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Doreen Serrano

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*For Damian:* My inspiration and my own private devil. It's time to say goodbye in this world.

*For Alexa:* My daughter who was taken away too soon; I'm coming for you.

11:11

Doreen Serrano





## *Chapter 1*

# Christian Woman

Heather was sprawled across the couch on her stomach. Her left leg was thrown haphazardly over the back of the sofa and her right leg was slightly bent. She flung her arms up over her head and pushed her face into the back cushion.

A thin satin sheet decorated with the moon and stars covered her from the waist down. She had fallen asleep fully clad in the long gray T-shirt and white sweatpants she'd borrowed from Jade's drawer.

The sheet gathered at her hips served more for comfort than for warmth. Heather could tell from the inside of her sister's blind-enclosed living room that the day intended to scorch anyone who stumbled into it. She squinted against the thin ray of sunlight that had found its way through a crack in the blinds.

She wished she didn't have an appointment with Dr. Angel and considered skipping it to avoid the monstrous ball of heat lurking just outside the window. As a child, her big sister had tried to convince Heather she was an

albino because her skin was so fair. Never a big fan of the sun, Heather would have preferred chewing glass to lying in the bright rays.

For years, she'd tried to make Lisa understand the sun only depressed her and depleted her of energy but her oldest sister refused to acknowledge her vampire tendencies. Instead, she had dubbed her Casper and openly teased her in front of her friends.

Heather simply insisted to anyone who would listen that her skin was creamy or milky white. It sounded prettier. Plus, she believed fair skin was better than the wrinkled leathery look anointed by a brutal and unforgiving sun. She found it ironic that Florida, the sunniest of all states, ended up revealing itself as their home by the time she turned twelve.

Heather managed to pry only one eye open, using it to watch her little sister walk out of the bedroom. Jade was dressed in a silky nightgown and matching maternity robe. Her hair had been thrown into a loose ponytail and her swollen belly was all that gave away her pregnancy. From behind, she looked as thin as a model and from the front she had the glow of an angel.

Jade walked into the kitchen and flipped the switch. Light illuminated the room and Heather felt comforted by the sounds of water running and cabinet doors being opened and closed. She wanted to believe her sister was measuring out and preparing to brew a huge pot of coffee.

“Coffee?” Heather called out weakly.

Her voice sounded hoarse as her vocal chords hadn’t awakened at the same time as the one eye and the caffeine craving. She hoped she sounded pathetic enough that Jade took pity on her decaffeinated soul.

“Are you planning to bring your guest a cup of hot coffee as soon as possible?” she asked.

Jade nodded and smiled.

Heather wriggled and groaned under the sheets as she considered bitching about the first thing that came to mind. She wasn’t a morning person and she wasn’t one to stifle her annoyances. She reminded herself of her vow to become more pleasant and closed her mouth before the first complaint flew out.

Jade had been sleeping in her bedroom the night before when she heard Heather’s cries and groans from the living room. Stubbing her toe in the rush to save her sister from the unknown, she had been surprised to find her still asleep. She couldn’t believe the sounds of agony that had come from whatever nightmare Heather was stuck inside of. As she watched her big sister fight an invisible enemy, Jade wondered what had disturbed Heather’s life so much that she couldn’t even find solace in her dreams.

Jade knew her sister had been seeing more of Dr. Angel over the last month. When she had asked her about it, Heather merely brushed it off. She had told Jade the doctor increased sessions from bi-weekly to weekly

and offered nothing more. Heather was normally more forthcoming about her therapy so her lack of explanation told Jade she was withholding something.

Jade invited her sister to spend the night but not because she felt hormonal and violent as she had claimed upon the invitation. She knew Heather wouldn't have stayed if she didn't exaggerate her own fragile mental state because she hated to be away from her sons, especially overnight. Anxiety ravaged her sense of peace anytime she wasn't within a solidly protective distance of her boys.

"Do you know why you have my good sheets on you?" Jade asked as she flipped the power switch on the coffeepot, knowing her sister would come to life when the coffee grinds did.

The first sounds of percolation gave Heather the incentive to sit up, albeit in seemingly slow motion. Her morning grouchiness was well-known and most of her family made a habit of keeping their distance until she'd thrown back at least two cups of coffee.

"I was wondering that myself," Heather said looking down at the sheets that engulfed her. "Did I wet the bed?"

"Why would I put my special sheets over you if you were soaked with urine?"

Jade shot her sister a look that said she was brain dead again and she pulled a half gallon of milk from the refrigerator.

Heather forcefully separated herself from the sofa and dragged her feet dramatically all the way to the kitchen. The sound of her slippers dragging across the floor sounded as pathetic and lethargic as she assumed she looked.

“‘Cause you’re stupid,” Heather answered, still working on opening her other eye. It was the only comeback she could think of so early in the day.

Heather helped herself to a coffee mug from Jade’s cabinet. She’d managed to pry the other eye open but both were still halfway closed. Twice, she had to brace herself to prevent herself from sliding around the tiled kitchen floor.

“Slippers and clean floors, bad combination,” Heather mumbled.

“What would you know about clean floors?” Jade teased.

Heather smiled. Her lack of attention to such a mundane task as floor cleaning was no secret to anyone who had known her for more than a day.

Though it hadn’t finished brewing, Heather quickly removed the coffee pot from its spot and instead held her cup under the hot drip. She shot her sister a sideways glance to make sure she wasn’t watching. She was, as usual.

“You are so impatient,” Jade told her.

“I’m not impatient. It’s just that I want everything right now.”

Heather grinned and took a painfully hot sip of coffee.

“Are you going to see Dr. Mind-screw today?” Jade asked.

Heather tried to exude nonchalance but knew her sister could see right through her.

“Yeah, I guess.” Heather answered.

She didn’t look at Jade when she answered and she didn’t mime her words. Her most telling sign of distress was when she failed to choreograph while she spoke.

“What are you guys talking about lately anyway?” Jade attempted. “Anything I should know about?”

Jade rarely intruded upon her sister’s sessions but only because she never had to. Heather was always quick to praise the brilliance of her psychiatrist or to disclose the juicy secrets she shared with him. Lately though, she had become both protective and private about her appointments.

“How long have you been seeing him now anyway?” Jade asked.

Jade wasn’t finished investigating. She wanted information.

Heather closed her eyes and hoped an onslaught of questions wasn’t headed her way.

“I guess it’s been about ten years,” she replied.

Heather had lost a baby girl after a premature birth took her away too early and had found Dr. Angel after discovering she was unable to suffer the loss alone. Her child had been born too tiny to even put up the weakest

of fights and Heather had come to admit her spirits had been irreparably destroyed. Counseling and heavy duty medication had been her last hope and finding Dr. Angel had probably saved her life.

She had only been looking for the quick fix needed to mentally and emotionally face the world again. She'd never have guessed an abyss of secrets waited to reveal themselves, leading to a decade of intensive psychotherapy.

"What do you guys talk about anymore?" Jade persisted.

"God," Heather joked.

She didn't want her pregnant sister worrying about the panic attack that had sent her careening down the rainy highway a week before.

"Really," Jade answered slowly.

She smiled, knowing Heather wouldn't waste time or money talking to anyone about religion.

"Why don't you guys try to figure out why a loving and all-knowing deity would create a place like Hell?" Jade asked. "I never understood that one."

Jade's sarcasm lived in the resentment both sisters still nurtured as a result of the religious hypocrisy and illogical teachings of their youth. Heather dragged her slippers back across the wooden floor, this time with a steaming cup of coffee in hand. She eased herself back into the soft cushions and pulled her legs into an Indian-style position.

"He didn't," Heather finally responded.

“Who didn’t what?” Jade asked and Heather rolled her eyes at her sister’s poor memory span.

“God. He didn’t create Hell. I think Hell created Him.”

“Oh, boy,” replied Jade.

The pregnant sister found her own snug position among the pillows. She had difficulty getting comfortable with the massive lump that had taken over her perfectly flat tummy and promised to never take fluid movement for granted again.

“Well, God existed all by Himself once, right? Maybe He knows how He got here and maybe He doesn’t but at one point, He was completely alone. And He had total awareness but nobody to share it with. That sounds like the definition of Hell to me.”

“You just created an entire religion in one sentence,” Jade said.

Nothing that came out of Heather’s mouth really surprised Jade anymore because Heather had been spewing strange theories since she was a baby.

“I’m serious. In a position like that, wouldn’t you want to create a world to share with other people?” Heather persisted.

Although Heather had asked a question, she continued talking without waiting for a response.

“You wouldn’t equip your creations with awareness because it would defeat the purpose. I mean, if they knew all the answers, there wouldn’t be such a thing as faith, right? And isn’t faith crucial to our spirit? Anyway, that’s



how I would do it. I wouldn't let them know that time was endless and I'd find a way to live among them by making myself a part of each of them. That's really what the soul is, see? It's the part of each one of us that is actually God."

"What would be the point of all that?" Jade asked.

"To live out a life that had purpose instead of just being the puppet master. Maybe he wanted to know happiness and love, not just through observation but from experience."

Heather shrugged and continued.

"Maybe after He created the world, He discovered there was one thing He had no control of." Heather paused for effect and raised her eyebrows at her sister.

Jade glanced at the clock on her monitor. "It's way too early for this shit."

"Don't you want to know what it was?" Heather pressed.

She offered puppy dog eyes and a pout and when Jade still didn't show interest, started panting like a dog.

"Okay, okay," Jade laughed. "What?"

"Evil. Maybe He didn't account for the evil that existed," Heather said.

"Wouldn't He have the power to just destroy the evil?"

"Not with free will," Heather countered.

"Maybe there is no free will and that's just a crock of shit people want to believe so they don't have to admit an invisible man in the sky can't answer all their prayers," Jade replied.

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