

Chapter ONE

The sun had set on a dark April night. The gray skies had been pouring rain all week, but by the time the commotion had died down, the rain had begun to ease. Light was peeking through the clouds and reflecting off the gold-adorned pillars of Saint Luke's Cathedral. Droplets streaking down the red-stained glass made it look like blood was spattered on the windows. The long set of beautiful marble steps leading to its front doors had been taped off. By the time the forensic cleaners had arrived and started to disinfect the scene, the rain had washed away most of the mess; only small pools of blood and a faint red stain in the cracks of the steps and in the sidewalk drains were left. The sound of droplets against the roof of the cathedral drowned under the sirens and the yelling from the first responders. Bottles of chemicals and disinfectants were doused onto the stairs. The smell of the hydrogen peroxide was thick in the air. The churchgoers huddled at the archway at the top of the stairs to try and hear bits and pieces of what was being said outside. The first responders directed them out the back of the cathedral into the parking lot and ushered them to their cars. They had zipped up the body bag and loaded it into one of their vans. An eighteen-year-old kid who couldn't save his mother. In only a few hours, it was as if nothing had happened.

The last of the funeral mourners had driven off and the parking lot was now cleared out. The only sounds heard were whispers between officers and engines of roaring cars driving by. A few officers lingered near the edge of the lot, whispering to each other.

“Jesus Christ. I mean, he was just a kid. Couldn’t have been more than what, eighteen, nineteen. What the hell happened here? Did anyone know why he did this? Did anyone even see him do this?”

“It was a funeral for his mother. At least that’s what everyone in the church said. The poor kid probably couldn’t handle it. They never imagined he would do this. He spoke warmly about his mother, like everyone else, and then walked out. The only weird thing they noticed he had changed his haircut, or something. A family friend said he saw him reach into his car and pull out a few things, maybe an envelope or a letter, but didn’t think anything of it. Everyone assumed he was going home and didn’t look back. Seconds later, they called us. Apparently, Sergeant found the letter.”

“I wonder what it said. Hey Serge! Hey Serge, what’d the letter say?”

Their sergeant's neck jerked up. His head twitched back and forth from looking at the stack of wrinkled, smudged notebook papers and looking at his officers. He glared at them with a look neither of his officers had ever seen from him. For the first time in a long time, tears pooled in his eyes. He walked silently toward the officers and handed them the stack. His hand stayed holding the papers slightly longer than it should have while he contemplated whether or not he wanted them to read it. He stammered, gave a soft smile that held no joy, and walked away.

In his car, he was still reading the lines of the note in his head. He pictured the boy sprawled out on the steps of the beautiful cathedral with his hand still wrapped around the handle of the gun. You could peer into the kid's head through his temple. The steps were covered in splintered bone and the grey and pink tissues and sinews of his head. The contents of his skull veiled his face, and the pink mist of his final decision sprayed across the marble steps and matted into his clothes. The boy seemed at peace; he lay with his arms at his side, eyes wide open and bloodshot, peering straight into the sergeant's mind. The rain cleaned some of the splatter off his face and formed a small ring of blood around his head. The sergeant swore that when he arrived at the

scene, the ends of the boy's mouth were curled into the slightest smile.

He grabbed a towel from the back of his car and tried to wipe the blood from his boots, but the blood was stubborn and clung to the leather. He rubbed his feet over and over, getting more and more frustrated. Beads of sweat dripped from his brow as he scrubbed harder and harder. His breaths were shallow and speeding up. The walls around him were closing down and vision was darkening. He snapped from his panic and threw the towel back into the trunk, quickly switched off his car's lights, and sped away. His whole way home, as he fought to keep his tears in his eyes, he muttered,

“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

Back across the city, at the cathedral, the rain had begun to pick up. As the water began to seep into the pages, the black ink was starting to run down the page. To save the letter, they checked over their shoulders to see if anyone was watching, and ducked under the caution tape. They went hurriedly up the steps and entered the nave of the cathedral and stopped halfway down the center aisle and sat on opposite sides of the pew, facing each other.

“Well? What does it say?”

CHAPTER TWO

If you are reading this, I have won. I have entered Hell, and I have created Heaven. If those of you who find my body are beginning to mourn or even feel sorry for me, stop. I am, and I cannot stress this enough, exactly where I want to be and, above all, have returned to my mother. To those of you who want to even begin to consider some amount of foul play or that someone else might have done this to me, please know that I take that as a grave disrespect. If you are to understand anything about this, it is that I did this on my terms, done by my own volition. I don't need anyone's prayers or pity. In fact, I beg of everyone who happens to hear about this to not partake in either of those disgraces in my name. You can keep your tidings of grace and peace from God; it means nothing to me. You all run into your churches to pray and beg for protection and grace and love as if it wasn't Him who brought upon the harm you need salvation from to begin with. All-powerful, all-good, and all-knowing, yet He gave us a world where the children starve, the women are mistreated, and my mother gets leukemia. And of course, we'd never even come close to affording bone marrow donation or any real treatment, for that matter. Of course, she never deserved a moment of rest, right? What do I know, though? All I am is the high school dropout son of a poor immigrant woman. There must've been something I couldn't understand. I'm just too stupid to understand

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the divinely perfect reason that my angel of a mother, who never hurt a soul, needed to die a painful and debilitating death. My apologies if my anger is beginning to precede me, but you know how one can get when they have to idly watch their mother die a long, agonizing death. Also, I don't know if any of you have ever planned a funeral, but Jesus is it expensive. My mother right now is lying in a wooden box worth more than our rent. And the fee from the cathedral, Christ don't get me started. My mother has been going to this church for twenty-two years and they charged a fee you would not believe. They have marble floors, gold-lined ceilings, stained glass worth more than anything we ever owned, and somehow there's nothing left to help cover the cost, but I guess that's just how it works.

Now, as I'm writing this, I realize I need to think of the kind of people who will be the ones to see this note. The first responders, coroners, detectives, judges, and what have you don't know me in the slightest. Perhaps a distant family member or two might come across these words, but even then, they could never fully understand the situation at hand. So, for your sake, I will give you some context. Not because I wish to write about my life or that I think my life was a spectacle to behold and to be admired, but because I feel sorry for the masses who would misunderstand the feat that I have accomplished and would take my magnum opus for some sad, tragic story.

At the time of writing this, I am eighteen, living alone in the Bronx. Before this, I had never lived a moment of my life alone, and I detest this thoroughly. My mother has raised me since the day I was born. My father was never around, and I truly never really wished he had been. My mother had such an incredible amount of love for me that I am sure, still to this day, that there wasn't a single household that had more love than ours. My mother and I had more, sleeping in this empty apartment, than most can even dream of having. She taught me to always cherish what we have in life and to find joy in the little things. Life was quiet. It was easy. I don't think I could ever get accustomed to the noise of a privileged life. Everything felt as if it was just as it should be. We had each other and we had our routine. Once I was old enough, I decided to leave school and start working. We worked from sunrise to sunset, Monday through Sunday. Whatever could pay us in cash, we did it. Every Sunday morning, I sat in the same spot in the same pew, my mother to my left, and whispered soft Hallelujahs. The first thing my mother ever taught me was that, above all, we trust God. If we weren't at church or at home, she was a quiet woman. Her English was sometimes broken, and she spoke with a fairly heavy accent. She was always very self-conscious about what people thought of how she spoke. Almost no one knew her as I did, but if anyone needed proof that God was real and that He had angels, there was no need to look farther than her. If there were

days we couldn't eat, she said it was because another family needed it more, and she was happy to give it to them. And until the day she breathed her last breath, she was telling me,

“It’s ok, God needs me sooner, and He knows you’re strong. Go be who I always knew you would. You can soar without me weighing you down and limiting you, darling.”

Hearing my mother call herself a burden killed me long before anything else could even have a chance. I wanted to tell her she was wrong. Through the tears, I stuttered off the beginning of nine different sentences, but she was right. I could work longer shifts. I could take more physical jobs. She emigrated here alone so that I could be born a citizen. I could have a career. I didn't need cash payments. It was as I was watching my mother wilt away that I realized God was either not all-powerful or not all-good. He let an angel feel like a nuisance. By the end of all of this, the only thing I've learned is that to love someone is to hand them a knife and make them promise to eventually plunge it into the depths of your heart. Over and over again, life is nothing but a series of

taking that knife out and handing it to someone new until eventually you drive one deep into someone's chest and leave them to dry the blood and stitch the hole. I am far too tired to even think about picking up the needle and thread this time. Again, I've devolved into babbling like a child about my woes. I guess, to understand the decision to rebuke God, I should have explained how I came to love Him in the first place.

The first time I remember my mother telling me about Him was when I was around seven. Of course, I had been attending church every week with her since I was born, but this is, to me, the first time He became more than a name. Sometime in late December, my mother took me to a cemetery to visit a friend of hers who had recently passed away. She wanted time alone and had me play in the field directly behind the headstone, where she could still watch over me as she talked to her. I don't remember how much time had passed, but after what felt like an eternity to young me, my mother came and held my hand and told me its time to head back home. As we left, she placed an orange Tic Tac on the base of a small flower bed leading up to the headstone and made the sign of the cross. I asked her why she put that there, and she replied,

“It was always her favorite candy, and God is gonna give it to her.”

I don't know what it was about hearing that, but it stuck with me. It caused such a feeling of safety, a safety I had only ever felt when I was with my mother. A year later, we came back again. The candy was gone, and I was sure God gave it to her. Knowing what I know now about Him, He probably just ate it Himself. It was from that December morning all those years ago that a praise of God began to course through me. Between then and around when I was fifteen to sixteen, nothing really happened out of the ordinary for us. We worked, prayed, ate, and slept. Every morning and night, before every meal, when I was stressed, when I was happy, when anything happened, it was Hallelujah. It was almost as if nothing I had or accomplished could be mine. Our hardships were ours, but our victories were His, and no one bats an eye. My mother shielded me for a while from the downpour of adversity we had to face, but you can only shield so much from someone who is always with you.. We moved a few times when I was really young, so it was a little hard to keep friends as I moved from school to school, and eventually I stopped trying. My mother never let me feel alone or unwanted. No matter how long her day was, when I got home after a long day, she would hear my long-winded, never-ending explanations riddled with sidetracks. I always had so much I wanted to tell her that I might have never even once finished a story, start to finish, without breaking off into a never-ending tangent about other things I thought about that day. Whenever she didn't need to work

nights, there was this little pond we'd walk to where we would "fish." She'd hold my hand as I looked for the biggest stick I could find, and then we would sit side by side, and she'd hold my hand as I held it into the water and waved it around. We would sit there together for hours, and everything would feel so still. In those moments it felt like nothing in the world could hurt me. On the walk home, I would talk the entire way and tell her everything that crossed my mind and she would listen as if it all mattered. Some people underestimate what it can do to make someone feel heard, but she didn't. She always listened. When we got home, I would rush to get ready for bed and pick out a book for her to read to me. I'd sit in her lap, and we would fall asleep on our old little chair, me in her arms. It wasn't until much later that I realized how much we struggled, but that was because of who she was. She took everything that could have hurt me and carried it herself. And no matter what it cost her, she made sure I felt safe and that I felt loved and that I felt like our life was enough, and every time I left the house, she would say the same thing to me,

"Tchau filho, te amo. Vai com Deus."

which means "Goodbye son, I love you. be with God", and for a long time, I believed that He cared just the same about me and I never questioned any of it. There was nothing to question. Everything I needed, she gave to me, and everything I didn't understand was already

explained before I ever had the chance to ask. Looking back, I now attribute the joy of my youth to my mother, but at the time, I gave it all to God.

As I mentioned earlier, everything was relatively okay for the majority of my life, until I was fifteen. It was around this time that I had to drop out of school. Between the ages of twelve and fifteen, I would go and work odd jobs with my mother when I could. Whether we were cleaning out neighbors' apartments or washing the windows of the bodega across the street, I did my best to help my mother. But it was when I had just turned fifteen that my mom had begun to slow down a little bit. She was feeling weaker and would get tired faster. She needed more and more help to keep up with how much she had to work, and we decided I would leave school, get a GED later on, and go from there. My mother always wished I would go to college. She'd sit by my side some nights and tell me that someday I would own a company and I'd move us both out of this place and we'd have a little house somewhere outside the city. She always swore she knew that I was destined to accomplish great things. She never failed to let me know she was proud of me. Maybe in another timeline, my mother never got sick. Maybe God could recognize the righteous before He set our lives ablaze. But ablaze it went when one summer day, as we packed up our cleaning supplies from the shop next door to us, she said she did not feel well and needed to sit down. She was

sweating profusely while trying to tell me she felt fine through labored breathing. I picked her up and rushed her home. She looked pale as I laid her on her bed. I should have known something was not right from that day on. I drew all the blinds and turned on the little fan on her floor to cool down the room. I stayed by her side as she napped, and when she awoke much later, she said she felt better and that overheating was all that it was. Steadily, she began to weaken even more. She often had a small cold. The color had now drained from her face. She promised it didn't feel like anything worth worrying about and that it felt like something small, something temporary, something that would pass the same way everything else always had. She had been tired before, she had been sick before, and every time she pushed through it like it was nothing more than an inconvenience. So when she told me she was fine, I believed her. I guess some part of me knew it was easier to accept her words than to confront the possibility that something was actually wrong. But it didn't go away. The small colds stayed. The days stretched into weeks, then into months. She began to cough more, at first only occasionally and then in a way that made her stop what she was doing just to catch her breath. Eventually there were moments where she would have to steady herself against the wall or the edge of nearby furniture, her hand gripping whatever was closest like it was the only thing keeping her upright. Every time she'd see the worry in my eyes and wave me off. Every action took more effort

than it used to. The same woman who used to outwork everyone I had ever known now needed to sit down after things that would have never affected her before.

One morning, we were headed to a job I had gotten us to clean, a nicer house on the opposite side of the city. It was far from where we lived, but it paid just a little more. We got up before the sun rose, just like every morning, the sky still dark and heavy, and we sat side by side at the kitchen table. We drank our instant coffee and got ready for the day ahead, moving through the same routine we had done a hundred times before. We headed out the door just after the sun rose and walked down the steps of our apartment. Mother said she was feeling a little uneasy today and asked if she could take a lighter day and have me do the more laborious tasks, trying to say it casually, like it was no big deal, like she just hadn't slept well. Of course, I agreed, telling myself it was nothing, that she was just tired, because we were always tired. We were on our way, moving slowly down the stairs, when halfway down she stopped to catch her breath, and I hadn't noticed right away, making it a few steps down in front of her before I realized and turned around. When I did, she was leaning slightly against the railing. I asked if she was okay, but before she could answer, she began to sway a little off balance. Her knees gave way. I, luckily, had turned just in time to catch her. I thanked God for years for letting me do so. As I caught my balance, I saw into her eyes as she came back into

my arms. At that moment, every one of her coughs and wheezes and tired looks rushed at me all at once and hit me like a truck. As I looked at my mother's face, I knew I had failed her all these months. I screamed for help, and our neighbors rushed out and called an ambulance, and I stayed holding her there on the stairs. Mother had fully come to by the time the ambulance arrived, trying to reassure me even as they lifted her onto the stretcher. Even then, she was saying she was fine and that she had just fainted. Once she was admitted, they ran their tests and did their observations. I sat in the chair beside her bed, watching machines blink and listening to conversations I didn't understand. On day one, they said she had a very above-average white blood cell count. They said it carefully, as if they expected a big panic, but my mother and I didn't know what that was an indication of. The next day, they said testing had confirmed the cause of all of it: leukemia. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think. My mother had cancer. This wasn't a cold or the flu, and it wasn't aging or anything else we convinced ourselves it was. My mother had cancer. As I said it in my head, it didn't make sense because this kind of thing happens to other moms, but not to mine, not to the woman who held everything together when we had nothing, not to the person who never let me see how hard things really were. This doesn't happen to an angel. They told us they had caught it relatively early and that there is a chance for remission. They talked about treatment plans and

timelines, possibilities, but anytime they suggested a course of action, the only thing she could say was,

“How much would that cost?”

That’s it. That’s all she would ask. Just the burden her treatment would have on me. Even in that moment, she could think about someone else. I sat in my chair, hands clasped and head down, praying to God, begging and begging for this to be a dream or a false diagnosis, for someone to come back into the room and tell us they made a mistake, but that never happened. In a couple of days, they sent us home with a prescription, a few bottles with names I couldn't pronounce then and have zero recollection of now. We had instructions that felt too simple for something that was supposed to keep her alive. I was now sixteen, almost seventeen, working alone and trying to support my mother with cancer. I had never even fathomed that this was a situation I could find myself in. In a moment, my life shifted from school and small routines to counting pills, watching symptoms, and measuring days by how she felt when she woke up. The days of walking in the park and reading stories late at night with my mom felt more like a faded dream than something I actually once had the privilege of doing. But the Lord, in His infinite wisdom, knows best, or at least that is what I kept telling myself. It’s what I repeated quietly when things felt like they were slipping too far out of my hands. The next two

years were, relatively, not the worst. She always sounded like she was getting over a cold. Sometimes she would wake up not sounding sick at all, and I'd forget it was not just a cold she was fighting. Whenever she felt strong enough, she came with me to work just to sit and talk. She couldn't walk across town from job to job anymore, so I bought us a bike, and whenever Mother wanted to come with me, I took us both. Her condition didn't improve by much, but at least it didn't get worse. It was a kind of stillness that kept us trapped in a limbo of constant worry that this won't last. I worked longer hours, took whatever jobs I could find during the day, and worked security at night. It felt like every dollar I earned had a place to be before I even held it. We knew from the start we could not afford to return frequently to the hospital, not with the cost. We could only go every three months or so, stretching the time as long as possible between appointments. Each visit felt like a gamble. Each visit could mean her days were numbered. Mother always reminded me that we should show up, hoping nothing had changed too much since the last time, and would say,

“What do we have if not hope for a better tomorrow?”

Now I saw where hoping can get you. Maybe God heard the prayers I had made that the news of remission would be waiting for us on the other side of those doors, or

maybe He couldn't bother to listen to me, take your pick. The doctors sometimes spoke in a way that sounded like hope. They'd say that since she seemed relatively stable, even with only the minimal treatment we could afford, there was hope for us. For a moment, it seemed like the medications were working. The fatigue had not gotten worse, and the coughing had settled into something manageable. It seemed like we had called on the Lord, and the Lord had listened. All of the prayers had paid off. All the Sundays at St. Luke's had meant something, and the light of God had started to peek through. For a while, life settled into something that almost felt like a routine. Not enjoyable and not easy, but something we could at least understand. Some mornings I'd be cleaning apartments on the other side of the city, scrubbing floors that didn't belong to me, and on weekends I worked security. What a life it is to be picking up after people who had more than they needed and didn't think twice about what they threw away.

My birthday came and went at the end of September, but it didn't feel the same. I spent most of it out of the house, and by the time I came home at night, Mother had gone to sleep. There was a cake sitting on the counter waiting for me. Not store-bought, but a homemade vanilla pound cake. She always used to love baking it. It was both of our favorites. She hadn't baked it in a long, long time. Tears began to stream down my face, unlike any other time I had ever cried. I had to step

out of the apartment so I wouldn't wake up my mother. I came back inside, kissed her forehead, had a slice of cake, and went to bed. When winter rolled around, everything felt heavier. The air turned sharp, and the cold didn't just stay outside, but found its way inside as well. The apartment never really got warm, no matter what I tried. The nights were longer and darker. Work got harder to find, and the jobs I found paid less. At the same time, rent rose, just a little, not enough for anyone else to notice, but enough for us to feel it in a way that made everything just out of reach. Everything became a little worse. A little more rent, a little less work, a little more coughing, a little less strength, and everything kept adding up. Somehow, we managed to get through it. Not in a way that felt like we had won anything, but in a way where the demands just kept coming, and we kept finding a way to meet them. The cold eventually gave way, and we returned to spring. The months passed quietly after that, slipping by in the same routine we had come to know. I made a grave mistake, forgetting that this could get much worse.

Sometime in November of the next year, everything changed. It wasn't gradual like before. There was no time for excuses or to adjust or pretend it wasn't there. It happened all at once. That morning started like any other. I woke up early, got ready for work, and checked on my mother before I left. She was awake, sitting up, and she told me she felt fine, and I left for the

day. When I finally got back, the apartment was quiet. Mother didn't call out my name when I opened the door like she usually did. I called out for her, and there was no answer. I rushed to the bedroom and found her sitting on the edge of her bed, her body slumped forward slightly, her breathing shallow and uneven in a way I had never seen before. Her hands were shaking, her skin pale, and when she tried to speak, her voice came out weak, barely above a whisper. I rushed to her, trying to steady her, trying to ask her what was wrong, but she couldn't give me an answer. I remember the time between the call and the ambulance feeling longer than anything I had ever experienced. In times of distress, it's as if God slows the world down just to make you sit in it. Each breath sounded like it took more and more effort. I kept telling her everything was going to be fine, over and over again, like saying it enough times would make it true. When the ambulance finally came, they took her from me, placed her on the stretcher, asked questions I didn't know the answers to, and suddenly, we were back in the hospital. The doctors didn't speak in the same careful, hopeful tone they had before. There was urgency now. They stabilized her and rushed to run more tests, and I sat there again, hands clasped and head down. This time, I wasn't praying for it to be a mistake. I knew it wasn't. When they came back, they told us her condition had worsened significantly, that the disease had progressed, that the treatment she had been on was no longer enough. They talked about more aggressive

options, stronger medications, more frequent visits, and things that needed to happen immediately. My mother looked at me that night and said,

“That’s it. No more. It’s not worth it. I’m tired of coming here. I want to rest. I don’t want to spend the last moments of my life in and out of clinic after clinic and hospital after hospital. I’m done. I’m weak. If this disease doesn’t kill me, it’s because the treatment did. *Amo sempre meu filho, mas estou tão cansado. Mãe precisa voltar para o céu.*”

I’ll never forget those words. It was the moment I decided I had to let my mom die. But how could I not? Living was Hell for her. She, more than anyone I know, deserved to rest and be free of pain. It would have been selfish to force her to stay here by my side while she suffered. Through the tears, I was able to utter one sentence.

“I’ll always love you too, Mom.”

I held her in my arms for a long time after that. We sat in the room silently for an hour and told the doctors it was time for end-of-life care. I stepped out of the room afterwards and walked outside the hospital. I stared at the sky and yelled one last prayer into the sky. One last time, I begged that he would make this all just go away.

The next three weeks felt unreal. I don't think I ever truly processed what I had to witness those weeks. I watched as my mother deteriorated before my eyes. I had to sit and watch as the cancer ate away at her, as she became weaker and weaker. I watched as God did nothing. With each passing day, I got angrier and angrier at Him. Near the end, Mother would fade in and out of consciousness, and in the third week, she fell into a coma. Imagine that. He didn't even have the decency to let me tell her goodbye to her face. The doctors had asked me if I was ready to take her off life support, but there wasn't an option. I had nothing left. I talked to my mother for hours that day. For just a moment, it felt like it did all those years ago, walking to the park with my hand in hers. She was light in this darkness. The world would beat her down over and over and over again, and she'd throw on a smile, and she'd listen to my stupid little child-like aspirations. No matter what I said I wanted to be, she'd be there telling me I was gonna be the best there ever was. If she woke up tomorrow and I told her I wanted to be an astronaut, she'd drop everything and build my rocket. I used the rest of my strength I had during those hours; after that I had no more energy left. I held her head against my chest and laid next to her for a while. I was waiting for the right moment to call the nurse in, but I knew deep down it would never be the right moment. I took a couple deep breaths and pressed the button on the side of the bed to call them in. I signed some papers and that was that. I

held her hand as the line went flat, and through the tears, I told Mother I loved her and that soon, we'd be together again. I forced my eyes to stay open so I could remember the scene He caused.

On one of our hospital visits, it was nine o'clock in the morning, and I went looking for coffee for us both. I walked into the cafeteria and sat in this little plastic chair to wait for the long line to die down before going and standing in it. There was some local news broadcast blaring from the TV right above me. The reporter explained that, that very morning, someone walked into a school armed, and killed ten little children. The same mothers and fathers who dropped their kids off that day had to watch as parts of their children were zipped away and carted off. It was only hours ago that they waved goodbye as their precious angels skipped away, wearing backpacks that covered half their body, grinning the widest smiles someone could ever wear. For some odd reason, the broadcasters allowed a very young child to talk about what he saw inside his classroom. He looked at the camera and told the world he dipped his hands in his friend's fresh pool of blood, and covered himself head to toe, so that this gunman would think he had already been shot. This trembling kid, standing on live television, telling the world that the only thing that saved him was the fact that his friend had died, and he could now camouflage with his blood. What more do you people need to see before you

understand? He does not care about you at all. Why don't you go tell the children with gaping holes in their heads that God is good and will protect them?

The night that I had to tell the nurse to pull the plug on my mother plunged the knife in my heart as deep as it could go. I fell apart in a way I didn't know a person could. It was late at night when I walked home. It was the same 200 square feet as it always had been. Pictures of us together still covered the walls. Both of our unmade beds sat in the darkness in different rooms. The books we read together were stacked on the table in front of the little TV which stayed on the floor. Nothing had changed about the building, but everything was different now. I physically couldn't handle it. I broke down and was reduced to a shell of a man. The last four years of my life had torn me apart and begun carving away at me. I became a hollow body pretending to be human. I lay on the cold tile floor of that sad apartment, convulsing and in tears for hours. I threw up so many times that the only thing coming up was stomach acid and blood. Puddles of it pooled everywhere around me. My hands were clasped to my head as I pulled and tore out my hair until blood ran from my scalp. I pulled out so much hair, the next morning I had to shave it all off. I couldn't breathe through the sobbing and vomiting. I yelled louder than I have ever said anything before for God to switch my place with her. Take me if it means she gets more time.

For years while she was sick, I prayed, on my hands and knees, that my mother would end up ok. Every single morning, afternoon, and night, I prayed for her. A woman who, for her entire life, worked to praise God until it killed her. I have devoted the last eleven years of my life to Him without question and without hesitation, believing that there was a light at the end of this tunnel. And what did it amount to? Absolutely nothing. He had either created a world and was too unbothered to rid it of its purely awful horrors, or had deliberately placed them here to inflict unimaginable suffering on the masses. How can I continue to live a life devoted to that monster? Why would I ever still hope to one day spend an eternity with Him, and how can anyone believe that that is something worth living for? If He didn't care about me or even about her, then why should I care about Him, why should I kneel, why should I pray, why should I give thanks to someone who watched her suffer and did nothing? I guess maybe it's my fault. I was foolish enough to think that devotion was noticed and that faith was rewarded. Foolish enough to believe that the hand that had forsaken its own son on the cross would somehow think twice about me. He takes, and he takes, and he takes. He doesn't give a damn about you or your loved ones. He doesn't even try to hide it either. I mean have you ever heard of a disease called SIDS? If not, allow me to explain. It stands for Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, and the only symptom is that your newborn suddenly dies without cause. It

remains one of the leading causes of infant mortality. You would think that the all-loving Creator of the universe would never allow something like that to happen to His children, that there would be some line that even He would not cross, but year after year, distraught mothers mourn the loss of a child they carried for almost a year, a child they barely even got the chance to meet. He does nothing at all to stop it. We stop at no end to do everything we think will get Him to grant us His forgiveness and grace, but has anyone ever stopped to think whether or not we should forgive Him? If someone puts a gun to your mother's head and makes her stare down the barrel just to torture her, would you forgive them? But what, because two thousand years ago You had someone write it down that You love us, You think You don't have to prove it? Always remember, God makes no mistakes. Sodom was built, brick by brick, just so He could watch it fall. I hope that each and every one of you, even for just a moment, will feel what I felt as I sat there watching life leave my mother's eyes. Maybe then you all will see that we mean nothing to Him. And when that day comes, when someone you love is ripped from your grasp, how will you forgive him then? I pity the sad, broken man who will still fall to his knees and call His plan a gift and a blessing. What more do you people need to see before you understand that He does not care about you at all and that He won't protect you? If you don't believe me, why don't you go

tell the children with gaping holes in their heads that God is good and will protect them?

Now, Lord, You may have been able to take my mother, but I'll be damned if I let you take me as well. You have no power over me anymore, You don't scare me. That's all you've ever had, isn't it? Fear. The threat of what waits on the other side. Hell, punishment, "eternal suffering." All of it is nothing but a leash to keep us kneeling. You mean nothing to me now; you are nothing. I hate you, I hate you, I hate you! There is nothing left of mine for you to take, and if you want my life too, you can't have it. Mother, soon this horror show will be over, and we will embrace again, and when that moment comes, it will not be to be with him. you don't get to follow me there, you don't get to stand between me and the people I love anymore. you built your kingdom on a pedestal of fear, on the promise that if we don't obey, we burn. you forced us to sing your praise. We never had a choice, but I see that now. Without that fear, you are nothing; no throne, no judgment, no control. Whatever waits for me on the other side, I will take it gladly if it means you never get to see me again. you have no power at all anymore, you can't kill me, and you can't keep me here. I am not afraid of you anymore. you have no say in where I go anymore. you can't touch me anymore. This is not an ending but a beginning. father, into your hands I commend my spirit.

CHAPTER 3

The sergeant sat in his car and stared at his front door for a while. His whole body was tense, as he twitched in his chair. He slowly unbuckled his seatbelt and got out of the car. He approached his porch and grabbed his keys out of his pocket, opened his door, and quietly walked to his room to look for his wife. He climbed the stairs headed for his door when he walked past his daughter's room. He saw both of them lying in the bed. He trembled as he saw his daughter.

“What have I done?” he whispered to himself.

He turned his head away, stumbled into his room and sat on the edge of his bed. He rocked back and forth with his hands clasped over his mouth, biting his fists. He could not hold the dam anymore and cried, with his hands covering his face. He had been discharged from the army four years ago, and every memory he had suppressed came rushing back. Every life he took, their eyes were glaring right at him now. The sound of his rifle cocking back and the recoil as another round rattled from the chamber paralyzed him with agony. The sound of bullets tearing through his fellow soldiers echoed in his ear over and over again. He told himself that it was over, that he was home now. He did what he was trained to do, what his dad told him made him a man. Nothing made it stop; nothing could quiet the noise in his head or

ease the pressure in his chest. He laid in a ball, still stuck in those moments, rocking back and forth. All he could do was think of the soldiers he had to watch bleed out while his commander told him to leave them behind, all of the sons and daughters he had sent home to be buried by their parents. Seeing pain in the world is one thing, but it pales in comparison to the feeling of knowing you had a part in causing it.

The sergeant lay in his bed until he felt like he couldn't breathe. He grabbed his chest in pain and hurried toward the back door of the house. He stumbled side to side, narrowly avoiding slamming his body into the edge of a table. He unlocked his patio door and almost tripped while pushing himself through the doorway. As he closed the door behind him, he could feel the piercing air blow against the tears in his eyes. Staring up at the sky, he began to yell:

“How many did I kill? How many did you send to hell because of me? How many of that kid did I create by sending them home to their parents in a box? Have you made me a cancer? Is that what I am to this world?”

His knees caved under the weight of his body. Falling to the ground, he buried his head in his hands, and wept into his lap. He cried for the child at the cathedral and for the pain he caused to others. He cried for the pain he

won't be able to protect his daughter from and the inevitable pain he and his wife will have to cause each other by leaving the other behind. He cried until the pain had left him numb. He took many deep breaths and built up all the strength he could. Slowly, he crept toward the door and walked up the dimly lit stairs toward his daughter's door. He looked through again and smiled as he watched his wife asleep, holding their daughter. He quietly stepped inside and sat on the chair beside the bed. He gently caressed his wife's hair and leaned his head on her shoulder. He sat there, relishing in the presence of his angels. Blowing them both a kiss, he got up, and rested his hand on his daughter's. He stood there remembering the day she joined their family; he remembered the first time she wrapped all five fingers around his thumb. He smiled softly and whispered,

“Until the day I die, I will never let you feel alone. I promise. I promise my darlings.”