

# **Hell's Heaven**

## **Chapter 1 Draft**

*Ana Carolina de Santos, 29 years old.*

*Edward "Eddie" Francis, 64 years old.*

*Alexander Bruno Abrams, 94 years old.*

*Dates of birth: Various.*

*Date of death: December 19, 2037, 11:11am EST*

Death was a symphonic, sensory assault unlike anything Carolina, Eddie, or Alexander could ever have imagined.

For Carolina, the shock and physical impact of her body slamming the ground was followed by a throaty gurgling akin to air pockets competing with water as a clog clears a large pipe, and the sensation that she was the last drop of water swirling down the drain of a giant tub.

For Eddie, as he lay sprawled in a field, gasping his final breath, he heard a sound like a nail being expelled from a high-pressure pneumatic nail gun while he felt his essence being slurped up like runny Jell-o from a bowl.

For Alexander, lying on his deathbed, he felt his soul being sucked out of the world, accompanied by the sound and feeling of placing a hand over the hose of a powerful, industrial strength vacuum cleaner.

In the next instant (or hour or day, for time has no meaning where they are), they found themselves somersaulting in slow motion inside a colorless, soundless, smell-less, gravity-less realm. They were disoriented, barely aware, but this expanse of nothingness did not make them afraid.

All at once they were pulled into smooth, wide, transparent tubes of gleaming white-hot light. They heard and felt an enormous “whoosh” as they were thrust upward—to where they did not know. As they sped along, however, they began to feel an embryonic warmth and peace beyond any human experience. They were uncertain if they were conscious or even breathing. They could see no one, hear no one, but it didn’t matter: they somehow knew they were going home.

Suddenly, the tops of the tubes grew wider, and Alexander, Carolina, and Eddie shot upward into an atmosphere of swirling cobalts and deep azures. One after the other they gently set down on a white, flaky substance that looked like frost, but it wasn't cold. As their feet settled on the soft ground, they were overwhelmed by deep feelings of unconditional love.

The air was filled with the pleasant and soothing redolence of gardenia, jasmine, rose, and lavender, wafting through the oxygen-rich air. And the sounds... floating through the air were sweet yet triumphant melodies, as if the Vienna Philharmonic was welcoming elite guests in a fancy courtyard outside a lavish, black-tie party.

As far as the eye could see, beautiful, sparkling, diamond-like sculptures were scattered randomly throughout the white landscape, jutting up through the manna-like substance. It looked as if Michelangelo and Chihuly had collaborated for an exhibit on the grounds of the Louvre. And far off in the distance there appeared to be a small, bewildered group of people gathered around another white tube, which had brilliant golden rays shooting from it. The group around the tube were holding hands and bowing their heads as if in prayer.

The three new arrivals gazed at their surroundings in wonder. "Is this Gan Eden?" Alexander marveled.

"Has my mother died? Is she here? Why am *I* here?" Carolina thought.

"Looks like I made it to heaven—awesome!" Eddie celebrated.

As they took in the sights, sounds, and fragrances around them, they all came to the same conclusion: this must be heaven, *their* heaven. This was indeed the reward for all their good deeds on earth, and the start of an eternity of bliss.

They looked to their left and noticed a line of people of all ages, shapes, sizes, and ethnicities. The line stretched for as far as the eye could see across the soft, white plain, dotted with shimmering diamond statues. But the statues, smells, and music that soothed them were momentarily forgotten when they saw the line's destination: two awe-inspiring gates covered with gold, diamonds, pearls, and emeralds, all shining with the radiance of a thousand Northern Lights. That must be the entrance to heaven itself!

Alexander, Carolina, and Eddie looked at each other. "I suppose the logical thing to do would be to join the others in line," Alexander said, as he touched his body to see if it all was real. Then he bowed slightly and gestured to Carolina. "Ladies first."

Carolina blushed and walked over to stand at the end of the line. Eddie smiled and said, "I'm ready for a little heavenly reward! Aren't you two?" as he took the spot directly after Carolina.

Alexander smiled as well and got into line behind them. "To tell the truth, I'm a little surprised at how this looks," he remarked. "I was never a very observant Jew, but I do remember my mother telling me that heaven would be like the Garden of Eden. And the angel guarding the gates, Hadraniel, was supposed to be 3.4 million kilometers tall...." He chuckled dryly. "Maybe when we get closer I'll see Hadraniel and ask him how tall he really is."

"Nah, I'll bet it's St. Peter up there at the gates," Eddie replied with confidence. "He's gonna look in his big book where all of our good deeds are recorded and open those beautiful gates for us. I assume you guys did good on earth like me to get here, right? I'll tell you, if the outside of heaven is this great, how much *better* do you think it's gonna be on the other side? I can't wait!"

Alexander turned to Carolina. “What about you, miss—what do you believe awaits us at the end of this line?”

She smiled nervously. “I don’t know,” she said, looking down at her tattered and torn dress. “Truthfully, I thought it would be a long time before I... died, so it didn’t seem really important to think about God or heaven.” But then she added, “Maybe the souls of our loved ones are waiting to greet us and escort us to our new home with them. No matter what, I hope to see my *mamãe* soon. She’s been sick for so long, and she’s such a devout Christian, I wonder if she’s already made it into heaven.” She turned toward Eddie. “Do you have anyone you’d like to see?”

Eddie shrugged. “I worked with homeless people in Butte, Montana for nearly 20 years. I was the ‘Homeless Whisperer’—that’s what they called me, anyway—and I’ve seen a lot of people pass on.” He paused for a minute and added, “It’s funny, though: sometimes you see a man who’s living on the streets, he’s smelly and dirty, and people walk past him every day. But when you take the time to look in his eyes, you feel that Jesus himself is looking back at you. Those are the ones I remember.” Then he smiled and shook his head. “But I focused on saving as many people as I could from the streets, rather than really getting to know any of them,” he said with a hint of remorse. “Perhaps now I will be able to spend more time with them.”

Carolina turned to Alexander. “How about you? Is there anyone waiting for you?” she asked. He smiled at her—she was so young, and his ninety-three years on earth had given him a unique perspective. “I was born in Auschwitz, and my life’s work was to help Germans and Jews heal the wounds from World War II and the Holocaust,” he answered. “I feel I’ve made a difference for many people, but to be honest, like Eddie, I wasn’t that close to many of my clients. Although I would like to see my *meine mutter*, and also the midwife who delivered me in Auschwitz, and the SS officer who allowed me to live. I’d like to thank them for taking care of me.”

As he half-listened to Carolina and Alexander, Eddie glanced behind him, then looked forward with a puzzled frown. He cleared his throat and said, “Hey... guys, I may be imagining this, but I swear that little boy with the short brown hair was behind me in line, and now he’s in front of us. And the woman who looks like she could be homeless—she was definitely several spots behind us, and she’s several places ahead of us now. What’s going on? I didn’t see them cut in front of us, did you?”

Alexander and Carolina looked at the other people in line and, sure enough, while most of the line kept moving slowly toward the towering, glistening gates, the three of them didn’t seem to be moving at all. And amidst the feelings of love, warmth, and peace that had filled them since they arrived outside the gates of heaven, the first tendrils of doubt crept into their minds and hearts.

Why wasn’t their moment of salvation getting nearer?

All at once they heard a new, melodious sound in the air high above the heads of those who eagerly shuffled forward toward the heavenly gates. In the distance, they saw what appeared to be ethereal angels, gracefully floating and flying around the puffy, silver and white clouds suspended delicately in the deep blue skies. The comforting sound of angel’s wings filled the air, and soothing melodies reverberated through the temperature-less atmosphere, as cherubs fluttered by cradling baskets of fruit and little babies... one even appeared to be softly strumming a harp. The angels reminded Carolina of images she had seen above the altar in the church she had attended at home in Rio de Janeiro.

But then, without warning, one of the angelic beings slowly morphed into a darker, sinister looking figure. Its wings turned from snow white to rust colored, with bat-like membranous webbing instead of feathers. Its features and body coarsened and mutated into a form resembling a cross between an enormous pterodactyl and a hair-covered

flying monkey from *The Wizard of Oz*—only these creatures had appendages like curled horns protruding from their skulls, while razor-sharp teeth jutted upward from the pronounced underbite of the hideous lower jaw.

As Abraham, Carolina and Eddie watched in horror, another angel transfigured into the same demonic form, then another. “This can’t be possible!” Alexander gasped. “My God, no!” Carolina wept. Eddie rubbed his eyes, saying, “Maybe it’s just a trick meant to get us to move faster toward the gates, right? Let’s gooo!” And he pulled on the arms of the other two as he urged them forward.

The line was indeed moving faster now, but to them, the radiant, jewel-covered gates still seemed more than two football fields away. “We’re not getting any closer!” Carolina wailed.

Suddenly, one of the rust-colored, fiendish forms hurtled down from the sky and plucked a red-headed woman from the line some fifty feet ahead of them. The woman let out a blood-curdling scream as the beast, whose wingspan reached nearly forty feet, pulled her into the air, its claws piercing her skin. Her arms flailed as pieces of her long auburn hair were ripped from her scalp, drifting to the ground like tiny paratroopers, the bloodied clumps falling near other souls in line.

The woman’s legs swung wildly side to side as the beast zig-zagged through the air, its three-inch-long talons imbedded deep into the woman’s shoulders. Her screams rose higher and higher in pitch as the creature sank its teeth into her arms, legs, torso—any part of her body within reach of its ravenous mouth. Carolina turned and threw herself at Alexander, who put a protective arm around her, all the while keeping his eyes focused on the terrifying bloodbath occurring over their heads. In shock, they realized these were no heavenly angels: these creatures were from Hell.

The beast hovered in the air for a moment, then dropped its prey into what appeared to be a black hole. The sound of the woman's screams slowly faded as she vanished from this plane of blissful existence.

"What the hell is happening?" Eddie protested. "No one else in line seems to be freaking out about this. Are we the only ones who can see it?" Indeed, as they looked around, most people in line were completely focused on reaching their heavenly promise. Only a few others, like them, looked upwards with expressions of terror at the spectacle of the flying satanic creatures who seemed to be scanning the ground for their next victims.

"Screw this, I'm not standing out here in the open," Eddie declared, his eyes darted from side to side. He took off running, away from the line and toward the closest of the crystal sculptures about a hundred feet away. Just as he reached the base of the sculpture, however, he was jerked backwards, as pincerlike talons pierced deep through his skin into the bone of his shoulders.

Eddie started to scream, and once he started, his screams only grew more deafening. He could feel the creature's ice-cold breath on his face, carrying with it the smell of putrid, rotting flesh. Excruciating pain shot through him; every second it felt as if he was being flayed alive by dull, rusty razors. Ribbons of skin peeled away from his body, falling toward the ground, pulled this way and that by the gusts of air produced by the creature's enormous wings. "Lord, what have I done to deserve this?" he whimpered. The batlike demon roared in triumph as it lofted Eddie into the air as if he weighed nothing at all, carrying him higher and higher into the clouds.

Alexander stood looking upwards, his arm still around Carolina's shoulders, transfixed by the sight of what had happened to Eddie. Then a long, scaly tentacle-like arm clamped itself around Carolina's waist, pulling her away from Alexander's side. She screamed, and Alexander reacted quickly, grabbing both of her arms with his own. "No! You can't

have her!” he shouted at the enormous creature with a face like a rabid vulture, its teeth snapping at the young girl’s head.

Carolina sobbed hysterically, holding onto Alexander’s hands for dear life, pulled between safety and terror. Then the creature sank its teeth into her neck, and with a keening cry of pain and despair, she let go of Alexander and was pulled backward into the enveloping grip of the demon. “*Mamãe*, help me!” she cried. Her captor shook her like a dog with its prey, and as she continued to scream, it soared upwards with the girl in its grip, vanishing into the clouds just like Eddie.

Alexander stood alone, dumbfounded, still not processing what was happening. He looked around and saw that the line of people heading to the sacred gates now appeared to be miles away. Then he felt himself enveloped from behind in a viselike grip of not one, not two, but four bony, leathery arms, each with small, sharp, scalding barbs that permeated his torso. A raspy, malicious voice laughed cruelly in his ear, saying, “Did you really think you could escape your fate?”

Alexander felt himself being dragged upwards into the sky, as the creature’s red-hot barbs buried themselves deeper in his flesh, burning as if they were coated with caustic lye. With each second the fire spread throughout his body, his every cell exploding with excruciating pain. Tears streamed down Alexander’s lined face as he screamed his throat raw, praying, “*HaShem*, why have you forsaken me?” But the creature’s grip only tightened, and its diabolic laugh grew louder and louder.

As they flew straight up through a cloudbank, Alexander felt the cold, wet mist blanketing him giving him a momentary respite from his pain. Then all three demons released their prey at the same instant, and Eddie, Carolina, and Alexander plummeted toward the soft, white plain that stretched as far as the eye could see. For a moment, the same thought crossed their minds: “I’m free!” But right before they reached what they

hoped would be a safe landing, inferno-like gusts of scalding air blasted upwards from directly underneath them, originating from black holes that had abruptly opened up in the white expanse below. Each black hole had the appearance of a gaping mouth, lined with razor-sharp, serrated teeth.

Neither Eddie, Carolina, nor Alexander could see the bottom of these pitch-black tunnels, but they felt themselves inexorably being sucked toward the abyss. Helplessly, they flung their arms wide, reaching out to the others in a last-ditch attempt to save themselves. But it was no use. With the knife-like walls tearing at what was left of their flesh, they plunged headfirst into the inky blackness, their final, desperate cries cut short as the holes closed as abruptly as they had appeared.

It was the start of a permanent journey Eddie, Carolina, or Alexander never thought they would take—into the depths of Hell itself.