

A woman with long, dark, flowing hair is running away from the viewer through a dense cornfield. She is wearing a white, sleeveless, knee-length dress. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright, hazy glow that illuminates the scene and casts long shadows. The corn stalks are tall and green, framing the woman as she runs towards the light. The sky is a mix of blue and orange hues from the setting or rising sun.

NATALIE CARTER-GILES

HUNTING
HELENA

A NOVEL

HUNTING HELENA

This page intentionally left blank

HUNTING HELENA

NATALIE CARTER-GILES

FLANKER PRESS LIMITED
ST. JOHN'S

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Hunting Helena : a novel / Natalie Carter-Giles.

Names: Carter-Giles, Natalie, author.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20220481512 | Canadiana (ebook) 20220481539 | ISBN

9781774571231 (softcover) | ISBN 9781774571248 (EPUB) | ISBN 9781774571255 (PDF)

Classification: LCC PS8605.A86625 H86 2023 | DDC C813/.6—dc23

© 2023 by Natalie Carter-Giles

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. No part of the work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means—graphic, electronic or mechanical—without the written permission of the publisher. Any request for photocopying, recording, taping, or information storage and retrieval systems of any part of this book shall be directed to Access Copyright, The Canadian Copyright Licensing Agency, 1 Yonge Street, Suite 800, Toronto, ON M5E 1E5. This applies to classroom use as well. For an Access Copyright licence, visit www.accesscopyright.ca or call toll-free to 1-800-893-5777.

PRINTED IN CANADA



This paper has been certified to meet the environmental and social standards of the Forest Stewardship Council® (FSC®) and comes from responsibly managed forests, and verified recycled sources.

Cover Design by Graham Blair

FLANKER PRESS LTD.
1243 KENMOUNT ROAD
PARADISE, NL
A1L 0V8

TELEPHONE: (709) 739-4477 FAX: (709) 739-4420 TOLL-FREE: 1-866-739-4420

WWW.FLANKERPRESS.COM

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Canada



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada

Newfoundland
Labrador

We acknowledge the [financial] support of the Government of Canada. *Nous reconnaissons l'appui [financier] du gouvernement du Canada.* We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, which last year invested \$153 million to bring the arts to Canadians throughout the country. *Nous remercions le Conseil des arts du Canada de son soutien. L'an dernier, le Conseil a investi 153 millions de dollars pour mettre de l'art dans la vie des Canadiennes et des Canadiens de tout le pays.* We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, Department of Tourism, Culture and Recreation for our publishing activities.

To Vanessa,
without whom I may not have finished.

If ifs and ands were pots and pans,
thered be no work for tinkers' hands.

— Proverb

Prologue

I lie here in the corner on the damp and dirty floor unable to wipe away your blood splattered on my face. My hands are still tethered behind my back. I haven't felt them in a long time, and I'm not sure if the circulation has been cut off by the zip ties or if the pain from the gunshot wound in my arm has caused them to go numb. It's likely a combination of both. I wish I could stand and move farther away from your dead body lying next to me, but my feet are bound, and even if they weren't, I'm not sure I could stand. Between the butt of your gun connecting with my head and the bullet grazing my skull, my sense of balance is slightly off, and I think it is better for me to just lie here until someone carries me out of this place.

I hear David yelling, asking if I am all right, but his voice seems so distant, even though I can see he is here in this room, too. I want to answer, but I can't seem to form the words. I can barely take my eyes off of your body splayed out on the rotted basement floor and the pool of blood that is spreading out around you in a black, shiny pool. It is fitting that your blood should appear black and slick; it matches the darkness of your soul and the immorality you carried. There is a commotion beside you as they check to see if you are really dead. I know you are because I watched until your life drained from your eyes. I wanted to watch as you crossed over into hell, and I made sure it was me you saw smiling back at you as you went.

Our game lasted eight years. Eight long years. In the beginning, you nearly won, but I survived, and for the next days, weeks, months, years that followed, I watched and I waited. I prepared and I planned. I grew stronger and more confident. And you came back, just as I knew you would. But now it's finished. It's over. I have been changed forever. You have moulded me into someone I didn't know existed, but I am still me. I do not have to wonder who I am or what happened to the person I used to be—that person is still here. I have merely created a new version, one who isn't naive or unsophisticated in the ways of the world. I know evil exists. I know I will find it where I least expect it. And now I know it is possible to conquer it. I know because evil is dead on the floor beside me, and all I can do is look at your lifeless figure and smile to myself.

I used to wonder what event or events could possibly have led you to exude evil like you did, but I understand now that evil is not always chosen; sometimes it is accepted, sometimes it is forced, and sometimes it is embraced. I believe you embraced it. It may have been forced upon you, but you welcomed it with open arms and a thirst for more. I'm glad you are dead. There was no hope for you. Not because hope wasn't possible, but because you refused it. You gave up, you accepted what was forced and relished in it. You became a monster, and monsters deserve to die.

The smell of your dead body beside me is disgusting. The contents of your bowels and your bladder have soaked your pants, and even the metallic smell of your blood cannot disguise it. I wish for a moment I could stay just long enough to watch the rats come for you, but that makes me sound a little more like you, and in no way do I want to be like you. So, I will allow David to carry me out of here. I will give up my dream of revelling in your demise, but the vision of your dead, soulless eyes staring at me with panic and uncertainty will be the lullaby that lulls me to sleep for weeks to come.

Maybe we have more in common than I care to admit, but the differences between us are astronomical. We have both encoun-

tered the devil in all his glory, yet you became a follower while I became his nemesis. I vowed to fight him with everything in me while you succumbed to his charms. In the end, I have triumphed over evil, but I do not know that I am good. All I know is I am not you. But what if things had turned out differently? What if I were the one lying lifeless in a puddle of black blood tainted by my own feces and urine? What if my eyes were dead and soulless?

1

What if?

At some point in our lives, we have all played the age-old game of What If. I remember sitting in my grandma's kitchen while she baked my favourite chocolate chip cookies and playing What If. "What if I clean my room? What if I clean the dishes? Then can I have more cookies?" The answer was always the same. It did not matter what I was bargaining away or promising to do in exchange, her answer was always the same, "If ifs and ands were pots and pans, there'd be no work for tinkers' hands." Who or what were tinkers, and why did they need pots and pans? It took me a long time to figure out what she meant.

When I was nine, What If seemed like the perfect game to garner the myriad of things any aspiring nine-year-old would need. At bedtime, it could squeeze one more story out of my sweet father. All it took was the biggest hug I could muster and a kiss on the cheek. My mother was easily seduced by the game as well. "What if I promise to clean my room?" meant an extra half-hour at the park. "What if I set the table?" earned me an episode of *SpongeBob* before supper. As children we quickly learn the tricks for getting what we want. For some it's sad eyes and crying, for others, tantrums and stomping or just incessant begging. For me, those two little words were the magic that made my life easy and carefree.

Until they weren't.

When I was fourteen, my father became ill. In the beginning, my parents insisted it was a virus. But the flu does not last for weeks on end. When Dad stopped coming to my volleyball games at school, I asked him, "What if I become the team captain? Then will you come see me play?" The answer was still no. He didn't say it bluntly, yet the combination of apologies and excuses still meant the same to my fourteen-year-old ears. It was the first time the What If game hadn't worked for me. I was devastated. I'm not sure if it was because my father had refused to come to my games or the fact I had failed to change his mind. I stormed down the hall to my bedroom, slamming the door so hard I thought I had broken it.

That night my parents sat me down for a long overdue conversation, and in a matter of minutes, the world as I had known it had come to an end. Sitting there stone-faced as they explained that my father did not really have the flu, I was trapped between them, listening as they cried and held my hands. The reality was stage-four lung cancer. Yet all I felt was anger and resentment. I must have asked a thousand what-ifs that night, but there was no bargaining left to be done. No long list of chores or promises to be made in exchange for a cure or a quick fix. There was only one answer to all my what-ifs. My father was dying, and there was nothing I could do to change it.

Looking back, I should have known something was wrong. Dad was always at home when I returned from school. He would claim he had left early or had taken some sick time to recover from the flu, but the truth was he had never left the house. My once active father, who normally spent his spare time hiking, fishing, and tinkering with his old pickup truck, had suddenly become a couch potato. I had never heard the television set in my house as much as in those last few weeks. When I think about it, there were changes in my mother that I hadn't picked up on as well. Mom's infectious smile, the one that greeted me each morning and whispered me good night, was rarely seen in those days. I would often hear her

singing to herself while she cooked or cleaned the house, but her voice had been quiet for quite some time. My home, my family, had changed, and I had not noticed.

I remember lying in bed that night and thinking my world was falling apart. My father was dying physically while my mother was dying inside. And I had been so wrapped up in myself that I hadn't known it was happening. How had I not seen that my dad was tired all the time? My father was an athletic man, not large, but fit, so how could I have not noticed his clothes were suddenly too big? How had I missed the sad, red eyes Mom wore every day, or not caught the blank stares out the kitchen window while the kettle whistled and danced on the stove? But worst of all, I had not heard the silence between my parents, who were too afraid to speak for fear their voices would give away their dreaded secret. How had I not noticed? How had I been so ignorant? My parents loved me beyond words and had desperately tried to shield me from their sadness until it was no longer possible.

And I had been oblivious.

I laid there that night angry and ashamed. Angry that my parents had not trusted me to handle this news in the beginning, and angry with myself for being angry with them. I was even more angry that I had not known something was amiss in the first place. And then I was ashamed for having all of those feelings. I was ashamed that I had become that self-involved, conceited teenager who thinks the world revolves around her. That night I realized What If wasn't going to work with my parents. I could not bargain or make promises to them in exchange for my father's health or my mother's emotional well-being. It was time to put aside the childish game I played with my parents since I was old enough to speak in sentences. However, I was not about to give up the game altogether.

That night I learned to play What If with God.

2

I sit on the front porch watching my daughter, Lily, running through the water sprinkler that is desperately trying to revive my parched lawn. She lets out a squeal each time the cool water reaches her bare skin, as if each soaking is an unexpected delight. Our rescue pup, Sadie, follows her wherever she goes and seems to be enjoying the cool water almost as much as Lily. I remember the day we went to the animal shelter and picked Sadie from a litter of puppies that had recently been rescued from the city dump. Lily had begged and pleaded for weeks to get a puppy. She had a million and one reasons why she absolutely must have a puppy. The puppy would be her best friend; the puppy would keep her warm at night; the puppy would keep the monsters away; and on and on it went. And then she said it. Those two little words from my childhood that made my heart stop.

What if.

“What if I clean up the puppy’s mess? What if I feed her every day? What if I walk her every morning before school?” she pleaded.

How could I say no to those deep brown eyes? Lily is my world, my every reason to get up and keep going day after day. I remember the day the What If game had come to an end for me and my father. I was devastated. I did not want Lily to feel what I felt back then. She was too young to stop playing the game. I did not want her to know the truth behind those words. Hence, we have Sadie.

She is a tan and white fluffy mutt with the sweetest black nose and the most lovable personality. She and Lily are best friends. They do everything together. At more than half Lily's size, Sadie has taken on the role of her protector. Lily thinks it is cute. But she is only seven and, thankfully, has no knowledge of how cruel and dangerous the world can be. She is young and innocent. Her world is filled with sunshine, butterflies, and puppies. And I will do everything in my power to keep it that way for as long as possible. Because I, on the other hand, know too well how evil lurks around every corner, waiting to catch you when you least expect it.

I know because I did not have Sadie, or someone like her, all those years ago when I needed a protector. I know because I fought my way through a nightmare and was lucky enough to come out the other side. Sometimes I wonder if I really was lucky. Even though my ordeal is over, it was never really finished. There was no closure, no finality to it. He is still out there. The monster that made my life a living hell still walks among us, and I live every day looking over my shoulder, watching and waiting for the other shoe to drop. Is that lucky? Is that living? But then I look into Lily's big brown eyes and hear her sweet laughter, and in that moment, I know I am the luckiest woman in the world.

"Mama! Mama! Can we have ice cream?" Lily yells from beneath the sprinkler.

"Lily, honey, it's almost bedtime," I reply, knowing full well she was not going to sleep any time soon.

"But Mama, it's so hot outside. What if I promise to go to sleep right after my bath?"

And there it is, the what-if. How can I say no?

"Okay, munchkin, but only one scoop!" I yell back.

"Yay! Can Sadie have a scoop, too? She's really hot, Mama."

"I guess so, but let's get the two of you dried off and inside before you get soggy!"

We go through the same routine as we do every other night before bed. We start with a bubble bath overflowing with lots of straw-

berry-scented bubbles. Lily plays while Sadie watches from the bath mat. I believe if I allowed it, Sadie would gladly take part in the bubble bath, but I draw the line here. Once bath time is over and Lily is settled into her pjs, she and Sadie have a bedtime snack. Tonight, instead of a bowl of fruit and a dog treat, it's vanilla ice cream—one scoop for Lily, and one scoop for Sadie. Oh, how my mother would have disapproved. Two storybooks later and my off-key version of "You Are My Sunshine," and Lily and Sadie are tucked in for the night.

"Good night, Mama, I love you," Lily whispers, nearly asleep.

"Good night and sweet dreams, baby girl. I'll love you always," I reply. It is the same every night. No matter how tired or grumpy or anxious I am, I always make sure Lily knows she is loved. I know how lives can change in the blink of an eye, leaving us scared and confused, but the one thing I never want Lily to question is my love for her.

I tiptoe toward the door, but before I leave, I can't help but stop and stare at my daughter nestled under the soft pink covers. She is angelic, rambunctious, and so trusting of others. I am so blessed to have her in my life. She would not be here had it not been for him and my ordeal.

Ordeal?

I mull the word over in my head, like I have done so many times before. I am not sure that is the right word. What I went through, all that I endured, cannot really be labelled an ordeal. It was a nightmare—a nightmare from which I could not wake. Some might even call it a horror show. For me, it was reality. For three months, two weeks, and five days, it was my life. Yet here I am, watching my baby girl sleep by the glow of her Tinkerbell night light. I survived. I came out the other side, broken and forever changed, but alive. For three months, two weeks, and five days, I fought the devil with everything in me. He may have won in the beginning, but I came out on top in the end. Now I spend each day wondering when round two will begin.

What if he finds me? What if he finds Lily?

3

I don't remember much about the first week after my parents informed me of my dad's diagnosis and imminent death. I locked myself in my room every day after school and cried each night over the unfairness of it all. Why must I, at fourteen, have to say goodbye to my dad forever? My strong, loving, and supportive father could not be dying at forty-five. He had so much left to do, so many places to see, and so many people who depended on him. He was my mother's world—everything she did revolved around him. She loved me unconditionally, but with my father, it was different. He was her everything. I knew I was going to lose my father, but would I lose her, too? Would his death be too much for her? For me?

Then there was my grandma. The wonderful woman who loved to bake cookies with me as a child was now in a nursing home. Alzheimer's had claimed her years before, but her face still lit up when my father came to visit. Twice a week, we would stop by to visit with her, and each time she would smile and call him "Daddy." In her world, she was a little girl thrilled to see her father. Would she notice when he didn't come to visit anymore? Would she feel abandoned or neglected? I questioned it back then, but I am not sure she ever really noticed his absence. I always thought it weird how the mind could work like that—taking her back to another lifetime where the people and places of the present did not

exist while, physically, she remained here with us, the people who loved her. I learned later that the mind can take you anywhere, especially when you need to protect yourself from the present and just escape reality.

And what about my dad's friends? His co-workers? The community? Dad had so many friends and co-workers who loved him. He was always involved with the community, helping with charities and social activities. Whenever someone was needed to take the lead or turn another's ideas into action, Dad was who they called. He could organize the biggest fundraisers and most entertaining events. He had this knack of getting as many people as possible involved and then making sure everyone had a job to do. He was a leader, but he always made it seem as though he was just a part of the team. Would they miss his voice, his larger-than-life personality, his leadership? Would they feel the void his death would bring?

And there was me.

How would I go on without my father? The man who helped me with my homework and taught me how to send an awesome serve in volleyball, the man who was supposed to watch me walk across the stage to receive my high school diploma and my college degree, the man I wanted to, someday, walk me down the aisle. How was I supposed to say goodbye to him and to all my plans for the future? When you're fourteen, you have all these hopes and dreams, visions of what your future should look like. For me, they all included my dad. I was Daddy's little girl. I had him wrapped around my little finger, and we both loved it. I did not want that to change. I could not let my father go.

That's when I started talking to God, or rather bargaining with Him. Each day as I sat in class, I racked my brain trying to find something worthy enough to bargain with the Almighty. What if I tried my best to get straight A's? What if I promised to befriend Allie Lockwood, the poorest kid in school who didn't have any friends? What if I committed to helping Mrs. Roberts with her Sun-

day school classes, even though I hated Sunday school? You name it, I came up with it. I tried everything I could think of to secure my father a cure. In the end, I had to settle for a possibility, an opportunity to try something new with no guarantee it would work.

Two weeks after I was informed of my father's illness, Dad entered a new clinical trial his doctor had recommended. He sold it as a last chance, a final opportunity to beat this thing that was killing him, rotting him from the inside out. He had nothing to lose and everything to gain. And for a while, we thought it was working. Dad seemed to be getting better. Little by little, he improved. His eyes were brighter, his smile was bigger, his appetite grew. I thought it was finally going to be okay, that my father was going to beat this thing. Whatever I had said to God, it must have worked! Now I just had to hold up my end of the bargain. The following week, I aced my mid-term exams, Allie Lockwood and I ate lunch together every day at school—I even shared my lunch with her most days—and I'd started helping Mrs. Roberts with her Sunday school class. I vowed I would do what I had promised in order to keep my father alive.

Just over two months into the trial, Dad contracted pneumonia. It was the worst possible situation for him. The cancer was in his lungs, and despite the advantages the treatment administered in the trial had given him, his lungs were just too weak to fight. Little by little, his lungs filled with fluid, and each day, each hour, he fought harder and harder just to breathe. Dad was slowly drowning in his own fluids, and just eight days later, we were told there was nothing more they could do, and it was time for us to start making plans.

Make plans? How do you make plans for someone you love to die? Do you set the date and time it should happen? Do you prepare a last meal, say prayers, reminisce about days gone by and all the good times we've shared? I was fourteen. I did not know how to say goodbye to the man who had held our family together. My mother was a mess. She cried all the time and begged my father

to fight, even though a fool could see he had no fight left. I was fourteen. I needed my dad to get well and make everything right again, to take us back to the days when my biggest worry was if my team would win our next game, even though I knew those days were gone forever. I was fourteen. My father was going to die. My mother was losing herself in her grief. And I had suddenly become the adult in our family. At fourteen, I wasn't sure I could do it. I couldn't be the one to look after everyone else. I desperately needed my dad to get better, to live. I was not ready to give up on him or my mother. I could not give up on the life I so desperately wanted.

What if I didn't have to?

HUNTING HELENA



Natalie Carter-Giles has an arts degree from Memorial University of Newfoundland in English and history (double major) and has also obtained a certificate in criminology. She is an avid reader of mysteries and suspense novels and loves to spend her free time working in her extensive garden and enjoying the beauty of the west coast of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Natalie was born and raised in the beautiful island community of Ramea and now resides in Deer Lake with her husband and one of their three kids.