

THE GREATEST BASTARD

BY

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Synopsis

A young girl, Chloe Jamison, struggles with recovering from the tragic loss of her entire family. Desperate for change she starts a new chapter of her life by moving to a rural coastal town. There she meets a charming stranger and a beautiful romance develops. Chloe notices how Caleb subtly evades talking about important parts of his life outside of their near perfect relationship. This is easy to overlook because he is otherwise flawless. As the bond between them intensifies she becomes pregnant, shortly after which Caleb disappears.

Chloe's life will be forever changed as her search for Caleb leads to several dead ends and mysterious coincidences. The events that follow his disappearance cause her life to spin out of control to the point where she questions her very sanity.

This comes together for a shocking ending that will leave you questioning everything you ever thought you knew about good and evil. What if demons and angels and other creatures of fairy tales and nightmares really did exist? Could you accept the truths that may not be as you once believed?

(Book 1 Revelations Revealed Series)

The Greatest Bastard

Prolog

What I have learned from this journey is just because you are through with your past doesn't mean your past is through with you.

Girl Interrupted

I stood in front of the mirror making an attempt to smooth my long curly hair into two Pocahontas braids. From the outside I'm sure I resembled many other 21 year olds. But the outside didn't reflect the pain and torture that was constantly gnawing at my insides. I could barely look at myself anymore. Staring back at me was a pale ghost. The ghost of a girl whose olive skin used to turn heads. These days I was pale and taunt, making the faint scattering of freckles across my cheeks stand out. It looked ridiculous; like they were painted on as part of a juvenile Halloween costume. The pallid glow of my complexion also accentuated the dark circles under my eyes. My chocolate brown irises didn't help deflect from the purple rings that added years to my appearance. Why did I even look in the mirror?

Frustrated I finished taming my hair into braids without the using the mirror. I could have cared less if I ever looked at my reflection again. I guess some people would consider me a attractive girl, but despite my pretty features, I never really fit in. I looked edgy to the point that I intimidated people or they just thought I was a snob and never gave me a chance. That was fine with me though, I liked solitude, and I was at my best when I was alone.

I pulled my new underwear on. They were expensive and plain. Basic black but very light and comfortable, made for hiking, easy to wash and quick to air dry. Next my wool socks, hiking pants, and layers of shirts. I was a size 4, tall and slender. I had always wished that I was more toned and muscular but I lack the resolve it would take to change. Despite my parents best efforts I never really picked up team sports, eventually they gave up trying. My preference was to sleep in, read a book or watch movies. I never went out with friends like most kids my age. I guess that's why I never truly found a niche. I always expected too much of my peers. I hated pop culture and I've always felt that empty conversation was worthless. I suppose I was too intellectual or mature for my age. I definitely wasn't social enough for the 'popular' group. I was probably a bit too stylish for the outliers. Well I guess I never really related well to anyone. Sometimes I wondered if I were seeing the world morphed differently than everybody else. Maybe I had a type of autism or some kind of brain damage from birth?

My sister, Mia, was the only one who ever truly understood me and she was dead. From my mother I inherited a sense of adventure. Even as a small child I loved the solace of hiking, the further away from civilization the better. It was the one place that I could always count on to make me happy, give me peace. I was really counting on it now, with my life hanging in the balance. Since the loss of my family, despite counseling and medication the depression lingered and I felt numb, lost and alone.

Suddenly I was brought back to my senses by a knock on the hotel door. "Chloe Jamison?" a man's voice called out on the other side of the door.

"I'll be out in a minute," I responded. The car service had arrived. I had flown in to Georgia from Texas two days earlier and had spent the last 48 hours rearranging my gear and loading up on carbs. I was headed for the Appalachian Trail. The trail ran over 2100 miles through fourteen states, stretching from Georgia to Maine. It was four months and 23 days after the tragedy that this idea formed in my head.

I needed a change. I needed to snap out of the fog I was under. I felt like I was suffocating. I needed a life changing adventure so I decided to hike the Appalachian Trail otherwise known as the AT. I had no one to share my revelation with, no one to make announcements to and no one to tell me that I was absolutely crazy and talk me out of it. So here I was, four months later, ready to start my journey. I had no doubts because I had no place else to go. I picked up my backpack and opened the hotel door.

The driver was an elderly man wearing khaki pants and a red polo with the car service logo embroidered on the chest. He popped the trunk open and struggled with lifting my heavy pack into the truck. He finally resorted to using both of his fleshy hands to ease it into the vehicle. He was quiet during the drive. He seemed hesitant to drop me off when we arrived. The trailhead was nothing more than a heavily treed area in the middle of nowhere. It was just before dawn as I hoisted my pack up onto my shoulders. The heavy weight of it causing me to take a backward stagger. I quickly leaned forward correcting my balance. I clicked on my headlamp and thanked him as I headed towards the trail. The light beam cut a narrow path through the darkness clearing my way into the winter dead trees. I took a deep breath. For the first time since I had made the decision to hike the AT I realized that I might be in over my head. Oh well, I was on my way and it was too late to back out now. I fought off a shiver and put one hiking boot in front of the other.

Solitude

The path was immediately difficult. One hundred yards into the trail the incline began. The morning light began to creep into the woods about an hour after my first steps onto the trail. Other than to stop at the drop stations and pick up my supplies, I really had no plan. I was totally unprepared. It was early March and the cold was unyielding. Three hours in, I stopped at a clearing and dropped my pack. I looked up at the stark blue sky. I was tall, standing at 5'10. I was always taller than other girls, but here my perspective was different. The tree branches reached up into the heavens. I was alone, nature and I. I had achieved the solitude that I had so desired and suddenly I felt very small. I was but a mere blip on the planet earth, not even noticeable. In the whole scheme of life, I was no more significant than a gnat. These trees had been here hundreds of years and they were massive. I stood in amazement at their beauty. The way they transformed through the seasons, constantly renewing their beauty, ever changing, yet ever the same.

I was torn between awe and anguish. I was alone, forever an orphan. I stood there amongst the beauty and cried. I had staggered lost and confused into the arms of Mother Nature. I was sad and desperate, yet she had taken me in and given me a place. I missed my mom; she would have loved this adventure. She would have... but she was never coming back. I would never again hike a trail with my mother. I would never feel her arms around me. No one cared if I lived or died. No one would care that it was my

birthday or that I accomplished a goal. No one even remembered that I existed. I suddenly realized how unimportant we are and how quickly we fade away after those who are bound to us by blood are gone. Horrible thoughts began to flood into my head. I realized that I couldn't even remember my great grandmother's name. My mother's grandmother had already faded out of existence. Dead less than fifteen years and no one cared, or even remembered that she had existed. We are wretched, selfish creatures. It is amazing the depths to which your mind will sink when you are confused and at an emotional low. I pushed those thoughts from my mind, picked up my backpack and continued on.

The first day I walked until the sun began to drop below the tree line. I didn't have a watch, and didn't really care about the time. I didn't know how many miles I had walked or how many I had to go. I fumbled through the steps of setting up my tent then fumbled even more with starting a fire. When I was done I finally sat down to make dinner. Meals Ready to Eat (MRE's). I poured hot water into the silver pouch and tofu Pad Thai appeared. It was edible. I was tired and fell asleep quickly after eating. The first night in eight months that I hadn't required a tranquilizer to fall asleep. I guess that's progress.

I woke up sore from my forehead to the tip of my toes. It hurt to move, to breathe, to think. I slowly began to load up my campsite contemplating my options. But there was only one, of course. I knew that. Keep walking. Three hours into my second morning I began to meet some serious elevation. I trekked about two hundred yards up the third peak and stopped. Eyes wide, breathing hard, heart pounding. I was hopelessly out of shape for this kind of thing. My pack weighed way too much. Every step was a struggle. The hardest part was coming to terms with the constant discovery that there were always more hills in front of me. Every time I thought that I had surely summited the crest, I found that there were in fact more peaks to traverse. At one point I came to a clearing at the top of a mountain. I could see nothing but clear blue sky and the canopy of alpine trees below me. I knew I had made it to the crest. I sat in my glory eating lunch, congratulating myself. I was thinking about the decline that would be in my near future. I smiled because I had conquered the summit that had brought me to my knees just a few hours before.

After my meal I packed up and happily headed on my way, only to find that the mountain had once again deceived me. The elusive summit continued to loom in front of me as I pressed forward breathlessly up more elevation. It felt unattainable. I continued because what other choice did I have? Finally after hours of torturous and treacherous uphill battles I reached the top. It was absolutely the summit. The air was chilly, brisk, thin and clean. The pines smelled strong and my head was light with a vague hint of dizziness. I dropped backwards onto a boulder, allowing it to carry the weight of my pack. I lie there, soaking up the sun and the accomplishment. It was spiritual.

After a brief rest I dropped my pack and took in the vista. This could be heaven. I hoped it was. Mom and Mia would be happy with this. As I sat there eating my tuna pack I couldn't imagine a better afternoon. This was the first time I had allowed myself to be happy in months. There was a sense of harmony deep within me. I didn't know where I was, I didn't know what time it was, I didn't know where I would sleep tonight but I was at peace.

From reading AT books I was aware that there were designated base camps. I also knew that you could camp anywhere if you didn't make it to the official shelters. I didn't plan on using the encampments unless I had to. It took the pressure off of having to make it X number of miles in a day. I begrudgingly left my mountaintop Vista and set out. The weather was clear and dry. The trail would be at least partially downhill. I departed feeling really good. It seemed like this wasn't going to be as hard as I had thought just a few hours earlier. But I was wrong. It was hell.

At one point I came across a shelter and decided to reevaluate the items in my backpack. I analyzed each item weighing its importance. Slowly a large pile of supplies emerged on the bench in front of me. I would leave these for the next hiker. I was acting as if leaving my discarded items would be some kind of favor. The last item I laid down was a cell phone and charger. I didn't need it. I had no one to call and no one would call me. Okay my pack was significantly lighter. Good riddance, I was purged of several 'comfort' items that were unnecessary for this journey. The fact that I didn't have to do this, that this whole journey was totally optional, weighed on my mind, as I walked away from the mound of belongings. I wasn't enlisted. I wasn't on the run. I could quit at any time. But where would I go? I had no bed to sleep in, no family to return to. So I walked. As I walked I reflected on the past few months. I didn't bring music or anything else to distract me. Only a book for the evenings at camp. Something just didn't feel right about blocking out the sounds of nature with a steel guitar. This gave me lots of time to think.

Think I did. My mind wandered. I thought about the day at the university. The police and school councilor appeared at my door to tell me that my mother, father and beautiful little sister had been killed. I thought about the decision I had made during my parents funeral to not return to college. I thought about how disappointed they would be. Then I thought, "No they won't dummy, they are dead." It almost made me laugh right there in the church during the service. It's odd the emotions that suddenly appear during your deepest moments of grief.

My father always told me I had a weird sense of humor. "To know you is to love you," he would say with a laugh. My sister's funeral was much harder. We decided to have a special memorial service for her. This would give her many friends the chance to say goodbye and pay tribute to her. My sister was well loved by everyone. She was an athlete, a scholar and a social butterfly, just the opposite of me.

Following the accident my parents' friends made sincere attempts to look after me. They wanted to let me know that I was not alone in this world, but with time that faded and I was grateful. I didn't want people's pity. I didn't want people lingering around me. I liked being alone. I took comfort in my state of depression. Pain was the only thing that made me feel alive. To feel anything but numb was an improvement. If my heart stopped beating the only reason I would know was because the pain would finally be gone. But after several months of wallowing in self-pity, the bills became pressing and I was once again forced to face reality.

I had never paid a bill in my life. I felt not only depressed but overwhelmed. I didn't want all of this responsibility. My family had been killed by a truck driver who was on the job, the insurance company settled with a check. A check that amounted to a sum they figured my mother, father and 16 year old

sister's life was worth. For a month I couldn't bear to even look at the check. I really couldn't bear to even leave my room. My parents both had life insurance as well. Those checks also sat on the table in the entry way.

Then one day my mother's best friend dropped by. She talked me into seeing a counselor. She also set an appointment for me to speak with an estate attorney. She was sweet and kind. She was also suffering through the loss of my mother. I loved her for the help that she provided me in my time of need. I cherished the way that she loved and missed my mother. In the end I took her help and then pushed her away. The separation started when we were speaking with the estate lawyer. I announced that I wanted to sell everything. Nikki looked at me with eyes wide and jaw slack and said, "Maybe this is too soon, I'm not sure that you've thought this out completely."

I wanted to tell her to mind her own business but instead I said, "It hurts too much to live here, surrounded by their things. If I am going to survive this I am going to need to make a fresh start. I've been thinking about this for a while and this is something that I need to do!"

I could see the hurt on Nikki's face. I could see the understanding in the attorneys face. It didn't matter; I didn't care what either of them thought. I needed to be free of this misery. A few days later there was a 'for sale' sign in the yard. After the house was sold, the attorney set up an auction. I removed a few sentimental belongings and all of the photos and had them taken to storage. As per our agreement, the estate attorney paid for the storage for two years. The rest of my family's belongings were sold to the highest bidder. As I packed my bags the new owners took possession of my childhood home. I felt nothing but relief.

The attorney had set up accounts for me and deposited the checks, for a modest fee of course. Whatever he charged was worth it. After the auction I relieved him of his duties. He seemed surprised and talked to be about investments and my future. He understood that this seemed like a great deal of money but it wasn't enough to last a lifetime. I thanked him and hung up the phone. Shortly after the first meeting with John was when I had decided to hike the Appalachian Trail. I didn't feel the need to tell anyone. Nikki called frequently but I never picked up. The calls continued until the phone was shut off. She was sweet but I had no intentions of carrying on a relationship with her.

A large bird squawking above me forced me out of my dream state. I was not sure how far I had walked; it was mechanical at this point. I noticed the shadows getting longer and quickly snapped back into the present. I was still a novice at setting up a tent by myself. I didn't want to get stuck doing it in the dark. I also still needed to gather kindling and start a fire. I continued walking until I came across a clearing that looked level enough for a tent. That's where I set up camp. Although still cold, it was warmer than it had been at the summit. I figured that I must be at lower elevation. I began to wonder if my refuel stations were going to be well marked. I would hate to stroll right by. But then I was sure it wasn't rocket science. I mean it's a physical accomplishment but it doesn't take a brain surgeon to hike a trail.

When camp was set up I ate my MRE then settled in to read by the fire. It seemed like a good book but I couldn't keep myself interested. I zipped myself into my sleeping bag. I wasn't as tired as I had been the first night. Tonight I lay there, listening to the fire crackle and pop. Hearing twigs snapping under an

animal's foot and listening to the wind whistle between the trees. I thought back a few years to happier times. I had always loved the hikes with my mother but I was never one for suffering hardships. I didn't like to be cold. I certainly wasn't one of those people who wanted to risk stumbling out of the wilderness with a Mountain lion attached to my head. I liked the solitude and beauty of being surrounded by nature and being away from civilization.

My mother had dragged the family to Oregon on a camping trip one March. It was frigid and it was bear country. I refused to sleep in the tent with my mom and sister, instead opting to sleep in the SUV with the bear spray tightly clutched in my hand. The thought of that made me laugh. Mom would be proud of me now, wouldn't she?

Then my thoughts wandered to darker times. Back to the funerals during which I was in complete denial. My Mom was only forty-three and my Father forty-four, how were they dead? People don't die at that age. My sister's death was the worst. I guess by accepting her death at sixteen I had to face the possibility of my own mortality. I had to accept the fact that humans die. Life is fragile and imbalanced. My parents never got to retire, never got to travel. My sister never even got to graduate high school. Have a serious boyfriend. Life was so unfair. As far as I knew she was still a virgin, but so was I for that matter. Not that I hadn't had the opportunity, no boy ever kept my interest long enough. But now who would ever love me? Who would care about me? Who would worry about me? Would anyone even realize I was missing if I died right here on this trail tonight? Those questions floated around in my head until I drifted off into a restless sleep.

I awoke before daylight needing to pee fiercely. It was cold and I was unwilling to unzip my sleeping bag leaving the warmth of the -32 degrees down filled security that surrounded me. I drifted in and out of sleep for another hour or so until I thought my bladder might explode. Out of sheer necessity I gave in. I grabbed my bag of essentials and trudged out to the tree line. That's as far as I was willing to go with only a headlamp. The used toilet paper I discarded into a baggie. I burned the bag every day or two in my fire before going to bed, even though it was against the park rules. I think the fire itself was probably against the rules too, at least outside of the official campsites anyway.

Back at the camp I wasn't able to resume sleep. I packed up, ate a quick breakfast of oatmeal and started my day on the trail. The walking continued. Up and down, passing tree after tree. Occasionally I would remember that I didn't have any place to be and I would stop and actually enjoy the scenery. Half way through day four I stumbled across a register. I wasn't sure if I had passed any registers before but I stopped and began flipping through the pages. It was nothing more than a spiral notebook with a pen attached by a string. It was concealed in a semi 'waterproof' box. There were many signatures and several funny remarks. Some of the comments were reflective others lighthearted. I took the pen and wrote, 'I miss you Mom, Dad and Mia.' I signed 'Alone' in the area where my signature belonged. It seemed fitting. Other hikers appeared to assign themselves 'trail names', so I took on the trail name that most accurately described me, 'Alone'.

Day six. Out of nowhere a sign appeared pointing left. In white letters it read the name of my first resupply station. Instead of relief I felt anxiety. I wasn't sure if I left the trail I would have the resolve to

return. But I needed provisions so I turned onto the new path and left the main trail behind. In my six days on the AT I hadn't encountered a single soul and I liked it. I had pumped water from springs and rivers through a filter, started fires, set up camp and slept alone in the wilderness. Remarkably I had walked 106 miles. I was dirty and exhausted and in great need of a shower.

It was late in the day when I arrived at the general store that doubled as the post office. I retrieved my refueling supplies, bought a few items and got directions to the nearest 'motel'. It was more like a boarding house that rented rooms. I was surprised to learn that I was in North Carolina. I paid the fees and walked up the stairs to my room. I unloaded, rearranged my pack, discarding trash and a few more needless items. I then restocked with the new supplies. Afterward I took the longest and best shower of my life, washing my hair three times. It felt amazing. I shaved and then just let the water run over my tired body for at least a half hour. I was wrinkled and flushed by the time I stepped out of the bathroom. I had powdered and lotioned and slid into clean clothes. I had never been so tired. I forced myself to take advantage of the laundry room. I washed and dried my one pair of spare clothes, repacking them for the morning. When I was finished I looked at the clock, it was 9:00 PM. I was hungry but couldn't keep my eyes open. I flopped down on the wonderfully soft mattress and fell immediately to sleep.

I awoke the next morning to the aroma of food. It smelled like heaven. As if in a trance I ended up at the dining room table with a plate of bacon, sausage, eggs and toast. This was apparently included in the nominal room fees. I didn't usually eat meat but today was definitely an exception. I wasn't a vegetarian per-se but I wasn't a fan of the state of commercial meat in the United States these days. I avoided it when I could. At this point I didn't care. I would have paid \$100 for that breakfast full of processed meats. By the time I was done I was ready to go back to sleep. Full stomach, clean clothes and tired body, I envisioned the warm cozy bed. Instead I heaved the heavy pack onto my back, tipped and thanked the hosts, and made my way back to the trail.

The next day it rained nonstop. I would have given anything to be back in the room I had stayed at the night before. I was cold and tired and my knees and feet hurt worse with every step. Finally I sat down under a huge tree and cried. What had I gotten myself into? The trees were looming over me, pressing in from all sides. How I had managed to keep my bearings I didn't know. The occasional white triangle blazes that were supposed to mark the AT were few and far between. This entire forest looked exactly the same. The woods suddenly became scary in the overcast gloom of the rainy afternoon. The trees seemed sinister. For the first time I really felt dangerously out of my element.

I knew I was being watched. I suddenly realized that I was moving quickly in the direction of a full blown panic attack. I had experienced a couple of panic attacks after the funeral. The shrink had given me anti-anxiety medications at the time, which I took willingly. Then as swiftly as the attacks began, they ended. I looked around at the beauty of the rain falling from the sky. I took in the menacing creaking of the trees. And I slowly willed myself to calm down.

I brought myself to my feet and continued walking until the sky began to darken. I looked for a dry location, an impossible task. Instead I opted for a spot underneath the cover of a large Oak tree. It provided some protection. It had withstood hundreds of years of storms so it had proven itself worthy,

at least in my opinion. I set up my tent and crawled inside knowing that a fire would be out of the question. I sat there looking out at the rain as I read by the light of my headlamp. As soon as the dark engulfed me I drifted into sleep.

The next morning as I was packing up, I heard something behind me. I turned to find someone hovering over me. My eyes squinted tightly against the bright morning sky. I could tell it was a tall man. He was standing in line with the rising sun so I couldn't make out more than an outline. I stood up and the figure came into focus. He was a young man with dark tousled hair, dark eyes and light tan skin that almost glowed. He had the kind of straight, bright smile that lit up a room. He could have been in a toothpaste commercial as perfect as his smile was. He was devastatingly beautiful, like no one I had ever seen outside of the movies. I caught myself staring at him. I must have zoned out at some point because the next thing I knew the man started to laugh.

"Are you alright?" He asked. I immediately nodded through a flush of embarrassment and quickly dropped my eyes to the ground.

"Umm, yes, I was just startled. I thought I was alone out here." I said a bit defensively.

"Ditto." Said the man with the perfect pouty lips and thick black eyelashes. "I haven't crossed paths with anyone out here since I started the trail five days ago."

He leaned over to help me pick up the tent. I awkwardly glanced sideways in an attempt to show disinterest. "My name is Caleb" he held out a strong hand in greeting.

I accepted his hand, "Chloe" I smiled uncomfortably.

Caleb continued to talk and ask questions and surprisingly the conversation flowed very well. He fell right into step with helping me pack up my camp site. Conversations with strangers rarely flowed well for me; I was quite the opposite of verbose. Usually the minute a stranger sparked up a conversation my posture stiffened. The more I tried to relax the tenser I became. This morning, felt different. I felt completely relaxed in this beautiful stranger's presence. Maybe I had been alone or too long. But I had always been alone, just not this isolated.

In the past I had the safety net of my sister or parents if I needed to talk to someone, needed advice or needed anything for that matter. This morning I actually welcomed the company and feared for its end. After the camp was packed away I was relieved when Caleb asked if I would like some company on the trail. I agreed a little too enthusiastically. He offered to trade packs as I struggled to get my heavy through-pack on my back. I refused his offer but he insisted. His pack was extremely light as he was only section hiking. My neck and shoulders cried out in thanks. I warned him that I was slow and gave him permission to leave me if I was holding him back.

He laughed and said, "It's the journey that we are here for, not the destination."

Caleb was funny and had a way of putting me at ease. I liked him immediately. I liked him even more with every minute I spent with him. He was not only beautiful to look at but he was so strong and

helpful and comforting to be with. We spoke about books we'd read or wanted to read and places we would like to visit. Caleb was very interested in history. I guess I was too. I loved hearing the historical facts that he shared with me as we walked. At the end of our day of hiking, we set up a shared camp. Afterwards we sat around the fire talking and laughing late into the night. It was the first night I hadn't fallen asleep the minute the sun dropped behind the tree line. I was exhausted by the time I crawled into my sleeping bag. My dreams that night were peaceful and full of hope.

I woke up the next morning well after sunrise. I fluttered into awareness and then bolted upright in a state of panic, afraid that Caleb would be gone. Instead he had renewed the fire and had made breakfast. His campsite was packed up and ready to go. He offered me a plate and packed up my site while I ate. He was such a gentleman. I could get used to this, I thought flushing with embarrassment.

Accomplishment

Hiking with Caleb lasted two more wonderful days and then we went our separate ways. His section hike was complete. I had made good time hiking with Caleb. He talked and I listened and answered questions. Time went by too quickly when I was with him. After we said goodbye I missed the company. These feelings surprised me. Maybe the need for human connection still lingered somewhere inside of me? I scoffed at this; but just maybe there was still hope for me yet. I continued my hike, stopping every six or so days at resupply stations. During which I enjoyed clean clothes and warm showers. I took the time to appreciate the vistas that I worked so hard to achieve. I felt every bit of the joint and muscle pain after making it across the high peaks of the southern Appalachians. The trails were surprisingly well graded but it was remote and lonely, with long, strenuous climbs. I hit my first snow storm along the North Carolina-Tennessee border.

I had come across a few hikers since my time with Caleb. One was a college student from Oregon. He was planning on going for the triple crown of hiking which included the AT, Pacific Crest trail and Continental Divide trail. His trail name was trail-slayer. Not sure why, he said it was given to him because of his triple crown goal. I didn't really hike with trail-slayer. He was a speed hiker and there was no way I was keeping up with him. We enjoyed a vista together over lunch and chatted but then we parted ways.

A week or so later I came across two men hiking together. One who was called 20/20 and the other was Pete. I quickly seen why 20/20 got his trail name. He seen every little animal, unique flower or tree and quickly pointed them out, hence 20/20 vision. Pete didn't have a trail name but Pete constantly complained about his feet hurting. I began calling him Pete with hurting feet. I found it to be hilarious but I wasn't sure if Pete felt the same way. Pete was very entertaining and often broke out these strange rituals. At one point we were ascending a hill and Pete clamped his nostrils together and began blowing his nose against the pressure of his fingers. He did this to depressurize his ears in the higher altitude. I remember watching his eyes bulge and wondering if his eyeballs would actually pop out of the sockets if he continued. I hiked with 20/20 and Pete for an entire afternoon, we shared a campsite but parted ways the next day. Pete began calling me lost girl before we separated. I didn't miss trail-slayer or 20/20

or Pete after we parted company but my thoughts still lingered on Caleb. As Pete was exiting the trail he mentioned the potential for bad weather on the next section. Of course I ignored him.

The severe weather however did not forget to make its appearance. It made my descent off the mountain especially problematic. It was very cloudy and the rocks were wet, slippery and dangerous. It was an intense experience. I wore hiking boots that were waterproof and had good tread. I doubted they were recommended for hiking in several inches of wet snow. Also my Cold Gear was warm but probably not suitable for the 20 degree snowstorm I was trudging through. I began reflecting on my life as I trekked through the snow. I did that frequently. When my physical world became too much to handle, I tended to retreat into movie reels of memories replayed in my mind.

I commenced thinking about the guest at my parent's funeral. My mother and father were private people, so the funeral was a small and intimate gathering. Much love was shared between the few friends that came to the service. I had expected there to be outrage, anger, disgust, even hatred for the man who had caused this horrific event. I witnessed none of those things. There was, of course, shock. There was sadness, remorse, and perhaps some initial twinges of bitterness, but no outright anger. I can't sit here and say I know every emotion that went through the mind of each and every person. But I did not encounter outward rage. I felt only love; a loving presence of unity and togetherness.

This memory enlightened me to see that time after time there are attempts to assassinate the human spirit. And time and time I see where it absolutely refuses to be broken. I appreciated that they were all able to be pillars of strength and compassion. I wanted that for me. I just had to permit it. I realized that I needed to start allowing my emotions in, so that I could heal. I wanted to be stronger. I wanted to be capable of spreading love and kindness, good energy, positive emotions. I wanted to see what this type of change could do for me and those around me. I knew on this day, on this mountain, in this snow storm, that I didn't want to die. I wanted to live. I wanted to change.

Maybe we are an experiment in spiritual evolution. Things happen to us hurt; I know this as well as anyone. I would not be pretentious enough to sit here and speak about how positive life is. Life can be ugly and mean. I've been there but now I needed to move past the ugly. I hated myself for how I felt. At this point I chose to change. It can be done. I knew that I didn't have to rush it but I had to accomplish it. It would happen exactly as it was supposed to. I realized now that I needed to allow myself to 'be' instead of trying so hard to 'do' all the time. Maybe this was me listening to my inner being during a time that I was finally willing to hear it. Maybe it was my painfully aching body speaking to me as I lumbered freezing through the pelting snow. Perhaps this was the pathway towards the right destination for me. Possibly it wasn't, but it had brought me to a place of self-realization. I could have crawled into a dark hole and shut myself off from the rest of the world after what had happened. But I wouldn't do that. I deserved better. When someone we love dies, we face an abysmal future without them. The meaning of life can be almost impossible to find. Somehow on that mountain I had come to terms with what had happened.

I knew that the sudden, unexpected deaths of my family would be the most difficult obstacle I would ever attempt to overcome, by sheer nature and meaninglessness of it all. No matter how hard I tried to

understand, my family's deaths made no sense. In trying to make sense out of them the grieving process literally became more complicated and prolonged. As I descended the mountain and the snow turned to rain I realized that sometimes it is up to us to make meaning out of catastrophe. Or sometimes we have to decide that there is no meaning and move on. As I got to the bottom of the descent I found a tall oak tree and sat down and wept. Weeping is not the same thing as crying. It takes your whole body to weep, and when it's over, you feel like you have no bones left to hold you up. All of your energy is used in the weeping process, when it's over you are spent.

As I wept I remembered a book I had read about the Dalai Lama, I'm not sure which Dalai Lama, but it was one of them. The book mentioned a Tibetan saying, *'Tragedy should be utilized as a source of strength.'* No matter what sort of difficulties, how painful the experience is, if we lose our hope, that's our real disaster. This piece from the book played through my mind over and over again as I wept. I knew I could not lose hope.

I sat there weeping and reflecting until the sky grew dark and air grew cold and I started to shiver. Self-preservation kicked in and I quickly got up and began setting up camp. It was too wet for a fire and I was very cold. I heated some water on my camp stove inside the tent and brewed some tea to go with my MRE for the night. I didn't feel like eating but I went through the motions. I knew it was vital to my survival. It was cold and today I had hiked the most difficult terrain in the worst weather since I started this endeavor. My calories were expended; I was running on pure adrenalin.

I wrapped up in my sleeping bag and let the warm drink and food settle in. I left the camp stove burning to help warm me. I never did that because I wasn't a good judge of how long a canister of fuel would actually last. I was exhausted but I tried to read for a while before falling asleep. I had picked up a book at my last resupply stop. Stephen Jay Gould, *'The Mismeasure of Man'*. I only read for a few minutes before drifting into the soft fringes of sleep. As I glided into my subconscious I could smell the scent of ozone that accompanied the mountain rainstorm. I thought about a passage in the book. *"We pass through this world but once. Few tragedies can be more extensive than the stunting of life, few injustices deeper than the denial of an opportunity to strive or even to hope, by a limit imposed from without, but falsely identified as lying within."*

I woke the next morning feeling as if my AT adventure were coming to an end. By the time I arrived at my next stop in Damascus, Virginia I had hiked four hundred seventy miles of the AT's approximate 2,200 miles and spent over sixty days on the trail. I did not accomplish my goal of thru-hiking the AT, if it ever truly was a goal. An equally factual statement is that I succeeded in having an adventure, a retreat. It included all the challenge, logistical, physical, psychological, and emotional, that I was seeking. I walked through spectacular high mountain country; met some memorable characters, and became a traveling companion with at least one person who made me look at life in a more hopeful way.

The "failure" part of the trip involved losing my determination to continue the AT. Maybe I lost my will to die. As I took those first few steps onto the trail I didn't care if I live or died. Maybe the trail was my subconscious' way of saving me. As I walked through the forest I had no choice but to go through the motions of life. I walked. I set up camp. I slept. I ate. At the end of the day I was utterly spent. Barely

having the energy to cook dinner and lethargically consume a few mouthfuls of food. Going through the motions was the only choice I had out on the trail. It would have been too cold and miserable to die there. Plus my mother would have been ashamed. Not only because I was giving up on life but because my means of suicide would have been her beloved hiking.

Hiking as the weapon of my destruction I laughed. 'No mom, it actually probably saved my life,' I said to her as a tear escaped my eye. Although I was in no shape to complete the AT hike, I had been determined. At some points I did feel as if I might end up on a ranger's incident report. Serendipitously, I briefly met a former member of a search and rescue team during my time on the trail. I remember the worried look on his face as he turned to leave me at the shelter.

Life is difficult enough when tragedy strikes on a personal level. The loss of a loved one hits hard but the loss of all your loved ones, can bring a person to their breaking point. What do you do when your entire future dies? When the whole world has changed and you know that life will never be the same again. Not for me, not for my future children or for their children. How do you regain your bearings? How do you make a new start? I was put through a kind of test, and it's the only kind of test that really amounts to anything. When something tragic like this happens, we have our choices to make. You start to really be alive, or you start to die. That's all. There's nothing else. I chose to honor my family and live. I experienced tragedy fully. I have grown richer from having lived in the shadow of that tragedy and I chose to emerge transformed. Transformed into my own person with a future that is yet to be determined but it is definitely a future.

With the AT behind me, I was back in civilization, well kind of anyway. I checked into a hotel and asked about transportation to the nearest city. I was told that there was a Greyhound bus depot in Abingdon, Virginia. The clerk gave me information about a tourist bike rental business in town that provided shuttle rides to Abingdon for their customers; she suggested that I may be able to catch a ride with them. That's what I did. I paid for a bike rental and they shuttled me to the Greyhound bus station in Abingdon. From there I caught the Greyhound into Silver Springs, Maryland. Why Silver Springs? I don't know it was a choice on the list so I picked it.

This chapter of my life was over. I was uncertain where the next chapter would take me but I felt motivated in a way I hadn't in a very long time. I felt like a reader whose emotions were at the mercy of the author. Staying up all night to get through the next thrilling plot twist during a moment of edge of your seat drama. But what I realized at this moment was that the pen was in my hand. I was the author. At this moment I took my life back.

Author.

Back in the real world the frustrations crept back in. I was alone. I was still reeling from the aftermath of the funerals, insurance settlements, real estate sales, psychological counseling peppered with Prozac, Valium and Ambien. Yes, the dust had settled but I knew I still needed drastic change. I had to break free of all of the morbid memories that haunted me. The auctioneer sold everything other than a few

sentimental memorabilia that I had set aside. The realtor sold the house. And I made the decision to move across the country to a small coastal village in Maine.

I had received quite a bit of money after my family's death. I used some of the cash to buy fifty acres of land that backed up to mountains on one side of the house and broke off as cliffs that spilled into the Atlantic Ocean on the other. Most of the land was heavily treed and offered the seduction that made me feel in my element. The house was an old Victorian farm house that was originally built in the late 1700's. It had been carefully restored and updated into an elegant home that kept its historical charm but with modern comforts and sophistication. It was expensive but the one thing I had was money. And the one thing I knew, without a doubt, was that money did not buy happiness. I came to the decision to move to Maine a few weeks after I got off of the AT, while I was in Maryland.

I had always wanted to be a writer, but I knew that I was amongst a dwindling minority of youth who still preferred to read a book over watching a screen play. So instead I had opted to become a teacher. Of course because of the insurance settlement, my parent's property sales and life insurance I would never have to work, unless I was reckless or I just wanted to. At this time, I wasn't reckless and at this point I didn't want to work.

I had spent a few weeks in Maryland and Washington DC, recovering, eating well, shopping for clothes, a laptop and doing touristy things. It took me a while to figure out what my plan would be from here. I would buy a home and pay cash; there was no reason to stress myself with any complicated financing or mortgages. But where would I live? The world was my oyster so the saying goes. My home had to be in a quiet location, with four seasons. A location that inspired me. These days my inspiration was all about doom and gloom. The ocean inspired me, so did the mountains. Seclusion was important, no crowded cities or big towns. It came down to Washington State, Oregon or Maine. I had this nagging feeling it had to be Maine. So, Maine it was.

The next day I bought a plane ticket to Maine, rented a car and hired a realtor. I just happened to meet a realtor the first day I was in Maine. She was nice and attentive so I worked with her. I spent several weeks in Maine finding the perfect home. I ended up spending several more weeks in Maine going through the closing process. The realtor kept explaining that the process takes time but it would be quicker since we didn't need to involve a bank. It didn't matter to me; I had no place to be. While I was there I shopped for furniture and décor setting up future delivery dates. I spent a lot of time exploring and getting to know the area. I liked Maine, it was a good decision.

From Maine I flew back to Texas. I shopped for a vehicle and ended up buying a Jeep Wrangler. I hired movers to pack up the few belongings I had in the storage unit and said goodbye to my childhood hometown. I never intended on returning. I had no reason to. At some point we all have to grow up and leave our childhood behind, it was never easy but this felt right. My drive across country from Texas to my new home in Maine was liberating. I stopped along the way to purchase a journal and a camera. The journal was recommended by my 'shrink'. I felt like this would be a way to get back into writing, which was my true love. I didn't rush; I stopped frequently along the way to see the sights. My road trip lasted over a month. It was September twenty-eighth and Maine was gorgeous.

As I drove up the country road speckled with old farm houses to my new home I had a content feeling wash over me. I had been on the road for over a month and having a place to call home felt really good. It smelled green, like farms and flowers and newly cut grass. As I got closer to Old Foundry Rd there was a fresh salty smell in the air from the ocean. I made the turn onto the tree lined gravel driveway and the smell of pine overtook me. The sun was warm and bright, the grass was green, the ocean blue and I was home.

On the first night in my new home, darkness fell early over the fall sky. Emptiness settled in where joy should have been. This was my first step towards independence and transformation into my new life. I lay quietly on my pallet by the fireplace looking outside at the bright stars against the dark sky. The vast beauty of it renewed my belief in the possibility of heaven. Later that night I awoke to a low burning ember on the fire. There was a constant whooshing sound of rain and wind outside of the window. It wasn't really cold enough for a fire but I wanted one anyhow. I pulled the comforter over my head but it still took what seemed like hours to fall back to sleep. When the rain finally settled into a quieter drizzle my eyes grew heavy and sleep overcame me.

I had notified the stores of my arrival date as my road trip came to an end. They set up delivery times for the things I had purchased during the summer. The furniture started arriving early the next morning, and continued throughout the week. The movers arrived from Texas the first week of October. Boxes began to be unpacked and the house started to feel like home. It was my home, not a collage of old memories that drug me down and kept me in a constant state of melancholia. The feeling of a new beginning started to creep in. An old photo album from my former life sat in the bottom of a box. I was afraid to touch it, for fear of opening a Pandora's box of sadness and pain that would again take hold ripping away the fragile layer of optimism that had crept into my soul. Eventually I found a place for it on a bookshelf, still unopened, happiness was safe for now.

After several long nights of unpacking I awoke up to a beautiful brisk fall morning. I decided to go explore my property. Cliffs or Mountains? I still had some unpacking to do and really didn't have proper hiking attire so I opted to explore the cliffs. My former hiking attire had been quickly disposed of once I was off the AT. I did have my running shoes and yoga pants and that was enough for a small adventure out on the trail.

I had ocean views from my home, so the cliff line was an easy stroll approximately fifty yards straight out my front door. As I approached the cliffs I was amazed at the sharp drop down to the rocky edge where the ocean met the boulders. It had to be forty feet down. Disappointed at the lack of access to the water, I began to follow the cliff further east into the thick tree coverage. My land was adjunction to state land so it was public access. The walk through the dense trees was beautiful. The trees would occasionally open up to views of the ocean and cliffs. The sound of waves breaking below was ever present. The trees were full of color and the ground crunched beneath my feet. The air was brisk and made me feel alive. It was quiet except for the sounds of the ocean and nature that surrounded me. I found comfort in this.

I came to a cliff that extended out over the water. I climbed over a few fallen trees into the clearing and sat at the edge of the bluff, watching the water. In the distance I could see a water spout from a whale. I finished an apple and sipped on a power drink, losing track of time as my thoughts wandered. How my mother would have loved it here. I felt so connected to my mom right now, more than I had felt since my family's death. Every time I hiked I felt a connection to her, she so loved the outdoors. I had obviously come to feel joined with nature through her so it made sense that I felt my mother's presence in this beautiful secluded spot. As I worked to fight back tears a voice startled me back into reality. I was so alarmed that my heart skipped a beat before speeding up. I turned but could only make out the outline of a person standing in line with the late morning sun. As he walked closer my eyes came into focus.

"Chloe is that you?" questioned a familiar male voice. I was confused. The person's silhouette was still washed out by the bright sun behind him. Why would the voice be familiar to me? I really didn't know a soul, especially in Maine. I stood up and was face to face with Caleb.

"Hey stranger," Caleb beamed revealing that beautiful toothpaste commercial smile. I was shocked and a bit confused. Yet still very happy to see someone that I had an association with, no matter how minimal and insignificant that connection might be.

"Are you following me?" I laughed going in for a hug. Caleb's arms were strong around me and the human contact felt very nice. Caleb had an athletic muscular build, but not bulky, trim, he was perfect.

"Following you? I live here. My family has owned property here since at least the 1700's. I was just out for a run when fate brought me back to an old friend." The way he looked at me with his soft eyes and playful grin gave me chills.

God Chloe, don't be so desperate! I thought. But I was desperate. Desperate for companionship for friendship, even for as simple an act as a kind word. I fought off chills. Caleb continued to talk and ask questions and surprisingly once again the conversation flowed. I never wanted today to end. Eventually Caleb rose to his feet. He seemed taller than I thought when I first met him.

"Well, it has absolutely been my pleasure meeting a kindred spirit out here in the middle of nowhere. Could I expect another chance meeting say, tomorrow around 10:00? Weather permitting." The words rolled off his tongue followed by a toothy smile, which caused me to smile.

"Ok it's a date," I said kicking myself the minute the words rolled out of my mouth. Before I could correct myself Caleb winked and was gone through the trees. I felt faintly nauseated over my stupid date comment, insinuating that Caleb wanted a date rather than he was just being friendly.

On my way to the house the rain moved back in and the wind picked up making the temperature drop significantly. I zipped my jacket up to my chin and wrapped my arms around myself. The rain continued throughout the night and into the next day.

As I stepped out on the porch the wind struck my body with the force of a rogue wave striking an unsuspecting swimmer in the ocean. It was bone chilling and the rain pelted me like shards of ice. I

couldn't hike in this weather so I sat at home sulking about my missed 'date' with Caleb. The rain continued another miserable two days. It finally began to back off and the sun peeked out from behind the clouds.

It was still cold but I was determined to complete the journey I had set out on days earlier. My destination must have been two miles each way. When I finally got to the opening on the cliff, it seemed like a haven. The rain had stopped and a beam of sun broke through the clouds, cutting across the trees and providing much welcomed warmth. As I stood there, waiting, the realization set in that Caleb was not going to come. There was no way for him to know that I would be here. My mood dampened to sadness. I found a dry rock and sat down, staring blankly out over the ocean, until I became so cold that I began to tremble. I decided to head back to the house; fighting back tears the entire way. I was kicking myself for being so disappointed. I felt stupid. Back at home I pulled my damp hair up into a ponytail and decided to start writing in my journal. I wrote about my disappointment and then I wrote about Caleb and soon I was four pages in and I felt much better.

I made it a habit to start jogging the two mile trail to the cliff where I had met Caleb. Each morning I jogged there at the same time of the day. The same time we met there. I would sit on the cliff for at least an hour, and then run home. It was good exercise and the hope of running into Caleb again was great motivation. October turned to November and the trees turned from yellow to red to brown, eventually losing their leaves altogether. This added a spooky element to the wooded pathway. I really loved my time on the trail, genuinely, even after giving up hope of running into Caleb ever again. I eventually began to expand my running territory to include different trails, deeper into the forest or a further stretch along the cliffs. I continued my runs because it gave me an opportunity to clear my mind and it certainly helped ease my depression.

Mid November came along with the first snow, a light dusting. I couldn't wait to see what wonderland awaited me on my beautiful trail. It was not disappointing. The woods were transformed under the layer of fresh snow. I could see my breath in puffs of white clouds, as the crisp winter air immediately froze my cheeks. Everything looked brighter with the snow. I took the trail slower, not used to traversing snow covered terrain. Texas rarely got snow; in fact winter lasted little more than a month most years. Snow was like a fairytale. It reminded me of Christmas, my favorite Holiday. As I approached 'my' cliff, my heart began to speed up. I could make out the shape of a person standing in the opening between the bare trees. I immediately knew it was Caleb as I burst through the horizontal trees into the clearing.

Caleb turned and again I was mesmerized by his gorgeous face. Dark eyes under thick dark lashes peered back at me. His pale face sported slightly rosy cheeks, obviously chaffed from the chilling wind. His windswept mane kept in place under a black knit hat. His dark eyes sparkled as a smile spread across his face.

"Hey stranger, you're a little late for our date," He laughed. I instantly felt embarrassed again by the 'date' comment long ago. If he only knew that I had been here practically every day since, hoping to see him.

Conversation picked up like we were old friends. After two hours had flown by, Caleb stood up, swiftly and gracefully. I was desperate to hang on to the moment, afraid that Caleb would slip away forever.

I blurted, "Would you like to come over for dinner this weekend?" Immediately I felt my cheeks heat up with embarrassment. I tried to remember if he had mentioned a girlfriend, but I knew he hadn't. A lump rose into my throat and I felt like I was going to faint right there in front of him.

Caleb shot me a smile and a simple, "Ok."

Relief immediately washed over me, easing the tightness in my chest and opening up my throat. "Saturday say six?" I asked, then began to tell him my address, "I live..."

Caleb interrupted and in his low attractive voice said, "I know where you live. Welcome to small town Maine." Again he smiled. I wondered what I had gotten myself into. I had no idea how to entertain a man alone at my house.

I floated back home with the knowledge that I was turning the page to the next chapter in my new life. I'm not even sure how Caleb managed to come into my life, not once but twice. Sometimes you have to accept certain things that cannot be explained. I knew I was falling for him. I was not doing anything intentionally but even so it was happening. It was like being caught in a riptide and carried out to sea. Instead of fighting the riptide and being pulled under to my certain death I had chosen to ride it out. So here I was floating in the tide, peacefully and willingly being pulled out to sea. This riptide could eventually save my life and bring me back to shore or it could pull me so far out into the sea that I might never manage to make it back. My future was now in the hands of a riptide named Caleb, with tender eyes and the most mesmerizing smile I had ever seen. For the first time in over two years I truly hoped I wouldn't drown.

Riptide

I spent the next two days googling recipes, buying dishes and cookware and downloading romantic classics onto my laptop. At times I thought I might be going overboard but then I would rationalize by telling myself that I needed all of these things anyway. By Friday evening I was very proud of myself for pulling it all together so nicely. At the very least I had created a casual and slightly romantic ambiance.

Friday night was tough. The house was clean and put together, although still quite bare. The table was set. An easy yet suitable first date meal of stuffed chicken breast was pre-prepared in the refrigerator. I didn't like chicken but I didn't want Caleb to think I was strange so I would eat a little for show. I was also making an attractive green salad that would hold me over. I had bought a nice red wine that the clerk at the liquor store had recommended. Just in case I also had sparkling water and beer on hand. I personally wasn't a huge fan of wine either but it seemed like most people enjoyed a glass of wine with dinner especially at social events.

I decided to take a melatonin to help me sleep but it had been nearly two hours and I was still wide awake. I was plagued with anxiety. I tossed and turned and finally rolled over to see that it was nearly two in the morning. I had to go to sleep! Then I remembered the Ambien in my bathroom medicine cabinet. OK desperate times call for desperate measures. I swallowed the little white sleeping pill and fell back into bed. Sleep still did not come easily. I continued to toss and turn until the medication took over and pushed me through the wake-sleep veil and I was out. My alarm went off at eight. I always set the alarm. I could have easily fallen back into the lazy, sleeping all day, gloom that had nearly choked the life out of me last year. The psychiatrist suggested a set schedule. It really did help. I snoozed the alarm a couple of times but finally succumb to the day and rose out of bed.

I dressed and attempted to eat a bowl of cereal with almond milk. After cleaning up I headed out for my morning run. It was a brisk, sunny morning. I was layered up appropriately but the sting of the frigid morning air still nipped at my cheeks. Each time I hiked or ran I always hoped I would bump into Caleb. Today I ran hard. Taking a new route at one point, getting turned around and losing my return path home. I did that often. Today it was probably because my mind was wandering, fantasizing about tonight. Several different scenarios ran through my head from sweet and romantic to romantic and sultry. I wasn't sure what I was expecting or what I wanted for that matter, as long as it was good and Caleb remained in my life. I finally arrived back home, out of breath and exhausted but also excited about seeing Caleb.

The rest of the day went by very slowly. Around four I showered and dressed for dinner. Caleb had seen me at my very worst. Hiking or running in my most casual clothes. On the AT I hadn't showered for a week when we met. Tonight I wanted him to see me at least casually nice. I fixed my hair into loose playful curls and picked out a flirty black dress and flats. I usually wore flats anyway because I was already so tall. Caleb was at least 6'2" so if the need ever arose I could get away with wearing heels around him. The fireplace was burning and soft music was barely audible in the background. It got dark around four-thirty these days. I flipped the front porch light on and sat down to wait. I poured a glass of wine and sipped on it. Yep, I still didn't care for wine. I was just hoping it would calm my nerves and it definitely gave a better impression than drinking a beer.

A few minutes before six the doorbell rang. More excitedly than I intended I flung the door open. Caleb stood there smiling. In his hand he held a small bouquet of giant sunflowers and Texas bluebonnets.

"Hi beautiful," he smiled and handed me the flowers. He looked delicious standing there in a V-neck navy blue sweater, under a brown leather jacket. His hair was unruly as always. But that look fit him. He had this sexy dark shadow beard and mustache that supported his strong chin. It was messy but well-shaped, looking a little scruffier than the typical five o'clock shadow. He pulled his facial hair off without a flaw, looking like a man who just had too much testosterone coursing through his veins to ever get a decent shave.

"Beautiful," I said, not clarifying whether I was speaking about the flowers or Caleb, I think both. It was very thoughtful to have brought flowers. I loved Sunflowers and Blue bonnets. "Come in." I stepped aside clearing a path for him. I got Caleb comfortable on the couch, offered him a glass of wine then

excused myself to the kitchen. I put the flowers in a mason jar and started the chicken cooking. Afterwards I joined him on the couch. We chatted about the area, the trails, the mountains and the ocean. Caleb was a lifelong resident of the area and he seemed to have detailed knowledge about the best places to explore. He was also a world traveler and a historian. Before I knew it our food was ready and we moved our conversation to the dinner table. I brought out a bottle of sparkling water and poured us each another glass of wine. I think the wine was helping to facilitate conversation, at least on my behalf.

We sat at the dinner table well after we were finished eating, continuing to talk. After our meal the conversation turned more serious. I had never spoken of my family to Caleb. As we sat there with candles flickering and lights low, wine and conversation flowed easily. I asked Caleb about his home and family. Caleb's face took on a solemn tone as he told me that he was the sole living member of his immediate family. He was an only child whose parents had died several years ago, his mother in an accident and his father of an illness. He was aware of some distant relatives around but he had no contact with them. The wine and conversation were making me tired but I was exhilarated at the same time.

Eventually Caleb and I moved back over to the couch. It was very comfortable sitting there in front of the fire listening to Caleb talk. At one point he put his arm around me. It provided me a coziness that I hadn't felt for many years. When I was young and my parents would wrap their arms around me in a gesture of comfort, that's how I felt. I could feel the warmth of his arm spreading across my neck and shoulders. Along with it came the most delightful drowsiness, and before I knew it I fell blissfully asleep against his shoulder.

I awoke to the sun beaming down across my face. I was laid out carefully on the couch with a throw blanket covering me. I smiled and covered my face with my hands. I couldn't believe I had fallen asleep. I guess the restless night before had caught up with me. Caleb had obviously left at some point during the night. I was sad for that but I still felt good about my evening with Caleb. I sat up to see my shoes neatly placed together at the edge of the couch. There was a piece of paper on the coffee table. I picked it up.

Chloe,

I had a great time last night, especially the part where I got to watch you sleep :) you do that so beautifully. Anyway, I eventually got tired myself and headed home. I was hoping it would be okay if I brought dinner by this evening around 5:00. Hopefully this isn't too presumptuous as you said you didn't know anyone else in Maine.

Respectfully,

Caleb

Caleb had beautiful handwriting, it almost looked like calligraphy. I glanced at the clock; it was nearly ten in the morning. I cleaned the kitchen and dining room and sat down to update my journal. It was too cold to run today, or maybe I was making excuses. I decided a nice pair of yoga pants and University

sweatshirt were appropriate for a takeout food second date. I did fix my hair and put on a bit of mascara, I didn't want to downplay it too much.

The doorbell rang at five. Caleb stood there wearing jeans and a sweater and his erotic brown leather jacket. OK, the jacket wasn't erotic but jeez it looked very good on him. His cheeks were pink tinged from the cold weather. This time he held a pizza box in front of him.

"You hungry babe? Cause I'm starved." Then that beautiful smile flashed across his face. I stepped aside attempting to avoid swooning at Caleb calling me babe. We sat on the rug in front of the fireplace with glasses of wine and pizza. Again talking late into the night. With the pizza box long gone we lay in front of the dying fire, facing each other, eyes growing heavy. I had shed my sweatshirt for a tee shirt. Caleb lifted his hand and ran his fingertips up my arm and up the side of my neck, his thumb gently rubbing the lobe of my ear. He scooted closer to me. A tickle grew in my stomach and gooseflesh covered my arms. Caleb's other hand found its way to the small of my back and pulled me gently towards him. I could feel his breath on my neck, ever so lightly as he kissed me. I could feel the warm air travel down the neck of my shirt. My nipples responded to the warmth, tightening up into erect sensitive mounds.

"Is this ok?" Caleb asked sounding slightly out of breath as he continued to gently kiss my neck moving up towards my lips.

"Yes," I whispered, also sounding breathless. I wasn't sure yet if I wanted this to lead to full on love making but the kisses, caresses and cuddling felt enthralling. I felt safe with Caleb. His hand found its way to the hem of my tee-shirt and I could feel his bare palm against the curve of my waist. His touch was soft and warm and lingered there. He moved slowly, almost as if sudden movement might startle me away. When his kisses found my lips his warm breath tasted sweet and the light probing of his tongue was welcomed. His hips pressed against mine. He was erect and I could feel the hardness brush against my upper thigh through our clothing. I wanted this to continue but the rational side of me took over and I slowly began to come to my senses.

"Caleb, I'm sorry," I whispered. Caleb immediately stopped and pulled away.

"No, I'm sorry. I guess I got carried away." He sat up pulling his hair back out of his face with his right hand. He looked younger, more vulnerable in the pale light of the fire. He gently took my hand and kissed it. "Should I leave?" He asked, almost pleading for me to say no.

"Please don't." I quickly responded. "Don't go."

"Ok," he smiled, that smile always melted my heart. Caleb laid back down beside me, draping one arm around my waist, resting his head on the other.

"You know I've never done this before?" I said softly, embarrassed.

"Done what?" Caleb asked. *Oh. My. Gosh!* Was he was going to make me say it. Did he not know or was he messing with me?

"Oh!" He said suddenly, "*That!*" A crooked grin spread across his face.

"Well, that presents a problem," Caleb said sitting back up, rubbing his chin. A wrinkle suddenly appeared between his eyebrows. My stomach dropped with disappointment. His grin was still there though. "I was hoping one of us would know what to do if the opportunity presented itself." Caleb said softly, with a huge grin on his face. I wasn't sure if he was joking in attempt to lighten the mood or if he was making a serious comment.

He positioned himself behind me and slid his arms back around me. We lay cuddling in front of the fire. He was facing my back. I felt so comfortable and safe in this position but I hated not being able to see his face. My mind was reeling from his statement. Could what he said be true? Was he a virgin too? No way, he was way too handsome and social and every woman's dream. I lay there debating whether or not he was teasing me or serious. We continued to talk but not about that.

Caleb had a way of making me feel special. He provoked me to talk and share my feelings, my past. I even found myself talking about my parents with him, without hurting. We eventually fell asleep and I woke up in his arms. We gently kissed goodbye with plans for him to return again for dinner. He had a farm over the mountain and had chores to attend to during the day. On the weekends we hiked the trails, explored the mountains that were still winter accessible by snow shoeing, and generally spent all our spare time together. This became routine over the next few weeks. Caleb could talk about philosophy, religion, history, culture, literature or anything else that I brought up. He was blessed with intelligence and outstanding looks. I had fallen completely and irrevocably in love with Caleb. He had filled an emptiness in my heart. He provided something that had been missing. He had taken away the loneliness that the death of my family had left. He had given me purpose, something to look forward to ... a reason to look forward to life.

Christmas was beautiful, romantic. Caleb brought decorations and put lights up on the trail head by my home. Together we cut down a Christmas tree and dragged it back to the house on a sled. I pulled out old family decorations and placed them on the tree. I baked and played Christmas music and awaited Caleb's arrival each evening. Finally there was a night in December by the fire where we first made love. The Christmas tree lights glowed in the corner. The fireplace was warm and inviting and Caleb was patient, kind and gentle. It wasn't clumsy or awkward like I expected.

Afterwards I lay there looking at the luminosity of Caleb's skin in the fireplace light. My hands softly drifted to my lips as I remembered the feel of his kiss. A smile that I couldn't contain came from within. I thought about his kisses exploring my body. His touch lingered in places that made my spine tingle. I could almost still feel him, hands on my hips, my back, on the inside of my thigh. I lay back on the pillow, feeling content in life. Was this happiness? Somehow I had managed to climb out of the depths of despair to this. I closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep. Not a care in the world.

Awakening

Caleb and I grew closer over the next several months. We talked a lot; we made plans for the future. We made love frequently and passionately and life began to come together. I was writing again and I was hopeful. I had never been someone whose life was defined by the man she was dating. I didn't need anyone else to give my life meaning. In a past life a boyfriend wouldn't have been a game changer at all. But this wasn't a previous life and maybe it wasn't the boyfriend aspect of things at all, but Caleb did give me a reason to go on.

Once again I had a human connection with the world. I had someone to care about me and for me to care about. As much as I wanted to make those changes on my own I couldn't. I would make progress only to be sucked back down into the dark grip of depression once again. Yes, I still missed them. I cried less. A lot less. I had even thought a few times about putting out photos of them but hadn't taken that step yet. I wasn't sure if I was ready for a daily reminder.

At times I vaguely noticed that Caleb had a way of evading conversations about himself. I usually realized this in retrospect. I decided that the next time we were together I would ask him more direct questions about his family, his farm, maybe even ask to visit his home. Six months together and I had never even been to his house. I felt like I knew him completely but I was missing some vital pieces of the puzzle. The problem was that those pieces never seemed to matter when we were together.

One day in May I woke up tired and nauseated. I had slept until one o'clock in the afternoon. Later in the day the illness subsided and I was ravenous. I was still somewhat exhausted by the time that Caleb arrived. Being too far out for any food delivery, I had managed to drag myself out and drive into town for pizza. That night I fell asleep in Caleb's arms to wake up in the morning alone. This was our typical routine.

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entire life, as did a large percentage of the county's population.

"Sheriff, I know this sounds strange but I am here to report that a friend of mine is missing." I swallowed hard, choosing my words carefully in an attempt to avoid sounding certifiably crazy. "I moved here a few months ago and since then I have become very dear friends with Caleb Frasier. He was supposed to be out of town for a few days but he should have returned Thursday. I expected him to stop by that night but now it's Sunday and I haven't heard from him. I am very worried"

"Frasier huh? Where does Caleb live?" The Sheriff seemed to be taking my concern seriously, at least for now.

"Well sheriff we hike together along the cliffs out by my house. And he walks to meet me there, so it has to be walking distance from my home, which is on Old Foundry Rd." I stammered. The sheriff smiled at me kindly, I assume because he was probably well aware as to where I resided.

"Does Caleb have a phone?" He asked.

"No." I answered, then quickly added, "But neither do I." I felt the need to explain that not all people had phones and I wasn't just some off my rocker out of town stirring up trouble.

"Yep, a lot of folks in this part of the state don't necessarily have phones, but the youngun's usually do." The sheriff nodded to himself. "Well Miss Chloe, I don't reckon I know a Caleb Frasier and I know most the folks in these parts. I was even aware of you. I haven't gotten any reports of major accidents with fatalities on the highways this week." The Sheriff got up and yelled into the next room, "Charlie, you know any Frasier's that live up around Old Foundry Rd?"

"There's the old Frasier property up off of County Road 28 but I don't think anyone lives there. As far as I know it's been abandoned for as long as I can remember. Some type of probate situation." Charlie answered back. I made a mental note of the address.

"Well Miss Chloe, I will do some checkin' around and if I find anything I will let you know." He shoved his arm out to me. I took his hand and shook it firmly. I doubted anything would come out of this visit with the sheriff. I felt hopeless.

That night I fell into a restless sleep. In the middle of the night I awoke to Caleb sitting on the bed next to me. I sat up and hugged him tightly. Tears were streaming down my face.

"Oh Caleb, I was so worried about you," I cried.

"I'm sorry," he said simply. "Please forgive me." I felt him trembling.

"We will talk in the morning," He said climbing into bed, wrapping his arms around me. "I'm exhausted."

Caleb was back with me again and I felt safe. But there was still a vague sense of injury and restraint on my part; things were far from healed between us. I forgave him for now but the memory of his disappearance, the lies and stories still hung tight in my memory, not to be easily forgotten. For the time being I would enjoy the warmth of his body and the safety of his arms around me, knowing he was alive. Tomorrow there would be time for explanations.

Without a Trace.

My alarm went off at eight the next morning. I could smell Caleb on the pillow next to mine, could still feel the warmth of his arms around my waist. With a smile I sleepily turned over to reach for him and found that the bed was empty. I sat up to try and clear my head. Was I dreaming or had Caleb been here last night? I concentrated on the memory. Of course he was here! I told myself, tears running down my cheeks. An uneasy resonating feeling in my stomach told me that Caleb had not been in my bed and I had dreamt it all. The hollow feeling in my gut turned to nausea and I followed my daily routine of running to the bathroom to vomit.

After recovering from the bout of nausea, I took some tea and toast to settle my stomach. Later that morning I drove to County Road 28 where the deputy had said the Frasier property was located. There were a few old farm houses; any one of them could have been occupied or abandoned. They were all old and showing their age. I had no idea what I was thinking coming out here.

There was a farmer out driving his tractor. I thought about asking him but I didn't want to disturb his work. What would he think about a crazy woman running across the field flagging him down on his tractor? I shook my head at the thought. I drove slowly past several mailboxes scanning the names. Then I noticed an elderly man in coveralls walking towards the road. I decided to stop and ask him if he knew the Frasier's.

I pulled my Jeep across the road from his driveway and stepped out. "Excuse me sir," I said, feeling a little uneasy approaching a stranger. "I was wondering if you know where the Frasier farm is?"

"Frasier farm?" He repeated looking confused.

"Yes sir, I am looking for Caleb Frasier." I said.

The old man raised his eyebrows at my statement. "Well Miss, there is a Frasier property that has been under some kind of probate for about 100 years," he laughed and pointed further down the road. "No one lives there but the lawyers pay for the upkeep. It's about four miles down at the end of the road, backs up to the ocean. Nice piece of property, one of these days some family member is gone get rich off it. That's 'iffin they can't ever get it out of the lawyers hands."

"Do you know the family or how I can get into contact with them?" I asked almost pleading.

He shook his head slowly. "Naw, that's the trouble. They can't find no family. The last of 'em died off early 1900's. I guess the lawyers keepin' it in trust until someone comes forward. Old Ernie Griffin is the caretaker, I guess he knows the most about the state of affairs with that place. He lives in the house out back. He's prolly around if you wanna go speak to him. He's a nice enough fella."

"Ok thank you sir. I appreciate your time." I waved goodbye as I crawled up into my Jeep. I planned on making a bee-line to visit old Ernie Griffin.

I drove to the end of the road and found the house. Well it was more like an Estate. Beautiful but a bit weathered. The lawn was tidy and you could tell that someone was caring for the place. From the location it looked like the cliff trails by my home would eventually lead to this property, if you followed them far enough. I never had but thought I might check it out sometime. I drove up the driveway and parked at the edge of the front porch. There was a pickup truck out back but no other vehicles. I went up to the front door of the main house and knocked. No answer. Knocked again. No answer. I was on my way down the front steps to inquire at the caretaker's quarters when the front door screeched open. Startled I swung around. There was a man standing in the door, holding the screen open.

"Can I help you?" His voice was deep and his speech was slow. His skin was weathered with deep wrinkles. He was wearing a Green John Deer ball cap and a paint splattered plaid shirt with the top button undone, exposing a crisp white undershirt. His wrangler brand carpenter jeans were faded and sported a hammer hanging in the loop on the right thigh. I realized I had never seen that loop actually used for a practical purpose.

"Hello sir, I was looking for Caleb Frasier." I said startled. I had given up on anyone answering the door at this point.

The old man looked me up and down, skeptically.

"I spoke to one of the neighbors down the road; h-he said I would find you here. Are you Mr. Griffin?" I asked hopefully.

He slowly nodded his head, "Yep that's me, but just Ernie's fine."

"I'm Chloe Jamison, I recently moved into a home over on Old Foundry Rd. I was just wondering if this is where Caleb Frasier lives?"

"Caleb Frasier, hmmm?" Ernie removed his hat exposing a deep crease across his forehead where the ball cap had rested. His hair was pure white. I thought he must be at least eighty, maybe older. He used a handkerchief to wipe the sweat from his brow then placed the ball cap back on his head. I nodded. "Well ma'am, there's nobody lives here, I'm the caretaker, I live out back thar'." Ernie pointed down the road that lead towards the back of the house. "Caleb is a Frasier family name but that line's done run its course."

"Are you sure sir? This is extremely important. I seen Caleb just a week ago and he told me he lived over this way. I don't know where exactly he meant but I know it was walking distance to my house. I really need to find Caleb sir." I knew I was coming off as desperate but I was desperate.

"Ma'am those fancy attorneys down in Portland been lookin' for a Frasier blood kin for as long as I kin 'member, and I may be old but I still got a good memory." Ernie smiled. "There's no other Frasier line 'round these parts that I know of. My pappy and grand pappy were both caretakers for the Frasier's so I think I'd know if there were any Frasier's round here. I was just a bit confused thou cause you called out the name Caleb and that was a Frasier family name like I tol' ya before."

I started to cry. I couldn't help it. Maybe the stress and hormones caught up with me but there was no holding back the tears.

"I'm sorry ma'am, I didn't mean to go upsettin' ya. Maybe sum'un playin games wit' ya? Come inside I'll give ya a drink o' cold water. I got them Poland Spring bottles in the cooler for when I'm workin'."

I followed him inside. He moved swiftly and with ease, maybe he was younger than I thought?

"Thank you sir. I'm sorry I broke down like that; I'm just really worried about my friend. He's been missing almost a week now." He handed me a bottle of cold water from a small igloo cooler. The label was wet and loose and slid off into my hand as I took it. I was thirsty so I twisted the cap off and took a drink. "This is a lovely home." I said looking around at the well-kept interior. There was striking crown molding everywhere I looked. The inside of the home was immaculate, both in upkeep and décor.

"They call it Georgian architecture. The attorney's put money into it each year; I guess that's what the trust tells 'em to do so they do it. They also keep payin' me to do the upkeep 'round here. Guess they'll keep doin' dat until the money runs out." He said looking around the room in admiration. "I think that'll be awhile thou, the Frasier's always had a grip of money from what pappy tol' me"

"Since I'm here do you mind showing me around? It's such a beautiful place." I could tell Ernie took tremendous pride in his job so I figured he wouldn't mind showing it off. We walked through each room slowly, Ernie pointing out the art, furniture, floors and décor. Everything seemed to be original time-period pieces. There were many family portraits hanging on the walls, very beautiful people, all with serious faces, dark hair, dark eyed, fair skinned. We turned left down the hallway at the top of the staircase and I stopped dead in my tracks.

"Ma'am you OK? Your colors done left your face! Ma'am?" I felt Ernie's strong rough hands grab my shoulders to offer support. He steadied me until I recovered.

"Who is that?" I asked pointing to an exquisitely framed portrait of a young man. He was striking in what appeared to be a riding suit and jacket. He had fair skin and dark eyes that peered out from under thick black lashes, the man wore a very familiar smile.

Next to this painting was the portrait of a stunning young woman, in a flowing dress with flowers in her hair. She wore a heart amulet on a chain around her neck. She looked tranquil. Very different from all the other more formal, prim and proper women's portraits throughout the estate.

"Well ma'am that's the thing. You were askin' bout a Caleb Frasier, that's the only Caleb Frasier I be knowin' of. That's his momma there next to him and his pappy next to her, he was also called Caleb. But this young man here died early so the namesake died wit' him I'm pretty sure. Old man Caleb didn't have no other chil'rens the way I understand it. To hear the story told old man Caleb's wife was a witch. When she los' her only child she went crazy, lost her mind right along with her boy. They say that's part of the reason the family gone barren and can't have no more chil'rens. That's why this house sits empty to this day. That woman put some kinda hex on 'em. I dunno but that's what my pappy and grand pappy tol' me. Thoughts of her used to give me nightmares as a chil'." Ernie said shaking off what appeared to be a shiver. "This place is haunted to this day."

I moved closer to the portrait. My God this could be Caleb, my Caleb! He was the spitting image minus the facial hair. My Caleb had to be related. "Sir I don't mean to question what you told me but this Caleb looks exactly like the Caleb that I am looking for, they have to be related. Are you sure there are no other family members in the area?"

Ernie was shaking his head. "Nope. No ma'am, I'd know'd it if thar' was."

I didn't know what to say. I continued to study the portrait to the point where Ernie started to worry about me again. I couldn't take my eyes away. Finally I succumb to the fact that the portrait wasn't going to help me find Caleb so I forced myself to move on. "Ernie, when did the Caleb in this portrait die, do you know?"

"Well yes and no. I don't rightly recall the exact date but I knows where to find it. I see's it all the time when I'm out back carin' for the lawn. It's etched on the tombstone out back in the family plot. I do recall it's in the late 1700's, he was a young fella, I recall that too." Ernie was forthcoming in answering my questions. He didn't seem to mind and he wasn't rushing me. He probably didn't get many visitors and maybe he didn't mind the company.

"Do you mind if I visit the grave, just for a few minutes. It's more out of curiosity now that I've seen the house. I promise I won't keep you much longer." I pleaded, but I don't think it was necessary, Ernie readily agreed to show me the Frasier family plot.

We were able to walk back to the family graveside. It was approximately five hundred yards away from the back entrance. I looked around for the caretaker's house but it was too far away to actually see from where I was. The land parcel must have been huge. I thought it must be quite a burden for just one

elderly man to care for on his own. It was well maintained though so he surly had some help or he was very efficient. I assumed the latter.

The plot was a lot larger than I thought it would be. Ernie pointed out Caleb's headstone. Caleb Michael Frasier Born October 10, 1740. Laid to Rest December 14, 1763. There was a very faded inscription that looked like it may have been written in another language, I couldn't make it out. I stood there frozen. How could these men who look so much alike share the same exact full name and day of birth, two hundred and fifty years apart?

"Is sumthin' wrong ma'am?" Ernie broke my trance. His eyebrows creased and he looked at me with concern. Maybe I had lost track of time and was standing there longer than I thought.

"No." I shook my head. "No sir. I won't take any more of your time. Thank you very much for showing me around." I extended my arm and took his hand, pumped it once in the attempt at a handshake. "You've been very kind." I said as I rushed towards my Jeep. I recognized the need to get out of there, escape. A faint hint of a panic attack was coming on.

I felt as if I may faint and I didn't want to trouble this old man any more than I already had. I walked straight to the passenger side of my vehicle and vomited violently. I was thankful for the water Ernie had given me. The water was warm now but it was nice to be able to rinse my mouth out. I felt better once I was able to sit in the Jeep for a few minutes. I cranked the air conditioner to its highest and coldest setting and sat there allowing the air to blow directly into my face. I wasn't sure what happened or why I had such a violent reaction to the portrait and the grave. This obviously wasn't the Caleb that I was seeking but it was just extremely odd how much they resembled each other. And then to see the shared name and birthday was almost too much to process. It pushed me over my threshold. I was at my limit of weird coincidences for the day.

The stress had gotten to me and I felt exhausted. I badly needed to rest. I drove back to my house, brushed my teeth and lay down to rest. My body was on downtime but my mind wouldn't shut off. I wasn't sure what else I could do. I had searched the county record online and found nothing. I had been to the Sheriff. I had wandered around the countryside looking for Caleb's home, even talked to the locals. I'm sure everyone I encountered thought I was insane.

Trepidation rose in my chest, I felt as if I couldn't breathe. The weight of the day's events had caught up with me. I rubbed a wet washcloth over my face, still feeling faint and dizzy. My knees trembled and I grasped the edge of the sink. I lowered myself onto the tile floor and sat cross-legged trying to get my bearings. I felt the despair I had relentlessly battled against for the past two years slowly creep into my chest to rear its ugly head. I wondered if I had the will to fight this battle yet again. I felt numb from exhaustion and the shock of recent events. How stupid I was to have believed that it may be conceivable for me to look at the world around me new with possibility. I was a fool. And once again I was alone.

Something Wicked this Way Comes.

I shivered in the cold wind, hugging myself as I stared out over the open ocean. I tried to force all emotion from my thoughts and use reason to reflect upon the past year. Rationality did not seem to be helping much. I turned to emotion, and began, stepping up to the task of reconstructing the details of my time with Caleb. The only outcome of this was to leave me shattered and weeping, tears forming icy trails down my cheeks, with no more understanding than what I started with.

I stood there reflecting upon the past, remembering several pivotal events in my life. Events that resulted of my own choices, and events that just happened, they were no one's doing, they just were. Everything came together to create the tapestry of my life, good bad and indifferent. I was here because I was supposed to be here. That's the only way this made sense to me.

It had grown darker. As the evening stars began to glow among the dark pine branches, I concluded that I was cursed. It was the only explanation. There was no logic to it. I could tear myself to shreds trying to make sense of this but I had other things to worry about right now. I had more pressing issues to contemplate. At last my tears were spent. I tore myself away from the cold ocean breeze and went to bed where I lay exhausted unable to sleep.

I had vacillated between ambivalence and desire for this child in my womb for nearly a month now. There had been so much loss in my life how could I willingly and purposefully open the door to more loss. I guess it was never really a choice. That night as I lay in bed, feeling lost in despair and loneliness I suddenly realized ... I wasn't alone. I would never be alone again. I had found my answer. My hope. The key to the future was in my hands all along. I was just too caught up in my grief to grasp it. At that very moment I realized how much I would love this baby.

Each morning the nausea had come on strong and swift. When I was hit with certain smells I felt a catch in my throat and I fought off waves of queasiness. My breast became heavy and began to swell. This little one wanted to make itself known, announcing it loudly, with no sense of foul play. The symptoms of its presence were very prominent. And as the symptoms of pregnancy strengthened, my love grew. Every cramp sent my anxiety into overdrive. About ten weeks into my pregnancy, I woke up one morning and I felt normal. No nausea, no sprint to the bathroom. Relief washed over me. I was positive there had been something wrong with the baby because of the fierce waves of nausea and vomiting that I suffered through each morning. Today that was gone. Over the next weeks I had a few more episodes of queasiness when I caught whiffs of some foods, fish being the most offensive, but that was it, the morning sickness had ceased.

A few weeks after my doctor's appointment the office had called me to offer a referral for prenatal care, which I accepted. They provided me the name of a local midwife, Betty Sessions. I had my first obstetrical appointment on June 20th. Apparently it was the first day of my second trimester of pregnancy. Betty was kind and gentle. She educated me about my pregnancy the entire time I was being examined, taking away some of the embarrassment I felt. Based on my exam, sonogram and last period she estimated the date of conception to be approximately April 4th. It was possible as there were not many nights that Caleb and I had abstained. Any break in love making was usually the four days during the month that I was menstruating. Betty estimated the baby's due date to be December 26th.

Betty explained the sonogram and then removed the gel from the warmer and squirted it on my belly. The probe tickled as she used it to spread the gel around. "I may have to push a bit on your belly to find the heartbeat because the baby is so tiny right now. Let me know if you become too uncomfortable."

She stared at the screen, moving closer towards the monitor as she slid the probe across my abdomen. "Here it is sweetheart. Meet your baby." Her smile beamed brightly as she pointed out the heartbeat and the little sac that encircled the fetus. It didn't look like a baby but there was definitely a heartbeat, I could see it clearly. Seeing the heartbeat truly brought the miracle of pregnancy to life. This really was a baby I thought to myself, another human life. The reality overwhelmed me and a tear trickled down my cheek. When we were finished Betty handed me an ultrasound picture of the baby to take home.

That night I felt hopeful and fell into a deep peaceful sleep. Dreams always came to me. I dreamed of Caleb. The moonlight fell in floods through the tall windows of the master bedroom. I had been awakened by something; I thought perhaps it was the light. I never bothered to put curtains up because I liked lying in bed looking at the moon and stars. I turned over, away from the window. There Caleb was lying next to me asleep on his back, full lips slightly parted, relaxed in a restful sleep. I lay there watching him breathe, filled with unimaginable love for this man. At that moment he turned to me in his sleep as he so often did, gathering me close to his side and resting his cheek in my hair. We clung to each other, as if we were both unwilling to let go. I breathed the scent of him, a masculine clean smell. He held me close, murmuring 'I love you' and other comforts softly, as if I were a child afraid of the night.

"I know you aren't really here but I just want to pretend for a little while longer," I whispered into his chest.

"When I hold you and feel you quiver like that, I want to give you my soul." Caleb breathed softly. He rolled on top of me and used his knee to open my legs. When he entered me I winced softly at the feel of his hardness. He kissed me long and hard as he pressed his hips against mine. I relaxed and enjoyed the ripples of pleasure as they spread across my abdomen taking over my entire body. Caleb was an exceptional lover and he brought me to climax easily. We shook in each other's arms as he followed my lead and let go, when he was finished he collapsed onto my chest. Coming to my senses I pushed him away, breathless, he aggravated my breathlessness by kissing me deeply. I relented once again, accepting his kiss. I kissed his cheek damp and salty. I could feel his heart pounding against my ribs and I wanted nothing more than to stay there forever, not moving, making love and breathing the same air as him.

We held each other for a long time without speaking, at last I murmured, "Why?"

"I had to," Caleb choked, putting his fingers softly over my lips to quiet me. Tears rolled quietly as I dissolved into the warmth of his arms and drifted contently back to sleep.

Consciousness fragmented into a number of small separate sensations, the softness of the pillow, the warmth of the sun spilling across my face, the smell of the ocean and pines, the fullness of my bladder. The sensations swirled and merged behind my dosed eyelids into a glowing beam of day light that roused me to a fully wakened state. I lay there resisting until I became aware of an odd feeling between

my legs. The way I used to feel when I first realized my menstrual period had started. I sat upright in a panic. What would be the psychological cost to me if I lost this baby? I knew in my heart I was bleeding and the baby was gone. Of course, all I have to look forward to is loss after loss. I was not yet ready to face it. I sat in the bed, tears running down my cheeks.

OK Chloe, just go to the bathroom and check, it may be nothing. I tried to give myself a pep talk. Of course I know what it is! It's always loss, always sadness, always bad news. Reluctantly, I rose out of bed, glancing back at the sheets. No blood. In the bathroom I was relieved to find that I was not bleeding. But I was confused to find what appeared to be remnants of intercourse. I sat in a state of shock thinking back on the dream I had during the night. Was this from me? The scent of Caleb and sex was all around me, engulfing me. I tore off my clothes and quickly jumped into the shower. I wanted it gone, the smell, the fluids, the memories.

As the hot water washed over me cleansing my body, flashes of the previous night played through my mind. Is this how a psychological fracture begins, I wondered? Things were getting strange. This was the second time I had experienced Caleb in a 'dream' but it felt so very real. Sometimes I dreamed about him and it was just that, a dream, but not last night. Last night was extremely realistic in every way. I was having a difficult time translating between what was real and what was not. I had a bad feeling, a very bad feeling.

I had no memory of finding my way back to bed, but I must have done so, because I woke up there. I slept for nearly two days waking only to go to the bathroom or sip some water. When I looked in the mirror I was alarmingly pale and even the small effort of standing covered me with a cold sweat. I slept restlessly with dreams of purgatory, fire, demons and padded insane asylums. I was in a state of torment with no apparent way out. Then at my darkest moment Caleb returned to me. I awoke suddenly, heart pounding to find Caleb sitting next to me on the bed.

"I'm concerned about you Chloe, concerned for our child." His beautiful eyes were dark from worry. "I know this situation has caused you pain. You have to understand that this was never my intention." I stared up at him. I couldn't cry I had no tears left. He took in a deep breath as he slowly removed my clothes. He then gently gathered me up from the bed and carried me into the bathroom. He lowered me into the tub full of warm water and knelt down beside me ringing out a washcloth and moving it tenderly over my body. "Chloe, we needed each other and we found comfort in each other. Our love was real ... it *is* real. It's just not conventional but that doesn't lessen it. You have to get better Chloe. The baby needs you."

"Caleb I am so confused. Am I crazy? Have I lost my mind?" I looked up at him, pleading for honesty.

"No, my love." He softly kissed my forehead. "You are not crazy. Some things are just not meant to be understood. Some things are beyond the reasoning ability of your world."

"My world? Is it not your world too?" I inhaled, the hot steam opening my lungs.

"Think about it Chloe. Aren't religious beliefs a mere leap into irrationality? Does religion not suggest the suspension of reason and acceptances of faith to believe that things can exist that are beyond comprehension?" Caleb's face took on a serious expression. I could tell he was hurting too, the root of his pain I did not know. "What makes religion so 'natural' but anything else that is unexplainable is 'unnatural'? Please Chloe try and stay calm and keep an open mind. Will you do that for me?"

I nodded in agreement. I needed to play this out, even if it were only a figment of my imagination. I needed to know where this would take me. I was hoping for some level of understanding. Some measure of peace.

"Why do we accept that prayers will fulfill a person's wish to escape misfortune or mortality. Prayers. They are words spoken to a creator who lives discretely in the sky, never seen, never heard from. He allows death, disaster, illness and unimaginable travesties. Still we speak words into the air in hopes that he will swoop down and save us from adversity. Yet this is perfectly sane?" Caleb paused to pour water over my hair, after which he began massaging on the shampoo. I melted into his touch. "Chloe you are not crazy."

"Who are you Caleb?" I questioned weakly.

"I am exactly who I told you I was. Caleb Frasier. I have never lied to you Chloe. Things are not always what they seem. Do you believe that all fairy tales of the supernatural and unexplained start with a bit of truth?"

"I guess so." I shrugged as Caleb rinsed the shampoo from my hair.

"Chloe, you are not yet ready for the entire story. You need to get yourself well first." Caleb had applied conditioner and was softly combing through my curls. "I just want you to know that I am here for you. I will always be here for you and our child. You are the most precious thing in my world."

I stepped out of the tub and Caleb dried and dressed me. He again picked me up and carried me back to the room. Clean sheets were on the bed. I slid in between the covers and Caleb curled up next to me. It felt warm and wonderful. I fought the vortex of sleep but was quickly sucked into the dark, quiet realm of a dreamless sleep.

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CPR continued and I heard a shattering crack inside her body, a rib breaking, so loud that I felt sick. How many times had I fantasized about my beautiful Chloe? Now I couldn't even look at her. I heard the doctor say, "we've got to try and save the baby; we are barely picking up fetal heart tones during CPR!" In the bright light of the operating suite, Chloe's skin took on a purple hue. Her huge bulge of a stomach was exposed and mottled as the doctor slid the scalpel across it.

I promised to keep her safe and look after her. I heard the soft, wet sound of the scalpel across her stomach and blood dripping onto the floor. How she had any blood left I didn't know. The nurses were pumping bag after bag of fluid and blood into her but she had to be losing it faster. I moved to be by her side and I began whispering in her ear.

"You stay with me now, Chloe!" I cried. "Do you hear me? Stay! You're not leaving me! I've been dying over the past few months watching you from a distance." I desperately wanted my voice to be the hope she clung on to, if hope was possible. I needed her to hear me. "Do you want me to tell you something funny." I laughed and kissed her cheek through my tears, "I was ten shades of jealous over that Damien fellow." Chloe's eyes were open, looking at me but seeing nothing. My cheeks were wet with tears, they stung like ice as they ran down my face in this cold sterile room. "Chloe I fucking love you! I need you! Please stay with me. Please." I begged in desperation. "I'm sorry for everything. I AM SO SORRY!"

The medical providers continued to perform CPR as the doctor operated. Then it was done. The baby was out. It was silent, no crying. It seemed like everyone paused briefly at that moment to look up at the baby. In an instant they were back to trying to save both of their lives.

One medical team took the little blue baby and began working on him. The other remained at Chloe's bedside working on her. I could tell the team with Chloe were grasping at a life that probably couldn't be saved. Her blood was beginning to congeal, it was still dripping off the table but it was thicker and slower. The CPR continued, pushing the now-viscous blood through her veins, I stood by helpless.

I watched them squeeze the bag that blew more air into her lungs, but there was nothing there, just the lifeless rise of her pale chest in response. The nurse doing CPR kept pumping on her chest, counting, while the rest of the team worked frantically over her. There was blood and paper and medical supplies everywhere.

I fell to the floor as I realized they were working on a corpse. That's all that was left of the girl I loved. This shattered, insanguinated, mangled dead body. I knew she was dead. From this there was no coming back ... without a miracle that is.

I crawled onto my knees and screamed up to God, "OK my brother, I surrender! I give up! Take me! Just leave Chloe!" I cried up to him. "This is your chance you SICK FUCK! You can snatch me out of existence this very moment without a fight! Save all of humanity. The pain. The suffering. The war. Over in an instant."

But this was his day. This battle was his; I knew he was too self-righteous to take me now, during this moment of weakness. He would not let me surrender. He didn't care about bloodshed or war. He didn't care about further loss, loss of angels or humans. He needed me. He needed me to blame for all that was wrong in the world. He needed me to keep his image pure and clean, untarnished. Selfish bastard!

He was called the King of man because only he had the power to intervene and save a human life in their earthly form. No other angel had that power. I knew Chloe's soul would be mine, but I was selfish, I wanted her in the flesh. I wanted her now! I didn't know how much longer I would be stuck here in

perpetual immortality fighting this prophetic battle of wits. All the while Chloe will be out of my reach. Oh, yes, God was a vengeful deity. I sat there quietly giving him the chance to consider my offer, on my knees, hands up in submission. Nothing.

I cloaked myself again. He would pay for this, even if it meant the war of all wars. It begins here ... tonight. Oh, he would pay alright.

I didn't feel any reason to be here beside her. She wasn't here anymore. What was the use of all this power if I couldn't save the one person I truly cared about?

I wanted to run away, get out of here, never, ever come back. But I stood watching as they pushed her dead heart faster. I couldn't take it any longer, turning away. I left them with the dead. In my defeat, I slowly walked over to the baby.

Suddenly he began to cry. I thought he was dead, all was lost. Tears filled my eyes and spilled over... he lived! At least Chloe's death wasn't an empty one. She'd freely sacrificed herself to be torn apart by my beautiful sweet demon child. And so her fight was over, but mine and the baby's was just beginning.

I trembled, trying to block out the sound that was coming from behind me ... the sound of a dead heart being forced to beat.

Gone

I went back out to the waiting room, like the grieving father, boyfriend I was supposed to be. When they came out to tell me I already knew, but my emotions were still fresh, raw, so I played the part well. No acting required.

The baby was in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit with a fair chance of survival. Chloe was dead. I sat there in the waiting room plotting my revenge. Yes, I may die in the process but so would he. I didn't much care either way. The other angels would avenge me if I fell but none of that mattered. All I cared about was my own justice. My revenge.

Somehow he had found Chloe, gotten to her and facilitated her death. If Chloe had survived, she would have wanted me to focus on the baby. But the baby would be fine. He was the most important person in the world right now and would continue to be for many years to come ... if he survived, that is.

I would burn the Deities entire kingdom to the ground. My murderous thoughts had distracted me from my pain. The reel of revenge played over and over in my head. Then I was interrupted by a hand on my shoulder.

"Sir," I'm Patty from the NICU, would you like to come see your baby?" She asked compassionately. I had been too far gone in my insane rhetoric's to even think about the baby. What kind of shitty father was I going to be?

"Um, yes, of course," I managed to choke out." I followed the nurse. The entire way she talked about incubators and tubes and monitors until I just blocked her out. She stopped me before we entered the NICU, "Sir would you like for me to call the Chaplin for you?"

I looked at her blankly and then I figured out what she was asking. Like to pray for me! Ha, what a joke. He had these humans eating out of the palm of his hand. I couldn't help but let out an angry laugh. "No ma'am I'll be fine. Thank you." I managed to say as kindly as possible. I am sure it didn't come off very genuine.

She had me wash my hands, put on a gown and led me into the unit. He was so tiny lying there. He was pink no longer the sickly blue he had been right after birth. The doctor's had put a tube down his throat to give him oxygen because he wasn't breathing when he was born. The nurse assured me that he was taking spontaneous breaths now and the tube was only temporary. I laid my hand on his chest. I could feel the tiny, thrumming beat of his heart. It made me think of Chloe and the dead sound of her heart being forced to beat. Then his little eyes opened and stared at me, more focused than any newborn should have been. Bright blue eyes, the color of a summer sky. He was Perfect!

Everything inside me came undone as I gazed upon the tiny fragile child. Everything that I ever thought was important, every stressor in life, every flaw, every thought of revenge just snapped open, like a tremendous tension had been released. Everything that made me who I was, my love for the dead girl, my love for power and immortality, my loyalty to the Angels, my hatred for my enemies, floated free like a boat breaking away from its moor, drifting out into the vast ocean. Yet I was not drifting alone I was securely attached by a new rope. Not just a rope, cables, unbreakable. I knew immediately that this child was everything to me from this point on. I fell back into the rocking chair beside his warmer. I knew I would give my existence for this child. And I knew I might have to.

The nurses eventually made me leave. I went back to Chloe's house. The pain that had faded away was back again, though I clung to it now. 'My baby, my baby, my son' I tried to keep my mind focused on him. I sat in Chloe's Livingroom looking at the blood ... so much blood. How long had passed? Seconds, minutes? The pain was gone. Numb. I couldn't feel anything. There was air in my lungs and my heart was beating but I felt nothing else.

Why did Chloe have such a profound effect on me? What was it about her? I went to lie in her bed. I was surrounded by her scent. My head hurt, my heart ached, there was a hollow pit in my stomach. My arms and legs felt like empty rubber hoses. I couldn't feel them. I couldn't feel me. I welcomed sleep ... or death ... but neither came.

It was the pattern to my life; I'd always been strong enough to deal with anything I came across. Yes, man was always outside of my control, but they were weak, fragile beings and I never had any vested interest in them ... until now that is. Chloe was always human and weak, the only thing I'd ever been able to do was keep her going, help her endure, survive. And I failed her miserably.

For me the pain would be eternal ... for I was eternal. For humans pain was easier, time passed and healed all wounds for them. I felt like something was stuck in my throat, I swallowed against the

thickening of it. I wouldn't forget. Oh, I had felt guilt and a semblance of pain for some of the things I had done. But immortals, like me, we're very easily distracted. Pain and guilt never stuck around long. But now I'd up the stakes and fully invested myself in this little human love triangle. There was no getting out of it easily or without intense, lasting pain. Sleep finally did come and I embraced it openheartedly.

Hindsight is 20/20 even for a God

So time passed, weeks of it. Even when it seemed impossible. It passed even when each tick of the clock ached like a hammer coming down on a fresh bruise. It passed unevenly, in sprints and drags, but passed it did. I buried Chloe and my grieving continued. The only reprieves were the small visits to my son in the hospital. He was improving and I was able to stay with him for much longer periods now.

Each morning I opened my eyes and realized I'd survived through another night. It wasn't a surprise to me, since I was immortal, but more of an unwelcome ending to the comfort of sleep. The weeks after Chloe's death I had a lot of time to think about my immortality and put things into perspective.

In the dregs of despair I had almost forgotten who I was. I knew Chloe was ok. She couldn't see me and as Caleb I couldn't see her, but the angels would know what to do. She would be the queen of our realm. That's the thing about angels we know our rank and our place. Yes, I have been gone a long time, but for us it's been just the blink of an eye. There have been angels who have crossed over and given me updates about the other realms. Eternity is a long time of running if you fuck with a stronger entity, none of my angels would risk that. The archangels wouldn't risk it either, except on the Deity's orders. There was no one more powerful than me, especially when I was in my realm.

I wondered what a human soul's experience was in the process of death and transition. I had never been human so I didn't completely understand their experience. I had never taken the time to ask a human on the other side. I guess I never cared. I was well aware of what happened after the dying and transition process, that's all that had mattered to me.

This body was a charade. When that witch cast the spell that opened up Caleb's body allowing a soul to enter, I decided it was time. 250 years ago things were different; men were shorter, bad teeth, gnarled up young from illness and injury. This wealthy kid's body was a real prize in its time. It suited me. It's easier to get what you need when you look like Caleb Frasier. Especially when I had to spend most of my time acting mortal; using my supernatural abilities puts me on the radar. A confrontation with the Deity would force the war that the big guy is so hot and heavy for. That shit can wait in my opinion. I've spent thousands of years in war and what do we get out of it. Loss of legions. We flex for each other, flaunting our 'special gifts'. Don't let the bible fool you, I've won, he's won, and neither of us are greater than the other. When we are at our greatest is when we fight as a team. We are invincible then. The one thing we both are is eternal. Both direct descendants of the spirit, the first creator.

After I acquired this body I spent a long phase relishing in the experience. I also spent a lot of time remaining veiled, so the king of man wouldn't be able to locate me. Time just escaped me, 253 years of it. Until Chloe, that's when I let my guard down and they found me ... and her. What a stupid damn mistake. It forced my hand and now the prophecy is being played out. Chloe provided me with a son. A son who would change the world, the realms, the kingdoms. Our son would right the wrongs that the humans God put into place thousands of years ago. Our son would take his place as king of all kings. His power will rival both the deity's and mine.

The Deity who calls himself the human God orchestrated that joke of a book to scare humans into submission. Blaming me for all things wrong and taking credit for all things good, when in fact he is the king of man. He should just step up and admit he doesn't give a damn about humans. That's why bad shit happens because he lets it. He has the ability to right wrongs, just like I do, but you don't see him running around saving humans. He has more power over man than any other angel. He has the power over mankind's life and death. All angels can change things for humans, to a point, but we cannot raise them from death. If I had that power Chloe would be here now. The truth is angels rarely interfere with humans. To us it would be like human's intervening in an ant's life, what's the point. We all have unique powers; some of us are stronger than others. The Deity and myself being the oldest and most powerful of all the Angels.

Those damn witches are constantly opening up the deity's little loophole by creating doppelgangers, which allow fallen angels to cross over into the human realm. The witches believe we reside in the dead. Ha! are you kidding, we take over the living body, the human just dies, as it was intended. Only God has the ability to intervene with saving a human life from imminent death. Plus angels are weaker on earth or when they are in their human form.

God has always had control over mankind, which was his 'special' power. Most angels could care less about that particular power. So he has power over the weakest, frailest creatures in the universe? Big deal. That's definitely not the best party trick I've seen. And the book and the stories he disseminates about me along with this God of all Gods bullshit, it never bothered me ... until now, until Chloe. I also could have given a fuck about that prophecy bullshit he wrote. He orchestrated that to blow smoke up his own ass. This power over humans went to his head. Now the prophecy is being fulfilled and I will have my revenge ... in this existence or the next. My son will rule and we will be the downfall of the so called king of kings reign over mankind. And one day I will return to my kingdom to rule side by side with Chloe and he will be the fallen angel.

But I digress ...

Two items on my agenda right now. Find out more about this Damien fellow who was hanging around Chloe before she fell ill and to prepare a home for my son at the safe house.

Damien had disappeared after Chloe's death, *big red flag* that he was involved. I had Kira trying to find out who he was and where he was. I'm positive he was an opposing angel, I just didn't know which one but I would soon. Kira would make sure of that.

The loophole angels had safe houses around the world. Most of us were here because of the Witches but some angels included the ability to temporarily travel between realms in their party trick repertoire. The Deity's angels had free reign among man as long as they didn't get too involved with the humans. For instance fornicating and especially procreating was definitely an eternal death by fire 'no –no'. Regardless that the deity himself has been known to go off at a tangent with a human or two, even resulting in an offspring. We all know how that turned out. He didn't even care enough about his own half human son to intervene in his torture and murder. Why would any human think that this same deity would give a shit about them?

Sabastian was preparing for my son's homecoming as the infant would be released from the hospital soon. I called him Aziah. Aziah being half human had struggled at birth but had survived and was now thriving. Aziah had leagues of angels protecting him. His birth has been long awaited among our kind.

First order of business for me, Aziah was going to need a mother, a human mother. We couldn't care for him and remain veiled all of the time. If we stay unveiled for extended periods the deity will be able to easily locate and destroy him.

My heart really wasn't ready for wooing another female right now. I genuinely loved Chloe and her absence still weighed on my heart heavily but the child was a priority now. So it was now my duty as a father to locate a female who was worthy of raising the next king of kings. This parenting gig was a stressful job.

Foul Play

I really think Chloe ruined me. She at least set the bar high for the next woman. I'm sure she would want it that way. I find a woman that I think may fit the bill and then she wants to have sex immediately, like first date immediately. OK I fuck most of them; well I've fucked all of them, but who wants to wife up a slut like that. I don't think that would be good for the kid.

I'm not being judgmental. I'm totally in favor of a good time. It's not like my kind see morality the way humans do. We know that book is a crock, nothing more than a bunch of ramblings written by hallucinating madmen. We would never let ourselves be defined by a bible written by humans, most of them clinically insane. Plus we really know the deity, first hand; we know he's a hypocrite. He doesn't know every hair on your head or watch every move you make. Come on people, does that even seem logical? Oh yea, faith, I forgot. Have faith that illogical, unreasonable, ludicrous things like that are happening.

The mighty Deity has been trying to find me and my kid and we're still here. So do you really think he's following you around with a notepad keeping track of every lie you tell. Well I'm not going to change a hundred lifetimes of bad information getting crammed down your throat ... but I'm just saying, you have a brain, use it.

Historically, I see the point of this ridiculous doctrine, I mean back in the day it was a lawless time, everyone would have killed each other if he didn't scare them into submission. I would have been mayhem, only the strong would have survived. It served its purpose in that respect. But those times are long over.

As far as the female Mom candidates it's about standards and good breeding not morals. I'd love to find the perfect mom who becomes a kinky ball licking wildcat at night. But at this point it's about the kid. He needs to fit in with society while flying under the radar. I've really got to get my game on track.

Kira walked in to the room. "Ziah's down for his nap," She announced. I gave her a nod of thanks. Kira was one of the original fallen angels. She was strong and sleek and a great warrior. I was happy to have her on my side. I noticed that she cut her eyes at Sebastian, also an original.

"OK what's going on guys?" I looked seriously at both of them. Sebastian raised his eyebrows, but made no other move.

"Why haven't you told him?" Kira ratted Sebastian out. They faced each other in silence for a long moment. I had reasonable intuition that this was something I wasn't going to be happy about. Otherwise why be reluctant to share the information.

"Chloe never showed up on the other side," Sebastian choked out. I felt the heat rise in my neck while I tried to stay calm. Man, I was having a bad week!

I knew that essentially nothing had changed. Okay, so the Deity had not given up, but had I ever dreamed for one moment that he had? This only confirmed what I'd already known; there was no fair playing field with him. No reason for fresh panic. She was my soul but he must have snatched her up upon her departure. He was just begging for trouble so trouble he would get.

I am really the only danger to the Deity, and he for me. No other angel has the power to actually kill either one of us. In the past neither of us would have actually killed the other either. Battle was just a game between bored Gods. We were brothers. We especially wouldn't have sought the eternal death of a brother over a human, but Chloe was different. I'm not sure he realized that. Maybe he was actually provoking me into the final battle. Goddamnit!

"Sebastian, bring me one of the archangels. DON'T harm them, I just need some information. Someone new through the loophole." I commanded. Sebastian nodded and left without hesitation. Archangels didn't actually need a loophole, we just called it a loophole for consistency. I wanted someone who had recently crossed over so I could acquire fresh intel.

I had a lot on my plate with Aziah and now this. Fucking Chloe! I loved that girl before I even knew her. Her heart called out to me long before we met. She was so weak and helpless and in need of rescue. And so beautiful. I shook my head at the memory.

God of human's. Ha! I am more of a God to humans. Minus that one special power over life. Why not? I'm here on the ground, playing the part, watching it all since the whole thing began. I've cultivated and perfected every sensation man's ever had. I cared about what he wanted and I never judged him. Never rejected him. In spite of all the imperfections and weaknesses, I'm a fan of the human race! Do you ever, in a million years, think the Deity would lower himself to come down here and live as man, among men? Hell no. He's a megalomaniac. A tyrant. Humans have no idea who they are worshiping.

Well, no going back now. I can't stand the thought of Chloe's soul in his realm, CHLOE IS MINE! I owe nothing to humans but I owe everything to Chloe. So if he wants this war that badly ... then War it is.

My thoughts were interrupted by Sebastian. With him was an archangel. A low ranking member, unimportant but one of the Deity's throngs nonetheless. I nodded at Sebastian in thanks. He was one of my closest allies, I considered him my dearest friend. I could not die but I could be sequestered and if that ever happened Sebastian and Kira would be charged with raising my son. A great honor bestowed onto them.

"What's your name son?" I asked the anonymous angel. Even if I knew him I wouldn't recognize him in this form. I always however felt the presence of another angel. As for the Deity and myself, we would recognize each other anywhere, in any form. My senses were much weaker when in human form, but still present. The Deity and I had a type of telekinesis, ever present, except when we were veiled or in different realms.

"I am not your son!" The angel spat vehemently.

"OK, that's fair." I smiled at him. Then said sternly. "So what's your name?"

"James," he stammered.

"James," I confirmed. "Whose legion do you belong to?"

"I am son of Ezekiel." He stated proudly.

"OK James, son of Ezekiel." I said respectfully. "What's going on in your realm?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." He sounded convincing but I sensed a twinge of nervous energy. So I pressed on.

"Has the Deity kidnapped one of my souls?" I asked remaining very civil.

"Is this a test?" James laughed.

"Isn't everything?" I looked at him, eyebrows raised. Palms held out as if the answer were plainly there.

"The souls of man are his. He is the king of mankind. So when you ask me if he kidnapped one of your souls, the answer is no, he has not." James said, looking smug. Heat again rose in the back of my neck.

"Listen son," I grabbed his shoulder firmly. He winced. "I am trying not to lose my patience with you but don't push me." Initially I had every intention of letting this lowly angel go, but he was now skating on thin ice by pushing my buttons. My patience was wearing thin and as forbearing as I was my tolerance ended with Chloe's involvement.

"That the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose. When the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men of renown." James began to regurgitate verses from that shitty doctrine. I pressed my fingers into my forehead in an attempt to avert a headache.

Then I joined in with James as if in a chorus, "And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." James stopped, and watched me wide eyed.

"James, I know you don't fully appreciate the predicament you are in so I'm trying to give you a pass but you are making this hellaciously difficult. I suggest you stop rambling. I have been force-fed that shit for two millennia." I was becoming angry. "You want to quote the doctrine to me?! OK here's some doctrine for you." I was within inches of his face as I began to forcefully speak the scripture. "The purpose of these relations was to corrupt the human gene pool and prevent the birth of the eventual Messiah who God prophesied would be born of a woman and eventually destroy Satan." I stopped and composed myself, "Tell me James, how did that work out for him??!" I grabbed James by the throat. He coughed and stiffened up.

"Now James, the girl. Does he have her?" I asked calmly.

"You won't kill me." James insisted.

"Won't I?" I looked at him blankly.

"It would cause a war between legions." He said pleadingly.

"James I have news for you, war isn't impending ... WAR IS HERE!" I dropped him to the ground, letting go of his neck.

"I'm not asking you to betray anyone. I just want to know about the girl. That's all. Then you go one your way." I said walking away, in a gesture of peace.

"You must have forgotten, in the Bible you lose." James said with confidence. "You are destined to lose."

I laughed, walking back slowly towards him. "Well consider the source James. This is my time. The twenty first century has been and will be entirely mine. James this is not a theological debate. This is your last chance to answer before I take you out of existence. WHERE IS THE GIRL!"

"Yea, he's got her. But that's all I know. It's not like I am high ranking, so you're talking to the wrong guy here." He was right, but he had confirmed the only information that I really needed to know. Chloe was with him. I placed my hand on his shoulder and squeezed slightly.

"Thank you James. See that was easy enough." I smiled and then immediately gave him eternal death. His human form caught fire and turned to ash.

Sebastian sucked in his breath.

"What Sebastian!" I looked at him wide eyed, taunting him to say a word. I knew what I had done. We felt it when any of our legions were ripped out of existence. The deity would feel the loss of this lowly angel. I didn't care. This was a battle that he began, but I would end. "I sent a message," I said calming down.

"Sir," he started. I was always leery when any of the angels started a sentence with Sir. "I don't mean to be disrespectful-" I cut him off.

"Well then don't." I said abruptly.

"OK but is this human girl really worth starting the war of all wars over?" He was definitely unsettled asking this question but he felt the need for it to be asked. I took a deep breath, choosing my words carefully.

"Well what do you think Sebastian? She is the mother of the Goddamn king of all kings. Do you think she is worth saving?" I paused. "Plus, how do you think Aziah will feel about us leaving his mother at the mercy of his mortal enemy?"

"Do you really think he would harm her?" He asked.

"What part of 'mortal enemies' is too complicated for you to understand Sebastian?" I answered. Sebastian responded with a nod.

"Sebastian I have someplace to be." I put my hand on his shoulder and looked him in his eye. "Thank you for being such a loyal friend." And I walked out.

Pretender

"How's the search for Mrs. Right?" Kira smiled sarcastically.

"It's a hard job but someone has to do it. Maybe I'll start going to church and see what I come up with." I smiled back mockingly.

"Bet there's a lot of heartbroken ladies out there." Kira laughed. "Well at least you can have a good time while you are searching."

"Kira, if you only knew." I answered. What I wanted to say was this search was breaking my heart more than she could ever understand. I knew they felt differently about the human girl than I did. It was understandable. But my love for Chloe was not something I could explain to them. It transcended time,

space, heaven, hell. Before Chloe, I wouldn't have understood it if one of the angels had coming to me speaking of a human the way I spoke of her.

Plus my search may be over. I had found a suitable candidate. She certainly wasn't Chloe but she was a good person, smart and she would make a great mother. Plus she was easy on the eyes. I had tried to take our relationship to the next step but she was holding out. So she had some principles about her. She was young and had just finished college. A teacher, same as Chloe, except Chloe never actually was a teacher. It was her intended pathway before fate intervened.

I would have to be careful to be as 'humanly normal' as possible but I just wanted to get on with it. The sex, the marriage and then her stepping into the role of wife and mother. She was a good person but there would be no great passion on my side. She would never know that though. I was great at deception, probably the best. But then I had to be good at it. It's not a survival skill that most people need. Most people weren't me.

I picked Emile up at 800, we went for dinner and then I brought her back to the house on the pretense that I had to get home to Ziah. I wanted her to become attached to him and I needed to see that attachment to make sure she would work out. She had been around him many times over the months and they got on very well. Plus maybe tonight would be the night that the deviant wildcat sex goddess would emerge. Well a man can dream can't he? Damn physical desires got me every time. I did love human sex.

Emile was beautiful with pale olive skin and brown curls. She had a great sense of humor and was easy to talk to. I almost felt bad for pulling her into this but there was a higher calling at stake. Her sacrifice would serve mankind. Don't get me wrong, I would provide her a good life. She would feel loved. But children were out of the question. And there was always the possibility of her ending up as collateral damage. Look what happened to Chloe. We would cross those bridges when we came to them. Tonight was all about enticing Emile.

Aziah was three now, and very intelligent. I spared no expense when it came to him. He had the best nanny, the best private preschool, the best toys and clothes. Between the angels and human's this kid had a great life. I seen his powers growing and I hoped the angels and I could teach him early how to contain them. He rarely got angry or threw tantrums. He was generally mild natured, but the few times he became angry it was very good that angels were around to intervene. The angels could control the humans, what they seen, what they remembered.

It wasn't like we controlled humans, because we don't. That would make things so much easier but free will, it is a bitch. We can force a human to do something physically, like stab yourself in the eye with a pencil. Yes, we can do that. What we cannot do is force them to change mentally, like make Emile fall in love with me just by telling her too. What a time saver that would be.

Emile insisted on putting Ziah back to bed. Afterward we sat in front of the fire, drinking wine and talking. I knew all the things to say and do to win this girl over, I almost felt sorry for her. It was getting late and I either wanted to bed this girl or go to bed. It had been several months now, there is a breaking

point for everyone. With the flash of a smile I leaned in and kissed her softly. She kissed me back. "Emile, do you want to stay over?" I asked hopefully.

She hesitated. If it wouldn't have been rude I would have rolled my eyes, but I restrained from any negative connotation. "It's ok baby, if you aren't ready I understand. I can give you a ride home."

"It's just that ..." She stopped. I thought she would never continue. I took her hand gently into mine. "It's just that I've never-" Holy shit how did I keep finding these girls. I guess standards and good breeding is synonymous with virgin and you are going to wait forever to have sex.

"Emile, it's fine. I love you. Yes, I want you, but I can wait until you are ready." I said comforting her. "I've got loads of time. I'm not going to give up." I smiled warmly at her. She hugged me tightly.

"This may sound old fashioned but I just always imagined being unspoiled until my wedding, but it seems to get to the wedding you have to taint yourself these days." She giggled nervously.

Great! I thought. How long do I have to wait to propose? I wondered. "Emile, I swear it's fine. That's a decision I can respect." I kissed her deeply. "It'll give me something to look forward to." I helped her up off of the couch. "Let me get you home now."

She seemed happy with how I handled things. I was fine with waiting. A sacrifice I was willing to make for a mother for Ziah. A means to an end.

I drove Emile home. She did look gorgeous in the moonlight. She had a great body too. It really was something to look forward to. I walked her to the door and kissed her goodnight. Maybe if things progressed I could propose to her at Christmas? Or her birthday in January. I would speak to Kira about that, see if she thought it would be too soon. Kira could pick out the ring and venue if she decided it would be appropriate to proceed.

January came, marking six months of regularly, tediously dating Emile. Many times we were intimate to the point of sex but never including sex. I was romantic and charming and everything a girl could not resist. It was no surprise when Emile accepted my proposal of marriage. Emile never spoke much about her family so after the proposal I asked if I would be meeting them and if they would be involved in the wedding.

Emile quickly stated, "No." She didn't offer up an explanation other than, "the only thing worse than not having a father was having mine."

I smiled and took her hand, "I can relate, believe me, I have family issues myself. Don't worry; you plan the wedding I'll pay for everything." I took her into my arms. "You've made me a very happy man Emile." And she had.

Emile became a daily fixture in my life. I guess it was helping me and Ziah get used to her. I couldn't help but think about how genuinely happy I would have been to do this with Chloe. That's how I got through each tux fitting, cake tasting moment, picturing Chloe. If there was really a score kept for the number of

sins committed, I was racking up my tally. The tedium was not something I grew used to; every day with Emile seemed more impossibly monotonous than the last. I was very good at hiding it though. Emile never expected anything.

We were married the August before Aziah turned four. It was a beautiful ceremony. Emile was a lovely bride. We were both happy for different reasons. Her because she was starting a new chapter in her life, marrying the man of her dreams. Me because this deplorable cat and mouse game had finally come to an end. Aziah had a mother. I could up my job responsibilities, travel more and be away from them as much as possible. Lessening the risk of The Deity locating Ziah. Everything had worked out and I congratulated myself on a game well played.

That night Emile was no longer untarnished. I had been having sex all along, just not with her. But I am sure she thought the suspense was killing me. She was beautiful to look at and the idea of her excited me. But she was very restrained in her love making. Lack of exposure, of course. I was gentle and thoughtful and everything she had dreamed of for her first time. I thought of Chloe the entire night.

I love you. I hate you.

Emile acclimated to the role of Aziah's mother very well. I was away as much as I could manage. I made sure Emile felt spoiled and loved when I was there. Everything was great until Aziah started school full time and Emile felt the need to have a child. At first I played the game. After a year of infertility she wanted to go for tests and doctors' visits to find out why she hadn't gotten pregnant. I began to pull away. I explained that work was stressful and we had a lifestyle to maintain. Assured her that we could focus on children in a few years. But she wasn't happy with that.

One beautiful crisp autumn day we were strolling in the park with Ziah. I remember thinking the sky was so blue you could drown in it. It reminded me of the ocean in Maine. Emile and I were walking, hands linked, when she turned to me. There was a faint crease between her eyebrows.

"Caleb, are you seeing someone else?" She asked. I was taken off guard.

"Why would you ask that babe?" I answered, stopping to look at her. Of course I was seeing other women. Many, many women over the years, but never anyone on a regular basis. That was about as much faithfulness as I could muster. No repeat customers. I could tell this conversation was going to be unbelievably frustrating!

"I can tell. I can tell when we are making love, when I'm holding Aziah. I can tell when we are walking through the park, like now. When we are talking and you look right through me. You are thinking about someone else. Women know these things Caleb." I could see the pain on her face.

Oh shit! Fucking Chloe! I always thought about Chloe when I was with Emile. Always. I couldn't help it, thinking of her. It's what got me through the dullness of each day. I had to be here, I needed Emile but I obviously could not mask my unresolved feelings for Chloe. I am eternal; therefore my love for Chloe is

eternal. No human could understand that. The thing is, Chloe and I will be together again. Pain fades for humans in death because they think they will never be with their loved ones again. They truly don't believe that they will be reunited after death. No matter what they say. If they did maybe they would wait it out. Eventually they move on. It's different for immortals like me. We rarely fall, when we do, it's hard. How could I explain this to Emile in a sensitive way?

"Let's sit down Emile." I pointed to the park bench. "Emile you know I lost Aziah's mother suddenly. I do think about her at times. I can't help it. I see her in you and you in her. It makes me happy that you love Aziah so much and I think how happy Chloe would be about that. There is no one else. Only you babe." I put my palm against the curve of her cheek and leaned in for a kiss. I'm on a roll I thought, I might as well get the whole traumatized by pregnancy thing out of the way while I'm at it. "That's why I am so reluctant to push this pregnancy issues. It scares me. I couldn't risk losing you ... like I lost her." I felt like I deserved a best actor golden globe for that. I guess Emile wasn't so impressed.

"Caleb, but I'm not her. I could never be her and I can't live with her ghost any longer." Tears were spilling over onto her cheeks. I was becoming more and more irritated with this conversation. WOW, this was going to be harder than I thought.

"What can I do Emile? I can't change history. I can't just forget because you want me too." I asked her with total seriousness.

"Caleb it's been eight years!" Her voice trembled.

"I'm sorry Emile. I will try harder but I'm not sure what else you want. Your past is your past. It's always there. It's not like it can be erased." I pleaded with her. I really didn't want to lose her. Aziah needed her. But I was increasingly annoyed and I wasn't sure how much more I could endure.

"If you loved me enough it could!" She was openly crying. She tore herself from my grasp and ran across the park towards the car.

Thank goodness, I thought. I knew I had to follow her and try and win her back over but at least I could have a few minutes reprieve to gather my thoughts.

Emile shut me out after that. It was the beginning of the end.

One night a few months later I came home after a 'business trip'. Emile had been drinking, taking antidepressants and who knows what else and she was a mess. She had been seeing a psychiatrist since that day at the park but I didn't think it was helping. When Kira seen what was happening she popped in to look after things. We still had the nanny, although at nine Aziah really had no need for one. We kept her because she minded her business, Aziah liked her and Emile was slightly unstable at this point.

I set my suitcase on the floor and asked Kira, "What's going on?"

"Your wife is having a meltdown." She raised her eyebrows at me and pointed to the master bedroom. "Drinking herself into a stupor and mumbling about Chloe and you not loving her ... blah, blah, blah. I don't know, she's half baked."

"Oh." I said pressing my palm against my forehead, hoping it would help relieve some of the tension I felt coming on. "She's jealous. Say's I still love Chloe." I couldn't contain my aggravation.

"She's right. It's easy to see Caleb." Kira said pouring herself a glass of chardonnay from the open wine bottle. "What?" She shrugged. "It's a good year, you leave it uncorked like that it will go to waste." She winked and smiled.

"I should have fallen for you Kira. Life would be a whole lot easier right now." I shot her a smile and she rolled her eyes at me.

"You wish." She took a sip of her wine. "Plus I'm not playing second fiddle to no dead girl! You can bet on that. Anyway, that fucking human girl is going to be your downfall Caleb."

"For fucks sake, you're telling me ..." I said, fully aware that she was giving me sisterly advice masquerading as a sarcastic remark.

"I am an immortal, I can conquer legions, control realms, bring God himself to his knees, but I can't get Chloe out of my head." I looked at her solemnly. She shrugged and continued drinking her wine.

The beginning of the End

Sebastian had located the realm where Chloe's soul was being held. I took no time getting my legions together for battle. We stood waiting.

"Be calm, brother. We have time to sort this out. No need to be rushed." Sebastian took my arm in a Roman hand shake. He knew I had seen red when I learned that Ezekiel's legions were holding Chloe.

We stood firmly as they advanced. There was a great production about their entry. They came in a firm, ceremonial formation, moving together perfectly synchronized. Ezekiel was always one to put on a show. The outer perimeter was an undefined blur, that darkened with each line of soldiers as they fell into procession. They flowed into infinity. Every beautiful face glared our way but they were too methodical to show any real emotion. The faint brushing sound of wings was regular, hypnotic, like music, a complex rhythm that never faltered. The pattern folded outward, looking ominous. Their advancement was measured but thoughtful, with no urgency, no pressure, no concern. It was the stride of the invincible. I noticed the lower ranking angels in the front with the older, higher ranking angels spread to the flanks. Ezekiel took his position precisely forward in the center, each movement closely controlled and thought out.

They also showed no surprise or dismay at the collection of my legions that would stand against them. A collection that rivaled their own. They showed no surprise by the realms that stood in our midst. I

possessed one hundred twenty-two legions. There were one hundred twenty of them here today. The other two were to watch over Aziah if I were sequestered or destroyed if the deity decided to show up and fight. The Deity's presence was highly unlikely.

Angels were a stunning sight. By nature we were beautiful. We were strong and athletic and cunning. This would make for a stellar battle, I thought. I didn't like killing angels but it was always a necessary task because of my brother's wrath, so I was used to it.

"What a display of grandeur, did you bring all of your legions Ezekiel?" I asked sarcastically "For such an insignificant battle against me? I'm flattered."

And then, as if their numbers were not enough, while Ezekiel slowly and majestically advanced towards me, more angels began entering the clearing behind them. I seen everything as it unfolded. I watched the procession on the battlefield. I watched Maliki, Ezekiel's lieutenant. I especially watched every muscle twitch of Ezekiel in anticipation of his next move.

"Are you planning to take me down personally Ezekiel?" I stood perfectly still as Ezekiel took his place of defiance in front of me.

"We both know that's not possible Caleb. I hear that's the name you are using now." He mocked. I shrugged and nodded.

"Yes we do know that is not possible. You also know that I can take out half of your legions singlehandedly. So why are you here? Why give so many of your beloved eternal death for the cost of one human soul?" I questioned.

"So it is written," Ezekiel answered plainly.

I laughed and scanned the seemingly endless influx of faces. Did they really think the intimidation would work on me and my legions I wondered as more unexpected forces moved in? As for me I expected nothing less than this show of power. They were secure in their overwhelming numbers; I was secure in my legions being unstoppable and battle ready.

This was an angry mob, salivating for righteousness. I did not fully realize the tenacity that the archangels felt for playing out the doctrines prophecy. It was always a big laughable joke to me. I guess I need not question their feelings toward my half immortal child who would one day rule all of them. It was clear that this motley crew would pounce on my child if I were ever sequestered.

The Deity would then spread the word that the evil brother had been eradicated, and that he had acted with nothing but justice and impartiality. Most of the angels had the stem look of battle about them. Like they hoped for more than just an opportunity to observe, they wanted to help destroy the destroyer. They didn't have a prayer. Even if they could somehow neutralize me, my legions were strong and old and trained by me.

Two angels advanced from the opposing force. I immediately recognized Chloe as she hesitated in between them, her expression was clearly fear and shock. Chloe's horrified gaze eventually locked on me in the front line, she then relaxed and smiled. Anger rose in the pit of my stomach. For the first time on a battlefield I felt fear. I felt the potential for loss, for death.

Sebastian snarled a very low but fervent sound. Kira grabbed my arm and held it tightly. "Have mercy brother, for they know not what they do." She whispered.

Ezekiel walked just a few paces more, then slanted his head to one side looking at me intensely with curiosity at the apparent reaction that he saw when Chloe was brought forth.

"HA! it's true!" He screeched a little too excitedly for a general leading legions onto the battlefield. "We have found your weakness. The chink in your amour." He laughed a bizarre high pitched laugh that echoed throughout the battlefield. I continued to fight off the anger that rose inside me so not to show weakness again. It would be exploited at all cost, I knew that all too well.

"I see you have done the right thing and brought Chloe back to me. We both know that her soul belongs to me." I could feel it. It infuriated me. The uncertainty and hesitation crept about me. My legions doubted me because of Chloe. Despair hung heavy the air, pushing me down with more pressure than I had ever felt before. I would deal with the legions at a later time. After this battle they will not doubt me again, ever.

"I see where you could be confused about that. The wretched human souls are yours but the Deity has accepted her as one of his children. She was not wicked, or evil, only a non-believer who fell pawn to your games." Ezekiel stated accusingly.

"Fair argument, Ezekiel," I stated calmly, "But, she is the mother of the devil's own spawn." Then I added in a thunderous voice. "SHE IS MINE!" I regained composure, "Let's handle this peacefully Ezekiel, we have no animosity towards each other."

"Those words seem out of place, considering the ensemble you've pulled together and brought here to resolve this conflict." Ezekiel turned with his arm extended motioning towards the legions that stood behind me.

I shook my head and stretched my right hand forward in a gesture of peace, there was still almost fifty yards between us. "You know that was never my intent. I am weary of battle."

"I know nothing of the sort." Ezekiel challenged. "Did you not give eternal death to one of my angels?"

Chloe stared at me blankly, her face like that of someone who has not yet fully roused from a terrible nightmare. Irritated, Ezekiel snapped his fingers. One of the angels moved to Chloe's side and shoved her roughly propelling her forward. Chloe blinked twice and then walked slowly towards Ezekiel in a stupor. She was forced to stop several yards short, her eyes still wide but focused on me. Ezekiel closed the distance between them by half; he was now within striking range. There was something terribly humiliating about the way she was being held by her captors. Probably more for me than for her. It was

like standing by while someone abused a small animal. Chloe's noticed me watching her. She adjusted her posture straight and rigid and her eyes focused on me in defiance of Ezekiel.

"So many pointless rules, so many unnecessary decrees you hold yourselves to Ezekiel. How is it possible for you to defend those laws when they are ever changing?" I paused not wanting to directly challenge Ezekiel any further. "They are your laws, they do not govern me. The Deity can have his kingdom of men. I just want one soul...Chloe's."

"Do not treat us as fools." Ezekiel's voice trembled through the masses. "If I were to give you this soul, nothing would change. You would still position your demon child in an attempt to overthrow the only real king."

"Ezekiel, brother, I've been here for thousands of years. You know me, I'm not an instigator. Your deity is the adversary. I appreciate the humans. I do not wish to rule them. We can all live in peace." I stated.

"We can all live in peace if you will present me with your son. The half mortal, half immortal child that is prophesized to cause the Great War." Ezekiel requested Aziah to be handed over as if he were asking me to borrow a quarter. He continued to speak, turning towards the two angels holding Chloe in place.

"Conceived and carried by this soul while she was still human. I am suggesting a deal. A contract that will ensure peace among our kind, and human kind. Your son in trade for this human soul." He pointed at Chloe.

I could not stomach looking at Chloe as I negotiated her life for the life of our child. Ezekiel was a monster under the guise of an archangel. But I did look at her. She was adamantly shaking her head. I didn't need her confirmation but I wanted it. Beneath the charades the opposing needs tore at me; a heaviness pushed down on me crushing me so tightly it felt like my bones might shatter from the pressure of it. Chloe or Aziah.

"The Deity would never harm a child ... your child. He is your brother." Ezekiel tried to convince me placing an emphasis on brother.

"Yes Ezekiel, how did things work out for his son?" I asked my voice dripping with contentions.

"That was you're doing!" Ezekiel shouted.

"Is that the story?" I asked pointedly. "I tried to save him. I told him what would happen. I offered him a place with me, offered my protection. He trusted my brother and look what happened to him! That will not be the fate of my son!" I shouted, causing reverberation through the crowds. "He sacrificed his son ... and for what? For a ridiculous story in a book that doesn't even make sense. I mean sin is rampant here, war, greed." I calmed and continued to speak in a level, calm tone. "What did it accomplish?" No my son would not be handed over to that monster. I looked at Chloe, even though I told myself I would not. She was beautiful and I wanted her badly but not at a price we were not willing or able to pay.

Ezekiel raised his right hand high into the air and I watched as Chloe was escorted to the midpoint between the legions and Ezekiel, slightly closer to him than she was to the mob behind her. Ezekiel's

smug smile peaked my rage. He wanted me to break; he wanted me to make the first move. Then the beginning of the end could be placed on my hands. Games, always games. It has to be tiring the incessant scheming.

"So what is your next move Ezekiel?" I was tiring of the mockery and wanted to get Chloe out of their clutches, so I needed to move things along. "We've got masses at our disposal, we fight or we shake hands and go home to live another day." I was furious, but trying to remain calm. "This war doesn't have to happen now ... this war doesn't have to happen ever. I DON'T WANT THE HUMANS. My son can live a full life of glory. I have many realms at his disposal. He can still be a great ruler." I paused, pleading reason with Ezekiel. "Do not force my hand Ezekiel. Do not do it!"

He again held up a hand to his legions. So it began.

"Do not do this brother!" I yelled.

"Last chance," I whispered leaning closer, speaking more to Maliki than to Ezekiel, seeing how unrelenting Ezekiel was. Maliki's face was desperate as he looked to Ezekiel for answers. I realized at that moment they had not come here to battle, they came here to present a ransom, thinking I would hand over my child. Fools! "He is the liar, Maliki," I yelled, "we are brothers. I have fought side by side with you. You know what I am capable of." I positioned myself for battle.

I made one last attempt to thwart this fight. I knew the signal for execution. I did not wish for this battle but I would not stand by and allow them to take Chloe out of existence in front of me.

I moved again, moved a few inches toward Ezekiel, a few inches away from Kira. She was watching intensely. Sebastian's gaze zeroed in on the gap between us. Ezekiel was unaware of the slight tactile moments that were going on. My people wouldn't have missed them.

It would take the angels less than a second to kill Chloe... they only needed the tiniest margin of opportunity. Even slower this time, I repositioned my shield.

As they clung to Chloe and she struggled, my anger peaked, higher even than the raging hatred I'd felt the moment the negotiations began. I could taste insanity on my tongue, felt it flow through me like a tsunami of unadulterated power. My muscles constricted, and I reacted out of habit and battlefield experience.

I slid my feet forward and to the side, I was ready. Ezekiel circled too far around when giving the execution signal, overcompensating. I leaned forward onto the balls of my feet and thrust.

I threw my shield with all the force in my body, flung it across the impossible span of the field, it flew like a discus. The breath rushed out of me with the exertion. The shield flew out from my grasp with the power of sheer energy, a streak of liquid steel. I could feel it, from the apex of my soul. It sliced through Ezekiel's neck like a hot knife through soft butter. Ezekiel's head rolled across the ground and lay at Maliki's feet. Before the legions could react I was at Chloe's side, my sword impaling both of her captors. Then I was able to breath again, Chloe was in my arms.

Simultaneous to my actions Kira and Sebastian followed my lead, calling the legions into battle. "It's starting."

In an instant of raw force, I saw the backlash of what I had done. Before my legions could get to the frontline, I held up a hand and threw a force field of fire towards the opposing frontline troops; they all felt eternal death in an instant. I pulled back and remembered that I had Chloe, there was no reason to battle to the death. I concentrated and set my force field free, stopping all troops in their tracks. The force field burst out covering a good five hundred yards, this was done effortlessly, taking only slight concentration. It flexed like any other muscle, obedient to my will. I pushed it along shaping it to cover over half the legions, the front half. I thrust the field forward covering the length of the clearing, and exhaled in relief. But my eyes were riveted on Maliki, who was now in command.

"Maliki" I called I watched the muscles in his back tighten. I had a captive audience for a few more minutes. I was going to try to prevent any further bloodshed. "Did that play out as it was written??" I yelled spitting on the ashes left where Ezekiel once stood. "Do you all still believe that travesty of a doctrine! It will lead you to death and despair and for what?!!!! For the glory of a madman who sends us all to our doom for his entertainment?" I looked squarely at Maliki. "I will wipe you out if you choose to go forward with this fight. In the blink of an eye I brought eternal death to the multitudes. There is no glory in this battle. Your deaths will be pointless. The deity will lose masses that he will not be able to rebuild. Giving me the opportunity to rise and conquer during his moment of weakness." I was speaking loud and forcefully. "Think brothers!" I pointed to my head with the hand that grasped the sword. The other was still tight around Chloe's waist. "Think! As this is not a wise decision. This will be the battle that begins the fall of the king of kings." I tried to reason with Maliki.

Maliki was an experience soldier but he was not an original and he was out of his league without Ezekiel. He knew that.

"You don't have to die today," I said calmly. "Vengeance won't help Ezekiel now. Think about what you're doing. If you attack you will all die. But you have a choice, you can walk away, right now."

Maliki's shoulders hunched with defeat, He lifted his arm and gave the signal for retreat. I took a deep breath of relief. They had seen our power. They had seen that there was absolutely no hope for them.

Maliki gave the legions instructions to retreat. There was no fear in his voice, only resolve and acceptance. If the troops were lost here I could have risen against the Deity, and likely won. Maliki's decision was the right one.

Sebastian snarled out a dark laugh. Maliki stared at him gloomily. "It would have been a regrettable waste to our kind to have lost any of you brother. Go back with your head held high. Know that we would be glad to welcome any of you into our ranks. You don't have to die for his lies"

The opposing troops had retreated. The battlefield was quiet. Kira and Sebastian released our legions. And then I remembered Chloe. I dropped my sword and wrapped her up in my arms.

Blink of an eye

I held Chloe tight, I felt as if when I let her go she would once again be gone forever. My heart pounded against her chest.

"Take me to meet our son," She said suddenly.

"Chloe, we have some time together but not much." I responded.

"What do you mean?" She asked sounding startled.

"We cannot remain here. It's a temporary realm created for battles, a neutral zone of sorts." I tried to explain in terms she would understand.

"Can't I go back with you?" She pleaded, tears welling in her eyes.

I shook my head, my heart breaking. "No babe, you are a soul now, your body died."

"So get me a body Caleb! I need you. I need to see our son!" She demanded wearily.

"Chloe if I could do that I would, but only angels can fill a body and only by a witch's hand." I was hurting more than she was but I was trying to keep up pretenses so not to frighten her.

"But aren't you – I mean *you are a God!*" She said, grasping.

"There are limitations to all of our powers. I am much more powerful when I am in my own realm. I am weakest in the human realm, we all are. I could give up my human body and return with you but Aziah would be on his own, we cannot do that to him. He is too important, and too many people want him gone." I winced at my own words.

"You call him Aziah?" She looked up at me and smiled, "I like that." She paused and said, "No, of course you cannot leave him." She sounded resigned, "So what happens to me?"

She had been through an ordeal already and I know she was fearful of her fate. I wanted to comfort her. Needed to. "You take your place as queen of my realm and wait for my time here to be complete." I pushed a stray curl off of her forehead. "You will find that time for you now will pass much faster than for humans. A hundred years passes in the blink of an eye." I offered a comforting smile.

"So you can come see me?" She was nearly begging me to throw her a lifeline.

"Chloe I cannot, each time I leave Caleb's body it begins to desecrate. The more I leave it the faster it will degrade and it will no longer be inhabitable."

"So get a new body!" She offered.

"Again, it's not that easy, witches play a part in that." I paused wanting to explain but not overwhelm her. "Each pass through a realm takes a toll on us, weakening us. I would slowly but eventually recover but it can take years, decades. Also angels know when you pass through a realm, they will know when

Aziah lacks my protection. Aziah needs me strong." I kissed her softly on the forehead. "I know this is a lot to take in. But Chloe our time together here is limited. I can promise you this, you will be cared for and treated as I would be treated, until my return. You are very important now, to every angel and human you will be known as queen." I cupped her face with my hands and kissed her soft full lips. "Chloe I have missed you dreadfully. I was a lost, ruined soul in your absence. You have affected me like no other."

"I love you more," she smiled.

"Yes, I know that, too. But . . . when I left you, I left you unprotected, vulnerable. And then you were attacked and died," I shook my head, looking at the ground, "I just need you to know, I am sorry for that. I made a serious lapse in judgement."

"You were doing what you thought was best. You were protecting me." She shrugged it off.

"I knew I would gain your forgiveness, but that doesn't let me escape the consequences. You died Chloe! Aziah needed you and I let you die." I could feel tears burning behind my eyes.

"I should have known you'd find some way to blame yourself. Please stop. I can't stand it." Chloe demanded, her arms pulling me close. "Just say I'm sorry. I shouldn't have left you because I love you more than my existence and be done with it already." She looked up at me with a soft melancholy grin.

"At least let me suffer a little. I deserve it." I demanded.

"No," She shook her head.

I nodded slowly. "You're right. Keep being understanding. That's probably worse."

"I love you so much Caleb." She said, changing the subject suddenly, "How much time do we have?"

"Not enough." I answered. "Until the new day comes."

I kissed her deeply, relishing in her warmth. My heart pounded loudly against my ribs, and my breath seemed to get stuck in my throat. I felt Chloe's eyes on my face, but I refused to meet her gaze.

The sun had gone down and the moon was bright. Just a few yards away from us there was a large body of water with glistening ripples. Chloe's fingers caressed the back of my neck, wiping away the drops of sweat. Were two souls ever meant to be together more than Chloe's and mine? I knew the answer to that. No, there were not.

"It's Beautiful," She said, looking at the moonlight rippling across the water.

"I didn't even notice." I flashed a smile at her.

"No?" She sounded surprised.

"Chloe, it pales in comparison to the beauty standing before me." I said genuinely.

She shot me a look of annoyance and took me into her arms. Her lips brushed against my throat. It sent chills down my spine. She moved her lips down my neck to my shoulders. I scooped her up in my arms and we headed for the water. She was unfastening the buttons on my shirt with lightning speed, once unbuttoned I shrugged it off, dropping it on the ground. I stood her up in front of me at the water's edge, slipping her shirt off over her head. The muggy, humid air was all around us.

We dropped onto the soft grass, a tangled ball of arms and legs. I had never been so turned on in my existence. I reminded myself to breathe. How did she do that? Have this effect on me. Finally we lay naked in each other's arms. Warm sweat soaked bodies sliding against each other as we kissed, long and deep. Touching, caressing, moving from one spot to the next.

I wanted her, needed her badly. As if she read my mind she released me and said. "I need you inside of me Caleb."

I obliged her request. I was so hard it hurt. I flipped her onto the ground facing me. I pushed with my arms shoving myself up onto my knees mounting her. Stopping a moment to take in the sight of her. She lay naked in the moonlight, perfect skin desaturated of all color by the moonlight. She was a goddess. Deserving of a God. Deserving of more than I was or could ever be.

A rush of heat flashed across my skin as she moved her hips towards me in anticipation. She had felt my erection at the base of her pelvis. I was basking in the pleasure. I could barely wait, yet I wanted to surround myself in her beauty, her perfectness for just another moment. Desire took over and I entered her with a moan. She shuddered. I felt every spasm, every tiny movement she made. I was torn between needing her, needing release and wanting to extend and lavish in the moment.

"Don't be afraid," I whispered. "We belong together, here or there, we will be together. My love for you transcends time and space." I was abruptly overcome by the reality of my own words. This instant was so perfect, so right; there was no way to doubt the words I said.

Her arms wrapped tightly around me, holding me against her, pulling me deeper into her. It felt like every nerve in my body was on fire.

"Forever," she agreed.

"Oh Caleb," Chloe moaned loudly. Taking away any reasoning skills I had left forcing me to give in to animalistic instincts and desires. I took her. I took every ounce of her, her body, her heart, her soul, her love. She was mine eternally and I hers.

This would be goodbye but not forever. Eternity was a very long time and we still had a great story ahead of us. But we would have to wait ... for a decade, a century, a millennia, or the blink of an eye.

The Book of Aziah C.E. (Current Era)

The SECOND book to this series ... *THE BOOK OF AZIAH C.E. (CURRENT ERA)* is a continuation of Chloe and Caleb's legacy through their child, Aziah's, eyes. It's not easy fitting in when your fate and future has already allegedly been foretold and you are mankind and heavens public enemy number one.

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