

“One of Their Own”

By Kat Adams

I couldn't smell the city—the smog or sewer. I couldn't hear passing cars or nearby conversations. Yet I was still there.

I opened my eyes, lying on my right side, as Independence National Historical Park came into focus. I'd spent years around this park. It was recognizable—and yet wrong. High in the steeple above Independence Hall, the historic clock glinted gold:11:22.

My gaze turned to the vast stretch of grass in front of the monumental building, the green more intense than I ever remembered. I brushed it with my hand, but felt nothing.

I started to sit up—my body felt weightless as I rose to my feet. I looked around. No runners. No vendors. No tourists. It was a vacant lot in an empty void—not just in Philadelphia, but in my soul.

Where am I?

The cloudless sky radiated shades of mauve—bold and vibrant, but sunless. I stared into its colorful abyss. A strange tingling spread through the right side of my head. When I touched it, a faint electric twinge ran through my body. It didn't hurt, but something wasn't right.

Then it hit me—the fountain in Washington Square was just beyond Independence Hall. I ran south, heart racing. When it came into view, I stopped short and pressed my hand to my chest. No beat. No breath.

The fountain shimmered, luminous as sapphires. I dropped to my knees and leaned over the concrete edge to peek at my reflection. A shattered skull stared back at me. Brain matter exposed. My eyes widened as I touched it and felt the electric pulse again.

Disoriented, I looked past the fountain when a familiar face emerged between the trees.

“Hi, Liv.”

I rubbed my eyes, lifting my body from the ground. Linda Davis—my fourth-grade teacher—had died last year.

“I understand how lost you must be feeling right now,” she said.

“Mrs. Davis, am I ... *dead*?” I raced toward her.

“Yes, sweetheart, you are,” she said with her hands softly clasped in front of her. Her smile brought me back to the worst year of my childhood—something a 9-year-old should never have to face—after my father died. Even with our bond, uncertainty flooded me.

“Where *am* I?” I asked hesitantly, looking up at the rust-colored redwood and vivid yellow ginkgo trees that surrounded us.

“You’re in what’s called the In-Between—between the living and the dead.” As staggering as it was to hear, I couldn’t help but think that this so-called “In-Between” bore the most vibrant colors that ever existed. Yet, it didn’t seem real.

“What happened to me?” I asked.

I shouldn’t be dead. I shouldn’t be here.

“I don’t know, but I’m here to help you,” she said as she stretched out her worn, wrinkled left hand to reach for mine. I briefly looked down at the gentle embrace—I felt her warm touch.

Tightening my grip back, I looked up and said, “I don’t understand.”

“We all struggle to accept death. Each of us who enter the In-Between has a connection with our living soul—they’re intertwined. Only when we come to terms with our death can we be released to our *own* Heaven.”

Heaven. The word felt distant. My best friend and partner in Investigations, Damian Peters, seemed to think my theory of the afterlife was extreme—that you have to maintain the high moral ground in life to be rewarded in death.

“What do you mean ‘our *own* Heaven?’” I asked as my forehead furrowed.

“The In-Between is like a holding cell. We find ourselves here when there’s...I’ll say...incomplete business to attend to.” There was authenticity in her grasp. “The only way to go to *your* Heaven is to follow the rules of The In-Between; to accept the grief over your death, and come to terms with what your living soul left unfinished.”

Unfinished? What does that mean?

I momentarily looked away, then shifted my eyes back to hers. I’ve always had the fondest memories of her, and I couldn’t imagine she left anything...unfinished.

“So, why are *you* here?” I asked.

Mrs. Davis released her grip and motioned her hand gently toward the fountain, suggesting we sit on the dark-gray concrete edge. She was always one to talk with her hands, illustrating her emotion and care.

“The year before you transferred into my class, my husband died in a car accident after being struck by a drunk driver.”

“I remember,” I answered as we sat.

“Well, I’ve come to realize that I never accepted his death and that’s why *I’m* here.” She looked down as the heaviness slumped her shoulders.

It was hard for me to believe—she never let on that she struggled so much with losing her husband. Sad, sure—but denial?

“I blamed so many people around me for my hurt.”

As she continued on, her voice seemed to fade as memories of that pain surfaced. Flashes of my father rushed through my thoughts—thoughts I lost sight of so long ago—swiftly scrolling like a film projector. When we vacationed at the Jersey Shore, the fragrance of salt in the air. When we went fishing at Pier 38 along the Delaware River, he'd said, "That's my girl," after I caught my first smallmouth bass. How he taught me to live selflessly—to serve others, without losing sight of honor. That's how he lived, and that's how he died.

"So, I'm here because my father was killed in Afghanistan?" My hands trembled.

"Not necessarily," she said, momentarily canting her head to the right. "The memories of our untimely deaths are removed to avoid any temptation to hold onto our former, living soul." I could tell the calmness of her voice was meant to soothe me, but I was on edge.

"Will I *ever* know what happened to me?" My puzzled expression desperately cried for help. She glanced briefly at the radiant grass, shuffling her feet before crossing her ankles. Then her eyes met mine with the most contemplating stare.

"I wouldn't say *never*." She paused. "But it comes with an irreversible risk."

"What kind of risk? What else do I have left to lose?" I felt myself being ripped apart between discernment and despair.

"*Your* Heaven," she said simply with that same comforting grin.

"But I'm not ready to go to Heaven or go to...*my* Heaven."

"And that's exactly why you're here, Liv," she said as she reached over to calm my tensed shoulders, "to come to terms with what our living souls left behind. What is it that you might have left unfinished?"

I told her about the investigation—illegal weapons trafficking inside the Philadelphia Police Department. About how I couldn't walk away, no matter what the cost.

“So, there’s a way to find out how I died?” I asked Mrs. Davis. “What if I was murdered?” Even saying that out loud made my stomach turn as the reverberating twinges of my head wound slightly increased.

“Yes, there is a way, but I must caution you,” she hesitated, “you will lose any chance of being absolved of this world. And to be frank, I am risking entering my *own* Heaven by telling you this.”

She said that time ran differently in The In-Between. What may seem like an hour here, was like an entire day to the living. But, if my death was a result of what I was investigating, I was willing to take the risk. I needed to return to the Department to find out why.

“The In-Between is a replica of the living world, and it runs parallel to the dimension of the living. The merging of worlds can reveal the living to you, but only if it were the true reason for your unfinished business.” She paused with pursed lips and an apprehensive stare. “Even though you will be able to see the living, you *cannot* allow yourself to be exposed and you *cannot* intervene. If you do, you will stay in The In-Between forever.” Trying to convince me otherwise, she said, “Your Heaven is waiting for you, and so is your father.”

“You’ve seen him!” I said as my desperation only deepened. “Is he here?” I eagerly looked around for a glimpse of him emerging from the foliage.

“He was,” she answered as my gaze returned to her. “He entered *his* Heaven long before I arrived. You see, when Alytos enter The In-Between,” gesturing her hand in my direction, “they are provided a Mylotos,” she said as she touched the center of her chest. “A Mylotos is someone who passed before them and had a significant impact on their Alytos’ living soul.” Her comforting grin morphed into a grateful, humble smile.

That’s why she appeared to me.

“I was provided a record book, called a Katagraf,” she continued. “It outlines how to help Alytos reach their Heaven. The Katagraf listed other Mylotos who were there before them, including your father, to help our Alytos come to terms with what will never be resolved.”

She explained only I could choose to either be released to my Heaven and reunite with my father or reconcile my death among the living and remain in The In-Between. I completely understood why Mrs. Davis couldn’t go with me and risk her own Heaven. And I knew what I would be giving up, but I needed to find out what happened to me. I had to.



The city felt hollow as I moved through it, weightless, as the Department Headquarters loomed ahead. I was dressed in my normal business casual attire—one of my favorite floral button-up shirts, with the sleeves rolled halfway up my arm, and a pair of khaki 5.11 pants. I barely felt the sidewalk under the sole of my ankle-high, black slip-on boots. Looking around at the barren city streets and buildings, I wondered if my father’s In-Between was like this—vibrant with the highest hues of technicolor yet surrounded by a dull void.

As I traversed up North 7th Street—the Department a straight shot—I envisioned so much on that half-mile trek. I was taken aback recalling how Mrs. Davis appeared, just as I remembered her the first time I met her more than 20 years ago—in a deep pink, polyester dress suit. The blazer was fastened by five large, black buttons and adorned with black trim. Her matching skirt was just past her knees, and she wore the same black, cone-heeled pumps. Even though I only spent one year in her class, she never left my side. She even came to my high school and police academy graduations. My mother always seemed jealous of her because Mrs.

Davis was there for me more than she was. Losing Dad was hard on Mom—on all of us—but Mom was never quite the same.

The year my father was killed, Mom moved me and my older sister, Vivian, to Philadelphia, where she grew up, to get a fresh start—without Dad. That’s when I met Mrs. Davis. As my relationship with Mom deteriorated, Mrs. Davis used to tell me, “Olivia, my dear, try to show your mother grace. It hasn’t been easy for her.” My pace slowed and I briefly closed my eyes.

Oh, Dad...

As much as I longed to see my father again, I also felt as if he would be disappointed in the choices I made when I was alive or, even now, dead. One of the worst choices of my life was dating that guy in college. I was completely blindsided by his manipulation and emotional abuse. Embarrassed afterward, I used a paring knife to cut the top of my hand—to feel *something*. I just didn’t know how else to process his emotional trauma.

No wonder I had trust issues.

That scar became a reminder to not allow myself to be that vulnerable ever again. I looked down at the top of my left hand, but the scar was gone. I flipped my hand back and forth, rubbing my right thumb over where it used to be. It must not have had anything to do with me being here. Then, another questionable decision came to mind: when I dropped out of college only after two years. But it was so boring, and I needed a bigger challenge.

Dad would’ve hated that.

I wanted to honor his life, and I found that as a police officer—at least, I thought I had. But, when I was shot two years ago, I was reprimanded for actually doing my job. I was ordered to stand down by my supervisor, Lieutenant Cary Bradshaw, but my ethos wouldn’t allow me to.

I couldn't knowingly let the suspect get away without trying my best to "protect and serve." So, I pursued him on foot—and got shot. Subsequently, I was reprimanded for disobeying a direct order.

What a bunch of crock! I know I did the right thing. Dad would be proud of that, right?

I paused for a moment—with the scar on my hand gone, I wondered if my gunshot scar was still there. I pushed down my waistband to expose the front of my right hip. It was gone too—also not part of my unfinished business. It had to be the investigation, so I continued onward. As I approached Race Street, I saw Headquarters off to the left.

If only Dad could tell me how proud he was just one more time...

I walked through the PPD parking lot and, approaching the back entrance, I saw a translucent-like doorway—its prismatic colors rippled like water. I reached out my left hand to touch it, but it disappeared. Startled, I quickly retracted it.

This must be what Mrs. Davis was talking about.

Forcing myself to block out any apprehension, I closed my eyes and leapt into it.

When I opened my eyes, I found myself in familiar territory. I saw the recognizable faces of the uniformed officers walking by. I heard the phones ringing off the hook masked by the dozens of conversations occurring simultaneously. Corporal Julian Stork stood at the front desk, talking to whom I presumed to be a complainant. I heard the sputtering cheap coffee, which was brewed nearly 24/7, but couldn't smell the burnt aroma that always lingered. Then I heard the vending machine behind me, giving off the recognizable clank of a soda can being dropped.

"Damian!" I rushed toward him. "Damian, can you hear me?"

Unfazed, he cracked open the top and tilted his head back.

"Hey!" I shouted, waving my hands above my head. "Damian, it's me!"

Not too sure how—or even if—this would have worked, I ignored Mrs. Davis’s warning not to intervene and I reached for his arm. I saw my hand touch his left bicep, but I couldn’t feel the grasp. He suddenly stopped.

He felt me...he must have!

He glanced at his arm and then looked up—looked right at me, but it was more like he looked through me. He walked away and I followed. He sat down at his habitually messy desk in Investigations, with files and papers spread all over. I used to get on to him about his lack of organization and that he was bound to lose something important. He’d always replied, “I know exactly where everything is in my own organized chaos.”

I stood behind him as he logged into his computer—the picture of his family on his desk caught my eye. The glittery textured frame was of a beach, with an umbrella in the upper left corner and flip flops on the right. It was taken in Mexico last summer when Damian and his husband, Manny, took the then seven-year-old Jules there for the first time—their daughter, my goddaughter. My heart sunk—she must be devastated.

Oh, Jules—I’m so sorry.

I looked away and saw my bare desk—the only thing on top was a banker’s box, presumably with my personal belongings inside. Our conversations were often surrounded by the life-and-death situations we faced every day. When he saved my life the night I was shot in the hip, we had a new-found appreciation of the danger—and for one another.

Our desks faced each other, which wasn’t always a good thing. He used to stare at me as he read the emotion on my face—when I was disgruntled, frustrated. When I found out about the inside job. Trying to dissuade me, he stood up and leaned over his desk, whispering, “Liv, just

leave it alone. You already have a magnifying glass on you. One more strike and you're pushing papers."

"You know I can't do that," I whispered back. "It's one of our own."

"St. Bernard, I need you here with me, so just let it be."

I knew he was serious when he called me by my full last name. He usually called me Liv, from Olivia, but most people in the Department called me Saint, short for St. Bernard. After I was reprimanded, I found out they played on the nickname "Saint" as a way to mock me because I was always insistent on doing the right thing. It baffled me how I lost credibility and respect within the Department—something I tried so hard to bounce back from—to prove myself.

Then I discovered the weapons—redacted reports in the system, specifically masking weapons serial numbers, with the dealers' biographical details and contact information. Persuading me from investigation further, Damian and I were subsequently assigned more petty investigations.

"Saint, we got this. You look into the stolen bikes," Bradshaw told me.

Then I put two and two together—the redirection was intentional. I wasn't supposed to find out. I tried to stay as discreet as possible, but the more I dug, the more I uncovered.

Mrs. Davis was right—being here is restoring my memory. But who was it? I know I found out, but I still can't remember.

"Peters, my office," Captain Kevin Johnson shouted to Damian. As a 20-year veteran of the force, Johnson led the Investigations Division for the past five years. He cared deeply about appearances and used his authority to remind subordinates where they stood. When he gave television interviews, he took credit for the work—our work—as long as it made him look good. His canned responses made me gag.

“On my way, Cap,” Damian answered as he stood up and grabbed his Coke, a notepad and pen—again, I followed. Damian knocked on Johnson’s opened door.

“Come on in. Shut the door. Have a seat,” Johnson directed.

I stood behind Damian as he plopped down on the brown leather chair, adorned with bronze tufting, and placed his hands on the arm rests. Plaques of Johnson’s accomplishments, letters of appreciation and certificates, covered his walls. He loved to boast about himself, as a way to say, “Hey, look at all *I’ve* done.”

Being back in his office always reminded me of my formal reprimand. He had admonished me on my actions when I disobeyed Lieutenant Bradshaw’s direct order, who was also present during Johnson’s lecture to me. He’d said he was doing me a favor by keeping me in Investigations; he could have knocked me back down to Corporal and moved me to a staff position. However, he opted to only include the formal reprimand as part of my official personnel record. But, if I had one more infraction...

“Sergeant, you should be thanking me right now,” he had told me. I never rebutted his decision, as I stood there behind my walker only three weeks after enduring hip surgery to remove the bullet. It just wasn’t worth the fight.

“What I’m about to tell you is going to be difficult to hear,” Johnson told Damian as he closed his laptop on his desk. “I know how close you were with Saint, and I have no doubt you are still coping with her loss.” He shifted his weight back and forth in his black leather, leaning back into the king-sized chair and said, “We all are.”

Yeah, right...

“With that being said, it’s my duty to inform you about the circumstances surrounding her death. As you know, it’s procedural for Internal Affairs to run an investigation when we lose one of our own. I’m going to need you to process this as objectively as possible.”

A knock at the door startled me. I looked over and saw Bradshaw peek in through a small gap in the opening.

“Come on in, Cary. We just started.” Bradshaw made his way to the other tufted leather chair in front of the Captain’s desk. “As I was saying, Internal Affairs started their investigation into Saint’s death two weeks ago.”

What? I’ve been dead two weeks!

“Well, their findings are less-than favorable.”

“What do you mean?” Damian asked. “She was murdered!”

“Now, hold on. Just listen,” he said, moving his palms in a downward motion. “Yes, she was murdered. But she was murdered by a weapon’s dealer, who was found to have been in business with Saint. IA claimed she redacted official records and stole weapons from evidence. When she was shot, she was making a deal.”

“What? That’s impossible!” Damian said and leaned forward. “Saint was the straightest of the straight, you know that! She would never do anything like that!” I was comforted knowing Damian would stand up for me, even in death. He knew what I found, and he knew I was looking into it, even as he tried to steer me away from it.

Johnson gave Damian the details of how my login credentials showed up in the system, that certain weapons in evidence were removed by me and never returned, and how my bank records showed a significant and unexplainable increase of funds.

No! That money was my annual installment from Dad’s trust fund!

“Damian!” I shouted and crouched down to his left side. “You know that’s not true! Don’t listen to him!” But no one heard my cry. I could see a fragment of doubt on Damian’s face.

I wanted to scream. I bolted back to the portal—back to The In-Between. I couldn’t stand to hear any more of what Johnson said, or bear the look on Damian’s face. I slumped down on the curb outside of the Department’s back entrance, defeated. I tried to cry, but no tears fell.

“Dad, what do I do?” I looked up at the vibrant mauve sky.

I might as well just accept it—accept the blame they put on me. Accept that I was dead. Accept that I needed to follow the rules of The In-Between and be absolved of this place once and for all. I was desperate to find Mrs. Davis. She must know what to do.



Back at Washington Square, I approached the fountain where we were together last. It was still as beautiful as ever, but so strange to not hear what I could clearly see in front of me.

“Mrs. Davis? Are you here?” But there was no response. “I’m back.”

I paced nervously, unsure if I was even able to summon my—my Mylotos. I walked around to the other side of the fountain and found an oversized, antique-looking book. Its deckled paper edges were bound by a worn, brown leather cover and secured by twine down the spine. “Katagraf” was etched on the cover. I picked it up and sat down on the concrete edge of the fountain, rubbing my fingers over the embossed title—I gasped.

I felt it!

I was startled that I sensed something in this world other than Mrs. Davis’s warm embrace. I slowly ran my fingers back and forth over its raised golden lettering. I recalled what Mrs. Davis said about how Mylotos kept a record of their Alytos.

I flipped through toward the back of the book, looking for her entry, shuffling through its aging pages. A scent of vanilla stimulated my senses. I took a deep breath and once again touched my chest. Even though my chest still didn't rise, the vanilla aroma surrounded me.

Focusing back on the log, I found it. As I read through, it recorded details of Mrs. Davis's life—where she was born, her family, her occupation. And how she died:

MYOCARDIAL INFARCTION, THE 15TH DAY OF AUGUST, IN THE YEAR 2024.

It was followed by my name, listed as her Alytos. She really did impact my living soul so deeply. Her entry summarized everything we talked about—how she guided me to come to terms with my own death and the unfinished. Then, the last words:

ABSOLVED.

Panic flushed over me.

"But I need you! I need your help!" I yelled into the empty void. "How do I get out of here?" Nothing.

You're an investigator, Liv—you can figure this out.

Then it came to me—she said my dad was a Mylotos, too. I flipped back through the vanilla-coated pages desperately trying to find something—anything—to help me. There it was. A sudden burst of emotions flowed through me. I brushed my fingertips over the words:

MICHAEL DANIEL ST. BERNARD.

IMPROVISED EXPLOSIVE DEVICE, THE 22ND DAY OF SEPTEMBER, IN THE YEAR 2003.

His Alytos was another soldier, James Micah Carpenter, who also must have died on the battlefield. Dad's standards of high-moral character and honorable actions always motivated me, as I'm sure they did for James, too.

HONOR ALWAYS, EVEN IN DEATH.

A spark inside of me ignited as I read his words. I slammed the book shut. I knew what I had to do. I needed to clear my name, and I needed Damian's help. No longer apprehensive of losing my Heaven, I quickly made my way back to the living world once again. I stopped short in front of Independence Hall, noticing the steeple's clock still said 11:22. At the same time, the electric twinge on my head wound started to pulsate.

I sprinted towards the Department and approached the back entrance—this time I didn't hesitate. I leapt straight into the portal. I ignored the phones and the conversations and rushed to Investigations. Damian was at his desk, but he was dressed differently. He wasn't in his usual PPD polo and khakis—now, he wore a white button up, black tie, and black slacks, with his black blazer slung over the back of his chair.

Days must have gone by.

"How did Saint's memorial go?" Sergeant Heath Jeffers asked Damian as he approached with a massive, heavy bag slung on his right shoulder, preparing to leave the office for the day. Jeffers was a detective in Investigations the last two years. He came over from Internal Affairs to fill in while I was recovering from my gunshot wound to the hip, and never left. I didn't know him very well, but he gave off a creepy vibe. He made snarky remarks, once insinuating a sexual assault victim had it coming because of her attire. No wonder he was a twice-over divorcee. I didn't like to be alone with him—there was just something about him.

"It was nice," Damian answered, continuing to click his keyboard without looking up. "Disappointed not more showed up."

"Yeah, bad timing, man. We had that victim interview...you know?"

Damian didn't respond. Click, click, click.

"Alright, well, see ya tomorrow." Jeffers shrugged and walked away.

It's not that surprising no one came. After all, I was being blamed for running an illegal weapons ring with known dealers. They probably even blamed me for being murdered. No one else spoke to Damian or asked about my memorial as they followed Jeffers's lead out the door. It wasn't long before Damian was alone—I needed to get his attention somehow.

As Damian typed a report, the wound's burning intensified as I reached over and slightly moved his mouse. He looked around as if someone touched it as they walked by, but no one was there. I got frustrated as he went back to typing.

"Damian, it's me!" I yelled from his right side. Nothing. Frantic, I went to my desk and flipped off the top of the banker's box. The wound burned more. Damian jumped up out of his chair when the thud of the top struck the vinyl flooring.

"Who's there?" he yelled. With him out from behind his desk, I went over to his computer and typed—L I V—on his notepad app. The keyboard strokes must have caught his attention. I tried to type more, but my fingers went right through the keyboard. My head wound powerfully flared.

"What the..." he whispered as he read my name on his screen. "Alright, very funny guys. You don't have to be disrespectful!" But this was no joke—it was dead serious.

"Peters? You good?" Johnson asked as he peeked out from behind his door.

"Yeah, Cap, I'm good," Damian muttered and then sat back down in his chair. Johnson went back into his office as one of the dozens of files on Damian's desk caught my eye—Case #1122—plain as day on his desk.

The clock!

It rushed back to me—my notes about the illegal weapons were concealed within the bike theft case file. I reached over to push the brown-colored folder to the floor, but my hand went right through it. I started to feel weak as the burning sensation strengthened.

“No! This can’t be happening!” I yelled. “You have to see it, Damian!”

I knew it was the only way to clear my name. The intensified burning turned into electrical shocks as I motioned my hand one more time. The folder flopped to the floor.

“Jesus!” Damian said, jumping out of his chair once again. He looked around and bent down to pick up the file. The impact caused the folder to open, partially revealing my notes hidden under the bike theft documents.

“Yes, that’s it!” He picked the folder up, sat down at his desk, and rummaged through the case file, pulling out all of the notes related to the illegal weapons ring. I watched over his shoulder as he pored over my notes, one-by-one.

“I knew it,” he whispered, then glanced over at Johnson’s office door. “Jeffers...and Johnson.” He found my note about the AK-47 I checked out from evidence for fingerprint processing. The more he pieced it together—the more *I* pieced together—the more my head wound flared.

Jeffers followed me into the fuming room and said, “Bradshaw needs you right away.”

I looked down at the gun then back at him. “I was just about to—”

“Don’t worry, I got this.”

“Okay, let me sign it over to you.” I knew I signed it, but my signature was missing from the official record.

As the memory flashed, so did my head wound—voltage spread across my scrunched forehead. I pushed through electrical current to type one more time: M-E-T-A-D-A-T...

Even though my finger vanished through the keyboard before finishing, Damian still got the message. And he found it within the electronic record: My login. Jeffers's edits. Manipulated evidence. Johnson's approval.

I could see it in Damian's eyes—he was furious. With my notes in his hand, he stormed into Johnson's office, busting through the closed door—again, I followed.

“Peters, what the hell are you doing?” Johnson demanded.

“What the fuck is this?” Damian said as he slammed the incriminating documents down on Johnson's desk. “You son of a bitch! You set her up!” He yelled pointing at Johnson as I watched from behind his left shoulder.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“You! Jeffers! You're behind it all!” His fury intensified. “And you had Liv murdered!”

“How dare you!” Johnson yelled, standing up, leaning over his desk, knuckles white.

I couldn't just stand by—it was my fault Damian was in the middle of this—I can't let him go down, too. My head felt like it was on fire. Brushing my wound, I pushed through the stabbing shocks, garnering whatever I could within me.

“You killed me!” My voice reverberated through the room. This time, I was heard *and* seen. A luminescent glow surrounded my body, like the prism of the portal.

Stunned, Damian fell against a leather tufted chair and stared at me.

“Liv?” he gasped.

Johnson removed his Glock 9mm from his hip holster—aiming it at my chest.

“No! You're... you're dead!” Johnson pleaded. “I shot you!”

Damian sharply turned his head, giving a piercing stare at Johnson.

“You did, but I’m not gone,” I answered, my voice ricocheting. “And now your secret is out.”

Damian raised his Glock and pointed it at Johnson.

“You bitch!” Johnson yelled, pulling the trigger.

“No!” Damian yelled as he sprang in front of me, returning fire to Johnson. My mind went black.



I woke up again where I’d begun—back in The In-Between. Still vibrant with color. Still an empty void. Still 11:22.

I stood up, just as weightless as I did the first time. As I arose, my wound was no longer pulsating, burning. I brushed my hand against it—no electrical current. My relief was quickly replaced by fear.

I ran as fast as I could to see if the Katagraf I left at the fountain had any information about Damian. When I got to it, I leaned up against the concrete edge to see if it fell in the sapphire water, but it wasn’t there. All I saw was my reflection staring back at me—without the grotesque image. I reached up to touch my head. The wound wasn’t there—just gone.

“Liv.”

Startled, I swiftly turned around. There he was: dressed in his green, black, and brown fatigues, black beret and combat boots.

“Dad!” I yelled as I ran toward him. He gave me the biggest and warmest bear hug I ever remember feeling from him. “You’re here.” My voice cracked as I buried my head into his chest.

“I’m here to take you to your Heaven.”

I lifted my head away from his chest, as a tear dripped down my cheek. I stared into his piercing hazel eyes, not daring to let go of his embrace. “What do you mean? I...I broke the rules...”

“You did the honorable thing, Liv. You did the right thing.” He paused as he held me tighter. “Sure, you were a bit unorthodox,” he said as he tried to mask his laugh, “but you came to terms with your death, and you did what no Alytos has ever tried before—you finished the unfinished.”

My eyes widened when I asked, “Dad, what happened to Damian?”

“I can’t answer that. But what I *can* tell you is that his name isn’t in the registry.”

“That’s a good thing, right? I mean, he survived?”

“Likely, but knowing that isn’t part of the rules,” he said as he chuckled a little more.

“You should know that by now.”

“And Johnson?” I gasped.

“Well, he’s a different story. Let’s just say there is no place for him in The In-Between or in *any* Heaven.” He paused, placed his hand on the back of my head, guiding it back to his chest. We stood there for a moment, rocking side-to-side, when he asked, “You ready, kiddo?”

“Dad, just one more thing,” I said as I looked back up at him. “I’m...I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologize for, Liv. I’m so proud of you.” His words were a sudden beam illuminating my soul. “Shall we?” he asked.

“Okay,” I nodded as we glided toward the massive redwoods, arm-in-arm.

“So, does this mean I don’t get to be a Mylotos?”

“I don’t think they want you guiding any Alytos,” he said dryly.

We both laughed—disappearing into the dense trees, leaving the In-Between behind.