

# The Heart of the Alchemist

By

Penny Wells

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## Chapter One

Katie cursed as her phone fell from her hand. In slow motion, she watched it bounce off the sidewalk, inhaling sharply as it cartwheeled through a puddle and landed in the downtown Chicago street. Just as she bent to pick it up, a car whizzed past, making her jump back in surprise, heart racing. She looked both ways. The street was empty now. Feeling irritated that she hadn't insured it, she retrieved her phone from the asphalt. She shook her head at her own clumsiness and wiped the splattered screen on her pant leg.

Katie opened her text messages. David had messaged her, which had caused her to drop her phone in surprise. She read it with butterflies in her stomach: *I had a great time the other night but we can't hang out again. Maria and I are back together. It wouldn't be right.*

The butterflies in Katie's stomach vanished, replaced by hollow disappointment. She sighed. Of course he and Maria had gotten back together. She rolled her eyes irritably and continued down the road. She couldn't think of a reply so she tucked her phone in her back pocket and hoped to forget about it altogether.

*I mean, at least he told me he was dating someone else. He could have gone on dating both of us.* Somehow, that was little comfort.

Two blocks down, Katie could already see the line was out the door of the café. She groaned, imagining her manager's stiff customer service smile, held in place by gritted teeth.

Slipping in the side door, Katie hastily donned an apron, silenced her phone, and braced herself before swinging open the door to the front of the store. A cacophony of coffee grinders, dropped change, cash register dings, milk steamers, announcements of orders filled, and how-may-I help-yous assaulted her. Pasting on her smile, Katie stepped into the fray.

Six hours later, Katie untied her apron and tossed it into the dirty pile. "Want anything to go?" her coworker, Charlotte, called to her.

Katie shook her head no. "That's okay. I don't need the caffeine."

"Aren't you hanging out with David later?"

Again, Katie shook her head no. "He got back with Maria."

"Aw, that's a bummer. He was cute," said Charlotte.

"I know!" said Katie.

"At least he told you he was back with her," Charlotte mused.

"Yeah," Katie heaved a regretful sigh. "At least he told me."

"I'm sure you'll meet someone else," said Charlotte.

Katie eyed the glittering engagement ring on Charlotte's finger. Her fiancé was a lawyer. Charlotte wouldn't have to work at the café for much longer and everyone knew it. This fact made Katie feel as though Charlotte's relationship advice was tinted with her own blessed success, and took into account none of the misery Katie had been carrying around since the love of her life had dumped her—a heartbreak followed by a string of bad dates. Regardless, Katie hitched up a smile and said, "I'm sure you're right," before waving goodbye.

In all weather, Katie walked to and from work. It would be silly not to, seeing as she lived only three blocks away. She enjoyed living so close. The walk before work gave her time to think about what was ahead, and the walk home gave her time to decompress.

With each step, Katie felt the coffee mania drain out of her. She hadn't partaken today in the proclaimed elixir, but often thought of the coffee business as a craze all its own. As her foot

met the pavement again and again, the tension released from her shoulders. By the time she reached her front door, she felt nothing but exhaustion.

She walked through her tiny single bedroom apartment, stripping as she went and leaving her clothes where they landed. In her bedroom she pulled on sweats, a t-shirt, and fuzzy socks. She threw herself onto her couch in the living room and opened up her laptop. She blinked guiltily at the tab still pulled up on her screen. It was an email from her father, offering her a position at the corporation he worked for.

She was perfectly qualified for the position, and she was certain her dad's recommendation would secure her the opening. She was not sure why she hesitated. It wasn't like she enjoyed serving people coffee all day, and even she could admit that it wasn't a great setup for meeting eligible young bachelors. Why didn't she take it?

She minimized the window, ignoring the potential future being offered to her. She tried not to think about the fact that this was the third email her father had sent her this week, all of them without her sending a reply.

Pizza ordered, Katie poured herself a glass of red wine and pulled up Netflix. She selected a historical drama and settled herself in for an evening of false gossip, recreated from the days before electricity.

The next morning, Katie's mother called while Katie was walking to work. She cringed and declined the call. *I can't speak to her right now, anyway. I'll have to get off the phone in five minutes.*

All day, with every latte and chai tea she made, the phone call hung over her. The day seemed to pass both sluggishly long and frightfully quickly at once. Finally, she clocked out, hung up her apron, stepped onto the street, and pulled out her phone. Her mother answered on the third ring.

"Hello? Katie?"

"Hi, Mom."

"Took you long enough to call me back," she said.

"I was at work."

"Oh please. That lame excuse for a job is no reason to ignore my calls. Can't you step away for a moment? I'm sure your coworkers can carry on without you. They'll have to sooner or later. You can't work there forever."

"What do you want, Mom?" said Katie with a sigh.

"Well I was calling to see if you've been getting your father's emails. You haven't responded to any of them and he found such a great opportunity for you." She waited and when Katie said nothing her mother went on. "You've got to get serious about your life, Katherine. You are nearly thirty years old, unmarried and without any prospects, working at a *coffee shop* for heaven's sake! When are you going to grow up? Your life will never get better if you don't make it better yourself, sweetie."

"I happen to like my life, Mom," said Katie.

"You're becoming an old maid and it's breaking my heart," her mother continued as if Katie hadn't spoken. "This job has no security for you. Any monkey off the street could pour a coffee. It's not a skill. It won't provide a future for you."

Katie heaved a breath and exhaled into the microphone so her mother could hear her frustration. Her mother changed tactics in response. "I'm just worried about you," she said sweetly. "Ever since you dropped out of the master's program, you've been a little aimless."

Katie's blood ran cold. She did not like to think of that time in her life. After switching majors several times, she had finally graduated with a bachelor's degree in business six years after she had started college. She had met a boy in her last year and had fallen hard for him.

Chad, the man with ocean blue eyes and glittering gold hair. He had a musical laugh, a floppy-eared dog, and he loved to go running. He was perfect: athletically trim, smart, funny, and spontaneous. They had spent late nights out in the countryside, cuddled up in the bed of his pickup truck padded with pillows and blankets and an air mattress. Chad always made her breakfast and held her hand. She had won the lottery in meeting him, and she was blissfully aware of it during their every moment together.

When Chad enrolled in the master's program, Katie had followed him. Their first semester had gone well, but shortly after Christmas, Chad's father fell ill. His mother had never liked Katie. When Chad went to visit his parents in the hospital, it became clear that if he was to inherit the family business and the wealth his father had amassed, he would have to marry a girl both his parents approved of.

Two weeks shy of their second anniversary together, Chad had taken her to the lake, where they had gone on their first date. Besotted with him, Katie was sure he would propose. Instead, he broke up with her. An awkward car ride later, he dropped her off at her flat and she never saw him again. He had chosen the family business and his parents' money instead of her.

Brokenhearted, Katie couldn't function. She dropped out of the master's program, moved to an apartment that didn't seem to have memories of Chad in the very plaster and carpet, and had gotten the job at the café.

"It's been three years, Katie," said her mother softly. "It's time to move on."

Katie realized she was clenching her teeth and relaxed her jaw. "I have moved on," she said, and the words sounded pathetic even in her own ears.

"Good, then you're ready for a real job," said her mother lightly. "I'll tell your father you've accepted the position."

"No! I don't want—"

"Well what *do* you want?" her mother snapped, all semblance of patience gone. "You've done absolutely nothing for three whole years. You won't get them back, Katherine. Add that wasted year in the master's program and you're four years down the hole! You have got to get on with your life! I know you really loved Chad, but he's not worth ruining your life over."

"This isn't about Chad, Mother," she said, her tongue fumbling over his name as her hands fumbled with the keys to her apartment.

"What is it about then? You're so smart, Katie. You're pretty and you have a few years of youth left. You can still make a good life for yourself."

"I know, Mom."

"What shall I tell your father about the job offer?"

"Nothing. I'll write him myself."

"Well you'd better get on it. They're waiting to hear from you before they look for someone else to fill the position."

"Right."

"It's a very good opportunity, Katherine."

"I know."

"You could meet someone."

"I know."

"Do you need anything, honey? Are you feeling all right?"

“I’m fine.”

“You sure?”

“Yes,” said Katie, kicking off her shoes. “I just got home so I’m going to let you go, okay?”

“I just want the best for you, Katie,” said her mother earnestly. “You know that, don’t you?”

“I know,” said Katie quietly. “Thanks, Mom.”

“I’ll talk to you later, dear.”

“Bye.”

“Goodbye.”

Katie hung up and tossed the phone lightly on her bed, collapsing next to it on a pile of dirty laundry. Her mother was right—things were never going to improve until she improved them herself. *But are things really so bad? I like my little flat. I like walking to and from work. Sure, it would be nice to make more money at a job more fulfilling. It would be great to meet someone.* Her thoughts trailed off. Was she so used to being unhappy that she had stopped trying for anything else?

“What am I doing?” she asked aloud.

Slowly, she sat up. Her mother was right about one thing: she did need to answer her father so the candidate search could continue one way or another. Katie changed into yesterday’s sweats and t-shirt, pulled on a fresh pair of socks, and padded to the living room. She considered the laptop from across the room, and then retreated to the kitchen, stepping over the pizza box from last night’s dinner.

Pointedly ignoring the stacks of unwashed dishes in the sink and lining the counter, she microwaved leftover Chinese food and poured herself a glass of wine from a fresh bottle. *Red goes with everything, right?* She thought as she carried it with her plate into the living room. She eyed the laptop, decided she couldn’t very well type while eating, and turned on the television. When the program ended, the food was eaten, and the wine was drunk, Katie ran out of excuses. She switched off the television and pulled the laptop over. She selected the email and began to type:

*Dad,*

*I’m sorry it’s taken me so long to get back to you about the job offer. I’ve been doing a lot of thinking.*

*While I recognize that this would a great opportunity for me, I’ve ultimately decided not to apply. Thanks for thinking of me when this came across your desk. It means a lot.*

*Love,*

*Katie*

She took a breath and clicked send. She rose from the couch and walked her dishes to the kitchen. Adding her plate to the mess in the sink, she poured herself a second glass of wine. She raised it to no one and said, “To ruining your life!” Katie toasted her glass against an imaginary one and took a long drink.

She walked back to the couch just as her laptop alerted her to a new email. Her father had already written her back. Heart sinking, Katie clicked to open the thread. Her father had sent her one word: “Disappointed.”