

## EPILOGUE

Josh looked across the valley at the city of Albuquerque painted in orange and red light from the setting sun. He felt Steel place a hand on his shoulder. Cool air played across the short, reddish blonde hair that sprouted from his head. He had cut away the dyed hair. Already, the hole in his lower lip had healed and he hoped he looked vastly different from the jerk that had slammed a truck door in his mother's face. Steel had told him he cleaned up pretty good.

"The cable car starts back down for the last time in a few minutes. You want me to stay?" Steel leaned on the lion stick. He had not been without it since Liz had left them a week ago. They had come here to Claire's favorite spot to give her a fitting memorial.

Josh looked up at the man who would take care of him. He studied the bright, turquoise eyes and the peeling skin on his forehead from the fire. Maybe they could find a life together. He would try. He had to start somewhere. "No, Jonathan, I want to be alone."

Steel nodded and reached into his backpack. He took out the brass box and studied it for a moment. He handed it to Josh. Josh felt the cold metal box in his hands and looked out over the valley. "This was her favorite spot. Thanks for bringing me here."

"I'll wait for you at the cable car house." Steel walked down the stone path and disappeared into the fir trees.

Josh made his way down the winding path to the edge of the precipice. He stood with the toes of his tennis shoes on the lip of the cliff and felt the wind as it hurtled up from the darkening valley. He let it cleanse him, brushing away the anger and resentment of the past five years. He looked over his shoulder at the place where his father had launched himself on the hang glider so many years ago. He followed the path he remembered out into the dimming evening sky and his eyes drifted out to the clear air hovering over the city below. Already, lights twinkled below him; lights from a thousand homes filled with struggling kids just like him.

Josh lifted the box and said, "Well, Mom, I'm here to tell you goodbye. I don't know how to say I'm sorry for all the years of misery I caused you. I guess that's something I'll have to learn to live with." Tears trickled down his cheek and filled the

hole where the lip bead had once been. “But, I’ve got Jonathan and God to help me, now. I promise I’ll make something of myself. I promise I won’t mess things up again. Or, at least I’ll try.”

Josh opened the top of the box and the ashes caught in the gusting wind. They swirled up into the air in a whirlwind of gray dust. He watched the ashes twist in the air, drifting away blown out over the valley following the path of his father’s hang glider. For a moment, he smelled gardenias. Then the sensation ended. But, a new sensation came over him. The hair stood on the back of his neck.

“Oh, Josh! I’m back!” He heard a voice behind him. He turned around. Darkness had now swallowed the mountain path and the setting sun was suddenly hidden by the mountains. Above him a half moon gleamed in the sky. From the far side of the small clearing, she appeared, dressed in a black jump suit. Her white face floated in the still, cold air. “Looky here what the cat dragged in. Did you really think I would just go off and leave you like that?” Vivian Darbonne stopped on the mountain path and licked her lips.

Josh blinked in sudden fear, his heart seized in the icy clutch of terror. “Leave me alone, Vivian.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that, Josh. Now that you’ve said your sweet little goodbye to your poor, dead mother, it’s time to party again. And, this time, I brought along some friends.” She lifted a pale arm and motioned to the trees behind her. Dark, shadowy figures moved among the fir trees and slipped into the scarce light afforded by the moon. They moved lithely, like cats stalking prey. Seven of them clothed in black came to stand beside Vivian. One girl smiled as she stood to Vivian’s right. “Hello, Josh. I’ve missed you.”

Josh’s eyes widened in shock. “Ila?”

“It’s time to come home and play, boyfriend. I’ve missed you so much.” Ila’s lips parted and her tongue ran across fanged teeth. Josh shook his head in fear and closed his eyes.

“Oh, God, help me. Mom, help me. I can’t handle this.” He felt the wind die down behind him and he stumbled back toward the cliff face. His feet scrambled for purchase on the crumbling edge. A strong wind suddenly engulfed him and lifted him off

the ground. It set him down away from the edge. He turned. Archie Michaels stood behind him, the old man who had saved him from the drop into the bayou.

“You’re the guy from the school yard.” He whispered.

“And, more.” He said. Josh watched in amazement as the old man morphed. His features elongated and his skin grew younger until he was a tall being with huge wings. “My real name is Michael, the archangel. And, this is the last time you’ll see me. I’ve had to finish off what God started with the Inca and then I’ll go back to more weightier matters.” He winked. “It’s not easy being an archangel. I’ve enjoyed working with ordinary people again. Don’t worry. In the future you’ll get your own guardian angel. I’ll make sure. Let’s just say I’ll be repaying a favor to your mother.”

“Then she knows I’ve changed?”

“Of course, Josh. Shall we deal with these demons so you can get on with your life?” Michael’s voice carried strength and power.

“Let’s do it!”

Josh turned and found Vivian and the seven demon friends frozen as if time had come to a halt. Suddenly, they lurched into movement and Vivian’s face stretched in surprise as she saw Michael.

“Well, Josh, I see you have a friend. One of those cowardly angels who didn’t have enough sense to turn his back on God.” Her lips twisted in disgust and she spat. The spit burst into a tiny cloud of flame when it touched the ground. “Well, whoever you are, you can run on back to Him and report how you had your tail kicked by Satan’s finest, Mr. Angel.”

Josh felt Michael’s wings envelope him in warmth. Michael’s voice boomed out across the emptiness.

“That would be Mister Archangel to you!” Suddenly, the night began to fade and a light so bright it seemed to penetrate to his very bone surged out of the space around Michael. Josh heard Vivian scream in pain and heard the others’ running footsteps as they fled before the righteous onslaught. The wings relaxed as the night closed back in.

Josh opened his eyes. The angel was gone and the glowing lights of the city glittered below him. He whirled back to the clearing and found it absent of Vivian, Ila, and the others. The stars winked in the cool mountain air above him and the fragrance of

gardenias once again enveloped him. He inhaled it and smiled. He closed the brass box and put it on the rock in front of him. It was as close to a memorial as he could imagine. He started up the path toward Jonathan Steel.

“Cool!” He said to the stars above him.

*The night settled into its routine. Insects filled the air with music. Trees rustled in the cool wind. Stars stared down in endless wonder on this world of man. A shadow separated itself from the tree line. A figure moved through the darkness illuminated only by star light. It neared the rock at the edge of the cliff. A hand reached down and lifted the brass box. The head tilted as the figure opened the box. Eyes barely visible in the star light studied the emptiness of the box. In the glimmering star shine, a single tear caught the light as it fell into the open box.*

*The figure slammed the lid shut on the box and with one swift motion hurled it out over the cliff. A tortured scream split the peace of the night and echoed down the valley.*