

Chapter One

Lilly: 17 November 2015, Midday, At The Funeral

I'm sitting in this cold, musty church, giving my best impression of the grieving widow Reid. I'm good at that... getting the job done, like a magician who saws a person in half and puts her together afterward. Only, with me, it's no trick or illusion. What you see is what you get. That's me, Lilly. I'm one of many who live in the body of Elizabeth Reid. The poor girl disappeared a long, long time ago. I believe she's dead. It's us, the Tribe, who live in the body now. But nobody knows that.

The smell of incense and sweet graveyard flowers wafts over from the oak coffin that sits only ten feet in front of me, covered with white lilies. Somewhere, in the back of my mind, fear creeps up like a wildcat lying in wait, ready to attack and devour me. My eyes are glued to the lid expecting it to lift any moment and out steps Horace like a Jack-in-the-box. Of course, I know he's dead. I touched his waxen, ice-cold face and gagged at the smell of formaldehyde surrounding his body after the funeral people had finished preparing him.

I had to. I needed to know that I was free. Finally!

I should be devastated. After all, we'd been married for twenty-four years. But I'm not. We know now he tricked us to marry him. Back then we were too innocent, too afraid, and too young. The death certificate said death by a heart attack. He had a heart? Horace? I never noticed. Neither does Helen. Have a heart, that is. She's the elegant lady sitting next to me portraying the grieving sister of Horace Reid with a performance worthy of an Oscar.

“...Horace Reid was a wonderful man working tirelessly for the greater good

of our community. He will be missed in Waitakere Flats. As managing director of the New Gateway for Young Delinquents, he took a personal interest in the young boys and girls who lost their way. We will miss his wise guidance and philanthropic contributions that helped young people not only here, but also in Auckland and even wider New Zealand.”

The elderly man giving the eulogy reminds me of an old, weathered, dried up pine tree way up in the mountains. He stares at us with intensity, as if he tries to burn his message onto our brain. I get it. One of Waitakere Flats’ upstanding pillars of society cut down in his prime, at the age of seventy-three. Much too early. Everyone agrees.

Everyone except us.

In my head, I hear a whisper, "Don't trust him." Thanks, guys, I'm on to it. Horace was wonderful? Oh, sure, you would say so. Took a personal interest? He was a disgusting pedophile like the rest of the NGYD lot. Even just thinking of the Gateway people brings my blood to boiling point. I could tell stories, but nobody listens to me. I'm just the poor, crazy wife who should be grateful that he took a shine to me.

A shine to me?

Horace and his sister Helen were friends with Elizabeth's parents and became our guardians after they died. We were ten years old when their car went off the road and plunged eighty yards into a gorge. We call them Elizabeth’s parents because they didn’t give life to us. We don’t know exactly where we came from. We like to think we came from Elizabeth. Nobody noticed when the angels took her and we were left to pick up the pieces.

After the parents died, we celebrated with M&Ms, marshmallows, and

pineapple lumps and hoped this would be the end of the abuse. They should burn in that special place in hell reserved for parents who hurt their children. After a few months with Horace and Helen, though, we found out how terribly wrong we were. They were even worse than Elizabeth's parents.

Horace ended up marrying Elizabeth eight years later, and that was that! It happened after one of the electroconvulsive therapy sessions we had. He gave us the choice of marrying him or being admitted to a mental clinic.

“I’m horrified to see you suffer like this. If you become my wife, I can protect you from being admitted to the hospital for further treatment.” Those were his words. Back then they rang true. Nothing scares us as much as mental hospitals do, not even Horace bloody Reid. Elise, our front person, had tears of gratitude in her eyes when she said: “I do.” She was eighteen and he was a forty-nine-year-old geezer with a receding hairline. That’s how we got here, staring at the lid, praying it stays down.

Auf wiedersehen, Horace Reid. Geh mit Gott, aber geh! (If German is not your thing, that’s longhand for good riddance H.R.!)

From deep inside me comes the urge to kick the coffin and an even stronger one to escape and get out of here. It's hard not to succumb and instead stay put. I swallow.

Shush, guys. Not now. I'm on the job.

The service ends. About time too. My insides feel like a pressure cooker ready to explode anytime. They're playing the last hymn on some hidden cassette player. The church’s organ is at the repair shop. I have to fight back a giggle. Imagine, an organ at the repair shop, like a car with a malfunctioning clutch? I find stuff like that funny.

A stream of mourners files into the church’s foyer, like a snake slithering out

of its hiding place. Most of them I've never met. Their somber faces from earlier now lean more toward a smile. Some even laugh as they greet each other. The social stuff begins. Yay.

Helen stands beside me in her black business suit, shaking the hands of the long line of people. Sunglasses are hiding her eyes, and she presses a lace handkerchief to her delicate, chiseled nose. Huh, as if there would be a single tear or a drop of snot.

"I'm so sorry for your loss, Mrs. Reid."

I only nod and let the next person shake my hand, always making sure I have my back against the large, leafy plant that fills the corner of the foyer. I hope nobody comes up to me from behind. We don't cope well with surprises. I didn't need to worry. People are wary of me since the word got out we destroyed the office of the Sigmund-Freud-wannabe-doctor.

Of course, we didn't destroy his office. We should have. He called us an abomination of a human being. Our Toby--bless the little guy--poured a glass of water over the doctor's laptop in return. I thought that was poetic justice: calling us an abomination cost him two thousand bucks for a new laptop.

After thirty years in the mental health system, I've heard it all. We are certified crazy. Now, calling a mentally ill person crazy is no longer politically correct. I have my own thoughts about that. Removing the label hasn't removed people's attitude toward someone with a mental illness. I, for one, would rather be crazy than mentally ill, because having a label like mental illness is like a death sentence. There is no way back from there. You'll never get rid of it. It follows you to the grave.

Miss Marple, a therapist we sometimes see when we can sneak away, said we are not mentally ill.

“If someone steps on your toes and you shout “ouch” that's not a mental illness and doesn't need medication. It's a normal response to being hurt. Dissociating after experiences of severe trauma is a normal response.”

We love her for saying stuff like that. Of course, Miss Marple isn't her real name. We only call her that because she's such a clever sleuth. Her real name is Dr. Charlotte Macfarlane.

Horace and Helen don't know we see her. They *swear* on their specialists. According to them, we need a leash for our brand of craziness. And let me tell you, it's a mighty leash, even if it's invisible. Helen makes sure we never get away from it. Her leash is called Clozapine, Quetiapine, and Risperidone, plus a battery of other white, purple, and blue pills that are part of the leash. Some make us tired, and others give us the shakes. They are not designed to help or—heaven forbid—cure us. None of the pills do. They only keep us quiet so people can manage and control us better.

Not that the idiots at the mental health place Horace dragged us to had a single original idea about what help would mean. Don't get me started. Over the last thirty odd years, an army of doctors has diagnosed us. According to them, we are paranoid schizophrenic, bipolar, borderline, a compulsive liar, and then some... They threw the complete book of mental disorders at me. Pick a disorder and I assure you at least one person diagnosed us with it. Tell me how to crawl out from underneath that mountain of bullshit.

“My condolences, Mrs. Reid.”

With reluctance, I shake the offered hand. I know this woman. She's another one of these creepy NGYD ladies. I've seen how they treat young people in their care. I've seen the bruises and welts. Anger rises inside me. Have you ever peeled the shell off a rotten egg? Know the feeling of your innards contracting at the stench?

Something triggers your gag response and your stomach wants to turn itself inside out. That's how my body reacts to everything NGYD.

Everything in me wants to shout, "I'm not Mrs. Reid. I never married that bastard." As a fact, I distinctly remember voting against that marriage. Back then my voice wasn't strong enough. We weren't a Tribe back then, only a disconnected group of souls trying to cope. Horace thinks he married Elizabeth Seagar, but it was Elise who tied the knot with him.

Elizabeth, beautiful, sweet Elizabeth had been long gone by then. I think it was around her second birthday when she reached the end of what she could endure and disappeared. We couldn't prevent it. We were too young and none of us knew about the others. Elizabeth disappeared and nobody has seen her since. The helpers she'd created when things got unbearable—us, the Tribe--took over. It wasn't easy to continue as if nothing had happened. We pulled it off and, over time, got better and better at it.

Miss Marple said Elizabeth couldn't have died because the body survived. She thinks she will be somewhere. Well, we looked everywhere. This time, Miss Marple, you missed the mark. Elise became our front person. Nobody noticed the switch. Elise started with a clean sheet and no memories of what happened. Not that it helped with the abuse. Nothing any of us did please the parents. Trust me, we tried. By the time they died the body was ten years old, broken and scarred, and a small army of parts, the Tribe, ran the show.

My name Lilly comes from my German great-grandmother Liselotte Schumacher, who came to New Zealand on a boat that landed in Hawkes Bay. She was a tough lady who didn't take nonsense from anyone. From the moment I read about her in an old family bible, I wanted to be like her. None of us likes being called

Elizabeth. It evokes in us the smell of rotting, damp soil, the metallic taste of blood, the agony of crippling pain, and brings up a past we prefer to forget.

I hope this reception is coming to an end soon. My feet hurt and I struggle to suppress a yawn. My ears ring with all the sympathy people pour over us. Poor, dear Helen. You seldom find a brother and sister so close and dedicated to each other. His death is so tragic and unexpected, such a good man, what a loss to the community. It goes on and on like a hamster in a wheel.

And Helen? She nods and dabs imaginary tears from the edges of her eyes.

I, too, produce a few teardrops and let them roll down my face. And for impact, I'm throwing in the occasional bonus sniff. I know, I'm good at what I'm doing. People feel sorry for me. Their whispers and comments float through the foyer, like the murmuring of the sea as it cradles a rocky shoreline. Such a hardship, widowed at forty-two. Poor thing, on top of being so unwell in the head. He kept her safe, poor Horace. He stood by her. What a man.

What a load of bullshit, too.

Nobody stood by me. People don't know about Horace's dark side. Being widowed at forty-two is just the beginning. We aren't even forty-two. Yes, Elise thinks she is. I'm eighteen, Luke is twenty-two, Toby is five, Phoenix is fifty-six or thereabouts, and Sky? She hasn't got an age. And that's only a handful of us. We have a chance to start fresh and I do everything it takes to succeed.

After shaking Helen's and my hand, everyone is darting over to the tables that groan under masses of finger food and drinks. The air is getting sticky and hot, filled with the sickening, sweet smell of flowers mingled with a plethora of different perfumes. I feel nauseous from the stuffy air, the heat, and the whole shebang. If this doesn't end soon, I'll vomit all over the polished marble floor.

I can't wait to get out, but Helen has a tight grip on my right arm. I'm sure it's supposed to look as if she's supporting the grieving widow. But she and I know she's afraid I'll bolt out the door the moment she lets go.

“Don't even think about it,” she hisses in my ear, although she doesn't need to say anything. We know the drill. We wouldn't try anything with dozens of people watching. Countless failed attempts to escape in the last five years have taught us to plan ahead. We are ready to give it another try but the time has to be right. We may be crazy, but we aren't stupid. This time it has to work.

Has to.

The reception is over and everyone leaves. Helen marches beside me until we are out of earshot. “How dare you embarrass me like that in front of all my friends?” She hisses like a viper and pushes me into the back seat of her car.

“What did I do?” Cross my heart, I have no idea what she's talking about.

“Shut up. You know exactly what you did. Don't play the innocent. That trick may have worked on Horace, it doesn't work on me.”

She starts the motor and pulls away. I would love to find out what she meant. Did one of the kids pop out unnoticed? Perhaps I didn't act sedated enough?

She gave us a shovel-ful of pills earlier this morning to make sure we were leashed and muzzled for the day. The old girl has no idea we flushed the meds down the toilet. She has no idea that even if the meds would knock some of us out, someone is always watching everything. We don't know yet how to keep all the things we see and hear in one place and we don't always work well as a team, but we'll get there.

Nowadays, we move in and out, shift a little to the side to let someone more qualified for the task at hand run the show. We are getting stronger. For Helen's benefit, I slip into the role of a semi-comatose nitwit. All it takes is letting your jaw

drop on one side and spit drool down the chin. Then you soften your gaze, focus on peripheral vision, and make your eyes roll up.

Easy.

The sound of the motor and the soft swaying of the car are making me sleepy. I sense I'm drifting off. There is not much I can do about it. We haven't yet found a way to control our coming and going. It's hard for us to stay in the body for any length of time. I'd love to know how singletons manage to be around all the time, day and night.

We simply get tired after a while. It's as if someone lets the air out of a balloon and we deflate. I once saw a movie where an astronaut lost connection with his spaceship and drifted off into the endlessness of the universe. Silent and without a struggle he gave in to his fate.

That's how we experience leaving and entering the body. In books, it's often called switching. But that's not how it is for us. Switching sounds much too purposeful and way too active.

Nope.

We drift off, and another part comes into focus. Sometimes, though, it's like bursting onto the scene. Like when there is a dangerous situation. That's when Amadeus comes breaking through all barriers. No prior announcement. No warning. He comes flying like Superman with supersonic speed.

In general, we haven't got a violent bone in our body. The only time Amadeus became violent was when a man attacked Maddie. What is it with grown men, raping little girls for fun? I mean... really? Amadeus came along just in time to avoid the worst. The attack had thrown Maddie into a stupor and she was non-responsive. The guy was an NGYD man. Amadeus gave him a broken nose, a broken collarbone, and

a super-sized shiner. Seeing him squirm and howl was a beautiful moment we'll treasure for a long time to come.

We paid for it with a two-week stay in a mental respite clinic where they pumped us full of Valium and other stuff. Nobody wanted to know how the incident happened. They called us liars when we accused an upstanding member of society of attacking us. After all, he was a well-known, local philanthropist and we already had a mental health record, as long as the distance from the earth to the moon.

Still, we all think Amadeus is cool. He's strong like a bear and you don't want to get on the wrong side of him. I don't. I keep well out of his way. He scares me a little.

I feel Elise's energy getting closer. About time because I'm fading. My job was to do the funeral. Nothing more. She took off before we entered the church. I guess the funeral was too emotional for her. Elise doesn't do strong emotions. That's how she can stay around for the everyday activities, be the good girl, do the dishes and hang up the washing on the clothesline.

Don't ask me to do the cleaning, cooking, or making the beds. I've never done it, and I'm not interested in learning how to.