

THE GREATEST BASTARD

BY

Zoe Morelli

To READ THIS BOOK IN ITS ENTIRITY PLEASE PURCHASE FROM AMAZON . COM

Synopsis

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

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

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

(Book 1 Revelations Revealed Series)

The Greatest Bastard

Prolog

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

Girl Interrupted

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Solitude

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Accomplishment

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Author.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

