tooth clutched to ear and phone melted onto the palm of his hand. *Who uses blue tooth anymore?* Interaction. He clearly lacks it. Confident enough to make direct eye contact, but too ignorant to not know when enough is enough.

A tired looking woman finds her way into my peripheral vision. My head completely turns towards her to make contact. Soft eyes. Kind hands. Gentle hands. Polite smile. Greying hair, distinctive. Shaking from the cold as her young child is wrapped in, what I assume is, her tired looking jacket. Unappreciated and bored. Nothing like the Mr. *Power Suit* over there. She catches my stare and politely grins as though she is forcing herself to. She can't be older than 35, but she looks like she has lived a century. *I'm sorry.* I think to myself.

An empty seat matches my glare and taunts me. *I'm you,* it says back. Empty. Ignored. Practically invisible. Filled by anyone willing to take the time, and then left behind like a parting train. Forever meant to be alone. The tacky 80's pattern on the backing fades with the denim blue of the seat. Pieces of lint and mystery stains hold its breath, as it dare not speak of the stories from last night. My eyes scan the train car for another set of retinas to sink my teeth into. Nothing more than just a few *friendly* faces and major PDA from a couple three rows down. *Aren't they lucky?*

I finally get tired of picking at other people. My head turns to the train window. Pitch black. Darkness. Nothing more than the shadowy, faint light that we pass by at a mile a minute. Ironic. The greatest thing about this dark train ride is the faint, sliver of light we pass by, and it happens too fast for us to even notice. Not that I care. My eyes fix themselves on the reflection staring back at me. My reflection. My sad, sunken eyes being held up by the glooming dark circles we call *bags*. My thin face makes me look like I haven't eaten in days, which I hadn't; never had the time to. The color of my skin reflects everything else that is happening on the inside –mentally and physically. The once olive

pigmentation narrows into a deceased yellow. Just a slight tint. My ratty hair *shlumps* its way over the right side of my face, hanging like a piece of thread off of a sick needle. A small indent encompasses my left eyebrow. A scar that took my innocence away, whatever that was left anyways. Such a crappy day.

My hands twitch underneath my sleeve, as if it was never apart of me. I take a look and continue to pick at my nails and skin. Scratches from yesterday's appointment make a second appearance. *Maybe I should stop picking on my poor hands.* I force myself to stop and put both hands under my thighs for warmth. I trace my fingers down to my pant leg. It waltzes around a print from the past. A cigarette burn. Don't ask. My heels click three times together, praying for this train ride to be over. *It's been like 30 minutes.* I shake my head in frustration. My brain turns off, and I zone out.

Ten minutes later, and a dead sea of people splurge out of the train door. Cohesive waves, like seas of fish or opposite sides of magnets. Heels clicking on the pavement like the lonely end of a movie. Meaningless chatter directed to cell phones, blue tooth, and other meaningless pieces of metal, fiberglass, and plastic. The clouds loom evenly over the city, just like the disappointment of God. Don't get me wrong. New York. The *Big Apple*. Bright lights. *Cultured* people. Things you think would make a city great, but it only makes it just like every other city in the world. All too familiar. The grey pavement blends with the rest of the hue of the city; so much to the point that your eyes won't be able to recognize any other bright colors aside from grey. Business suites. Power suites. All dowsed with the stench of money, steady income, boredom, and cheap.

They all scatter like ants throughout the city. Carrying umbrellas as if a human were watching them carry crumbs on their backs. West 42<sup>nd</sup> street and 6<sup>th</sup> avenue. I make my way through the one-way street towards west 44<sup>th</sup> street. Surrounded by a sea of young theatres, the Majestic Theatre stands tall. Contemporary, urban, but still holds the tale of two cities, a surplus of memories and lives. At 245 west and 44<sup>th</sup> street, the Majestic Theatre is home to the most extravagant and vivid musicals on Broadway. It is also where I slave away for long hours trying to keep myself a float in the city that knows how to drown you. The theatre sits hidden in what appears to be a brick wall. Almost scanned over, you can miss it. But the humble façade masks the sheer beauty and majesty once one steps into the lobby. Seating just under 2,000 people, it is one of the largest theatres in midtown Manhattan. The venue screams Spanish architecture and

forward thinking. I look up and see the balcony sit lonely, waiting for the audience's indulgence later on that night. The box office sits idly under a sea of light bulbs that have yet to be lit.

I flounder and tease myself. Living in the sheer paradox of true beauty. How the burst of hues and tones of the Majestic theatre sits silently among the grey and the cement walls. The cool-touch metal. I stop myself from continuing my train thought; I would just run myself into the ground at that point. I turn towards the employee entrance. The corridor leading towards the rear of the theatre swallows me whole the more I pace forward. The emotionless walls capture the faint of whisper of two voices. One that sounds apologetic and the other that appears ruthless. The more I follow the voices the louder it becomes.

The two familiar voices soon come to a halt once they notice my presence. Harold Sigsworth; we call him Harry for short. The most foul-mouthed person that I have ever encountered. Snake venom replaces the spit that is produced every single time he dares take a breath. Bright red, wavy hair that almost makes him look like a curly fry. His larger than life personality matches his wide set nose. His sandy skin acts like a canvas for his apparent freckles. A thick cockney accent booms from his thin, lanky body; bizarre for such an awkward looking man. His unflatteringly tan suit always makes him look paler than what he is. Ironically his suit and shoes being the most expensive thing he will ever own; the man's a cheapskate in the worst ways possible. As much as I would love to dissect his obvious Napoleon complex, he is the one that I have to call my *Manager*.