

**The Suffering**  
*by Quensetta Williams*

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# **Quensetta Williams Enterpries**

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# 1. Chapter

Some would say that every ghost story is a love story. They would say no matter what, somewhere in the history of the death or life of the person or ghost there existed a beautiful and gut wrenching love story, and some even believe that love had, in some way, shape, or form, a direct result on the death that occurred. The amount of time that may have passed mattered not; they were connected, no matter what.

Spring love is the freshest of love, the love of the brand new start, a love consisting of pastel tie-dye and springtime flowers. Some also say that if the death of the one in a love affair happens in spring, and the love is in the spring as well, the ghost of the deceased will spend eternity bidding for love in a barren place that has no changing seasons, looking for the same love, the fresh spring love that had been ripped from their souls.

While that is a romantic theory, the fact is the season doesn't matter whatsoever. If you die in the throes of love, it could be a burning hell hot summer, and you will keep seeking. Fortunately for Gertrude Franz it was a beautifully perfect autumn. Weather-wise anyway.

## 2. Chapter

Gertrude Franz. With a name like Gertrude Franz she had spent most of her life believing she would never find love and the entire blame would lie with her name. Gertrude. Gert. Wow. So, While she had dated frequently and even gotten serious once or twice (once), she went ahead and got a cat, a male suffering terribly from lunacy. At the slightest sound of anyone even near the front door, Issues (yes, this is the cat's name) would bound through the entire house via the elevated cat train system called "the curtains". The cat was large, grey, and perpetually miserable. They were complete opposites and they were perfect for each other. Issues was Gert's husband, and that was good enough for her.

Gert was perky, with a personality that drew attention like a magnet and laughter the way a canyon drew an echo. She made a friend of everyone she met. People were one of her favorite things. Her taste in clothing, bright and flamboyant, not only drew positive attention but fit her perfectly, all 5 foot, 104 pounds of her. Best of all, she had a shoe and hat collection most women would willingly go to prison for. That, my friends, is not to mention her bags. She had friends, she had a great job, she had hobbies, she had a life.

She didn't need a man...she didn't even want one.

### 3. Chapter

Gert had a long, slow, boring weekend which consisted of Issues dictating the movies they would watch and the fattening food they would eat. They did not move, except to scratch and run the remote. That was the one thing Issues let Gert do. It gave her purpose. It almost seemed like he was smiling sometimes, like he knew the truth: she was the cat to his human. By late Sunday morning it appeared Issues had literally taken root and begun to sprout, while Gert was in a perpetual cramp from absolutely no bodily movement whatsoever. Small amounts of stretching had begun on both parts, and it was mutually known that movement and life were soon to begin again. Just as acceptance of the inevitable was mentally taking place, the telephone chirped. It chirped again.

Gert was never one to ignore the phone when it rang, especially when all this stupid cat did was sit and stare at it. He certainly wasn't going to answer it. Worthless feline. Worthless. Gert grabbed at the phone at the very thought of forgetting the existence of her cat/spouse. Worthless.

## 4. Chapter

"Hello!" Gert tried to sound as excited as possible. She was hoping the call would result in getting out of here for a couple of hours.

"Gert? Hi! It's Caroline! You know, from work!" Caroline Fitch was one of these women that tried so hard to make friends that she didn't have any friends. It was a real "shoot yourself in the foot" type of situation for the girl. The problem here is that Gert didn't have a mean bone in her body, and they had formed what Gert referred to as a "close acquaintance-ship". Gert was the ear she bent and the shoulder she cried on, mostly about her love life.

Now what Gert had in beauty and charisma, Caroline had in insecurity. She was functional, had been with the company an impressive amount of time, and was dependable. As a matter of fact she had been in line for the Administrative Assistant position Gert now filled, but the fact of the matter was the boss felt Caroline was not emotionally able to withstand the pressure and responsibility. He was right. It didn't matter. Gert knew that her and Caroline, well, they'd be "acquaintances" for the rest of their lives; Gert's anyway.



## 5. Chapter

The main reason, actually the only reason, Caroline would actually call her at home had to be her love life. Fortunately for Gert, she had gotten enough bodily rest to be strong and ready. She could take it. She braced herself for about 2 hours of ear numbing chick conversation.

"What's up, Caroline? I didn't think I'd hear from you; I thought you said something last week about going to your parent's home to paint before winter. I thought you were there." Caroline's parents had a beautiful home Lake Raintree. They lived there year around. Why was she here?

"That was last year, Gert. Look, that really is beside the point. I have come to ask you for a favor. A really big favor." Her voice seemed to lower, and mine did the same when I responded.

"What, Caroline. What do I have to do?"

"Oh, I knew I could count on you! Okay, listen, Kyle and I are going to be going to the theater this Friday night for a midnight premier showing of that knew movie "Nut Crackers". Now, it's hard enough for me to get Kyle to do anything with me at all much less go in public to a movie. The only way he would go is if his cousin Brandon could come, and that meant I have to find a date for him. Gert, you're perfect." All of this poured from Caroline's mouth at approximately 73.5 miles per hour, and one could tell she didn't want Gert to speak until she had given her every thing she had defense wise concerning the request. Gert just listened.

## 6. Chapter

Caroline had been scared to death that Gert would say no; she could tell, and she hadn't the heart to let her down. Caroline had been dating who Gert liked to call "Kyle the Controller for nearly a year, since last November, and she wanted this to be the one. She wanted Gert to double date with his cousin, and she wanted it badly, just so she could see Kyle. She had to complete a task if she wanted to see Kyle, and she did. Gert shook her head in the isolation of her little home. Did she want to go? No. Would she go? Yes. The reality of the situation is this: she had an abundance of really good platonic friendships with men she had met going on double dates. She got along great with them; she loved them. The problem seemed to start with the words "commitment" and "surrender". "Teamwork" was a good one, too. The date was Friday, giving her a great reason to look smoking hot, and it gave her a week to plan it. Yes, she would definitely go on this double date. It would be a blast. She would make it a blast.

She understood the relationship problem to be hers, something just didn't click, and they never worked out. She called herself "romantically challenged", kind of the same way she was vertically challenged, but that is another story. Even though she agreed to that date, she felt like she was suffocating already, and by the time her and Caroline hung up from the conversation, a cop show, "Trigger & Slugs" was just beginning. She plopped back in the same position on the couch she had been in before, noticing Issues on his back, spread out, and dead asleep, his mouth wide open.

Wow. I wanted to be just like him when I grew up. I knew deep inside I was really much more lonely than I wanted to admit.

## 7. Chapter

Monday morning consisted of a bagel and cream cheese with 3 cups of coffee, and Gert soon found herself dressing like a mad woman, clothes flying, hangers hitting knick-knacks, the works. Gert had a beautiful tone of natural red hair which she wore in a cute pixie most of the time. She was light complected, with a light sprinkling of freckles across her little nose. Her eyes were bright blue. This seemed to surprise people. They always expected brown or green. What kind of an expectation was that? Because of it, she loved her eyes, and tried to accentuate them purposefully. This can make her different than any other ginger in existence, if she works it, and she does!

After a long period of using clothes for confetti, Gert settled on a pair of red slingbacks to accentuate a bright yellow pleated skirt that lay just above her knee and accompanied that with a blood red button down, untucked. Over this she wore a red cable-knit sweater vest, and she wore a bright yellow headband with small red flowers on her pixie. With a bright yellow bag in hand, she gave a bit of love, if you could call it that, to Issues, and she headed out the door to work. She always considered her place of employment as a way to be fashionable in a professional atmosphere, and showing one's sense of fashion is vital to an individual, no matter the sense.

Gert genuinely believed she felt good enough that Monday that she honestly could have fallen in love with every other Monday in the future of the world. She thought that forevermore all was to be right with the world, and she even found herself in the depths of ultra-productivity and multi-tasking she had never known. She wasn't sure what to attribute her mood to, and she did not care. It was, however, during this time of clarity and efficiency she heard a knock at her office door.

## 8. Chapter

The knock. It was on Gert's tiny office door, and it was the timid knock of a female who more than likely wants to talk about a Friday night double date with someone named Brandon, and Gert really, really does not want to do this.

"Come in," she said. What else was she going to say?

Caroline walked in, stooped a bit in her posture, her head hanging low. Gert asked her if she wanted a seat and proceeded to sit back, close my eyes, and just think. Caroline didn't say a word and Gert even opened her left eye a couple of times just to see what she was doing over there. Finally it could be taken no more.

"Okay! Let's have it! Tell me all about it! Tell me all about this Brandon guy!" That was all Gert had to say and Caroline was off and running. Brandon was not only an engineer who graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, but he then got his Master's at Stanford. He had gone through one divorce after a very short marriage, and there were no children involved. He was obsessed with his work, his friends, and his cat "Troubles" believe it or not. Wow.

It turned out that Brandon had actually been divorced for sometime and because of this fact, he was very set in his ways and routine, just like me. While he was use to living alone he was smart, motivated, funny, and independent. In short, he was a great catch, but, like Gert Franz, there was absolutely no thoughts of potential commitment or anything else, Caroline said. This was a perfectly safe double date, she promised. No expectation between either of us at all.

## 9. Chapter

Surprisingly enough, Gert blinked and it was time to get off work on Friday. She had spent the last 4 days listening to Caroline talk about nothing but the date and reassure her she was going to have the time of her life; it will be the "bee's knees", Caroline said. She even had one experience that week of receiving an unexpected visit from Caroline's guy Kyle, also encouraging her to follow through with the Friday date. Now this is too weird to Gert, and she sent him packing, telling him she would be there, and if she heard about it again they were going to blow it.

She went right from work to get a last minute mani-pedi that is required, and then she headed home fast to get ready for the "amazing, incredible" night out. If you haven't noticed, Gert was very particular about her appearance, and it was a major source of personal expression for her. Tonight there was no need to run around like a rainbow, but she would be noticed. The nails of her fingers and toes were done in a color very comparable to pearl. Wearing a black satin dress, about mid-thigh and form fitting, was the perfect match for the light satin white blazer she wore over top. Her shoes were a black lace finish wedge that was perfect. All jewelry was in white pearl but for the ring on her right hand: it was one single black and one single white pearl, set in white gold and highlighted with small diamonds. She wore her pixie with pride, looking amazing and knowing it. That will put a pep in any step.

# 10. Chapter

She arrived at the theater a bit early, but it wasn't too chilly to enjoy, at least not in the beginning. She had a tendency to be punctual to a fault, but by the time the other three arrived she had read the movie poster so many times she was pretty sure she knew the movie itself by heart. Filled with jitters and regrets, she was fully equipped to carry on any amount of conversation that was needed, if talking was indeed needed in a movie. For this type of thing she was unprepared. You would think it would be easy.

She began the date very insecure, wishing she had not only never agreed to it, but actually considering making a run for it on all three of her trips to the ladies room. By the time they stood in line for candy and drinks for what seemed like an hour she had become what seemed like the best of friends, and she found herself excited to sit side by side with him for a couple of hours.

Life is a funny thing, an enigma filled with painful surprises and cruel sarcasm. These were not, however, the events of that particular evening. Neither Brandon nor Gert were able to tell anyone a thing about the movie; they talked to each other the entire time, and were finally forced to sit the duration of the film out in the lobby by the powers that be (this happened within 15 minutes of the film), and before the evening drew to a close, Greta and Brandon had memorized every plan they had made together for the next two weeks.

Gert was in love and had not a clue as to that fact.  
Perfect. It couldn't be more perfect.

# 11. Chapter

Brandon and Gert took their relationship up the ladder rather quickly. They didn't start out as friends; they were best friends. Why not? They had everything possible in common two individuals could have. It was kind of creepy, Gert thought at times, but isn't that what a girl dreams of, after all? In addition to the commonalities, he was willing to talk. He would actually participate in a one on one conversation with her that felt mentally and spiritually enriching way. This was a valuable aspect of their relationship, and made all the difference in the world to Gert when compared to other men of the past.

They went to a pet shop and bought matching style kitty leashes for Troubles and Issues, one blue, one red, and they would walk their cats together in the park, talking, laughing, flirting, and staring into the eyes of the other.

Within two weeks, Gert was simply positive Brandon was the one the long wait was all about. The one all the pain was in preparation for. See? She asked herself sarcastically. I told you this wasn't all for nothing. She was sure he was the absolute one. He seemed abundantly worth the wait.

The Thursday into the third week of their dating/relationship experience, Gert received a call from Brandon in the early afternoon, right after she had returned from lunch.

His voice was soft, gentle, and even a tad romantic, she thought, as he started. "How do you feel about dinner at Roberto's Bistro tonight Gert? You don't have any prior plans, do you?"

"N-no. I guess you took me by surprise. It's a work night; we both know how we feel about going out on work nights." It was true, and we agreed on this mutual rule wholeheartedly.

"I just wanted to go over a few important things, you know, get some facts straight," he answered. His voice remained gentle and soft; I could even detect a slight smile. I was already picturing an oyster with a ring in it. The funny thing is I could also picture myself saying yes.

I had known this man three weeks.

# 12. Chapter

Gert had always been an optimist in the love department. She had accepted her self-presumed fate long ago. She liked having her own control. She enjoyed capturing attention. These things could not only intimidate a man, but they can emasculate some of them as well.

Okay, there is another reason Gert may die an old spinster maid.

Brandon did seem different though. He seemed tough enough to handle her. It seemed perhaps she had met her match, and that was very, very sexy. Tonight, she would have the most amazing dinner of her life with a handsome, intelligent, and accomplished man, and she would leave with a ring on her finger. She wanted to look classy and gracious all at once.

She spent her time choosing a sea foam colored skirt suit with lapel with satin piping. She wore a satin dark teal button down, and chose a beautiful aquamarine earring and necklace set from her graduation years ago. A simple gold ring on her right hand was embellished by an aquamarine of modest size. Her hair hand swept and tousled, and her make-up set off with a light teal eye-shadow, she was simply wonderful. She entered the bistro with an inner nervousness that was invisible in the shadow of her glow and grace.

Brandon had chosen a very intimate seating arrangement for 2. A very small area separated from the rest of the restaurant and patrons by use of reconstituted potato sack material. This material was embellished with antique fishing hooks and sea shells, and they were in complete privacy. He had poured her wine, a decadent Cabernet Sauvignon, and held her seat for her as she sat. She was simply in heaven.

Brandon sat and gave her one of his beautiful million dollar smiles. He told her how amazing and beautiful she looked. He asked about her day. She kept glancing, waiting for the appetizer that surely would change her future. Instead, Brandon looked her firmly in the eyes, and smiling, told her he never wanted to see her again.

He offered no explanation, and she did not ask for one. She let not one tear fall from her eye. Rather, she gulped down her glass of wine, filled the glass and gulped it as well. She then grabbed her bag, thanked him for the drinks, and as he continued to fumble his words, she turned on her heel and walked out of Roberto's. Alone. It didn't even matter they were bringing the food. Who could eat now? What kind of guy dumps you before he feeds you anyway.

Wow.

Fortunately for Gert, there was a bar directly across the street, the neon beer lights making the nighttime seem like day. A Budweiser or ten would do just fine. Her jog slowed to a speed walk and finally a stroll as she approached the door of the establishment and went inside. She glanced behind her as she did, just to see if he had followed at all. Wow, she got out of that by the skin of her teeth. What kind of man lets a woman run off in the dark and doesn't even try to make sure she's okay?

Certainly not that puke.



These pipe dreams of love and marriage were ignorant and presumptuous. Who needs that? She was finished, and she swore she was NOT going to try again.

And that included double dates. Especially double dates. Done, done, done. Talk about escaping by the skin of your teeth.

## 13. Chapter

So Gert went into that bar and had enough to drink that she was able to successfully pull off her one-woman karaoke, comedy, and puppeteer act in town, and the only dummy in the place was her. Finally, at last call, she got a hold of a cab to come fetch her, and ordered two drinks at once. She didn't remember getting home, and hoped she didn't get sick in that taxi.

She woke the next morning, sick of booze and really done with men, so she said. She made a pact with Issues, but he didn't have the ability to pinkie swear, and she had doubts about the pact the whole time because of this.

She was terribly sick and hung over, literally crawling from the bed to the bathroom, and keeping herself in that position while she dressed to keep from being sick. For the first time only looked a little good when she went to work. She was able to pull it off physically, but emotionally she was a mess, and she knew she would be hearing it from Caroline as soon as she walked in the door.

Funny, but that wasn't at all the way it went. She did indeed see, and make eye-contact with, her shadow friend, but as soon as the eye-contact occurred, Caroline looked quickly away. But she saw Gert, and Gert saw her. No jumping up and running over; no wondering about the Thursday night date? No ring questions? Gert's mamma might have raised a fool but she sure didn't raise a dummy.

# 14. Chapter

Entering her office she hung her jacket on the metal hook behind the door. She took a deep breath and looked around. She didn't have time for these idiots anyway. This is exactly where she belonged. These people were her family, and her career was her life.

She removed the pitch black sunglasses she had worn to that point and tossed them carelessly onto her desk. Her head was pounding, and she got into her desk and dry swallowed three Excedrin. Gone in 20 minutes this damn headache would be. At that point she stood and began to seek out Caroline. She spotted her immediately at the water cooler. Eye contact was made yet again and Caroline seemed to make a quick escape, appearing to refill the water cup she held and pretending not to notice Gert at all. Wow.

Caroline took her full cup of water and walked away quickly without even acknowledging the presence of her so-called best friend.

"Caroline," Gert called. No response. Hell, she was only 5 feet behind her, for crying outloud! "Caroline!" This got a response, Caroline spinning to face Gert, water flying from the small Dixie cup.

"Gert! Sorry! I didn't see you! How have you been?" This was a really stupid and redundant question. Caroline knew. Brandon was Kyle's cousin. Caroline's hands were trembling, and she in no way made eye contact with Caroline. She was shifty, and Gert was not one to waste time.

"Oh, by the way, how is Kyle? You know I got to thinking about it and I realized you haven't said one single word about him in days. How is he anyway?" She maintained the sneer of a smile intentionally, wanting Caroline to know, without having to say the words that she believed Caroline was getting just what she deserved.

As she waited for Caroline's answer she wondered, would the girl stutter or stumble over her own words? Would she lie, or simply tell the truth and justify? Would she apologize? Caroline was famous for her lack of backbone.

Much to Gert's surprise, and shocking pain, Caroline took a deep breath, steadied her hands, and looked Gert directly in the eye without wavering. Each met the gaze of the other steadily for a full minute at least before Caroline spewed the reeking words that confirmed what Gert already knew: that Brandon and Caroline were seeing each other. She wondered about Kyle. Finally Caroline lowered her eyes, turned on her heel, and walked away.

## 15. Chapter

"Gert," she stated in her firmest drill sergeant voice, "You really, really, really are finished with even thinking about this relationship crap for good. You are DONE soldier. Do you hear what I'm saying to you soldier!? Done!" She meant it, and for the first time in a month Gert felt like herself again; she was lean, mean, and in control. She had plans to go to a live fall concert with friends next weekend (all women), and she was pretty sure she was going to be moving up at work, getting an assistant of her own. At least that was the word.

The next couple of weeks flew by for Gert, with stylist appointments, shopping, cleaning her house, fall yard work, and the beautiful change in seasons she was herself again. It never seemed to take her long to grieve. It helped a woman to help herself she believed. She got a cut little spike done to her pixie, and had her tips done blond. She had her nails and make-up done in a Goth fashion, considering she was still just a little pissed. She also hooked herself up with leather shorts and halter, thigh high stilettos, fishnet stockings, and a matching cropped leather jacket. All her jewelry fit her mood, and she felt free and good, and she fully intended to drown what was left of her sorrow and have a blast.

# 16. Chapter

Gert picked the most far out Goth place she could find, knowing deep inside she would never find the kind of man in a place like this. It was just getting a few customers, and she chose a stool at the bar that was all alone, a place where she could think until she was drunk enough to get crazy.

"So, do you think you're gonna make it? You look to me like you're just about through it, but the eyebrow piercing has got to go." The voice must have been referring to the new piercing she had just gotten when she had her hair and nails done. She knew as soon as she did it that it was a dumb move. Just being defiant with life, she supposed. She turned toward the voice, to her left, and three stools down he sat. He wore faded Levi's and an old plaid flannel shirt. The only thing about him that fit into this place was the vintage black leather biker jacket, otherwise here was a man with no eyeliner, piercings, and his dark hair was clean. She bet it was soft and smelled great, and even as she thought these things she thought she must be drunk already.

"Well, are you gonna make it?" He smiled now. He had beautiful teeth, so white, so straight. She couldn't help but smile back. She could feel the heat of the blush rushing to her cheeks and she quickly looked down at the hands in her lap with the violent nail job at the tips. The easily embarrassed Demon Child.

"Yeah. I'm gonna make it. Thanks. I'm Gert." She winced inside at the very mention of her name, but he gave no indication of surprise or disappointment. He smiled yet again.

"I know you will," he replied. "I knew you would already. So did you."

His name was Mike, Mike Blake. Within 10 minutes they had moved to a booth to talk and once the talking commenced there wasn't a firearm large enough to stop the two. They had more than a strict work ethic in common, they had EVERYTHING in common, from music and art to books and humor. They both were raised in very similar backgrounds, raised by single parents to a point, becoming the step-child of another and gaining obnoxious, controlling siblings. Neither had ever been lucky in love, and neither had no idea how to change it. Thank goodness there had been no children. Imagine their pain at the failed marriages of their parents. The only different between them was their personalities and their pets. She was an extrovert and he knew when to shut up and listen. He had a goldfish; she had a cat diagnosed as certifiably maniacal. The good news was he wanted a cat. That could be good.

Might be risky for the goldfish, though.

## 17. Chapter

So they sat. They sat there talking and laughing and completely enjoying each other until last call. They ordered two drinks apiece, just because they could, and once those were gone, they continued to talk, laugh, and cry until the bartender gave them a harsh boot. It was time to leave. It might have been the booze, but wow, why her? Surprisingly, he walked her to the door and handed her a bar napkin. On it were his name and number, and a sweet little note: "You ring my bell...". In his other hand was another napkin and an ink pen. On his face was that smile, and against her pacts and promises, she acquiesced. He really expressed a genuine desire to see her, and soon. Tomorrow? Make it work, he begged.

For the first time in years Gert let a man kiss her before they parted ways, and when they kissed she meant it. She could have sworn he did too. She thought about him intensely all the way to her little house, and as she stepped from the curb to cross the street that led to her stoop, his kiss was the only thing on her mind. As she was struck by a steamroller being moved to another location at 2:30 in the morning, as she lay on the ground, gripping a bloody napkin that had been her last chance, Gertrude Franz, as she was dying, looked up at the night sky and said, "I won't be alone anymore..."

She still firmly gripped Mike's number, that bloodstained number, as they closed her eyes and covered her body for the last time.

# 18. Chapter

Gert woke with a quick start, a jump even. She felt stiff, and tried to stretch but found no relief. She squirmed around and tried again. It was then that she realized she wasn't stiff at all. As a matter of fact, she felt great, better than when she was a kid. That was when she opened her eyes and realized not only was her nose 1/2 inch from the ceiling of her bedroom, but Issues was running circles around the house like he had gotten into some amphetamines.

That was the precise moment it came back to her, and it came back hard. She was dead, for crying out loud! But she met Mike! She had fell in love in about 3 seconds, I mean the real deal. She left the bar with his number and got hit by a steam roller and she was killed! A steam roller! At 2:30 in the freaking morning!

She had absolutely no concept of time other than what the clock said and the fact that the sun was out. What felt like 20 minutes registered an hour and a half on the clock, and couldn't figure out how to get down. She spent what seemed like only minutes learning to maneuver this awkward spirit of hers around, and finally got pretty good at that. She needed to learn to touch things. She had to get dressed. What should she wear? What!? She didn't even have a body. Not to mention the fact the answering machine said she had 17 messages. Probably they were Mike, and she couldn't press play or even call him back. Where was that napkin anyway?

She realized immediately it was still in her hand.

# 19. Chapter

After trying to check her bodiless image in the full length mirror and feeling again like a fool, she decided the movie "Ghost" with Whoopi Goldberg was a big bucket of crap. She couldn't even see herself much less move a penny. Wow.

Gert burned a little more "time" getting around and mastering what movement capabilities she could. She would worry about finding out about moving things later. Thank God for Patrick Swayze, you know? By the time she headed out her front door and downtown to her office, she felt completely comfortable in her ability to get around. On her way to the office, she decided she was only going to have one last look. Okay, maybe she wanted to see if her office was destroyed, but mostly she wanted to know who was in it.

What Gertrude Camilla Franz got was most certainly not what she expected. The first things she saw was her office. The door was wide open and the vertical blinds were gone. The office had been rearranged. At the desk, with her drab decor covering the shelves, desk, and walls, was Caroline.

She sat in that chair with a stance of authority, but laughed and tossed her hair and had not a care in the world. That was when Gert noticed the person she was laughing at. The person in the chair in her office was Brandon, and he was laughing harder than she was.

She had been dead that long. Hell, she had even missed her own funeral. Her mom always said she would, but she was prompt. How embarrassing to miss your own funeral. What was she thinking? Who cared? The only conversation left about Gert Franz was at the water cooler, and it was fading fast.



## 20. Chapter

She maneuvered herself into the office which for years was her very own. What about that promotion that was set to take place? She knew that too was in the pocket of this manipulative demon of a human being, this actress, this phone, this hollow soul-less dead girl named Caroline.

She couldn't be seen, but that didn't stop the goosebumps that rose on Caroline's arms as Gert hovered near, staring at her, smiling. It was not a happy smile. It was a sneer of hatred and sudden awareness of the truth.

"It is amazingly funny how it worked out so well. I can't believe I was able to pass off the beneficiary of her policy as Mike. I can't believe the policy went through at all!" She laughed again. "Are you happy baby? Now you have everything you want and so do I."

Brandon smiled at her, but his eyes were empty. Gert knew, right then and there, that Caroline was next.

"Mike will endorse the check over to me as payment for a past loan. I'll make it easy on him and sign it for him. I feel bad for one thing. He followed her to that bar and followed our instructions to a tee. When I was with him and the police, when it was over he was sobbing. The police left and I said, 'Wow, Mikey, ya knew her ten minutes or something.' You know what he said to me? 'Out of all the empty women, Brandy, that one was full.' Aw, hell, Caroline. 1.5 mil makes it all worthwhile."

Gert knew with sudden and utter acceptance this was out of her control. All she could do was what she was doing and figure it out as she went along. She couldn't even cry.

## 21. Chapter

So it had all been planned. It was smart and it took time. Gert knew with certainty that the entire persona Caroline presented to her from the get-go had been nothing more than a facade, a way to test Gert's heart to see if she was victim material.

She loved people. She always had. She loved them to a fault, even when she didn't like them much. She could make a friend out of a turd, her Uncle Harold use to say. She had made friends with a couple of them. As Caroline and Brandon continued to discuss the situation, Gert learned Mike really only had the intent to keep her there until closing; to befriend her. It was all he was to do.

She learned his heart was broken. She learned he made a pact with his goldfish, who couldn't pinkie swear.

All she knew to do, since she couldn't call him, was to go to that bar. He certainly didn't hang out their regularly, but maybe, just maybe she could smell the way he smelled that night. Probably she couldn't smell, but she could remember. His smell, his smile, and his eyes. Gert floated into the the Goth bar called Forever Night, and there, in the same booth, was Mike.

She sat with him, upon him, smelling him and swearing she could. She was amused at the goosebumps her presence brought him, and she thanked God for letting her know love before that steamroller hit her, even if she only knew love for a few hours. He was absolutely worth it.

## 22. Chapter

Brandon and Caroline entered Forever Night looking more awkward than Mike did. Brandon sat in the booth next to his step-brother, and Caroline seated herself next to Gert. She ended up borrowing Brandon's jacket. Funny.

Together these four (three) sat, and the conversation started out quite mundane. Brandon made up some story about Kyle having pulled some stuff at the insurance company where he and Caroline worked. Brandon told Mike it was about Gert being killed, and it had been a scam.

"Brandon, how long have you been my brother?" asked Mike.

"Since you were 7 and I was 9, Mike, why?" Brandon's eyes began to shift.

"Since I have known you, in one way or another, you have murdered and killed everything I have ever loved. I stopped letting myself do it. I gave up. I have been so lonely and angry and bitter for so long I wonder if this is not normal and all the world is nuts. Brandon. Oh, Brandon, when I was 7 I thought you were god. God, Brandon." Mike took his forefinger and wiped a solitary tear from his cheek. "I know I must be one of the victims next on the list; one of the stumbling blocks to your perfect plan. Guess what? I don't even care. I've made your job easy, son."

Brandon slid a fat envelope at Mike. He picked it up, looked inside, and ripped the whole packet in two. Caroline whimpered in pain. "You paid me to stall her for a steam roller you paid to run her over. You killed me and you killed her. Rot in hell." His tears fell freely now. His eyes were empty, and Gert's spirit knew with certainty that Mike wanted to die.

## 23. Chapter

He wasn't finished; whatever the plan had been from the beginning, Mike must have received a form of money down. He pulled a fat wallet from his back pocket, struggling to free it from the denim confines of its home. He threw the wallet at Caroline and Brandon with such force it literally bounded from the side of Caroline's caramel colored hair and landed in a pitcher of dark lager.

Mike then turned away with might and strength and began to run from Forever Midnight. There was a doorkeeper station who was nearly bowled over, and even though I was airborne I had a very difficult time catching up to him myself. But these thoughts rushed through my conscience as I pursued him. Thoughts that I knew, as sure as I was dead, he did mean for me to. I also knew, from the thumping in the core of my spirit, that this man loved me, as I loved him. I wanted him to live and love again, but my heart knew it was not to be.

## 24. Chapter

Mike was an intelligent, funny man, with things he wanted and things he wished for that never came true.

The number 9 bus was never on time, even the "Get Drunk & Ride" program #9. It was always early, at least by 10 minutes. Gert had gone to this bar countless times and had to miss last call 90% of the time because the #9 Get Drunk & Ride was more punctual than she was. She always complemented that old boy that drove the number 9. He was about 80 it seemed, and he stayed up late to get folks home.

But not tonight. Tonight there had been a drunk driving accident that held that #9 up and made it late. The old boy that drove would not get his drunks home alive if he sped, so he stuck to the speed limit, and for the first time in who knows how long, the #9 was late. It was late enough to defeat its own purpose.

Neither the #9 nor its driver would be on time again. This would change things.

## 25. Chapter

Yes, the #9 hit Mike, in the night, and it hit him hard and good. Gert, in the intangible form she possessed could feel the pain he felt louder than she could hear the chaos. The emotion, the things of the mind and spirit, that is what you hear, feel, touch, and smell when you leave your earth suit. This is what she heard: his pain. It was brief but it was loud, like a shriek, like a scream for help. But then it was no more.

After the impact, after the screeching of the buses brakes as it fought to stop, Mike lay there on the cold concrete, trembling and bleeding. Gert knelt beside him, and all she could feel was love, the love she had never felt. She heard his spirit before she saw it, it rose, clean and healthy and strong, and it looked her in her eyes, the eyes only he could see, he smiled that smile. She smiled back, and he reached for her hand. He used his left, because in the other was the napkin with her number. Still. For both Mike and Gert the loneliness, the trying too hard, the failing, and the suffering were over. The suffering at weddings and at anniversary parties. The suffering of observing young love, or two embracing who have known that touch for 50 years.

The suffering was over for the two of them. They now had each other; for eternity. The suffering. The suffering that comes with the hollowness of a soul that is simply incomplete on its own.

At long last, the silent, lifelong suffering of these two free spirits was over. The suffering was gone.