

# E.A. COMISKEY

THIS MOTHER-DAUGHTER  
JOURNEY MIGHT LAST  
FOREVER.

# LIST

# OF

# 13





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*List of Thirteen*

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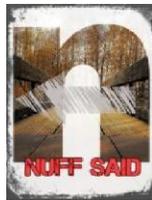
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**LIST  
OF  
13**

By  
E.A. Comiskey



*For Theresa R., who has the most fantastic bucket list imaginable, and for the one who waits for her.*



# One



## A Welcome to Death

Dog breath assaulted Alice's senses, stirring her from unconsciousness. She turned her head to fend off an onslaught of slobbering canine kisses. Claire lay next to her, sprawled on the rock. Alice shoved the dog away and scrambled on hands and knees to her daughter.

"Claire! Claire, are you okay?" She fought the urge to shake her awake, terrified she'd turn a bad situation worse.

*Oh, God, the plane crashed. Where are we?*

Grasping Claire's face in her hands, she used her sternest Mom Voice, the one that had always worked back in the girl's high school days when she'd never wanted to go to bed at night and resisted waking up every morning. "Wake up, Claire! Wake up!"

She tore her eyes away, searching frantically for help. Though she felt no pain, she must have hit her head quite hard. The whole world shimmered and wavered around her. The burning wreckage of the plane floated on the calm sea, a nightmare island of smoke and destruction on the distant horizon. A small group of people stood on top of it, madly waving their arms, though no sound reached Alice's ears. Only the painful thumping of her own heart.

What could she do to help them?

Exactly nothing.

She and Claire must have been thrown out somehow, landing here on this craggy, red-rock shore. She screamed for help, but no one came except the exuberant dog.

He lavished love on Claire, gentle but fervent licks and little nudges against her cheek with his big, fuzzy nose.

"Careful there." Alice blocked him from Claire with her body. "Can you do a Lassie and go for help?"

He chuffed in response.

Alice examined her daughter, seeking out any sign of injury. She checked the long, grown-up limbs exactly the same as she had when Claire had been a little girl and she'd fallen off her bicycle. Five years, twenty-five, a hundred and five--it didn't matter. This was her baby.

Not a single scratch showed anywhere, and yet terrible thoughts of spinal cord injuries and internal bleeding tormented Alice.

The dog's snout poked under her arm and his wet tongue darted out to lick Claire's nose. At the same moment, another nose snuffled at Alice's ear and a third brushed, cold and wet, across her left hand.

*What in the world?*

Alice focused on the dog for the first time and saw three panting mouths, on three separate heads, attached to a single body. The sight was so unexpected that when Claire groaned and shifted beneath her, the movement startled a tiny scream from her before the tidal wave of relief crashed down.

"Claire! Thank God!" She reached to pull her daughter close, but Claire was pushing to scramble away from the animal.

"What the hell is that?" Claire's wide eyes brimmed with panic as one of the mouths licked at her hands. "Jesus!"

"Claire, don't curse." The words fell from her lips without her mind's permission. "Oh, Claire," she said again, pulling her into a fierce embrace.

"It's a three-headed dog," Claire said in a breathless voice.

Alice shifted to look at the creature whose sides heaved with quick, excited breaths.

"Yeah. It's kind of creepy, but he seems harmless enough, poor thing."

Claire tugged free of Alice's arms and pushed herself to her feet. "Go get help, Lassie," she said, echoing her mother.

Two heads cocked in opposite angles stared back at her. The third watched Alice. All three huge mouths hung open. All three tongues lolled. The animal was the same size and shape as a large chocolate lab. The momentum of his whip-like tail swayed him from side to side. His toenails tapped out a jig of puppy-like hysteria on the rocky ground before he chuffed and launched himself at the women once more.

Alice rose to her feet, the world shimmering and dancing before her eyes. She pressed a hand to her aching chest. How tragic, to survive a plane crash only to die from a heart attack now. She glanced over her shoulder toward the wreckage on the water, but it was gone. Not only the wreckage, but the entire ocean. Gone. Her mind filled with wild, panicked screaming, but her lungs refused to draw in enough air to release the sound.

"Down!" Claire ordered from behind her.

The animal backed off. He released a playful woof from the right-hand head and ran twenty feet away, stopped, bounced a few steps back, and yelped again, this time from the middle head. The other two heads both seemed to be listening to some approaching sound.

"Where are we?" Claire wondered aloud, taking in their surroundings.

They stood alone on top of a red-rock mesa. Strange, stormy, scarlet and gray clouds boiled across the sky obscuring everything more than a few hundred yards away.

"Where is everyone else?" Alice asked in response.

A graveyard silence covered them.

Alice shivered at the thought of graveyards.

Claire's attention fixed on the dog again. "What is it?" she asked him.

Once again, he woofed, ran a few steps, and returned. Edging close, one set of teeth gingerly closed on the fabric of Claire's shirt sleeve and tugged.

Claire turned her hand to press her palm against the animal's fur. "You want us to follow you?"

Alice reached for Claire's shoulder. "No, little Bee. You were knocked out cold. Sit. Stay here and rest. We'll wait, just a little while. Someone will come. Planes have those little black boxes." Her eyes flicked to where she had seen the plane, burning in the water.

No plane.

No water.

Hot fear slithered through her guts. She reached in her pocket in hope of a miracle. She never took her phone out of her pocket, ever, unless she needed to charge it or talk on it. Sure enough, the only thing her fingers drew forth was a crumpled piece of yellow paper half-covered in red ink.

The dog took off, and Claire trotted after.

“Claire, wait,” Alice called.

“He’s trying to tell us something,” Claire shouted back.

Alice stuffed the paper back into her pocket. Had she really expected the child to do anything else? Not a child, she reminded herself. A woman. A strong-willed woman who’d sooner exacerbate an internal injury than sit around hoping for rescue.

The dog led them to the edge of the plateau and over the side, where a steep path sloped toward a cluster of ramshackle houses--little more than wooden shacks, weathered gray with drooping roofs and lopsided doors.

The landscape stretched wide before them now. Aside from the pathetic buildings, a vast expanse of lifeless rock covered the world as far as she could see. The path they trod led through the center of the town--if you could call such a place by so grandiose a name--and entered a tunnel cut into the side of a mountain towering into the murky sky.

Desperate to break the eerie silence, Alice asked again. "Where is everyone?"

Claire peeked over her shoulder. "Mom, have you ever heard of a three-headed dog?" The lift of her chin and her square shoulders spoke of confidence and bravery, but the waver in her voice didn't escape Alice's notice.

The animal barked as if in answer. Two of the heads stared at Alice, while the third led the body on down the path.

Alice strained to think of something else to say, anything that would distract her from the all-consuming terror threatening to burst from her in a fit of screaming far beyond anything old Janet Leigh ever dreamed of. Silent tears leaked from her eyes, blurring the surreal scene before her. “Maybe we should have stayed one more night in that swanky LA hotel.”

The instant the words left her mouth, she realized her mistake.

Claire's footsteps faltered and then her spine stiffened, her pace nearly doubling.

Alice jogged along in her wake, certain the temperature had suddenly dropped twenty degrees. "Claire," she called. "Claire, I didn't mean..." but her words bumped against her daughter's back with all the power of a swarm of gnats. She'd reached the verge of giving herself over to hysteria when she noticed a man approaching.

She couldn't fathom who he might be or where he might have come from, but the sheer, perfect, normalcy of his appearance shimmered like a golden lifeline. His black hair swept back from his face in thick curls. He wore a dark gray suit with a bright red tie, and beamed at them with the kind, subdued smile of an undertaker.

Her inner voice chastised her. *That's twice you thought about death, Alice. Stop it. You're alive. Not just alive, unscathed! It's a miracle. You just need to figure out where you are and how to get home.*

It all sounded very logical, but it did nothing to stop her watery knees from threatening to buckle beneath the weight of her terror.

The dog took off toward the man.

"Cerberus, sit," he ordered in a gentle baritone voice with a slight accent she couldn't quite place. The furry butt planted itself upon the rock, the tail sweeping a clean triangle behind him. "I'm very sorry," the man said. "He got away from me. I know he can be a bit overwhelming at times."

Alice latched onto hope and dug in. This man could help them. "Did you see the plane crash in the water? We were on it. We..." They what? Got thrown out? Fell? Swam? Somewhere behind her fear, she had a vague memory of a flash of light and a moment of pain. The wreckage had been on fire. She'd seen it in the distance. Or had she? Her existence had suddenly become a jigsaw puzzle dropped on the floor, and she could only make sense of tiny bits and pieces. "Can you tell us where we are?"

The answer the man gave was as shocking as it was ridiculous:

"You're in the Underworld."

Alice planted her hands on her hips and lifted her chin, trying to imitate her daughter's image of confidence, preferring fake bravery over real terror. "You're hilarious, but we have had a truly awful day. We need some help."

"I'm sorry you had a hard day but, really, you're in the Underworld. There were no survivors on that plane."

*A deafening crack of thunder and a moment of pain so intense her muscles tightened painfully as her body flinched away from the memory.*

*Burning wreckage, there one moment and gone the next.*

*Mom, have you ever heard of a three-headed dog?*

*A three-headed dog named Cerberus.*

Alice clenched her fists to still her shaking hands. "That can't be right. It's a sick joke and you're not funny at all. Where are the others? They'll need help, too."

His undertaker-smile never faltered, even as his eyes filled with pity. "I'm afraid it's no joke. The others have their own paths to follow. This is yours." He indicated the path they stood on as though it were, literally their personal path.

Alice put a hand on her daughter's arm. "Come on, Bee. We'll go find--"

Claire yanked her arm away, glaring at her mother. Without a word, she stomped over to the stranger, slid her arms around his neck, and pressed her lips against his. He stood still in stunned surprise for a moment before responding with fervor.

Before his hands wandered too far down her daughter's back, Alice wedged her way between them, pushing them apart "What do you think you're doing?"

"What? It's okay for you to throw yourself at a man, but it's not okay for me?" Claire jabbed a long, slender finger at her mother. "You don't get to tell me what to do anymore. Not only am I a grown woman, but you lost any moral high ground you may have had when you threw yourself at a freaking carnie."

Alice slapped Claire's hand away, heat blossoming in her cheeks--from anger or shame, she didn't know and didn't care to consider. She couldn't believe her daughter would choose this, of all moments, to pick a fight. Strong-willed stubborn mule of a child. "Get over it. You are too old to be this childish. Don't you think we ought to let this ridiculous argument die and figure out where we are?"

The man cleared his throat and they both shot daggers at him with their eyes. No funeral-home-kindness now. Rather, he offered up a tiny, nervous grin. "I'm not teasing you. You're dead. This is the gate to the Underworld."

Briefly, Claire had distracted Alice from her fear. Now it returned, redoubled. Her eyes darted around the barren land, toward the top of the mountain, and finally to the shacks clustered together beyond the man.

An elderly woman shuffled out of one of the pathetic buildings. Her long, ragged black cloak dragged behind her, etching a serpentine path through the dust. In place of hair, a nest of snakes writhed on her scalp. A creature resembling a large iguana with six legs, a barbed tail, and six heads perched upon stubby necks waddled along in her wake, dragged by a chain she clutched in one bony hand. The woman and her pet turned away from them, shuffled several doors down, knocked, and disappeared into that place, just as a tall slender man dressed in an ancient Pharaoh's costume popped out of the door of another building and headed in their direction.

His skin was green. Not olive. Green. Like grass.

A tiny whimper of abject terror escaped Alice's lips. Her stomach turned as she spread her arms in front of Claire, keeping herself between her child and the bizarre scene. Her heart pounded a brutal cadence.

"You tell me, right now," she demanded. "Who are you? Who are those people?"

"I'm Hades," the oh-so-very ordinary man said with a little bow of his head. His smile revealed deep dimples in his dark-stubbled cheeks. "And I know this is hard to accept, but you really are at the gate to the Underworld." He gestured at the shacks. More doors opened. More grotesque, mutated forms emerged, congregating in pairs and small groups in the street. "The people over there are the trials one must face to move past death and into the afterlife: Grief, Anxiety, Disease, Fear, Hunger, Agony, and the Gorgons." He flashed a smile. "They're my favorite. Super creepy." He rolled his eyes upward as though weighing out his words. "Technically, though, if you want to be fussy about it, none of them are people."

The green Egyptian arrived and stood next to Hades, hands resting on slim hips. A thick braid of dark hair, tied at the end with golden thread, hung from his otherwise bald head over one muscular shoulder. "Who's not people?" he asked.

"You, for one." Hades clapped him on the back in a friendly manner, chuckling at his little joke.

The green guy shrugged. "Fair enough." He smiled, spread his arms wide, and gave a little bow, similar to the one Hades had executed a moment earlier. "Welcome to the Underworld, ladies."

*Please don't let me faint,* Alice prayed.

Hades tapped the other man on the shoulder and pointed at Claire. "That one kissed me."

The Egyptian raised his thin, arching brows and leaned to see the wide-eyed woman standing behind Alice. "She's pretty," he observed.

"Very pretty," Hades agreed. "Good kisser, too."

"Why'd she kiss you?"

Hades threw up his hands. "You have to ask? Why wouldn't a woman kiss me?"

The green man rolled his eyes at Hades and looked to Claire. "Why'd you kiss him?"

Claire pushed her way past her mother's trembling arm. "Who are you?"

His smile widened, showing perfect, straight, white teeth. "I'm Osiris, King of Duat. Who are you?"

"This is Claire and her mother, Alice," Hades said when neither woman spoke.

"How do you know who we are?" Claire demanded.

"Perks of being Lord of the Underworld," Hades said.

"Oh, God. We're dead." Alice finally gave into her trembling. She stumbled a few steps and collapsed onto a boulder.

The tumor. She could well be lying in the hospital, hooked up to machines, in surgery, passed out cold at home alone and dreaming this whole absurd thing. This could all be one more cruel joke played by the demon of cancer in her body.

But this dizzy whirling existence bore no resemblance to anything in her own mind. Never before had her heart fluttered so painfully at the base of her throat. Never had such fantasy form been carried upon so reality's razor-sharp edge. And no part of her would dream Claire dead. Not ever. Forcing words from the desert of her throat, she asked, "Both of us are dead? Are you sure? Claire still has time."

"I'm sorry, but yes. Time's up, for both of you." Hades' warm gentle voice may as well have been a dragon screeching in her ear, so horrible were his words.

"It's not supposed to be that way. There's a mistake," she insisted.

He rocked on the toes of his polished leather wingtips. "We don't make many mistakes here. We've been doing this for quite a long time. Our systems are pretty streamlined."

Claire crossed her arms, a gesture of sassy defiance Alice was all too familiar with. "Aren't there supposed to be... like... clouds and harps and stuff? Where are St. Peter and the Virgin Mary? What's with the snake lady and the three-headed drooler?"

Cerberus woofed. His tail started swinging again. It seemed he was happy someone finally remembered he was there.

Hades reached out absently to scratch one of the dog's heads. "Well, yes," he began. "See, not everyone goes straight to their final destination. It seems you have some unfinished business."

Behind Hades, the shack-dwellers crept closer. Among that group, there were more sharp teeth and jagged claws than Alice had seen in a lifetime of terrible nightmares. Alice stood and positioned herself between her daughter and the strange men once more. She stepped back, pushing Claire further away from them.

Claire shoved her mother out of the way again. "Would you stop?" she growled under her breath.

"Stop protecting you?" Alice asked, incredulous. "No, I will not stop. That's my job as your mother."

"I don't want your protection," she said.

"Claire!"

"Mother!" She threw up her hands in frustration and looked to Hades once more. "What kind of unfinished business do we have?" she asked, as if unaffected by the approach of the monstrous creatures.

Hades shrugged. "That's for you to figure out."

"You don't know, or you won't tell us?" Claire asked.

Alice stepped forward and put her hand on her daughter's arm again. "Claire, don't antagonize him by being rude."

"Rude? Seriously, Mom? We're dead. I don't think we have to worry about good manners in Hell. What do you want me to do?" She gestured toward the green man. "He's the King of Do-it. Should I bow down and kiss his sandals?"

*This child! I swear she'll be the death of me.* Death again, like running into a brick wall. Her mind returned to its nonsense

refrain. *We're already dead. Both of us. Claire died. There has to be a mistake.*

"Duat," the Egyptian corrected.

Both women focused on him. "What?" they asked, simultaneously.

"I'm King of Duat, not Do-it."

Claire shook her head. "Okay, Your Majesty. Can you tell us what our unfinished business is?"

"I'm afraid I don't know. I'd like to help you if I could."

She huffed and rolled her eyes.

"You must find your own path," Hades said.

"Okay. Assume we figure out what that means. Then what happens?" Claire asked.

"The Underworld is a holding place, an in-between. It's neither your world nor truly the next. Figure out your business and wrap it up if you're able, and you'll be free to move on if you wish to do so."

"How do we figure it out?" Alice asked.

"I can't tell you that," he said.

Claire narrowed her gaze on him. "Well, a big heaping lot of help you are!"

"Claire, really," Alice admonished.

"Can you just lay off, Mom?"

"These people are trying to help us." Bickering with Claire felt so normal she was almost glad when Claire argued.

"They're not even people. He said so, himself. I'm just trying to get some answers."

"Sometimes you don't get answers. You have to have faith," Alice said. *Faith. Yes. Faith could carry them through.* She'd clung to faith through life's most hellish moments. None quite this literally hellish, but the same principles applied, surely.

"Well, the faith you taught me had rules attached--like not having one-night stands with carnies. And no one in church ever said anything about taking a journey through the freakin' Underworld, or working out any kind of unfinished business."

Alice chewed on her thumbnail. She believed with all her heart that the Bible was true. She couldn't think of a way to reconcile what she knew and what she was seeing.

Hades' grin lit his whole face. "I see a lot of people come into this place, but you two are a delight. No begging or bargaining."

"No begging or bargaining, but these ladies may string you up and force some answers from you," Osiris said.

"I think those people... er... things are getting closer," Alice said, but the men ignored her.

"If I had answers, I swear I'd offer them up to these two fireballs," Hades said.

Claire glared at him.

Osiris chuckled. "Well, good luck. I've got to go check on things back home. Have fun with these two." He bowed to the ladies again. "Good luck to you. Godspeed." In a whirl of green and white smoke, he was gone.

"I honestly haven't had this much fun welcoming newcomers in cons," Hades said as though a man disappearing in a blast of vapor was an everyday occurrence. "Your kiss brightened up my world, and your fierce spirits lighten my soul." He gestured to the gloom surrounding them. "As you can imagine, anything hopeful in this place is a welcome change. In return for what you've given me, I'll take you past the first trials. I can't finish your business or guide you all the way to your journey's end. As lovely as you both are, some rules can't be broken. What I can do is take you as far as the Fields of Asphodel. From there, I believe you can work the rest out."

"I don't understand what's being asked of us." Alice longed to drop back down on the rock and cry.

"We don't have anything else to go on, Mom," Claire said.

Alice had to admit she was right. She squared her shoulders and swallowed hard. "Alright, then. Thank you for whatever help you can offer."

He bowed from the waist. "This way, then. Follow close, please."

Claire strode off after him and Alice brought up the rear, keeping as close to her daughter as possible. They followed the Lord of the Underworld past the small crowd of nightmare creatures.

They were much more horrible close up. A stench of rot emanated from them. They hissed and taunted the travelers. Alice's heart raced the entire time. Yet, she reminded herself that she was

already dead. What could the creatures do to her, anyway? As one of their mouths snapped in her direction, an inner voice told her she didn't want to find out. She held one hand out far enough to find comfort in the brush of the warm, soft fur of Cerberus as he ran in circles around the two women and his master, yipping and barking at the monsters, baring the teeth of all three heads at any who came too close. His hyperactive tail never stopped its frantic motion, betraying his love of playing Brave Guard Dog.

Past the rows of buildings, the tunnel archway loomed. Hades led them into the velvety darkness. They tiptoed forward, clinging to one another until a hint of light reached out to them from the other side. On the other end, a meadow stretched to the horizon. Pink and white flowers on thick stems as tall as a person lent a weak splash of color to the landscape stretching beneath the pale, watery sun. In the distance, a handful of men and women stood motionless among the tall plants.

Hades stopped walking and faced them. "Well, here you go then. The Fields of Asphodel."

"Now what?" Claire asked.

"Now your real journey begins." He took Claire's hand in his own and lifted it to his lips. "Thank you for a joyous few moments. I wish you the very best fortune on your journey. May I leave you a bit of advice before I go?"

She nodded.

"Don't let your appetite get away from you. Time is tricky in this place, and humans need sustenance, even here. If you're hungry, find a way to eat. Eat anything you can. To eat is to live. Or... well... you know."

"Thank you," she said, and he gave another little bow.

"Are you sure there's no mistake?" Alice asked. She couldn't bear the thought of Claire's life being cut short. She still had so much to experience.

He offered her a sad, kind smile. Another undertaker's smile. "Not this time, Ma'am. Good luck to you." She barely had time to take in his words before he left her standing in the Underworld, sick at heart and alone with her daughter, whom she was quite sure was angrier with her in death than she had ever been in life.