

6 The World Was All Before Them

The world collapsed back together with a gasp of air and clamor of screeching machines, alerting cardiac arrest and cessation of breath.

Zoey only had enough time to see her hand still on Jamie’s forehead, his face already having taken on the mask of death, before the coding team arrived and, in a whirlwind of the Hippocratic Oath, started administering CPR and defibrillation. Pushed outside the little room by this activity, she wandered to the visitor’s waiting area and sat down in the middle of the empty room.

The world collapsed back together in a blur of waiting briefly until the coding team called official time of death and a member of the medical staff approached Zoey with words of condolences and paperwork to fill out and sign. The world was both too fast and too slow, and she confused the nurse when she declined to see the body one last time.

“We’ve already said our goodbyes,” Zoey explained, knowing full well that the nurse knew that Jamie was comatose when she arrived, and he never woke up one minute later, when he went into code.

Still feeling out of phase with reality, she made her way out of Parkland, toward the train station, and caught a train just before it left for downtown. As if on autopilot, she caught a light rail car, not bothering to sit down during the brief journey as the car was jammed with Saturday evening leisure folk, and stepped off at the Thanks-Giving Square station.

She knew it was a late hour, yet she trusted that the main gate would still be unlocked. The metal gate opened with no resistance, and she entered the now shadowed main pathway, walked through the gigantic gold ring “doorway” of Thanks-Giving Square, and sat down with sudden tiredness on one of the stairs on the other side.

She breathed slowly to calm her racing heart, her eyes closed, and when she opened them again, she looked to her left.

A tall, fit man with short-cropped salt-and-pepper hair – whether late thirties to early fifties would be hard to guess based on his appearance – still wearing the simple but now impeccably clean outfit of T-shirt, jeans, and sneakers. And wings.

“Your wings are white,” Zoey observed.

Ed looked at her, somewhat surprised. “You can see them?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Interesting. They’re not materialized.” He shifted his shoulders. “Looks like you gained some of your brother’s ability, then. Which reminds me – your brother says hi.”

She gave a quick bark of a laugh, but then placed her hands over her face as she gave way to tears for a few minutes.

Ed waited as she regained her composure. “Why the tears?”

“Relief. Relief and release. I see you in flames, my brother dies, and I wake up next to my brother’s body, with nurses telling me that only a minute – a minute! – had passed, and you inform me that my brother says hi to me from Heaven.” She rubbed her eyes dry with the palms of her hands. “You tell *me* what’s the appropriate response.” She looked at his wings again. “You *were* in Heaven, right?”

“Yes,” Ed replied, sounding awed and strangely tired. “Yes, I was.”

“So – Miranda was wrong. A fallen angel can – uh – unfall.”

“How do you know --”

“You sent. I heard most of everything between you and Miranda as you shielded Jamie and me.” She touched his hand lightly. “Thank you.”

Ed sighed. “I’m sorry about Miranda. I should’ve known that the reason your brother encapsulated himself was to keep Miranda imprisoned, from causing harm. I was so, so --” he waved his hands about, looking for the right word, “so adolescent in my depression that I didn’t even suspect that I wasn’t alone in possessing your brother.”

“Isn’t that a weird coincidence – that both you and Miranda would be in Jamie at the same time?”

Ed shook his head. “In the matters of Heaven and Earth, there are no coincidences.” He peered at the sky above them, still a bright blue in the late summer evening. “I thought I was your guide to Jamie, and your role was to guide Jamie to death. Never in a million millennia would I believe that a human woman would guide a mediocre fallen angel like me back to Heaven.”

“How?”

“By giving me a chance to be just as brave as the bravest man you know.” Ed smiled at Zoey’s stunned look. “I wasn’t the only one who was sending.”

“I – I just,” Zoey stammered.

“Another thing you should know,” Ed interrupted, suddenly serious. “Between Miranda and me, our added energy may likely have accelerated the progression of your brother’s cancer. And for that, I am sorry.”

Zoey shook her head. “Jamie is at peace now. What is there to be sorry for?”

Ed closed his eyes, as if in deep thought. When he opened them again, he said, “One other thing your brother said.” He paused. “You need to forgive your father.”

Zoey only stared at him at first. “Is he dead?”

“No. He’s very much alive.”

Zoey surprised herself by wincing at that news, at that old ache that, in spite of Jamie’s salvation, was still there.

Ed noticed her discomfort. “And that’s why you need to forgive him.”

She shook her head, but this time in anger. “Ed, you don’t understand --”

“Oh, yes, I do. More so than you think.”

Zoey stared at him again. “You know something that I don’t know,” she declared.

Ed smiled softly. “Yes. And I’m not allowed to tell you – yet.”

“Well – that’s not fair.”

He replied, “I’m not allowed to tell you – but I *am* allowed to help you figure it out yourself.”

Zoey frowned quizzically at him. “How?”

“First, trust me. And don’t move.”

Ed stood up, moved out of Zoey’s line of sight, and sat down on the step immediately behind her, his long legs bent and on either side of her. She heard Ed’s wings materialize as they unfolded and reached up high, like angelic antennae. Ed brought his hands around and rested them just barely a millimeter above her lower abdomen.

“What --”

“Shhh. Angel at work.”

Zoey sat still, trying not to breathe too much, when a slow warmth started spreading from the area immediately under Ed’s hands, to her pelvis and even her lower back. After a moment or two, she stifled a small gasp as she felt a tiny cramping on one side, just below her belly button.

Ed moved his hands away as he stood up and then resumed his position, sitting next to Zoey, as his wings folded and shimmered out of sight. He had a slick sheen of sweat across his forehead.

Zoey stared at her lower abdomen. “Did you,” she began. She paused as she lightly placed her hands protectively over the area below her belly button. “Did you do what I think you just did?”

“What do you think I just did?”

“Uh – repaired the damage to my reproductive system and got me pregnant?” Her voice rose to an odd falsetto at the last word.

“First part, yes. In about, oh, a hundred years, modern medicine should be able to perfect quantum nanosurgery to smooth out micro scarring like yours and help stimulate cellular and tissue regeneration. It’s just humans will still need technology to do it.” He smiled a little as he paused. “As for the second part, yes and no.”

Zoey opened her mouth to speak but closed it, waiting for his response.

“I’m not Miranda,” he explained. “There’s no ‘me’ in that baby – she’ll be human, not nephil.”

“Baby?” Zoey repeated, stunned. “She?”

“Same technique as repairing and regeneration of you; I induced parthenogenesis from one of your eggs. Spliced a bit from one of your stem cells from the marrow bones, so she won’t be a full clone of you. Biologically, you’ll be giving birth to your non-identical sister, although, what with the age difference she’d likely call you ‘Mom,’ so – ooof!”

Zoey had lunged left and hugged Ed as tightly as she could as she cried out, “Oh my God, Ed, *thank you!*”

At first Ed sat still, stunned. But then he laughed, and that feeling of warmth that Zoey had felt when she first flew with him was part of that angelic laugh. He hugged her back, and when Zoey pulled back, he was only a little bit surprised that he didn’t want to let her go, but he did.

They settled back into their seating positions, with six inches of space between them.

Zoey sat, her hands protective over her belly. After a heavy silence, frowning a little, she asked, “I don’t mean to sound ungrateful – oh my God, Ed, this is beyond my wildest hopes -- but --”

“Was I ordered to give you a baby,” he interrupted, finishing Zoey’s question.

“Well?”

“No.” He glanced down, at the small hands covering a belly that, in nine months’ time, would be huge on Zoey’s small frame. “You are my Beatrice, and I wanted to give you a gift. I can’t give you back what you lost in the past, but I can at least give you a part of your future. She is my gift to you.”

“So how,” Zoey paused, struggling to find the words. “How will she help me figure out what you’re not allowed to tell me – about my father?”

He smiled. “You’ll know when it’s time.” He looked pointedly at Zoey until she looked at him, eye-to-eye. “Until then -- can you at least try to forgive your father?”

She sighed deeply. “For you – and Jamie -- I’ll try.”

“Good girl.”

Zoey snorted. “Watch what you’re saying, Mr. Ed. This girl’s a *woman*, and she’s gonna be a *mommy*.” She shook her head, almost in disbelief. Her eyes moved towards his wings. “So – what’s next for you?”

“Me?” He slightly shifted his shoulders, the wings wavering in slight motion. “Report back to Central, get my orders, and do what needs to be done.”

“What you did before – composer, choreographer, engineer – would you be doing that?”

“That?” He shrugged. “Planetary creation and orbital alignment, what’s poetically called ‘music of the spheres.’ There’s no need for those occupational specialties once the original system’s been set up. The laws of nature pretty much take over.”

“You were part of God’s creation crew.”

“You can say that.”

“Wow.” Zoey smiled. “You’re *really* old.”

“Ha ha.”

“What about Miranda?”

“She was always a soldier.” Ed paused. His silence ran so long that Zoey was about to apologize, but he finally declared, “I’ve tracked her in Hell. How long she’ll stay there, brooding over her failures, or when she’ll return to Earth, I don’t know. But I’ll be keeping an eye on her, no matter what I’ll be doing.” He glanced up, seeing the growing dark orange-shot sky as the sun began to set.

“Do you think – since she went after Jamie and now she knows who I am, that Miranda will go after me?” Zoey suddenly became afraid, her hands clenching into fists. “Go after the baby?”

“Zoey.” Ed shifted from the steps, kneeled in front of Zoey, and held her clenched hands protectively in his. “Zoey, you are much stronger than Miranda. More than you’ll ever know. And that little girl, the daughter of a Beatrice, will be even stronger than you. Still, *I promise you*, you will never have to worry about Miranda. Just live your life and raise that little girl. Be happy and be at peace. That’s all you need to do.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.” He glanced up, seeing the dark orange sky grow into a clear blue-black as the sun dipped below the far horizon.

“You need to go,” Zoey observed.

“Yes.” He gently released his hands from Zoey’s and stood up. “Your daughter won’t have a father – but she’ll have a celestial guardian, when she needs one. And I’ll try to visit you, if I can.”

“If allowed,” Zoey added, trying not to sound sad.

He smiled, bittersweet. “If allowed.” He walked over to the gold ring and stood in the middle, facing her.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Shoot.”

“What’s your name?”

Zoey instantly received in her mind’s eye ridiculous images of a cartoon mermaid with a seashell bra, which quickly dissolved to images of a world-weary old Jewish man, which quickly faded as she felt words form around a becalmed cloud of light, *I drink the air before me, and return / Or ere your pulse twice beat.*¹

“Goodbye, Zoey,” the angel said aloud as he took flight and then shimmered out of the material world.

“Goodbye... Ariel.”

#

Just turned ten-year old Ariel James Fitzpatrick burst into the townhouse apartment, her jeans and shirt ripped, her knees and elbows badly abraded and bleeding. She left her bike as it was, flung aside on the front stoop.

“MomMomMom!” she called out.

“In the kitchen, AJ,” not-quite fifty-year old Zoey Fitzpatrick answered. She nearly dropped the pot of spaghetti noodles when she saw her daughter, but had the wherewithal to put it back on the range before she rushed to her, kneeling down to get a closer look. “Are you okay? Anything broken? What happened?” she asked in quick succession, lightly placing her hands on the various hurts that she saw.

“I’m okay, I’m okay,” AJ replied, sucking in her breath when Zoey touched a particularly tender and sore spot. “Just banged up when I flew off my bike, but that’s not the weird part!” She stared at Zoey. “Mom, I – you’re *not* gonna believe this!” She started shaking.

Zoey stood up and walked her daughter to a kitchen chair to sit down. Then she opened one of the kitchen drawers and got out a first aid kit, which she placed on the kitchen table. After wetting down a paper towel, she pulled another chair closer to AJ and started tending to her various scrapes and hurts. “Try me.”

¹ Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest*. Act V, scene I, lines 102-103.

AJ took a deep breath, then began. “I was just riding my new bike, see, just around the neighborhood, and I end up at the park.”

“Something happened at the park?” Zoey asked, alarmed.

“No, nothing happened at the park – I just biked around the lake for awhile. But then I’m coming back home really fast, about to cross Grand, when I hear this voice say ‘STOP.’ And it’s like it’s above me, but it’s also like inside me – it just says ‘STOP.’ But I’m going too fast to stop, and that’s when the bike just crashed into NOTHING. Nothing was there, Mom, I swear – the bike just stopped, and I end up flipping over the bike, skidding on the sidewalk. And I’m thinking, ‘What the hell’ – oops, sorry, Mom – and that’s when I see it.”

“See what?”

“The car crash. An SUV ran a red and plowed into this huge truck, and it was a HUGE mess, all smashed metal and rubber, fluids and smoke – and I would’ve been in the middle of it if the voice hadn’t said ‘STOP’ and then stopped my bike.”

“Stopped your bike,” Zoey repeated slowly, finishing the cleaning and bandaging of AJ’s scrapes.

“And... and for a split second I see... this guy... in the sky.” AJ’s dark eyes – the same eyes as Zoey’s brother and mother – were wide and scared. “Crazy, huh.”

Zoey’s blue eyes looked into AJ’s dark ones. “No, not crazy.”

“So... you believe me?”

She smiled and held AJ’s hands, mother to daughter. “Oh yes. Very much so yes.” She gave her a quick hug. “Wash up – dinner’s almost ready. And while we eat, I’ll tell you a little story that’ll sound even crazier than yours.”

AJ gave her a funny look before heading to the bathroom.

Zoey closed her eyes. *Thank you*, she sent.

The reply was echoey and faint, as if the messenger was already very far away. *You’re welcome. I wish I could visit, but I was just passing through.*

Was it Miranda?

No. Just random chance. As I promised, you don’t have to worry about Miranda.

Okay. Zoey paused. *AJ saw you.*

Yes.

Were you materialized?

No.

Ab. Zoey felt a mild sense of panic, which she settled down by breathing deeply. *And I thought the big talk about sex was going to be stressful.*

His laugh was faint but clear. *You’ll do fine.* Then the dimensional distance grew greater, and she barely heard his next sending.

How’s the forgiveness going?

She sighed. *It’s going.*

Ab, Zoey. Well, I’ll try to visit you, if I can.

If allowed, she added, smiling softly and sadly.

But he was already gone.