

PRAISE FOR *NO LESS DAYS*

“*No Less Days* is unlike anything I have ever read before. Alluring and timeless, it is punctured with bittersweet nostalgia and rumination on eternity as well as the ripples we cast into the fabric of the world. A hero that captures from page one, a universe populated with dimensional characters and so well-crafted it never once breaks its own rules, a fantastical look at questions of faith and the vastness of eternity. With *No Less Days*, Stevens is on the brink of changing faith-based fiction as we know it forever.”

—Rachel McMillan, author of the Van Buren and DeLuca Series

“Amanda G. Stevens has written an amazing story. Even though the premise is fantasy, there is a grit and realness to the characters and plot that immediately pulled me in and wouldn’t let me go. And there was a natural and touching inclusion of faith, the believers imperfect but true, that touched my heart and brought tears to my eyes. I hope there will be more.”

—Julianna Deering, author of the Drew Farthering Mysteries

“Enigmatic and imaginative, *No Less Days* captivates readers’ attention for a beautifully written story that boldly touches on the real—and hard—things in this life. Amanda G. Stevens delivers truth and creativity in equal measure, balancing the speculative with the contemporary in a way that will keep you turning pages until the end.”

—Emilie Hendryx - Create Explore Read

“Amanda G. Stevens has penned a gripping and thought-provoking story of life, death, and the burden of sin. These characters reeled me in quietly, chapter by chapter, and then—BAM!—hit me right between the eyes. I couldn’t put it down!”

—Katie Donovan, blogger at Fiction Aficionado

“*No Less Days* by Amanda G. Stevens introduces a cast of characters with an unexpected and challenging life journey. Bookseller David Galloway feels particularly alone, unaware of others with his condition and unable to fully engage with those he cares about. The story unfolds in clever and intriguing ways till the very end, in the distinctive voice of a talented author.”

—Kristen Heitzmann, Christy Award winning author of historical and contemporary suspense novels, including the Told You Series

“This book contains every element I seek in contemporary fantasy. Honestly, I’m not sure how my brain will resist exploding as I await the next book in the series! Stevens expertly executes a fresh take on the immortal hero story, giving an amazing sense of realism to this vividly characterized fantasy. If you’ve been looking for something new, fresh, and simply *awesome* to read in Christian speculative fiction, THIS IS YOUR BOOK. Amanda G. Stevens is an author to put on your absolutely-must-read list! Grab this book and hold it tight!”

—Serena Chase, author of the Eyes of E’veria series

NO LESS DAYS

AMANDA G. STEVENS

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Our mission is to inspire the world with the life-changing message of the Bible.



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*Now unto the King
eternal,
immortal,
invisible,
the only wise God,
be honour and glory for ever and ever.
Amen.*

1 TIMOTHY 1:17 KJV

ONE

His books were burning.

He let the glass door slam behind him and charged into the shop. The smell of smoke wafted around him. Where was the fire? He turned a circle at the bookcases in the front. The new books, not burning. In the back then—old books there. Irreplaceable books. He barreled up the two steps to the main landing and darted down the nearest aisle, sci-fi on one side and Westerns on the other. Save them all, hundreds of them, open a window and pitch them outside if necessary, and it would be necessary. Fire didn't hesitate, didn't sate itself, didn't tire. His scalp prickled.

The smell was fainter back here. He headed along the back wall, boots tracking rain over the old green carpet. No flames. No visible smoke.

"I hope that's you, David." The voice drifted from the children's shelves.

"Tiana." He detoured toward her, and the smell almost disappeared. No, he had to find it first. Strongest at the front. He went that way and called back to her. "Something's burning."

"Um, no?"

"Yes."

"I promise, there's not. . ." Tiana poked her head into the main aisle and then followed him. "Are you talking about my incense?"

David halted halfway to the front. "Your. . .what?"

"Behind the counter."

He stepped over to the checkout counter and then behind it, and the aroma assaulted him, infiltrated his skin as well as his senses. The burner was a small glazed ceramic kiln the color of a robin's egg. Smoke drifted up through holes in the tooled copper lid. David backed into the counter.

“Get rid of that thing.”

“It’s perfectly safe.”

“Tiana, get it out of my store right now.”

“Okay.” She shuffled around him, and he edged over to give her room. “I know that tone.”

She grabbed a blue pot holder she must have brought from home and carried the burner outside. David trudged to the closest chair, a wobbly old wooden thing made for a child’s height. He folded down into it, knees poking up, and let his chin hit his chest. He could lecture himself for his overreaction or he could move on and hope someday he’d believe incense wasn’t dangerous. Candles weren’t dangerous. Fire didn’t have to be followed by explosion and sizzling skin, where skin was left at all.

A third option did exist. He could admit that a century of overreacting to fire was a strong indication he always would.

However, he wasn’t a third-option sort of man.

The bell chimed over the door, and David stood. An apology might be in order. She had to think him neurotic.

Tiana set the burner behind the counter, lid off, cleaned out, smokeless. She leaned one hip against the counter and tugged her plaid work shirt. “You stick your finger in some incense as a kid, or what?”

“Exactly that.”

Her head tilt said she didn’t believe him. Good for her.

“And what tone did I use a minute ago?”

“You know. The David-Galloway-is-not-happy tone. You don’t use it much, but when you do, it thunders off the walls.”

“I don’t want fire in a store full of books.”

“There was no actual fire in the burner.”

“Smoke isn’t good for them either.”

A long look, and then she shrugged. “Jayde wanted to come by after classes tomorrow and start training, if you’re good with that.”

“Of course.”

“She’s like you about books. She’ll want to touch all the first

editions and have a moment of communing with literary history.”

A laugh filled his chest. “Appropriate for a lit major. Is her track American?”

“Yeah. Mid-nineteenth century is her area of interest.”

“Civil War?”

“The whole thing. Popular fiction of the time, slave narratives, Underground Railroad, Reconstruction. Apparently people made time to read even in conflict like that.”

David leaned against the shelf behind him and crossed his arms. “It’s only recently that people don’t make time to read.”

“Oh, here we go.” She smirked.

“Digital distribution cheapens everything,” he said. And reclaiming esteem for the written word would require something universal. A blackout, perhaps. Some days David enjoyed the possibility—the death of digital, the forced return to reading paper, no more screens.

“And while you rail against it, some of my friends who would never read a physical book are addicted to their Kindles.”

That was always her argument. And she wasn’t wrong. Still, he wished people valued books—paper, ink, effort, art, knowledge—the way they used to.

He pushed away from the bookcase. “So you want to give me another of your Sunday afternoons?”

“No other plans.” Tiana shrugged. “Show me the haul.”

He stepped outside and held the door for her, and she let him. She pointed to a patch of dirt to one side of the entrance, smudged with a dark-gray stain.

“Look at that. The big bad pile of ashes already got rained away.”

David sighed. Tiana walked around the building to the rear parking lot where he kept his work van. He opened the doors, and she clasped her hands in front of her. Boxes of books filled the van all the way to the front seats. He’d long since removed the back ones.

“How many trips will you need?”

“This is the whole lot.”

“It’s a lot of a lot.”

“And a steal of a lot. Five dollars per box.”

They both leaned into the van, reached for a box at the same time. Their arms could have brushed but didn't. He'd never know if she was deliberate about things like that. The way he was.

They kept the boxes shut and hunched over them to protect the books, but the rain had slowed to a light mist. They each made over a dozen trips from the van to the store and back again, quiet while they worked until David brought in the last box. Tiana had already opened several.

“Aw, look at all the children's books. Can I read some?”

“It's Sunday.”

“But you're paying me.”

“And I owe you two years of breaks.”

She sat cross-legged on the floor and pulled one of the boxes to her side. “*Make Way for Ducklings*. Do you know this one?”

“It's a classic.”

She didn't bother to throw sarcasm at him. The illustrations had already captivated her.

The afternoon passed like a few heartbeats. They unpacked and inventoried like treasure hunters, which they were, and the pleasure of discovery filled the air around them. Then Tiana glared over David's shoulder at the regulator clock on the wall, ticking all this time beneath their voices.

“I hate that it's already after five,” she said.

Could it be? He turned. 5:37p.m. David rose and stretched. “Should I have been keeping track?”

“Of time? You? Right.”

Tiana slid a nearly new illustrated children's edition of *The Red Pony* back into a beaten cardboard slipcase. A 1945 edition unless he missed his guess. Not a rarity, but not a common find either. David blinked. Right. Emerge from the books, give her his focus, try not to prove her crooked smile was justified.

“I do have to go,” Tiana said, “but while I'm thinking about it, are you going on vacation next month?”

Caution settled on his shoulders. "Why do you ask?"

"Seems to be your habit."

"Two consecutive years doesn't make a habit."

"Three pretty much does." She pushed to her feet. "I noticed while I was looking at the inventory logs from three years back. You didn't acquire or sell anything the first two weeks of October."

He'd hired her for her attention to detail. He couldn't scowl at it now. He went to the coatrack behind the long counter and shrugged into his trench coat, dug his keys from a pocket. Time to lock up, eat, head home.

"I'd just like to know if I'll be off work a few weeks."

"I know," he said. "And yes, I'll probably be away next month, but I can't give you a date yet."

"September's almost over."

He forced a smile. "Call me spontaneous."

Tiana grabbed her purple peacoat and followed him outside, watched as he locked the store. The rain had stopped, but the clouds overhead guaranteed this was only a temporary reprieve.

She looked up at him, coat buttoned to her throat, breeze ruffling her hair. "So you'll do what you did last year. No planning, just call me the day you leave and the day you're back."

"Most likely, yes."

"You're very frustrating sometimes."

No arguing that.

"And I'll see you tomorrow."

She rambled across the parking lot, crunching fallen leaves, zig-zagging her stride to step on as many as possible. Her legs were long, lean muscle defined by the slim-fit jeans above her cowboy boots. Her two-inch-long hair flared out from her head in black coils. Her skin was deep umber and smooth. Two years of knowing her, and the sight of her only grew dearer to him. It could be a problem, if he were the kind of man to let it.

She saluted him before ducking inside her little khaki-colored Ford. He returned the gesture.

Then he walked. The wind still tasted like a storm, and the gray clouds overhead weren't empty yet, but his coat was resistant. Only two miles home, and he'd walked to the store early this morning. The damp promise of rain had blown through his hair and filled his nostrils, his mouth as he drank the air with his head back. He did it again now, his lungs glad for each deep breath. Satisfied. However long he lived in Michigan—ten years or less, of course—he'd enjoy each change of season.

Another block, and he stopped at the family-owned sandwich shop on the corner. He stepped in and scuffed puddles from the soles of his boots.

Bobby, the owner's youngest son, grinned at him from behind the counter. "The usual?"

"To go."

David had tasted every sandwich on their menu before settling into his rut. He waited only minutes for Bobby to hand over a white paper bag with the receipt stapled over the fold.

"North Atlantic cod on grilled ciabatta and cream of asparagus soup."

"Thanks, Bobby."

"Have a good night, Mr. Galloway."

The sky began to spit again, speckling the restaurant bag, as he traversed the last mile home. A few hundred feet from his door, the clouds gave in altogether. He tramped through the downpour, drew up his collar around his neck. He unlocked the door and squinted up at the heavens, let the drops fall through his hair, into his mouth and the creases around his eyes. He blinked the rain away. Water, one thing that was always older than he was.

He went inside and shut the door, shed his coat, had dinner sitting at the desk in his library. Shivered a few times, but he couldn't begrudge the rain when he'd chosen to walk in it.

He should catch up on news. He opened his computer and settled into his overstuffed chair, feet propped on the leather ottoman. At his favored news site, he clicked headlines. World. Local. National.

He read the stories. Heaviness fell on his shoulders. Accidents and crimes. Terror and war. Suffering.

Nothing changed. Or rather, nothing improved.

He closed his eyes and leaned his head back.

One story of kindness. One, and he'd stop reading. He opened his eyes and searched.

Breaking story. Happened today around noon. DAREDEVIL ATTEMPTS TO CROSS GRAND CANYON, FALLS TO DEATH.

Don't go there. Don't.

He clicked the link.

A man's grinning face filled the top of the screen—white guy, blond, keen blue eyes, no older than thirty. Zachary Wilson. The article called him "popular," but David had never heard of him.

Then again, David ignored entertainment news.

A daring stunt. No net, no harness. Unexpected winds. The body hadn't been recovered yet.

David set the laptop aside and surged to his feet. He tried to work his jaw, but his teeth were locked. He stopped at his cherrywood bookcase and braced his hands on a low shelf, let his shoulders cave under the weight of everything he'd just read, absorbed it, every life that had been ended today. He straightened and pressed his palm to the spines of his books. Ran a thumb over his first editions of *Vanity Fair* and *War and Peace*.

He scrubbed one hand through black hair that gave no sign of thinning or graying, over a face he'd worn for two lifetimes—strong cheekbones, straight nose, no wrinkles. He sank back into his chair, using muscles and bones and joints that refused to wear out.

That man, Zachary Wilson. Such a long fall. . .it would be a kind of soaring, if he'd closed his eyes. No way to live through it, so nothing to dread really. Only open space and gravity, molecules of air rushing past faster than lungs could breathe them in. Maybe he had tucked his limbs in and rolled; maybe he held his arms tight against his body and dove as if he'd meant to do this thing. Or he'd flailed and screamed as if those actions would slow his descent.

David should go there. Should dive into the wind. Find a place with no witnesses, of course, but. . .he'd never fallen as far as this man had today. Why not discover how it felt?

He shook his head. Recovery wouldn't be worth it.

He stared at his books and tried not to let his imagination burn pictures into his brain. What his own body would look like after a crash like that. What Zachary Wilson's corpse looked like right now. He kneaded his jaw and sat forward, elbows on his knees.

Stupid, stupid children, believing they would never die.

He couldn't simmer here in his chair all night. A man had sacrificed himself in search of a rush. Men died worse deaths, though few for more pointless reasons. David stood and left his books behind. He stepped into the backyard barefoot. No point in soaking his shoes.

He'd sleep out here in the tent tonight, free of walls and processed air. Few things calmed him as well as rain pattering on canvas. He sat on the back steps, concrete chilling his thighs, and peered through the drizzling dusk toward the two-foot pen he'd built against the side of the house, a hexagon of stacked two-by-fours.

The smell of wet soil filled his senses, and drops pattered in his hair, on his shoulders. Inside the pen, dandelions, hostas, ferns, and strawberry plants bobbed in the soft impact of the rain. Nothing else moved.

"Fine, don't come out. Wait until the rain stops, though you've much sturdier protection than I."

He knew better than to believe in any attachment on the turtle's part. Half the time she never poked her head from where she hid. Tonight she eased into the open from under an old log he'd set in her pen years ago. She lumbered like a small dinosaur, craning her neck, blinking in the rain. David leaned forward.

"Good evening then."

She pushed up from all four legs, lifting her carapace off the ground, and lurched across the grass away from him. She spotted a surfaced earthworm, and her mouth gaped open and clamped down,

ferocious and not in a bit of a hurry.

“Protein first,” David said. “Now don’t forget a strawberry. Dessert.”

She clawed at the worm, swallowed it, and then sat there. The rain had nearly stopped, leaving a shine on her shell.

“Shall we delve into philosophy tonight? Why we’re here, what we should be doing with our time? Or would you rather enjoy the rain?”

For an hour or more, he watched her. She prowled the pen for a while, found a strawberry to nibble, and then wandered into the concealment of the hostas.

“You’re no help,” he said to her retreating tail. “I don’t know your purpose either, to be frank.”

He stayed outside until the dark was thick around him, until the rain had moved on and his bare feet had mostly dried, bits of grass sticking to them. Until he could sleep through the night and wake up in the morning trusting higher ways than his own.

Then he went inside for his sleeping bag and pillow. He hung his slicker in the closet, changed into pajamas, and padded out into the yard still barefoot. Wet grass tickled between his toes. He unzipped the tent door and ducked inside. It had been pitched so long in the middle of the yard the grass beneath it was dying. That didn’t matter on nights like this, when rain and restlessness converged and would have kept him shut up inside, were the grass too wet to sleep on.

He laid out his thermal bag and pillow and crawled inside. The flannel lining was soft against his feet, his arms. Exponentially nicer than the heavy coarseness of a bedroll. He closed his eyes.

The last week of September. He might not get many more nights like this before winter, if most of October was lost to him again.

He folded his hands on his chest, the old ceremonial melancholy tugging at him. He would die in October, more than likely. No way of knowing if it would be this one or the hundredth from this one. Maybe he’d know when it was happening. If he did, if this was the year for it, he’d call Tiana and tell her about the turtle.

Tiana would find a home for the old girl, maybe even keep her. The thought pulled another smile out of him—Tiana with a pet older than she was.

Enough. He wasn't going to die next month and had no reason to imagine otherwise. He tried to mute his thoughts and tune his senses to the rain, imagined every drop that hit his tent and slid down into the ground around it. Drops that joined creeks that joined rivers, drops that evaporated into new clouds to fall on the earth again and again.

TWO

I'm sorry."

Tiana stood on the customer side of the counter, feet apart, shoulders pulled back. She looked as if she expected a mountain to fall on her and planned to try her best to hold it up.

He wasn't that menacing. Or that heavy. "Why should you be sorry?"

"Jayde's my friend. I vouched for her."

"I interviewed her," David said. "I hired her."

"I hounded you into it."

Really? He cocked one eyebrow at her.

"David, the first four times I brought it up, you said we didn't need a third person and you had no intention of hiring one. Ever."

The one person alive whose opinion of him mattered, and she made him sound like an ogre.

Tiana paced over the wood floor as the bell above the door jingled and a woman bustled into the store, leading a girl by each hand. Neither of them could be more than six years old, each wearing blond pigtails that curled at the ends.

"Hello," the woman said.

David nodded to her. "Morning."

"There aren't many children's books in the window. How's your selection?"

"Oh, we just got in a ton of them." Tiana led the woman to the first row of shelves. "These three shelves, and one more down at the end if you're looking for anything teen."

"Not yet." The woman smiled. "Thank you."

"Ask if you have any questions."

Tiana marched back to the counter and faced David again, her stance no less defensive. "This isn't like her, really it's not."

“When did you call her last?” he said.

“About ten minutes ago.” She crossed behind the counter and snatched her phone up from its cubby, hidden from customers. “She didn’t answer my texts either.” She held the phone to her ear and waited.

A fortysomething man entered the store, nodded to them, and walked back to shop as if he’d been here before. Had he? David should remember. He tried to place the man, the black leather jacket with Western fringe that shouldn’t be forgettable.

“Maybe he’ll buy something this time,” Tiana said.

“Oh?”

“Yeah, he was in here on Friday and browsed for like an hour and then left. Remember?”

“Right.” No. David’s hand clenched at his side, out of sight behind the counter. Normal for this time of year, but he hadn’t expected it quite yet.

How he pitied old minds. So many experiences lost.

Tiana’s phone burst into an Adele ringtone, and she snapped it up to her ear.

“Where in the world are you?” She paced again, listening, then pressed a hand to her forehead. “Well, I hope you called the cops on his useless butt.”

His shoulders tensed, and Tiana made a palm-down gesture at him that had to mean, *Chill, David*. He nodded.

“What are you talking about? Jayde, that man never did a thing for you. You’ve got to stop—that’s not going to work on me, and you know it.”

A pause, and then Tiana lowered the phone to her side and stared at him.

“She’s not coming to work,” she said.

“On whom is she calling the cops?”

She walked behind the counter, slid her phone into its cubby, and released a sigh. “Nobody.”

David motioned her to one of the foot-high children’s chairs that had been left near the front. She gave a chipped laugh as she

dropped into it. He stepped out from behind the counter and looked down the rows of shelves. No customers in sight. He turned back to Tiana and tipped his head. They both knew she had to tell him.

“That loser she’s with.”

David grabbed a second kid chair and sat next to her. “How many times, do you know?”

She blinked at him, something she always did when he skipped to the end of her story without waiting to hear the middle. “At least two other times I know about.”

“Does she need medical treatment?”

“She won’t be getting any, but she’s not coming in, so. . .”

An icy needle punctured his chest and sent slow coldness outward into his limbs. “And she would if she were able.”

Tiana ducked her head and hid her face behind her hands. “She isn’t the type to call in.”

The man in the leather jacket rounded the corner. David stood and nudged his chair against the wall. Tiana sprang up and walked away, disappearing toward the nonfiction shelves.

David rang up the man’s books. Nicholas Sparks and Ian Rankin? Okay then. As the bell above the door announced the customer’s departure, Tiana reappeared. Her mouth pinched less, but she avoided David’s eyes. More to the story. The part she least wanted to tell.

She would tell him, though. Silence wasn’t in her.

She lifted her head. “Jayde always says, ‘He puts up with a lot from me too, you know.’”

He nodded. Same old story.

“I want to go over there and yell at her. Or drag her out of his apartment and. . .and keep her away from him for good.”

“How?”

“It wouldn’t work. Nothing I do ever works.”

When he nodded again, she looked ready to smack him. “Tiana, you know you’re right. Otherwise you’d be over there now.”

“She’d have to be locked in. It’s the only thing that would stop

her from going back.”

“Exactly.”

“Could we?” The tone was sardonic, but the tilt of one eyebrow said she’d follow him to Jayde’s boyfriend’s apartment for a kidnaping team-up, if he’d lead the way.

“I don’t lock people in,” he said.

She rocked back on her boot heels. “Even for their own good?”

“Even then.”

She volunteered to man the register, the job he’d hired Jayde for. Of course he let her. He’d hole up with his inventory and continue cataloging the haul from yesterday. But after three years, organizing their growing stock required two people. Despite his original refusal, he wouldn’t have hired Jayde if he didn’t need her.

He’d been working an hour when Tiana poked her head into the stockroom.

“Did you see the news yesterday, about Zachary Wilson?”

David fastened his focus to the box of books in front of him. *Boxcar Children*, maybe fifty of them. “The daredevil who fell.”

“And everyone thought he was dead.”

He shuffled the books into series order. “Not something people could be mistaken about.”

“Except they were.”

He marked a tally sheet on his clipboard—title, condition, location in the room for easy tracking later. “Tiana, the man fell thousands of feet.”

“Except he didn’t.”

“What was it, a publicity stunt? He really did have a net?”

“He had an angel.”

The scoffing sound bounced off the boxes surrounding him. She couldn’t possibly be. . . He looked up. She raised her eyebrows, pure challenge. Yes, she was serious.

David set down the books and stood from his crouch beside the box. “He isn’t dead.”

“An angel caught him.”

“You believe that?”

“How else could he be alive?”

Good question. Tiana held her phone out to him. He took it and tapped PLAY on the news video.

The anchorman spoke over a video of a helicopter search in the dark, then of a team on foot this morning, tromping around the bottom of the canyon lugging a rolled-up stretcher, water bottles, and more video cameras. Mist hovered around hiking boots. Sun slanted into the camera from the right. The recovery team’s pace was unhurried, but no one seemed to notice the beauty around them. Resignation.

“Now watch this dramatic moment,” the anchorman said, “as those who went into the heart of a tragedy, hoping to bring back whatever remained of this brave young man, come face-to-face with something beyond their wildest hopes.”

David allowed his eyes to roll. Everyone was brave these days. No one was stupid.

“Shut up and watch,” Tiana said.

In a cleft of the rock above the cameraman, no more than ten feet ahead, something moved. A few rocks slid down, plinked off each other. The man ducked a spray of pebbles, and the camera wobbled then steadied.

“Watch,” Tiana whispered.

A blond head seemed to poke out of the rock itself—obviously an illusion caused by the flat lens, but it was an effective one. Zachary Wilson stepped forward and jumped down to the ground, grinning. The camera blurred from his waist down. He was naked.

“About time,” he said.

Someone offscreen hollered, followed by a few bleeps from the news station. People surged into the camera’s view, circled Wilson as though he might be an angel himself, and then the camera shut off and the anchorman’s face filled the screen.

“We’re taking you now to a live interview with Zachary Wilson, who—”

Tiana gave a small *oh* pitched an octave too high.

David cocked his head at her. “Fan?”

“Something like that.”

“Fangirl then.”

“Hush, the man is about to speak.”

She tilted the phone toward her with one finger as the camera caught up with Wilson. He was sitting on the open tailgate of a black F-150 parked a few hundred yards from the edge of the canyon. The camera crew had jumped on the opportunity for drama, using an angle that set Wilson slightly off-center and included the cliff edge. He was wrapped in a coarse-looking blanket patterned in a Southwest checkering of brown and blue and yellow. His shoulders were bare.

“You’ve been checked out by the paramedics?” said the artificially red-haired woman holding the mic for him. They were going for urgent here, no small talk for the man who’d plunged to his death yet avoided it.

“Not a scratch.” That stupid grin again.

“Mr. Wilson—”

“Oh, come on,” he said. “Zac. Please.”

The woman’s smile bloomed. David glanced at Tiana. “So how many fans does this guy have?”

“Six hundred thousand followers on his social media accounts. *Before* this happened.”

He’d have to process that in a minute. Something about this was wrong. Something other than the angel story.

“Zac,” the interviewer said. “When you were first rescued, you said you were ‘caught up.’ Could you share that story for us?”

“Well, most of it’s a blur.” The smile held mischief, but something clouded his eyes for a moment. “Literally, of course. I can tell you I was falling for a long time, and then I wasn’t. Something caught me and I sort of. . . bounced upward; that’s the only way I can describe it. And a voice said, ‘Not yet.’ And then I was standing on a jutting rock a few feet above the ground, sort of hidden by the canyon on all

sides. And I knew I wasn't dead, that I was safe."

Tiana's hands clasped in front of her. "Wow."

"Wow," the interviewer said.

David slanted a look.

"Shut up, David."

No cause for the bitter taste at the back of his throat. Over-analyzing, that's what this was. He should stop it. But Wilson's story was not true.

"Do you know how close you were, when this happened?" the interviewer asked. "How close to. . .um, the end?"

Wilson's lip pulled. The movement was small, quick, but it wasn't a smile. More of a sneer. Then it was rinsed away by the warmth of his laugh, which sounded as joyful as it ought to, coming from a man who had escaped death. A chill washed down David's spine.

"Honestly, I'm just grateful not to have hit the ground."

Lying. And enjoying it.

"And do you have any explanation for your. . ." The interviewer blushed. "Um, state of dress when you were rescued?"

"No, I don't." The regret in his face—causing such a scene, having to answer this question—it looked real.

David could be wrong.

But if an angel did catch you midair, it wouldn't likely cause your clothes to vanish. Barring anyone else down in the canyon with him when he'd landed, that meant Zachary Wilson had stripped himself.

So he was an exhibitionist. All part of this act.

Or his clothes contradicted his story.

"What?" Tiana said when the interview ended.

"It's a stunt." There. Identified, boxed up, put away.

"Angels rescued Peter from prison. Chains fell off, the cell door opened. . ."

"You're comparing Zachary Wilson to Simon Peter?"

"You know what I'm saying. Have you seen the—the other video?"

Of course there was footage of the fall.

"I watched it once, just now, because I knew he was fine. But I

never want to see it again. Here.” She took her phone, tapped the screen a few times, handed it to him again, and left the room.

David watched.

Wind, a tip, a moment Wilson seemed to regain his balance, and then a flailing plunge trailed by the phone-videographer’s shrill teenage scream. As he disappeared into the canyon, the phone fell too, its owner still shrieking, and then the video stopped. A professional would have been recording the moment as well, but of course this was the version that went viral.

The fall truly didn’t appear intentional.

David closed Tiana’s browser and went to find her, keeping one eye on the checkout counter. She was among the teen books, head down, facing the corner.

“Hey,” he said.

She swiped tears. “Sorry.”

“You thought he was dead.”

“I really did.” She held out her hand for her phone, and he set it into her palm. “But that’s what happens to dumb celebrities, right? They die on camera. Nothing to cry over.”

“You really think I’d say that?”

“I didn’t say *you* would say it.”

“That was my voice.”

“I don’t. . .” She shoved her phone into her pocket. “Do I?”

A smile pulled his mouth. “You make the attempt.”

“Not gruff enough? Or not Canadian enough?”

“I’m no more Canadian than you are.”

“You sound like it, every once in a while.”

“Interesting.” He never expected his accent still to exist, but people occasionally commented on it. And of course, up here, everyone assumed they were hearing Canadian.

“Anyway,” she said, “there’s something else we need to discuss.”

“Oh?”

“You used the term *fangirl*. Accurately.”

He held in a smile. “I do live here.”

“Harbor Vale? Michigan?”

“America. Planet Earth.”

“Those lazy curls and those eyes of his, just piercing, you know? And he’s actually witty in addition to. . .” He must have made a face, because she laughed.

The woman and her pigtailed girls surfaced from the sea of books, each hefting armfuls. David tipped his chin in their direction.

“I’ll go up,” he said.

“Nah, I’m good. Zac’s alive: I’m great.” She swiped her cheeks dry and brushed past him.

Alone with his books, he couldn’t shut out those videos or the question of what had happened after. The things he’d imagined last night. Wilson’s body, his own body. Different outcomes. But what if their outcome was the same?

It was the most outlandish thought he’d had. . .perhaps in his lifetime. Another like him wouldn’t be walking tightropes on live television.

But the clothes. There’d be no explaining that kind of blood loss, of total tissue and bone destruction. Not without a corpse.

He knew nothing. Even he might be dead after a physical devastation like that. The impact would be worse than full thickness burns—it would have to be. He shut his eyes. Pressed his thumbs into them. No, Zachary Wilson couldn’t be like him. God wouldn’t do this to anyone else.

But he had to go to that canyon and see for himself.