

*A Thin Slice
of Heaven*

A THIN SLICE OF HEAVEN

By p.m.terrell

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What reviewers have said about p.m.terrell's books:

“...powerfully written and masterfully suspenseful, you have to hang on for the ride of your life.” – Suspense Magazine

“As a reader, you are swept along on a magic carpet of writing wizardry... In my opinion, it is only a matter of time before we see p.m.terrell on the bestseller lists.” – syndicated reviewer Simon Barrett

“p.m.terrell is most definitely a master wordsmith, plying her craft so well as to make us fall under her spell and never, ever want to come back out.” – reviewer K.J.Partridge

“p.m.terrell is without doubt one of the best authors I have had the pleasure of reading.” – Fated Paranormals

“p.m.terrell continues to amaze with how well-developed her plots and characters are... Just when you think it couldn't get any better than her last book, she surprises you and delivers a better book than the last.” – Books and Bindings



The castle loomed before her like a sinister, hulking giant of cold gray stone. Charleigh Dircks shivered at the edge of the gravel driveway as her cornflower blue eyes traveled upward from the broad, deep steps to the imposing front door and finally to the tiny windows that stared back at her in frosty detachment.

And frosty it was: a rare snowstorm had delayed her arrival at Belfast International Airport for hours and had almost been diverted to London. Travel from the outskirts of the city to what the tourist brochure depicted as a cozy, quaint honeymoon spot had turned into a slippery, harrowing journey. The driver was obviously unaccustomed to such weather, perspiring profusely despite the cold as the vehicle glided from one side of the road to the other as if on a skating rink, punctuated by colorful explanations

that Belfast never received snow such as this. It was a veritable blizzard, he kept saying in awe, glancing in the rearview mirror with bewildered eyes.

Now as Charleigh stared upward, she recalled the brochure's depiction of an idyllic night-time scene; an illuminated castle, an inviting glow of lights in every window and the lush landscaping radiant. What she saw before her seemed much more imposing and inhospitable. It was a two-story structure with corners that boasted towers almost three stories tall; it had seemed romantic and picturesque in the photographs but now appeared intimidating, the windows often nothing more than narrow slits in the stone. None of them were lit with a welcoming luminosity, though those in one of the turrets sported a faint orange-red blush. It appeared more like a medieval fortress than a castle.

"Ah, and there we are," the driver said as he slammed down the boot of the car and dragged her suitcase to the steps. "And I'll be takin' you in, I will, and ensurin' you're nicely settled."

He strode past her, effortlessly hauling her suitcase up two dozen steps. As she followed, it began to dawn on her that apparently no one else had arrived since the onslaught of the storm. The snow had remained pristine except for their own shoes crushing the wet, heavy stuff into frigid pools.

She stopped halfway up and turned around. The gravel drive was barely outlined by deeper snow on either side of it. Behind the car in which she'd arrived were their own meandering tire tracks while the road that continued beyond the vehicle remained untouched.

The sound of a woman's voice prompted her to turn back around. The driver had almost reached the top step and the massive front door was opening wide.

"Oh, and there's herself," exclaimed a stout woman wearing a heavy coat and boots.

A wiry middle-aged man stepped around her to take the suitcase from the driver. “And come on in, why don’t y’,” he said in a rich, deep baritone that was in sharp contrast to his stature. “We’ve a cup o’ tea for y’ both, and wouldn’t y’ know, you’ll be needin’ it on this day indeed.”

Charleigh made her way up the remaining steps as the door swung wider.

“Oh, dear, and it’s a fine time to be arrivin’,” the woman said.

Charleigh didn’t know whether she was being serious or sarcastic. As she joined them inside the great hall, the warmth enveloped her immediately, the scent of the massive fireplace filling the space with an unusual aroma of peat and dried lavender. A tall but sparse Christmas tree stood in one corner, slightly off-kilter. Though it was decorated, it remained dark and seemed more forlorn than celebratory, its size dwarfed by the enormity of the great hall. Boughs graced the banister to her right as well as the mammoth fireplace mantle, but they reminded her of the days after Christmas when the lights were turned off but the decorations had not yet been removed. It certainly did not appear as though the holiday was still a few days away.

She kicked the snow off her feet onto a threadbare mat, simultaneously pulling the hood off her head and allowing it to collapse across her shoulders.

The sound of the woman sucking in her breath caused her to look up. She’d grown pale and her eyes were even rounder than her face as she stared at her.

Charleigh’s hand instinctively flew to her hair. “I must look a fright,” she said. Her hair was cut short and might have appeared masculine except for the natural waves. It was platinum; it had begun to turn from her natural light blond when she was in her 30’s and between the demands of work and caring for her invalid mother, she never seemed to have the time to color it a darker, more youthful shade.

“Oh, no,” the woman said, struggling to recover her composure. “Not at’al. I’m rather certain it was a long flight from America, y’ know, and a long drive ‘ere to boot.”

“And let us be introducin’ ourselves,” the man added. “M’ name’s Rory and the missus ‘ere is Grace.”

“How do y’ do,” Grace said.

Her smile seemed broad and genuine but as Charleigh introduced herself, she couldn’t help but feel as if there was something hidden beneath those dark lashes. “I’m Charleigh Dircks,” she replied, pronouncing her name as ‘Charlie’ and wishing for the thousandth time that her parents had spelled it thus.

Grace motioned for her coat but before she could shed it, she had moved behind her and was helping her out of it.

“And we’ll just hang it ‘ere by the fire,” Grace said as she scurried to a set of pegs near the fireplace, “and it’ll dry out in no time at’al, it will.”

As her eyes became adjusted to the darkened interior after the glare of the snow, Charleigh realized the only light in the room came from the fireplace, which was large enough for three full-grown men to stand inside. It cast a flickering radiance throughout the large room, bobbing into even the farthest corners. When the glimmers subsided, they were replaced by shadowy tentacles to create a hypnotic dance between light and dark.

The floor was made of the same gray stone as the exterior walls. The ceiling loomed high, the massive wood beams dark. Several doorways appeared on the three sides not facing the front drive, and all but one was darkened.

It was an enormous room, made to feel even larger and draftier by the appearance of just one piece of furniture. Close to the front was a half-round desk of dark wood, behind which were eight cubbyholes. Beneath each one were two keys that dangled on cup hooks.

“So, and then,” Grace said, “wouldn’t y’ be joinin’ us for a warm spot o’ tea? Then I’m afraid we’ll have to take our leave, y’ know. The weekend shift will be here any moment now.”

“No, thank you,” Charleigh replied. At the sight of the woman’s crestfallen face, she added, “It’s been such a long trip, and I’d just like to be shown to my room, if you don’t mind?”

“O’ course,” Rory said, hurrying to the cubbyholes and producing a key. “And weren’t y’ travelin’ with yer husband, then?” He looked past her as if expecting her husband to materialize from thin air.

She swallowed her disappointment. “He was delayed.” At the heavy silence that ensued, she hastened to add, “He was in Europe already; we were to meet at the airport. But his flight—the storm...”

“Oh, but o’ course,” Grace said. “The storm,” as if it explained everything.

“Well, and then,” Rory added, “I’ll be most obliged to show y’ the room.”

“It’s one o’ the honeymoon suites, it is,” Grace offered. “On account o’ y’ sayin’ it’s to be yer second honeymoon.”

“How many years, might I ask?” Rory chimed in.

“Twenty,” she answered.

“Ah, how romantic,” Grace said, beaming. “Twenty years and still lovebirds.”

“It’s right this way, it is,” Rory said, pointing to the nearest door.

She turned around to thank the driver as she fumbled with her pocketbook for the tip, but he was already disappearing through another door. When she turned back, Rory was halfway up a winding staircase, tugging her suitcase along one bumpy step at a time.

“It seems very quiet here,” she managed to say as she joined him.

“Ah, yes, but that’ll change, it will. It’s our first winter to be open, y’ see.”

“It is?”

“Aye, and we’ve been attractin’ visitors to Brackenridge Castle for nearly three years now, we ‘ave.” He stopped to catch his breath and mop his brow. “In the summer months, wouldn’t y’ know. But then we happened upon some brochures, y’ see, from other castles round-a-bouts, and herself and me, well, we thought...” He resumed climbing, but his movements became slower as the steps wound higher.

“So,” Charleigh said, her own voice echoing in the confines of the stairs, “you must have eight rooms here?”

“Aye, and how did y’ know that? Ah, the brochure,” he answered himself.

The image of the eight cubbyholes loomed large in her mind, but she didn’t correct him. “And how many do you have staying here this weekend?”

“Oh,” he said, dragging out the syllable for as long as possible. “Others will be along directly. The storm, y’ know.”

They reached a circular landing and Rory took a ragged breath as he moved through a vast entrance into a foyer. Charleigh was grateful for the stop; the winding, narrow and uneven stairs had winded her; it was yet another reminder that she wasn’t as young and spry as she used to be.

She was expecting a typical hotel hallway of sorts with doors on either side. Instead, she found herself shoulder to shoulder with Rory as he slipped the key into the single doorknob.

“Where—?” she began.

He pushed the door open to reveal an enormous circular room. “Well, y’ see, it’s the turret. The missus and meself, we thought y’d enjoy the view from here.” He hurried to one of the tall, slim windows and waved his arm. “It’s quite a view, as y’ can see.”

She stepped inside. It was a sizable room with windows facing in three directions. She crossed to one and craned her neck to see nothing but white outside the window. It looked as if the ground, the landscape and the skies had converged into one giant marshmallow.

“Oh, but y’ll see more once the storm stops, wouldn’t y’ know?”

Turning back to the room, it seemed much darker, and she crossed back to the door to fish for a light switch.

“Oh, but the storm, y’ see, it knocked out the power. It’s quite common ‘ere, y’ know. It’ll be back on directly.” He hastened to add nervously, “As y’ can see, we’ve lit plenty o’ candles so y’ can find yer way. And the fireplace there, it’ll keep the room nice and warm and light, as well. The sconces in the stairway will stay lit all the night long. Yer quite safe ‘ere, I assure y’.”

“The sconces—”

“Coal gas. There wouldn’t be too many castles that could boast o’ such technology.”

Charleigh clamped her mouth shut. After a moment of silence, she looked up to find him circling the room. “The bath is private,” he said, “and the water is heated with coal gas as well, though it’s only heated at night, y’ see. The bath was only renovated last year so it’s nice and modern.”

He stopped when he reached the door into the foyer. “And would y’ be comin’ down for supper, then? Grace has prepared a traditional coddle, y’ see, o’ sausage and potatoes. An’ soda bread. Yes, an’ soda bread.”

“What time?” She glanced at her watch.

“Oh, whenever y’d be ready. Just come to the base o’ the steps and y’ll see the dinin’ facility directly across the great hall. The doors will be open and the food on a burner.”

“Fine.” She ran a hand through her damp hair. “I’d just like some time to freshen up.”

“O’ course, o’ course.” He grabbed the doorknob as he moved into the foyer. “Just let us know if y’d be needin’ anythin’. Anythin’ at’al. Grace and me, we’ll be leavin’ shortly but the weekend shift, y’ know, they’ll be here soon. Any minute now.”

Before she could answer, he was through the door. It closed with a heaviness like the finality of a tomb.

She stood in the middle of the room and fought back tears. *Where was he?*

She opened her pocketbook and retrieved her cell phone. She glanced briefly at the home screen; it was emblazoned with a monarch butterfly in all its glory, but there were no notices streaming across it as she’d expected. She’d texted him several times since landing, and he had yet to reply. She’d left the previous evening from Boston and flown all night, arriving in Belfast before the sun had risen that morning. Her husband’s flight was shorter, a mere hour from Frankfurt, where his business meetings should have ended early the previous evening. He should have been waiting for her when her plane landed.

She clicked through to her photographs to reveal a picture of them in happier times. That was twenty years ago, when Ethan Dircks could have been a poster child for California surfers with his sun-bleached hair, vivid blue eyes and tanned body. She stood beside him, tall and willowy; not the svelte figure of a Hollywood actress, but of a young lady who needed meat on her bones. Her eyes were insipid, the cornflower blue almost disappearing against her pale skin and light hair.

He’d been a real catch—everybody said so—and the first year or two, they had been happy. Or perhaps, she thought as she looked at the picture, she had been happy. There had been something missing in his eyes or in the way he held her, and she hadn’t really noticed until...

She checked her text messages. There had been four sent from her and no response from him.

She moved toward the window. At least she had cell phone reception here, which was miraculous in itself.

The stark whiteness outside her window caught her attention and she peered outside to see the driver, Rory and Grace making their way down the slippery steps. She continued watching as they climbed inside and with hardly a glance back at the castle the vehicle was maneuvered back onto the roadway. Everything was white and cold; it was a winter wonderland, one she hadn't expected but one that should have been a welcoming respite, cocooning she and Ethan into this room.

After a moment, she turned around to face the bed chamber. It was nice, all things considered. So they didn't have a castle full of guests; what did she care, as long as the accommodations were acceptable.

Her eyes landed on a round table set near the corner of the large room. In the middle stood a bucket filled with ice, a bottle of champagne resting inside it. Beside it was a dish of strawberries, no small feat she assumed for this time of year, along with a dish of cream and another of chocolate.

She'd told them it was their second honeymoon, which was what she'd intended. He'd pulled away this past year, far away. His business trips kept him overseas for longer periods of time and when he was home, he seemed anxious to depart again. There had been no intimacy as they'd become like strangers sharing a house. This had been a last-ditch effort, *her* last-ditch effort, to keep their marriage alive.

She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror and nearly stepped back in shock. Her hair seemed even whiter and hung in choppy folds around her face, a testament to her slow reflexes when she'd ventured outside to walk to the waiting car. She'd been dog-tired at the time and preoccupied

with Ethan's absence and hadn't noticed how wet and heavy the snowflakes were until she was drenched.

She stepped toward the mirror and peered into her eyes. They were a pale, almost lifeless blue; circles beneath them further sapped them of their energy. Her skin was light, causing her dark blond brows to appear even more vivid in the firelight. She stepped back to take in her full appearance; she'd gained thirty pounds in twenty years. Her jeans no longer seemed to hang on her but were filled out more than she'd ever desired, and the oversized blouse felt like a tent that did little to hide her stout figure.

A movement caught her eye and she started, whirling around. No one was there. She laughed nervously; no doubt, it had been a bird outside the window, its reflection caught in the mirror. Still, she returned to the door. There was a simple doorknob lock which seemed woefully inept, but she quickly recognized a thick piece of wood standing against the wall as an old-fashioned bar, and slipped it into place. It was better than a deadbolt, she reasoned.

She kicked off her shoes and checked her cell phone again. Finding no reception, she returned to the window and held it aloft until a weak bar appeared.

The phone beeped, causing her to jump, as a text message appeared.

She stared at it, not realizing that she'd been holding her breath until it expelled in a whoosh that left her dizzy.

"Charleigh," it read, "I can't do this. I'm not in love with you. I'm in love with someone else."

"The feckin' arse."

The sound of the man's deep, rich voice startled her and she spun around. No one was there. The bar remained across the door. There were no blind spots in the room; it was circular and plainly, though tastefully, furnished. She strode purposefully to the bathroom. A set of candles blazed

on the countertop and though the shadows danced in the corners of the room, she could clearly see that she was alone.

Yet she could not have imagined it. The tone had been resonant and almost gravelly, the timber of a man's voice upon first arising. The brogue had been both commanding and melodious.

But as her heart stilled and her mind allowed the words in the message to sink in, she realized that Ethan was not coming. He perhaps had never intended to join her. And now she was stuck in Ireland as a snowstorm raged outside her windows, three thousand miles from home.