

# True Purpose

by Sara Winters

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Michael pressed the spot where the bleeding had started. The wound was still tender when he touched it, but even that would pass with time. He rolled further onto his side and winced as a new wave of pain stabbed his side and lower back. It shouldn't be happening like this, he thought. It wasn't the timing that bothered him—he supposed everyone had a time to die—but the pain, the suffering, was it all really necessary? He knew the kids would be upset if they thought he'd—Oh! The kids. He choked back a sob as pain wracked his body again. What would happen to them? Who would care for them, nurture them, teach his little boys to be men and bring his little girl up to be the woman he saw lurking behind those warm hazel eyes? It was unfair. He'd given his life to caring for other people and to be taken down by someone else's hate... it all seemed like someone else's idea of a dark joke.

The dank alleyway seemed to close in on him as the moonlight was blocked by a passing cloud. It wouldn't be long now. A hazy image swam in front of him. He felt almost hopeful as he noticed a figure at the head of the alley, dancing back and forth as if it wanted to come in and help him. A dog. A starving stray from the looks of it.

“Hey!” he called out, but the dog ran away at the sound of his voice. He coughed and a tear slipped slowly from the corner of his eye. That was it. He would die alone in this alley.

Erica clutched her coat against the rising wind and walked faster towards her apartment building. After all of the foolishness at work—irritated customers, messed up orders, her boss, cranky and impatient, almost firing her—what she longed for more than anything was to go back to her cramped

and cold apartment, curl up in front of the space heater and dream of another life. One where people treated you fairly, good deeds were rewarded in kind, and love never left you for someone easier to control.

Even fantasies couldn't fill a long night completely. But maybe, just maybe, sleep would fill the rest of the void for once. She'd been missing it for weeks, so much so that she wondered if she were sick, dying even. Would that be welcome at this point? Probably. Better than suffering through the rest of this empty life alone.

She rounded the corner onto her block and reeled back as the wind picked up even more and pushed against her worn trench coat. Erica pulled the collar up around her ears and almost screamed as icy points of wind found her ankles and nipped at them. At this rate, the storm would hit before she got home. She leaned into the wind and moved faster.

Michael could hear the wind pick up outside the alley, but felt none of the cold. That worried him, even though he knew the cause. He'd lost enough blood that his body had gone numb and he couldn't feel much of anything at that point. He closed his eyes as the pain receded further and resigned himself to the facts at hand. Each moment brought him closer to his own end. That had been true his entire life, as it was in everyone's, but it was suddenly all too real now.

He'd regretted so many of the things he'd done with his life. Unnecessary arguments with friends, not telling his family he loved them more often, every selfish, greedy impulse that had inspired him to take credit or deny responsibility. It all came down to this moment. Maybe this was fate's way of getting back at him for his mistakes. Every lie and bad thought came down to slowly watching your life flow through your fingers with every careful breath you took.

Those boys he'd seen as he'd talked. The teenagers who'd teased him, taunted his looks, his clothes, spit increasingly worse insults in his face as his mind searched for a way to hurt them the way they were attempting to hurt him. He'd reacted. He regretted that as well. Regretted making that silly smartass comment, regretted wandering this late at night into a strange neighborhood, regretted not seeing that these children, these lost souls, were capable of so much more hurt than words could ever bring. He didn't think they knew what they were truly capable of at that moment either, not until one of them, the oldest boy, brought out a knife and they began to dance. It was a contest he'd ultimately lost.

But in these last moments, he'd have to forgive them. He would rather die feeling at peace than feeling the hatred that threatened to bubble inside him. He sighed. Not long now at all.

Erica moved at almost a jog now, having to fight harder against the wind that blew back at her, angry at her for getting in its way. As she

approached her building, a small gray dog of ambiguous breeding came bounding towards her, barking over the howling wind. He stopped at her feet and growled, took off in the direction of her building, and returned to where she walked, barking again.

"I'm sorry, I don't have any food for you," she said, despite the fact that she smelled like her night's work. She felt bad for the scrawny little thing, he looked like he could use a few meals.

Erica walked past the alley that ran between the long-closed grocery store and her building. Before she could reach the steps, the dog snagged the tail of her coat in its sharp little teeth and pulled her back, almost dragging her towards the mouth of the alley. Wow. She hadn't thought the little mutt had that much strength in its body. What had gotten into this dog anyhow? She turned and followed him into the alley. Maybe if she saw what he wanted her to see, he'd leave her in peace.

Michael coughed and more blood gushed out from beneath his hand. His pants felt soaked with it. Looking down he could see that most of his shirt was too. He thought he heard someone say, "What is it?" Could've been the wind. He glanced up and wanted to shout in relief. Well I'll be damned, he thought. That scrawny dog had actually bought help. If he made it, he'd buy the mutt a sack full of burgers—no, steak. He deserved it.

Erica stopped short as she finally realized what the dog had been dragging her towards. The man lay at the back of the alley, unseen from the street. She quickly put a hand to her mouth as bile rose to the back of her throat. He was soaked in blood. It looked like the tail end of a massacre and this man was the only victim.

"I'm sorry," she said to the dog, which was looking up at her with sad eyes. "I think he's already dead."

At that moment Michael coughed again and looked up at her. He opened his mouth to speak but instead coughed again. He glanced down at the warm liquid dribbling from his chin onto the ground, whimpering as he recognized it as his own blood. He spit onto the ground and tried again. "Help. Please." Even with the wind howling, she caught those soft words loud and clear.

"I—"

"You'd better hurry," a voice from behind her said. "He doesn't have much time."

She turned, startled to see a man in black. He appeared to be floating a few feet above the ground. Faintly she could see a building across the street through his hovering form.

"Oh my God!"

“Not quite,” he responded.

Her eyes widened. “Why are—”

He stopped her with a single glance. “What I’m doing here is not important, what you are is. Help the man before it’s too late.”

“You have to explain,” she whispered, finally getting out the words that kept getting stuck in her throat.

“I think you already know.” The figure disappeared and Erica stood there for a moment, wondering if the entire thing had been in her imagination. She didn’t put it past her mind to start playing tricks on her. It had been that kind of night. Michael moaned incoherently and she turned to face him. The figure appeared again.

“You’re an angel.”

He didn’t respond to her comment. It wasn’t a question, really. As he’d said, she knew. She glanced down at Michael and sighed. She wanted to help him, but she couldn’t. Not the way she wanted to.

“Yes you can. You are the only one that can help him.”

She shook her head. “Wait, no. This can’t really be happening. I—I can’t help this poor man.”

The look she received in response made her blood run cold. “This isn’t just some poor man, you know better than that. You also know a few other things you’ve been denying.”

The angel was right. She recognized him, of course she did. It seemed his face had been everywhere most of her life. A man once revered and then torn down by those who sought to climb above him, to possess what he had. His humanitarian efforts were overshadowed by personal demons he couldn’t escape and a media presence that focused solely on the negative. He’d been great, still was in fact, and now it seemed he was dying before her eyes. And there was nothing she could do about it.

“Have you ever thought,” the angel began, “that man never really lives up to his potential? There are those among you who are blessed with bringing so much good into this world, and for so many reasons, you see fit to waste God’s gifts. This man was born to bring messages of peace, love, and acceptance to those he touched, but he became afraid to share his gift because others taught him that the way God had shown him was tainted. But he has a chance to go back and renew his purpose in God’s path. His gifts don’t have to be wasted.” The angel paused. “And neither do yours.”

Erica looked down at her hands, at once understanding but still not wanting to believe why she’d been brought here this night. Tears flowed as she contemplated what was said, feeling some small inkling in her heart, while her mind screamed fierce denials.

“My purpose is to bring this child of God Home. That is, if you can’t serve *your* purpose.”

She glanced up again quickly, realizing what he was saying. If she didn’t—no, if she couldn’t heal this man, he would die, and it would be her fault.

“Fault is not an issue here. Purpose is. You’ve given up many chances in your life to use your gifts and you’ve let them pass you by without so much as a regretful thought.”

Her mind flashed back to the car accident she’d witnessed a few weeks ago. The passenger, a young woman—a girl really—had been thrown out of the car and landed almost at her feet. Around the corner from this very alley, in fact. She’d wanted to hold the woman in her arms and help her, but she’d felt doubt. Just as she’d doubted God’s will when she’d watched her father life’s taken away by the cancer eating away at his stomach. But she hardly had time to doubt now.

The angel nodded at her thought. “Time is short. For the longer you continue to throw away your gift, the less time God will give you to waste it. A wasted life will end much quicker than one of purpose. But you, as do all creatures of this life, have free will. Do what you must, but choose quickly. Time grows shorter for you both.”

She glanced down at Michael again, sorry that her wastefulness had caused God to put him in her path this way. She could... she would at least try. There was nothing wrong with trying. And, as the angel had said, she had to do it quickly, time was short.

“How do I—”

She looked up but the angel was gone, he was apparently more confident in her abilities than she at the moment. Erica kneeled down next to Michael. His hand had slipped away from the gaping knife wound in his side and his breathing had become alarmingly shallow in the past few moments. He was slipping away. She could almost see the aura surrounding his body fading as each shallow breath came to a shuddering end.

She put both hands over the wound, changed her mind, and moved one over his heart as well. She *could* do this. She had to.

“Heal.” Her voice cracked on the word, but she knew now she shouldn’t be afraid. “Heal,” she said again. Louder. Firmer. More confident. She repeated the word a third time, believing in her heart that it would work this time.

Maybe it wasn’t working. She squeezed her eyes shut and concentrated. She felt the warmth of his blood on her fingertips and sweat strained over her skin as she willed his body to restore life. She repeated the word under her breath like a mantra, running it together from her mouth until it rolled out as

one long chant, the end of one word indistinguishable from the beginning of the next.

Her voice faltered as she felt it beginning, but she kept going, chanting faster and rocking slowly as she felt the power flow through her. His life, the one she'd been sent to save, passed before her eyes. The memories he shared with admirers, family members, friends, the moments he treasured most flowed from her fingertips and into her heart, becoming a part of her. His joys became hers, his love was shared, the happiness he felt sharing his gifts became her own. The beauty of the life she was saving overcame her and she shuddered with the power of it, praying with all her heart that the world wouldn't lose the gifts of a creature such as this.

She opened her eyes. They were surrounded by a white light, blinding in its beauty. She tried to fight back the tears but couldn't as the power increased, flowing through their bodies, bonding them, healing his body and her broken heart.

They stayed that way for a few moments until the alley was so filled with light it felt as if they were sitting in the heart of the sun. A warm glow embraced them and, for a moment, Erica was sure they were suspended, leaving the troubles of this Earth behind and below. But in this light she didn't care. She wanted to go Home. Could practically feel God's presence as she walked through the Garden. She couldn't wait to go back. But she would. They both would. Because it wasn't their time just yet.

The light began to fade and Erica's chanting slowed, then stopped. As the last of the healing light faded, she ran her hands over Michael's side, astonished that the wound was not only healed, but that there wasn't a trace of blood to be seen. She could've imagined the whole thing. But she knew better than that.

A moment later Michael stirred on the ground, stretching as if awakening from a deep sleep. He sat up next to her and stared. He seemed to recognize her and he pulled her into a tight embrace, squeezing until she held him back. "Thank you," he whispered. "Thank God for you."

She leaned back in his arms to take in the joy crossing his face at that moment, his happiness at being alive. A joy she shared. She kissed him, sealing the bond she'd felt the moment she'd laid hands on him. Then she returned to his tight embrace, weeping into his shirt. "And you as well."

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