

Sample from CITY OF THE DEAD by Nate Eppler

SYNOPSIS:

A recently dead father breaks out of Hell to see his daughters again. And Hell comes looking for him.

Charlene Riley has just buried her father. After the funeral, her estranged sister Anne Marie and her sister-in-law Fiona return with her to the family home in Memphis. Charlene has brought the family together one last time to tell them she's done with the family. Charlene intends to leave town with her underage boyfriend Oliver and never look back. But before she can tell them her plans, Richard, her father, knocks on the door. He broke out of Hell to see them again. Agents of Hell are right behind him, demanding that the family give up their father or face the consequences. Charlene decides she can't let go of her father a second time and will defend the house at whatever the cost.

CHARACTERS

CHARLIE, (F 30s/40s)

ANNIE, (F 30/40s)

FIONA, (F 20/30s)

OLIVER, (M 17)

RICHARD, (M 60s)

*(In the Bedroom. ANNIE is pulling sheets off the bed so they can move the mattress.
CHARLIE is putting on a bright red vest.)*

ANNIE

Is that your work vest? Why are you putting on your work vest?

CHARLIE

Pockets.

ANNIE

For what?

CHARLIE

Knives.

ANNIE

Jesus.

CHARLIE

I'm not goin' down without a fight.

ANNIE

It says "Greeter" on the back.

CHARLIE

Yeah.

ANNIE

Is it yours?

CHARLIE

Yes, Annie. It's my vest. Why would I have somebody else's vest in my closet?

ANNIE

You got demoted to greeter?

CHARLIE

I did not get demoted.

ANNIE

You've worked there for like, forever, and they demoted you? Shouldn't you be managing that place?

CHARLIE

It's not like I took a pay cut.
Lemme see your hand.

ANNIE

It's fine.

CHARLIE

Give it here.

ANNIE

Why didn't Johnny Dort do something about it? You bein' demoted?
Does it look bad?

CHARLIE

The hand's turnin' black.

ANNIE

Why is it turning black?

CHARLIE

A dead man bit it. Beyond that I can't say for sure.

ANNIE

Should we put something on it?

CHARLIE

I don't think Bactine is gonna cut it here, Anne Marie.

ANNIE

What are you gonna do about it?

CHARLIE

I don't know. Keep it wrapped for now.
I didn't get demoted.

ANNIE

Well what do you call it then?

CHARLIE

Yeah.
I guess it's demoted.

ANNIE

You've been friends with Johnny Dort since-

CHARLIE

We're not friends.

ANNIE

Yes you are.
And it's his store now, right?
It's his wife, right? She doesn't like you being there? 'Cause ya'll used to-

CHARLIE

He got divorced.

ANNIE

Oh.
Well.
How that go? I mean, did he and you-?

CHARLIE

He doesn't want me. He made that real clear.

ANNIE

How'd he make it clear?

CHARLIE

He said 'I don't want you.' Then I got demoted. End of story. Just 'cause you want somethin' for yourself don't mean anybody else wants you to have it.

ANNIE

And that's when you started dating that kid out there? He looks a lot like Johnny when he was that age.

CHARLIE

See? *Goddammit!*

ANNIE

What?

CHARLIE

I fuckin' open up to you, I treat you like, I mean, we actually start *talking* and I- Compassion is beyond you, I guess- You know what? Fuck you.

ANNIE

Hey!

CHARLIE

Fuck you, Annie. Fuckin' judge me. How great is your fuckin' life, huh?

ANNIE

I don't even wanna talk about this!

CHARLIE

Then what the fuck are you bringin' it up for.

ANNIE

You brought it up.

CHARLIE

I did not bring it up.

ANNIE

I'm sorry your *undying love* for Johnny Dort couldn't get you your old job back.

CHARLIE

Watch it.

ANNIE

What do you expect? You said fuck me! You didn't mean *me* when you said 'fuck me?' How'd you expect me to respond?

CHARLIE

Oliyer is not my boyfriend. He is my friend. We're just friends.

ANNIE

But you were goin' to Florida with him.

CHARLIE

Annie.

ANNIE

Packed Mamma's suitcases.

CHARLIE

There's more important things happenin' at the moment so I'd rather just leave it alone.

ANNIE

I told you I didn't even wanna talk about it! I wanna talk about Daddy!

CHARLIE

What about Daddy?

ANNIE

What about Daddy?

CHARLIE

We're not givin' him back.

ANNIE

Charlene. You are not being reasonable. I am trying to be reasonable.

CHARLIE

Pickin' at me about-

ANNIE

I am not *pickin' at you!*

CHARLIE

-Pickin' at me about Oliver is real reasonable. Now is definitely the time for that. Yes, let's examine my fuckin' love life and forget about the dead body screamin' in pain in the living room and the goddamn army of Hell at the door.

ANNIE

I am not, yes, see, that's my point, if you'd ever listen to me long enough to hear a word I'm saying!

CHARLIE

Fine.

ANNIE

Fine. Okay. Fine. I am saying they already took him, whatever black marks he had on his soul, hear me out, whatever he did, no matter how much he changed, he didn't undo enough to make his way into Heaven.

Or whatever. They had him, Charlene. They *had him*. That's where he went, for whatever reason. It was a done deal. You really wanna mess with, you know, *satanic* forces?

CHARLIE

I am not messin' with them.
They are messin' with me.

ANNIE

You don't get to make this decision by yourself.

CHARLIE

You don't get a vote.

ANNIE

I sent checks. Me and Ricky paid those bills, we *contributed*. Stop acting like it's you alone.

CHARLIE

It is me alone. Even when he didn't know who in blazes I was, I was the only one right there with him.

ANNIE

I can't help that now.

CHARLIE

Yeah.

ANNIE

I made my peace with that.

CHARLIE

Not me. Good for you, though.

ANNIE

I should have stayed here, I guess. I should have stayed here and shared your wonderful life. It really does sound appealing, Charlene, I have no idea why I chose to get away.

CHARLIE

I wasn't there when he died. He called out and nobody came. If I'd have had, oh, I don't know, like some other fucking family members with me maybe he wouldn't have died alone.

ANNIE

I knew this would all be my fault somehow.

CHARLIE

God punishes you when try to let go of family.

ANNIE

That's ridiculous.

CHARLIE

Tell Mamma that. Walk out on your husband and kids and drop dead of a heart attack a week later at a Best Western in Jackson. God punishes you.

ANNIE

It wasn't 'cause she walked out.

CHARLIE

It was.

ANNIE

God doesn't punish you.

CHARLIE

Yes. He does.

ANNIE

The world doesn't work like that, Charlie.

CHARLIE

And how do you know that?

ANNIE

Because God didn't punish me when I ran away. Whatever happened to me, *I* did to me, I want you to be real clear on that. Whatever you think is happening to you, you did to you, okay?

CHARLIE

I know. I decided to run away with Oliver.

ANNIE

What?

CHARLIE

I told him I'd leave with him. Start over. Hit reset. Even if I only got to Jackson and dropped dead right there, at least I would have got away.

But that ain't the way it works.

I came in the back door. I stood here. Right here. Daddy was already screamin' for me before I opened the door. I set my bag down and I stood here. And I just listened to him. Beggin'. And I all I could think about is listenin' to Ricky screamin' and how nobody ever came runnin' to help him. We all heard it, I mean it was right there. And loud enough to travel all the way back to the house, there were days when I could hear it in my bedroom, but, nobody else seemed to give a shit about it and so I would just sit there and pray in my room that Daddy would stop or that Ricky would give in or pass out or die so that the screamin'd stop.

Mom never did anything about it. And you never did anything about it. And I wasn't strong enough to do anything about it at the time. And now it's Daddy screamin' and gaspin' for air in the living room and nobody comes runnin'.

It's all the same.

I'm still workin' at the same goddamn store I been at for twenty years. I'm still holdin' on to a goddamn flame I had in highschool, in *highschool*, Annie. You think I don't know that's ridiculous? And when I finally do decide to move on it's with a fuckin' teenage boy who somehow, somewhere in there, reminds me of somebody else that some other version of me loved a long, long time ago. So there I am, in the same place, doin' the same thing and I can't get myself to stop. So I say to myself, goddammit Charlie, you ain't goin' this time. This time he can scream until he stops on his fuckin' own. This minute, this one fuckin' minute you ain't gonna do the same goddamn thing you always do. And he did. He stopped screamin' on his own. He died in the goddamn living room while I was standin' here starin' out the window thinkin' oh woe is me, oh my poor fuckin' life.

ANNIE

I'm sorry.

CHARLIE

My fault. My problem. I'm gonna fix it.

ANNIE

I'm here now.

CHARLIE

Because he's *dead*. He is my responsibility because you were too fuckin' weak to stand next to me while I took care of him.

So help me or get outta the doorway.