

# REBORN

by Benjamin R. Wiesbauer

## *Prologue*

“Why do we forget everything?”

As William asked this question, he believed to see a smile where the glowing person's mouth should be. The question was followed by silence, and he did not know if he would get an answer.

“That is an excellent question, William, but I do not have an answer for you. Few have ever found out about this secret. Even of my kind, only the wisest know exactly why this happens to every sapient being.”

“But you’re a god, aren’t you? And you’re also the one who is bringing us back to life, right?”

The figure laughed at William’s words while it stood up from the chair it was sitting in and walked towards him.

“No, I am not a god. In fact, there are no gods the way you humans believe in. I have just chosen your species and connected myself to you to observe and learn from you. To guide you when the time has come for you, as my father has told me to do and as all my siblings do while they are scattered around the universe.”

“So, are there more intelligent species out there? And what’s up with your siblings’ connected races?”

As the person was standing right before William now, he could feel a pleasant warmth radiating from it and rising happiness in himself.

“I do not really know, but some of them may be ahead of your kind, and some may just be starting to develop a real consciousness. I have not spoken to any of my siblings in a long time and probably will not do so until my own cycle has to begin anew.”

“How many of your kind exist? As of what you told me, you all must be very old, so there must be countless of you.”

“Only my forebear can answer that question for you. Maybe you will meet them one day, and I am sure they would like you, as you are a curious little guy.”

As the figure said that, it laid an arm on William's shoulder. The warmth now flooded through him, making him feel calm and comfortable.

“Oh, I’d be honoured to. What’s all that ‘bringing us back to life’ thing about now?”

“Excuse me, I forgot about that. To put it shortly, I am not the one who is responsible for that, and neither is my forebear. As I have told you before, even we are bound to this circle of rebirth, but differently. Nobody knows if this is natural or if someone was somehow able to give the gift of eternal life to living beings. We just assume that the will of the universe keeps us all alive and judges our destinies. “

“How long do you live before you have to be reborn?”

“When the last member of my chosen species closes its eyes for its final rest, it is time for me to die too. Then I will engage with the shadows and search for a new race to connect with. The biggest difference is that I do not lose my knowledge as you do.”

“That’s all hard to believe, but still, it feels like the truth. There are so many more things I’d like to ask, but I don’t know where to begin.”

“I know it is hard to understand. Someday it will all be clear to you. For now, it is time to leave, William. Your new body is waiting for you, and we would not want to let your new parents wait too long for a sign of life from you.”

“Oh, okay. Alright, then I’m ready to go, I think.”

“Do not be sad. An interesting new life is waiting for you. Also, you can ask me further questions the next time we meet.”

William nodded with a saddened face but stood up and tightened his chest to be ready for whatever came next.

“Well then, William. Have a good life. As always, I look forward to meeting you again, my old friend.”

“Goodbye.”

The entire room, including all furniture and the figure itself, dissolved before William's eyes. Every light source was gone, so he could only try to feel his surroundings. It did not take him long to realise that nothing was left. He did not know if he was falling, levitating, or simply stuck in nothingness. After some time, it seemed like dimmed light reflected by something not too far away from him appeared. The longer he watched the lights, which only now started to dance with the slight breeze of wind he could feel, the closer they got to him. After what felt to him like an entire day in his lonely state of thoughts, the lights were finally close enough to be observed. As he had thought, the lights came from candles, and a shiver ran down his spine when he realised what dimmed the candlelight. Around the waxy sources of light, there were Human bodies tied to each other. They were empty and drained of blood. Surprisingly, they were not rotting away. Scary yet fascinating to look at.

He mustered the dead faces as he slowly glided further down in what seemed to be a tower full of corpses. Fresher bodies started to appear soon, some of them dripping with blood. The longer his journey took, and the further down he got, the more blood there was flowing out of the bodies until he could first hear and then see what were by now streams of blood gushing into a single body of liquid metres

The fluids splashed about as he fell into the lake of what seemed like a concoction of water and blood. There he saw even more bodies no further than two metres away from him. Both above and beneath him, there was only darkness, and he could see neither the top of the tower nor its bottom. Fear grew inside of him, so he tried to calm himself down and closed his eyes. He panicked as suddenly, something grabbed his leg and started pulling him down into the dark liquid. The more he fought against it, the stronger it tightened its grip. He kept on and reached out to hold onto the dead bodies, which seemed to multiply every second and let the tower grow in height. New candles lit up in those bodies that appeared just next to him, and now he could see shadows in the soft red shimmering water he was floating in. They encircled him and held onto his legs, slowly but steadily dragging him underneath the surface. The fear of drowning made him throw his arms and legs around hysterically until the shadows got complete hold of them. At this moment, he realised that he could not drown, as

he was already dead, so he let go. After he stopped resisting the shadows, everything seemed to happen much faster. They started to rip his body apart, removing his skin layer after layer. He felt neither pain nor anything else while this happened. Only a slight sense of discomfort arose in him.

“I know I’m dead already, but what’s happening here would scare me to death if I were still alive. I wonder if those shadows can speak at all?”

As if reading his thoughts, the shadows started to hiss, one after another.

“You are soon to be ready.”

“Undone shall be your sins, cleansed shall be your mind.”

“Only uncovered can you move on.”

Then, they began to sing, and he could barely try to understand what they sang, as their voices seemed more like they were trying to sing against several walls. The remains of his body started heating up, and there was a weak light on the surface of his skin. As the heat emitting from his body further increased, it felt as if he was burning without bringing him pain or discomfort. His skin got thinner, and the light grew brighter until nothing was left of his body except grey light. So, instead of skin, flesh and blood, he now seemed to only exist of grey, nearly milky light. William was astonished by what was happening and just stared at his glowing body.

“So, this must be my soul. It’s beautiful. Somehow it looks like a thick, contained cloud of white smoke filled with the light of the stars. It keeps the shape of my body, which makes it even weirder.”

While watching his soul, he did not notice that most shadows had let go of him. He was not dragged down by them any longer but by a swirl. Right then, as he realised what was occurring, he was torn out of his thoughts and panicked again.

All he could think about now was that he did not want to forget anything he had learned today and how to escape this fate. The only solution that came to his mind at this moment was grabbing some of the shadows and hoping that he could hold onto them, so he could somehow escape the vortex. To his surprise, this worked, and it seemed to save him as they pulled him up, out of the swirl and back up to the surface. This success would only hold on for a few seconds. A moment later, he got sucked down once more by the whirl, which became stronger and stronger. His fingers still wrapped around the shadows with a powerful grip, William reached the end of the swirl, leaving him in a space with no liquid left around him anymore. While gliding down again, he looked up and saw his reflection in the liquid as if floating beneath it. A flashlight, brighter than any source of light he had ever seen, brightened up the entire space for a split second. When the light reduced itself to the level of average daylight again, William could determine little orbs glowing in different colours, some of which he had never before seen, all the tints scattered all over the place.

Once more, he got distracted as he felt a piercing pain in his arms. The shadows he was holding onto had shaped objects looking like swords out of their arms and started to stab into his upper limbs. Luckily, the shadows were just as big as a cat each, so they could not reach his face or other dangerous body parts, as he held them away from his soul now. William’s fight with the shadows began anew, and some of them managed to escape as his grip

loosened. He did not even know why he was still holding onto them, as he was not in the swirl anymore, but something gave him the feeling that he would need them anyway. A beam of light hit him like a piercing arrow, and a glance down made him realise that this was not the only beam about to hit him. All the orbs started glowing more intensely as if they were powering up. The struggle between holding the shadows back and trying to find out what was happening below and around him hindered him from every option to react in time. William felt no pain as several beams hit and pierced his soul without leaving any kind of mark behind, as he thought they would. Only after some more beams hit him he started to realise what their effect was while slowly losing his memory. Again, he was thinking about a way to escape, losing more memories with every beam that hit him. His grip loosened once more due to getting tired and weak, and more shadows fled now. Fighting against the odds, William gathered all the energy he had left and pulled the remaining shadows closer to his body, using them as a shield against the beams. As he struggled to keep them close, he remembered what the figure had told him earlier.

“Some of you have strengthened their souls enough to overcome the circle. They do not forget anymore, and they keep their memory. While this may seem impossible to most of you, for now, it is only really the beginning of your journey. The potential in you humans seems to be to an astonishing extent, and I am most curious to see what you will accomplish. I hope your race will use it wisely and for good purposes.”

As he began to feel drowsy, he pressed the shadows against his chest, which got hit by the beams and started disintegrating where the light had hit them instantaneously. William was brought back to consciousness as the shadows produced a shrieking sound of fingernails scratching a blackboard. Not much was left of the shadows, and again, most of the rays hit him directly. Struggling to keep the last shreds of the shadows to him, he realised that he had forgotten how to move, so he could not do anything else except think about the exact same words.

“I’ll break the circle. I won’t forget. My name is William Salter, and I’ll remember!”

Slowly, he rolled up and fell asleep while his body was drifting further down. In his last moments of dozing, he could no longer perceive any more light, sound, or anything else. His soul took on a silvery hue for a few seconds before another flash, even brighter than the one before, illuminated the space, and his soul disappeared.

*In the end,  
No one can tell.  
Are we in heaven,  
Or stuck in hell?*

*Cleansed of fault.  
Released from veins.  
The soul splits up,  
And blood it rains.*

*The body stays.  
The soul sinks down.  
Convoyed by shadows,  
The mind it drowns.*

*Memories erased,  
By colourful light.  
All forgotten,  
But it feels right.*

*Born again, new.  
New body shaped.  
Without a clue,  
You cannot escape.*

***“Song of the Shadows”***

## *Chapter One - The Life Before*

On the 17th of February 2006, at 10:32 AM in New York-Presbyterian Lower Manhattan Hospital, a child was born to Christine, a small red-haired woman, and her husband Liam, who was at least two heads taller than her and had shaggy brown hair. Naked, wet and crying, just like every other baby, the boy made his parents proud from the first moment on. They were glad their child had made it into the world safely and healthy, and they felt overjoyed by being together. Over the next two days, Liam visited his wife several times a day to look after her and their son, and so it happened that the two of them should become witnesses of something they had never heard of before.

“Am I really that exhausted, or did he just speak?”

Liam laughed mockingly but then answered more seriously while holding onto the cup of coffee in his hands.

“You better get back to bed or take some pills. Hearing a baby speak already? It’s not looking good for you.”

She threw a pillow after him, which he nearly dodged, spilling some coffee as a consequence.

“Shut up!”

“You better take care of the boy and not drop him.”

“Don't worry, I won't, but maybe I'll drop you on the next chance I get to. Now help me to understand what he's saying.”

“Alright, alright. I'll try to translate it for you.”

Again, the child made some noises, but nothing came out of its mouth that could nearly be described as spoken words.

“That's easy. He's hungry. There you go.”

“That's not what he's trying to tell us. Do listen more closely.”

“Okay, we'll give it one more try.”

About two hours passed, during which the baby made no more sounds but was utterly silent. While Christine tried to encourage him to speak, Liam fell asleep in a chair beside her bed, waiting for something to happen. A cry of joy finally managed to knock him off his chair, marking the end of the mug still half full of coffee he held in his hand. While trying to get up again and also wiping spilt coffee off his shirt, he cheekily asked.

“Woah, did you drop him? Or has he foretold next week's weather?”

Christine completely ignored what had been said and cheered over her son's first word.

“He spoke! I knew it. I knew my boy would be able to do it. Didn't you hear it?”

“No, sorry. I was just thinking about which college we could send him to.”

A deadly glare fell onto him as he tried to hide behind the chair in advance, expecting something would be thrown his way, but nothing happened. Confused, he stood up again and looked at his wife, who was happily looking down at their child, smiling in silence.

“You seem more relieved than surprised about the fact that he’s speaking, and what do you mean by ‘you knew it’ anyway?”

“Yes, I am. Forget about that. That’s just something I said out of joy.”

“Alright, if you say so. Now, what did the little Jameson say to you?”

“Hold on. I told you that we’re not going to call him that.”

“Call him what?”

“Jameson! His name is Austin.”

Liam crossed his arms and made an offended face.

“Come on, Jameson sounds way better than Austin.”

“It doesn't matter anyway since he himself had a better idea.”

Now confused, Liam asked her, feeling confident enough to move closer to the hospital bed again.

“He had what?”

“Now tell your daddy what you want to be called.”

“You are joking, right?”

The baby made sounds like “William” and then giggled.

“What the actual...?”

“I told you that he could do it.”

Liam looked at Christine as if he had seen a ghost, moved back and sat down again.

“So, William, it is?”

Christine asked her husband, trying to bring him back to reality.

“I guess so. No, wait. He’s two days old. We can’t let him get what he wants from the very beginning. I propose giving him all three names so everyone’s happy.”

“Deal!”

Again the baby giggled while kicking with its arms and legs.

“Aww, did you see that, Liam?”

“Yes, he really is cute. The little William Jameson Austin. I can’t wait to see him grow up.”

“William Austin Jameson.”

“As you wish.”

“He’ll be a good child. I can feel it.”

They snuggled up together, and the parent's loving eyes watched their child, trying to grab stuff around him.

William's childhood was relatively normal most of the time, as he went to school, played and had fun like all the other children. The only difference was that he was rather swift at learning, and after a short period, he had acquired all the knowledge he needed for school. Therefore, there was more time for him at hand to play, and he enjoyed doing exactly that for as long as he was able to do so. This gift should stay until the end of high school, after which he remained a fast learner but started having to get down to his books more often. For him, it was completely normal to understand everything in a short period. Because of that, it was hard for him to make friends sometimes since he could not understand the struggle other children had. One of his teachers once even asked his parents if they were giving him home education in advance, and after they denied it, he would not believe them. Throughout elementary, middle and high school, William, therefore, had no struggles with his grades, and his parents supported him whenever he wanted to learn something in addition. After that, he started his Bachelor of Arts at Stanford University and only now had to start studying more actively. But he still had enough time at hand to learn about history far beyond the level of his regular studies. During this time, William also met his lifetime best friend, Mark, from whom he would imagine never to be separated again.

Mark was a simple guy who worked at a restaurant near William's university and the flat he lived in. He was 1.83 metres tall and had a well-trained body, just like William, as they went to the gym together. Even though he was a fit person, he had a kind of chubby face that made him look very kind. His hair was short and raven black, just like his beard, which, to show off his discipline, he trimmed every single day. He always made everyone laugh with his jokes and provided mental support to William whenever he needed it.

William, with a height of 1.80 metres, was the shorter of these two. But in terms of bodily fitness, he was just as vigorous as his friend. Most of the time, his curly hair reached his shoulders and was chestnut brown in colour. His facial features highlighted his jawline and made him look like a nobleman. Always calm and relaxed, no matter the circumstances, he was kind of the counterpart to the bright and energetic Mark, who was often restrained by William when he got fired up. Both of them had bright blue eyes that were nearly identical looking, which was why they were often believed to be brothers.

The two friends used to spend nearly every second they could get together, and a strong bond grew between them over the years. So strong that after William had finished his bachelor's degree, Mark moved to New York, so they would not be split up and could stay friends in the way they were. In William's last semester, he got homesick, which made him look forward to the end of his student life, and Mark tried his best to keep him going. The only problem was that when William was back in New York, the homesickness did not go away, so he tried to find out what he was missing. Mark tried to support him as best as possible, but he also could not find a solution to William's problem.doctor

Weeks went by, during which William did research on his own and tried to get to the bottom of his problem, but in the end decided to visit a doctor and get help, as he thought it might be a psychological problem. He was sent to Dr McDaren, an old friend of his mother, whom he had known from an early age. A middle-aged man, whose fancy clothes made him appear professional and sophisticated, greeted him with a friendly expression. The few wrinkles he had and the black-grey hair fitted perfectly into his whole appearance. The two of them had a

little chat about William, straying from time to time until they finally managed to end their conversation, and the doctor gave him a tip to travel the world. An hour-long speech about why it was a good idea to do so and why it would help William later on in his life, McDaren concluded.

“I would really recommend you do this. As I explained to you, you can only profit from it. You will learn a lot, find many new friends and who knows, by your standards you will even learn a new language or two. Also, you might find a place where you feel at home and even want to stay there.”

“But what if it doesn’t help? Wouldn’t it be just a waste of time and money?”

“You said you like history, William. There are so many historical places all around the world. Maybe you will find a solution to your problem at one of these sites.”

“I guess that could happen, but I don't really know if I should do it. After all, it's a big step.”

Dr McDaren leaned towards him and started playing with a little golden replication of the Eiffel Tower, which was standing on his desk. For a moment, he hesitated but then leaned back again and continued while focusing on the souvenir.

“In my opinion, that is the best you can do. Also, there is another tip I can give you, which is that the most exciting things happen in the places we least expect them to.”

“Well, thank you, Dr McDaren, and thank you for your time.”

“No problem, kid. I wish you a safe trip. Tell me about your experiences when you return and greet your mother from me. Goodbye, William.”

“I’ll do so. Thanks again. Goodbye, Dr McDaren.”

Confused, but at least with some sort of a clue about what to do, William left the office of Dr McDaren and went home. On the way back, he put some thought into the entire conversation shutting him off from what happened around him. When he arrived, the first thing he did was to call Mark and tell him about the plan, who was amazed by this idea and told William that he would join him and follow him wherever he wanted to go. After William discussed the idea with his parents and their promise that they would support him, he and Mark started to plan the trip. To do so, Mark came over to their flat and joined William, who was already busy making plans in his room. As always, Mark was first held up by William's parents and did drink a cup of coffee with them while telling them what was going on in his life. They grew fond of Mark quickly, and their flat was more or less his second home. They always sat down together for their talks in the living room, a big space filled with antique-looking wooden furniture, many plants and decorations and hundreds of books. Mark learned to feel at home and parentally loved on the cosy velvet sofa, as he never got along well with his own parents. Therefore, he always took his time to speak to William's parents, together or without him. After their usual talk and thanking them, he made his way down the hallway, which was similarly decorated as the living room. Without knocking, he entered William's room and raised the first question.

“Hi Will, have you started already?”

William jumped up from his desk chair and approached him with open arms.

“Yeah! Get over here, and then just make yourself comfy on the couch. My mother made some cinnamon rolls for us.”

They hugged, and Mark immediately grabbed one of the pastries on the side table next to the sofa.

“Great, I love those so much I could only eat them for the rest of my entire life.”

William's room was slightly smaller than their living room but cramped with double the amount of books. Despite still not even being close to the newest models, the furniture in the room was the most modern in the flat. William returned to his tidy desk and turned his chair to face Mark, who was now stretched out on the sofa.

“So, how's it going, Will? Have you found any special places you want to visit?”

“The only ‘must go’ location for me is Rome as there are so many ancient structures. Besides that, I’ve got some ideas, but I’m not sure yet.”

“Alright. I was thinking about some travel goals too. I’ve got a list here. Japan, Amsterdam and the UK.”

“You really needed a list for that?”

“I wanted to write down more, but I had no time left.”

“Let’s see. You only want to go to Japan because of that exchange student from Tokyo, am I right?”

“I mean, yes, Akari is one of the reasons, but I also think Japan is just a beautiful country. Also, there’s a lot of old stuff to look at over there.”

“You’ve got a point there. Either way, I want to stay in Europe for the beginning.”

“Akari was so sweet, just like these cinnamon rolls.”

“Mark, can you please concentrate and help me plan this trip.”

Mark reached for the plate with cinnamon rolls and grinned.

“Yeah, sorry. Tell me what you think about my other suggestions. I’ll eat one more in the meantime.”

“We can go to Amsterdam for a weekend or something. As for Britain, I also want to go there and have a place in mind already. The only problem is that I don't know where this place is.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I saw a town in one of my dreams some weeks ago, and it felt familiar, but as I said, I don't know where it is. It seemed to be a nice place as we decided to travel around.”

“And how are we supposed to go somewhere when we don’t know where it is?”

“I’ll find out where this place is, don’t worry about that.”

“Then we have Italy and the UK on our list. Anything else?”

“France.”

Surprised, Mark looked at William while taking another bite.

“What? But you hate France. You hate every single bit of this country. Why would you want to go there?”

“I don’t hate it. I just don’t like it as much as other countries. Also, something tells me to go there.”

“If you could just say what you are thinking for one time, that would be great.”

“I’ll explain it to you once we are there. By the way, I ordered the tickets to Italy already. Our plane is taking off tomorrow at 1 pm.”

“Are you crazy? I still have to pack my suitcase.”

“You probably should get going then.”

“Alright then. All this is a little bit spontaneous, but okay. Tell your mother to make more cinnamon rolls for the flight. See you tomorrow.”

Mark stormed out of the room, wishing William’s parents a good evening and left the flat, leaving the door open behind him, so William had to close it. William first informed his parents and then started to pack everything he needed. When he was finished and ready to go to bed, he started thinking about what Dr McDaren had told him once more and got lost in his thoughts. Shortly afterwards, he got sleepy and fell asleep, still thinking about the doctor's words and what he wanted to tell him.

The next day William's mother drove him to the airport, where Mark was already waiting for him somewhere. After getting out of the car, William texted Mark where he was, and he and his mother entered the building. It seemed to be a buzzy day, so they had difficulties getting through all the people at the airport until they found some space to check if William had forgotten something. While closing his backpack again, William looked at his mother and asked.

“Mom, we still have some time, and Mark’s already inside the boarding area. Do you want to drink one last coffee together before I leave?”

“Sure, William, let's get over there. They’ve got some great coffee.”

They walked to a nearby bakery in the airport area, having to force their way through the crowd another time and sat down at a little table. Christine grabbed two cups of coffee from the bar and returned to her son.

“Don’t let Mark eat all the rolls I’ve prepared at once. I’m not going to send any more.”

“Sure, I’ll hold him back.”

“I’m going to miss you two. Promise me to send me some postcards, will you?”

“I promise.”

“It would be great to go with you. I haven’t travelled in a long time. I’d really like to visit all my friends around the world again, but enough of my nostalgia. If you need anything, please

call me, no matter what and at what time. Don't hesitate to message me for more if your money is running low."

"Thank you, Mom, you're the best. I'll tell you everything exactly as it happened when we get back, so you can feel everything that happened for yourself."

"That'd be great."

Tears appeared in Christine's eyes, which she wiped away and then smiled again. They finished their coffee, and then Christine accompanied William to the gate, but before he could walk through the security control, she pulled him close and started whispering into his ear.

"Letting go is probably the hardest trial that can be placed upon us. I know you need this journey, and I know that you probably won't come home. Farewell, William Austin Jameson Amnar Smith. Even though you won't come back, we'll meet again."

She let go of him, turned around and walked away, leaving him behind more confused than he ever had been in his entire life. When a voice announced that all passengers had to board now, there was no time for him to think about what had just happened, so he passed the security control and rushed to the plane where he finally met Mark, who asked him where he had been all the time, leaving him waiting. William placed himself on his seat and started explaining to him what his mother had just said while the plane was taking off, and when William was done explaining, Mark seemed irritated and commented.

"Sometimes she's really weird, don't you think?"

"Don't say such things. That's still my mother you are talking about."

"But it's the truth."

"She even made an extra big load of cinnamon rolls for you."

"Yes, I know, and I'm very grateful for that. Still, she's weird. I totally don't mean that in a bad way. Please don't get me wrong, Will, she's one of the loveliest people in this world, but stuff like that makes her scary too."

"You're right. I'd still like to know what she meant."

"At least now you know what it's like when someone only speaks in riddles most of the time."

Mark laughed at his own words while William looked at him disappointedly until Mark continued.

"Okay, okay, sorry, Will, we should get some rest. It's going to be a long flight, and we'll arrive early in the morning."

"True. See you in a few hours. Sleep well."

"You too."

They both fell asleep shortly after and slept through the entire flight.



## ***Chapter Two - People We Knew***

The Delta Airlines plane landed at the Roma-Fiumicino Airport on Thursday, the 22nd of June 2028. After the checkout, William and Mark had to ride the train for about half an hour and finally arrived in Rome a few minutes past eight, from where they only had a short walk until they arrived at their hotel. On the way there, they discussed their plan for the next few days, with Mark starting the conversation with a question.

“Do you already have something in mind for the next few days, or will we improvise?”

“For today, I’d say that we could explore the hotel’s surrounding area for a bit and just enjoy the time. Tomorrow I’ve got some shopping in mind, as I want to buy some fancy Italian clothing. For Saturday, I planned a trip to Vatican City. Sunday would be a break day, and I want to go to the Colosseum, the Forum Romanum, and the Pantheon on Monday. After that, I have nothing in mind for now. So, we can decide if we want to stay in Rome and do more stuff here or if we want to go to another city. Something in the south would be preferable, but we can also go north, to Venice, for example.”

Pretending to fall asleep while walking, Mark seemed a little overwhelmed by all the information and answered reservedly.

“Sounds good to me. I actually would prefer something in the north. We’ll probably have to discuss this again on Sunday or another day. As you did so much planning already, I’ll think of something.”

“I’ll keep that in mind if I plan further ahead. Look, over there is the hotel already. I’m so looking forward to a coffee.”

“Yeah, me too. By the way, I hope you booked separate rooms.”

“Sure I did. I definitely don’t want the first thing I see in the morning to be you eating cinnamon rolls naked in bed.”

“You’d love to see that, believe me.”

Laughing and joking, they finished the rest of the way until they arrived at their destination. They entered the lobby of the Hotel Royal Santia and headed straight for the reception, with Mark already watching out where the bar was. William cleared his throat to get the receptionist’s attention and started speaking to her in Italian.

“Hi, I booked two rooms for William Smith.”

“Good morning. Smith, you say? Ah yes, here are the keys. Have a nice stay.”

“Thank you very much, have a great day.”

Losing interest in a communication he could not understand, Mark walked around the lobby to get to know it. It was a spacious room which was modernly decorated. Some people were chatting and seemed annoyed by him walking by a little too close. While William and Mark were heading upstairs afterwards, Mark was visibly confused over the conversation he had just witnessed, so he turned his head to William.

“We are best friends, but I did not know you could speak Italian. How come?”

“Did I never tell you? I started learning it about a year before we met. That’s probably why it felt kind of unimportant to tell.”

“Doesn’t matter, but anyway, that’s great. Now no one can make fun of us without us noticing.”

William smirked at Mark and nodded as they arrived on the first floor.

“Yes, that’s right. Here’s your key. I’ll come to your room in about ten minutes. Is that okay?”

“Sure.”

They both entered their rooms and started unpacking their suitcases. Despite having slept for the entire flight, William had to sit down on the bed for a moment as he felt sleepy again. As he let his gaze wander around the room, William realised that he might have never slept in such a modern room since he left the hospital when he was a newborn. The furniture was futuristic but still not overdone, and everything was coloured in white, black or grey tones. Several prominent, connected windows let the room be filled with a lot of daylight. William turned on the television, not bothering about what was on and turned down the volume so there merely was background noise. After five minutes already, Mark entered William's room, banging the door open and started yelling.

“You got a little slow in the last few weeks. What’s going on with you, Will?”

William was startled and gave Mark a pissed glare, but he quickly calmed down and replied.

“I told you that I’d be finished in ten minutes. Also, we are here to make holidays. There’s no need to make a competition out of everything, at least not at the moment.”

“Sorry, I just wanted to cheer you up a bit. But hey, I got an offer for you. I’ll go and get our tickets for the metro, and in the meantime, you’ll have a coffee or tea downstairs in the hotel bar. Sounds good? Alright then.”

Without giving William time for a reply, he left the room and could only be heard from across the corridor shortly after.

“Don’t forget to check out the waitresses for me! See you in a bit!”

William unpacked his clothes and decided to rest briefly before going downstairs. Fifteen minutes later, he went to the bar on the ground floor, and as it was a sunny day, he decided to take a seat outside, where he saw a bench with pillows underneath a fixed pavilion in the middle of the garden. Some plants were placed around the pavilion in big flowerpots standing on stone tiles like the garden furniture itself. While walking over to the garden bench, he started thinking about the words of Dr McDaren once more and if something would happen in France. A gentle breeze brushed his face as he looked around the garden.

As a handsome young man entered the bar, Luciana rushed to the counter to get a better sight of him. With her 1.92 metres, she was the tallest person in the room, and her long blonde hair was tied up in a braid. Her skinny clothes and her athletic figure attracted the attention of most of the men present. She made a half turn to her right side, where a door stood open and yelled through it in Italian.

“A new guest is moving to one of your tables but don’t hesitate. I’ll pick up his order.”

“Luci, stay with your tables. There are more than enough guests at yours who do need something.”

A lanky ordered to her, who just appeared behind her. It was Alessio, the head waiter of the hotel bar. He opened the door, so the fresh air from outside could get in as another young woman entered the room from the door behind the counter. She was of average size and had pastel pink coloured hair which reached just beneath her shoulders. Her slightly round facial features and freckles made her look quite lovely. As she entered the room, she looked out for Luciana and then asked.

“Where’s my new guest?”

“Oh, Diane, you’re finally back. He’s sitting outside. Margret told me that his name is Mr Smith.”

William slightly raised his head as he heard his surname and tried to find out who was talking about him without making them realise that he could understand them.

“I still could go out there for you, Diane.”

“You just want to flirt with him, I reckon. He’s my customer, and I’ll now go and get his order, so stop holding me back.”

“Ladies, get back to work already, or I will have you both dismissed. Luci, the man at table nine needs your help. I think you brought him the wrong tea yet again.”

While snorting, Luciana pulled away and went to table number nine, while Diane went outside and headed towards William. When she arrived at the little table in front of William, she greeted him and made herself ready to pick up his order reaching for the note block in her belt pouch.

“Good morning, Mr Smith. Can I do something for you? Would you like an espresso?”

He stood up and held his hand out to her while looking directly into her eyes. They had a bright brown colour, nearly orange, with a little blue mixed in and surrounding it. He got lost in them for a moment as he had never seen such eyes but still had a feeling that he knew them.

“Good morning. Please call me William. How are you?”

As she now had time to look at him, she was stunned for a moment, as he must have been one of the most beautiful men she had ever seen and only a few breaths later, she could speak again.

“Me? Oh, I’m fine, thank you. How about yourself?”

As William saw her standing before him, a familiar feeling came up inside him, but he could not tell what it was.

“I feel great, thanks. Would you be so kind as to bring me a big cup of coffee, please?”

“Of course, I’ll be right back.”

Her cheeks were red, and as she walked back into the hotel, she nearly stumbled over her own feet. Luciana, watching out for her, was already preparing coffee behind the counter and did not hesitate to ask.

“What does he want? I’ll prepare it and bring it to him. Alessio said you can take a break since there are not too many guests left.”

Still not fully back at the thought, Diane looked at her confused and then continued while leaning on the counter.

“Oh, yes, sure, thank you. He just wants a big coffee.”

“What happened to you, Diane? Did he kiss you or something?”

“No! He’s just super gorgeous and kind.”

“Then probably you should use your break well and talk to him.”

“Do you think so? I don’t really know if I should.”

“Come on, Diane. There’s a hot guy outside, and you’ve got time to speak to him. Do it.”

“Okay, okay, just give me one more second.”

“Don’t be so nervous. Also, here’s his coffee and one for you. Have fun!”

Luciana made her way to some tables with a fully packed tray and left Diane alone at the counter. Diane now moved outside, heading in William’s direction again, also with a tray in her left hand.

“There’s your coffee William. Do you need anything else?”

“Not at the moment, thank you.”

William smiled at her as she now stood right before him and tried to say something but could not do it. When William realised she would not leave, he continued the talk.

“Is something wrong?”

“No. Everything’s alright. I’m just on break now, and I was wondering if you’d mind me joining you?”

“Sure! It would be great to have a chat with you.”

She took place on the chair to his right and placed her own coffee at the table beside them, playing nervously with her fingers afterwards.

“My name is Diane, by the way. I’m sorry that I didn’t introduce myself before.”

“No problem, at least now I do know your name. It’s a beautiful name, and it fits you well.”

She smiled sheepishly and looked down at her feet before raising another question.

“Where are you from, and what are you doing in Rome? I hope it isn’t rude to ask you a few questions. I’m just interested.”

“Don’t worry. It’s okay. First, I’m from the USA, from New York City, to be exact. For your second question, my best friend Mark and I are here for sightseeing and to clear our minds a bit.”

“Sounds great. For how long will you stay?”

Diane’s feet started moving nervously while asking. She somehow knew that there was absolutely no reason for her to be nervous, but she could not help herself.

“Until Tuesday, for now. Then we’ll decide if we stay in Rome for longer or go to another city.”

“So, you want to travel around for a longer period of time?”

“Yes, but we don’t even know for how long we’ll do this. Also, the journey will be expanded by spontaneous decisions, and we’ve planned to visit some other European countries.”

“Wow, that’s a lot of travelling. I wish I could do something like you are doing.”

“What hinders you from doing so?”

“I don’t want to lose my job here. It really is a great place to work, and the salary is far above average.”

William continued with a cheeky voice while forcing himself to look away from her.

“Sounds like you are just too scared of doing it.”

Diane now seemed troubled and tried to defend herself, folding her arms like a little child.

“No, I’m not! I just..., I just want to save some more money to do so.”

“Thrifty as always. But that has always been a strength of yours.”

“Excuse me? I mean, yes, it is, but from where do you know?”

William flinched and turned his head back to her, looking just as confused as she did.

“Sorry, I don’t know why I just said that. It just came to my mind, and I couldn’t stop myself from saying it.”

She made a strange face at his words and waited for a moment until she continued.

“Weird. Anyway, yes, I do want to save money, but you’re right. I’m also a little bit scared just to leave and go on an adventure like yours.”

William, who felt sorry for getting Diane in this defensive position, started changing their conversation's topic.

“Look, we don’t have a plan for Sunday yet. How about you think about something in the area of Rome that you haven’t done until now but have wanted to do for a long time, and then we’ll do it all together?”

“That sounds amazing! Even more, since I only have to work until noon on Sunday. I think that I’ve got just the right idea for what we could do.”

“Perfect.”

“By the way, do you need anything else to drink? I’ll go and get you another coffee.”

“No, thank you, I’m fine. You shouldn’t have to work during your break.”

“Oh, okay.”

Her eyes seemed a little saddened momentarily, but then she looked up again with a bright face.

“Would you mind telling me more about you?”

Before he could give an answer to her question, she raised another one.

“Please tell me if I start to annoy you, will you?”

“You’re not annoying, don’t worry. So, where do I start? Ah, I studied history in...”

As he kept telling her about his life, she raised more and more questions, and time went by until William had nearly told Diane about his entire life. During the conversation, William had a feeling growing in him that he knew her and that he did not need to ask her anything as he started to remember characteristics and habits of her.

In the meantime, Mark returned to the hotel and started searching for William in the bar and just as he had seen him sitting outside and tried to walk there, a woman stood in his way. He had to raise his head slightly to see who was standing before him.

“Good day, Sir. Do you want something to drink? Coffee, tea, or one of our self-made juices?”

He was astonished as he saw Luciana and could not really answer.

“Uhm... I would like to... ahm.”

“You seem to be tired. How about I bring you an espresso?”

“Yeah, that should do it and a glass of water, please.”

After what seemed to be a daydream for Mark, he returned to his senses as he heard William and Diane giggling outside, so he moved over to them, with Diane greeting him on the way.

“Hello, Mark. Did Luciana catch you off guard? I hope she didn’t scare you too much. Also, from over here, it seemed like you fell for her immediately.”

“Nonsense. She just surprised me, nothing more. I didn’t fall for her at first sight.”

He crossed his arms and continued.

“It was at second sight.”

All three of them started laughing, and Mark sat down in front of Diane, looked at her and asked.

“Are you working here too?”

“Yes, I’m also a waitress, and my name is Diane.”

She smiled at Mark and then at William before standing up and grabbing her belongings from the table.

“I guess that’s it for now. I’ll better let you two talk as I should head back in again in a few minutes anyway. See you later, Will. Bye, Mark.”

William and Mark both greeted her and turned to another right afterwards.

“Alright, Will. I got the tickets. Here’s yours. Now tell me, what’s going on here? You are meeting again today?”

Before William was able to answer, Luciana placed Mark's espresso on the table and went back in after she winked at him. He thanked her and immediately turned around after she left to have a glimpse at her, letting William wait for his attention.

“Thanks for getting the tickets, Mark. Will you now please turn around again? Thank you. Diane joined me shortly after I sat down here. She brought me coffee, and since then, we’ve been talking about each other, well, mostly about me, but still. Then we decided to go out tonight.”

“Where are we going out tonight? I could ask Luciana out too.”

“I don’t know if that is okay for Diane and Luciana. They don’t really fancy each other.”

“They’ll get over it for us, Will. I mean, look at us.”

He laughed while William was just rolling his eyes. After Mark calmed down again and took a sip of his coffee, he continued.

“Seriously, I’m going to ask them if it’s a problem if we would go out altogether.”

“If one can make it happen, then it’s you.”

“I know, right? I’ll ask both of them when we go upstairs later on. A cinnamon roll is much needed now, by the way.”

William ignored what Mark said and interjected.

“You know something is interesting about Diane.”

“Can we just talk about cinnamon rolls for once? Just a joke, I’m sorry, go on.”

William threw a mean sight at Mark and finished his coffee.

“Dude, stop looking at me like that. I already said that I am sorry. You really got that look from your mother.”

“Anyway. As said, there’s something interesting about her.”

“Like what? I mean, yeah, she’s pretty good-looking, and she seems to be adorable, but besides that, you two haven't had too much time to speak now.”

“I mean, besides those things. I’ve got a feeling that I’ve known her for ages.”

Mark now seemed to be confused. He scratched the side of his head and questioned.

“Have you met each other already? Has she been to the States?”

“No, and no. Still, I’ve got this feeling.”

Mark now asked with an incredulous look on his face and in a slightly annoyed tone.

“From where should you know her then? From one of your future predicting dreams?”

“Please, let’s not start this discussion again. And no, I don’t think this feeling relates to my dreams. The feeling was a memory, not a vision.”

“First, you’re able to see the future, and now you take memories out of thin air? I’m really starting to worry about you.”

William, who now seemed to be more in a defensive stance than before, answered in a still, mild voice.

“Mark, we won’t talk about this any longer. We’re best friends, but this is a topic we shouldn’t discuss. So let’s get back to the reason this started again.”

“That’s a good idea. As you still didn’t tell me where we’re going today, I assume you’d like to spend some time alone with Diane, am I right? If so, that’s no problem. I’ll try to get Luciana into going out with me.”

“Thank you, Mark. You don’t have to do that. But then again, I also want you two to get to know each other.”

“Sorry for the wrong assumption, then. What about Luciana?”

“Go ask her, man. I hope she says yes.”

“You mean like right away?”

“Yeah, and also ask her if she’s got time on Sunday to do something with us.”

“Well, that sounds like a plan! I’ll go and talk to her.”

Mark finished his espresso and then vanished into the building. With that, William also decided to get back in, so he went upstairs to take a shower and change his clothes. Meanwhile, Diane and Luciana sat in the staff’s break room chatting.

“Luciana, I don’t understand why you did that. We’ve never liked each other too much, and now you want to help me all of a sudden?”

“It’s true that we haven’t gotten along with each other properly until now, but also, we’ve never really had a reason why it turned out to be like this. We might have completely different personalities, but I think that we could still be friends.”

Luciana smiled at Diane when saying that and shrugged her shoulders.

“Why now? It’s not like we’ve been working together for a week. We’ve been colleagues for nearly two years now.”

“You always seemed so boring. Looking kind of sad and being prudish seemed to be all you do.”

Diane stood up from the big armchair she was sitting in, turned around and wanted to leave the room already as Luciana raised her voice.

“And being a great waitress, of course! Please wait.”

Once more, Diane turned around with crossed arms. Her facial expression was a mixture of anger and sadness.

“Why should I?”

“Earlier, when you returned from picking up William's first order, you seemed so happy. Your face had actual colour, and I could feel your excitement. Almost as if I could feel your heart beat faster.”

Diane dropped her arms and continued with a nearly breaking voice.

“That was somehow an adorable description. I never thought that you could express yourself in such a manner.”

“Why don't we start over again and try to get us those fine young men?”

“We could try that. I got to go back outside. My shift is starting in a minute.”

By now, Luciana was standing and holding Diane back by her shoulder while adding.

“I'll talk to Alessio so you can finish earlier tonight. There won't be too many guests in the evening. And I've got a feeling that Mark will stay here with me to get drunk if I tell him to.”

“Be careful. I'm getting used to the friendly you already. But seriously, thank you, Lucia... Luci. Yes, he'll do, as he totally fell for you.”

While Diane wanted to leave the room again, they could suddenly hear Mark outside speaking to Alessio.

“Good Sir, have you seen Luciana?”

Alessio answered, and he did so with an annoyed undertone while rolling his eyes.

“As you may be able to see for yourself, she is not here, so why would I know where she is? And as she is not here, you must be content with me. So, what can I do for you?”

“Wow, that was a little harsh, don't you think?”

“Believe it or not, but the question ‘Have you seen Luciana?’ is the most asked question from our customers.”

“So you don't know where she is?”

“I told you already that I do not know.”

Without saying anything else, Mark ran into the lobby to continue his search for Luciana, while back in the breakroom, Diane and Luciana started giggling.

“He's already searching for you, Luci.”

“True. I'll relieve him and talk to him.”

“Good choice. I wish you luck!”

“Thanks.”

Luciana left through the door, which led into the lobby, while Diane re-entered the bar and got ready to start her next shift.

After Mark finished talking to Luciana, he and William met again in William's room, where they discussed each other's plans for the evening and then decided to have a look around the neighbourhood as planned.

They had a relaxed afternoon and went to some fancy clothing stores to get dressed for their dates. As they wandered through the streets, William told Mark about the surrounding area as if he had lived here for many years. When Mark asked him if he got all this knowledge from reading about Rome, he replied that he just knows it but does not know where he took all that information from. Similar to the feeling he got with Diane, he now got a feeling that he had been to Rome already, even though he had not, and so he got a little confused. The afternoon passed, and when they returned to the hotel, Diane was already waiting for them in the lobby.

"Finally, you two are back. What took you so long?"

"Just give me five more minutes to get changed, and then I'll tell you everything, Diane."

William replied, slightly out of breath, and while he went upstairs, Mark leaned towards Diane.

"He forced me to rush back, so you wouldn't have to wait for him too long. You'll take care of him tonight, won't you?"

"I don't really understand what you mean?"

"Well, he isn't in the best mood lately. Just keep that in mind, and don't get scared if he's acting strange."

"He acted strange already, but that's him, I guess?"

"How exactly did he act strange already?"

"He knew that I was thrifty before we really spoke to one another, and he said that I've always been like that."

"So he already started to give you a glimpse at his special ability, as he calls it. You see, he dreams a lot, and most of his dreams turn out to become a reality at some point in his life, and as he told me earlier, he has started to see the past too."

Diane looked visibly confused about what Mark had just told her, giving him time to continue.

"As said, please don't get scared by this, Diane. He's a very sophisticated and fine young man. Give him a chance, and if you want to know more about his dreams, don't mind asking him. He'll tell you for sure."

Shortly after, William returned and joined the talk with a question to Diane.

"So Diane, you told me that you have a specific restaurant in mind for us? Shall we get going?"

"I just wanted to tell you that I still have some work to do as there are more guests than expected. Why don't you get some rest, and I'll pick you up later from your room?"

William agreed and decided to get back to his room to take a nap as he was still exhausted from the flight and all the walking through the streets of Rome. Diane and Mark both headed for the bar, where they split ways as Mark's intention was to learn more about Luciana.