

Awake Under the Night Sky

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Chapter One

2000

The cold water beneath his body felt brutal, washing him back and forth remorselessly, the cold piercing him, stabbing him at will. His aching body and the pounding in his chest told him that he was, at least, alive. Alive, but with a searing pain. His limbs refused to respond to the demands of his dulled and weary brain; he had no option but to clutch the thin raft on which half his body lay. Where was he and how did he get here? He had no answers, no recollection. Beneath the gloomy sky he lay, hopelessly, not knowing what would come next.

Even in this condition, he refused to let the sea intimidate him – after all, he had grown up swimming in these waters. The darkness around him had to be explored, if only he could get his eyes to stay open. He had to gather himself, but the jolts of pain at the back of his head and neck were taking over, and he felt himself on the edge of an abyss. His scream for help was not audible to his ears; it was frozen in his throat.

A childhood memory of his mother and him laughing, running across the green fields, flashed through his mind. The memory woke him with a start and left a familiar emptiness in his heart. He didn't know if any of the salty water that lapped at the raft belonged to him. Surely not; although tears rose from the depths of his heart, no longer was his grief allowed to run over.

His eyes flickered open in another vain attempt at wakefulness, but all he saw was a flash of lightning before they closed again. At least he was still above the water - cold air, mixed with rainwater, filled his mouth. Thoughts were playing in his brain like clips from a motion picture. The image of his father, extending his hand to grab hold of him, added to his misery. He could not do this to his father, not now, not after what had happened almost a year ago, in the cruel winter of despair. He had to force himself to wake, to resist the water, to rise up and breathe the air above.

A few distant voices started to filter through, into his consciousness. He thought he heard his name. Was he imagining it or was someone actually looking for him? The sea was harsh, and the waves had begun to splash madly onto the thin wooden raft to which he clung. Fear that it might break apart sent a wave of panic through him, but his body still refused to react. Only his curled fingers seemed to move, gripping the edge more tightly. The splinters of the wooden raft rubbed at his numb skin as he desperately tried to move his arms. The voices meant that there were people around, his only hope in this vast ocean.

The voices got even louder – and then, a yell. 'Look! Over there ... Over there, dammit ... hurry!' There was commotion after that – broken sentences, yelling, and the roar of a motor boat. Andre regained some semblance of normal sensation. Someone was trying to check for signs of life, feeling his heartbeat, warm hands touching his forehead and the sides of his neck. Then the words became clearer.

'He's alive. Oh Lord, he's alive.' He recognised the choked voice to be his father's. It almost sounded like a whimper, and a rush of warm air, tinged with the faint smell of wine, caressed his cheek. He imagined his father tracing the form of the cross, his hands moving by habit, echoing the sacred shape. Other, less familiar voices rose above the noise of the rain splattering on the thin wooden raft.

He felt himself being lifted, firm hands around his shoulders, legs and back. His body was being moved from the raft to a surface that felt like rubber. The raindrops had become fiercer and were wildly dancing on his face; the wind echoed in his ears and he was aware of another flash of light, followed by a roll of thunder. But it was the sound of human voices, infused with concern, which gave him much needed hope. Again, strong hands were lifting him, and this time he was lowered onto a harder, more unyielding surface.

The voices faded away and the cold water was no longer beneath him. Instead it was the damp wooden deck of a boat; he recognised the pungent smell of salt-laden timber.

He knew now that he would live. Live to restore everything to the way it had been, to the way it should be.

He had to get a hold of himself. He could not remember how he had ended up on the raft; his tired brain flashed images of a few of his friends, but all else was shrouded in darkness. He could sort that out later, but for now he allowed his senses to submit to the sweet embrace of slumber.

The barrier between day and night remained blurred for what seemed like weeks. He tried to remember what had happened, but only fleeting and broken images came to his mind, nothing from which he could make any sense.

When he woke, the sun was piercing his eyes from a chink in the curtained window and he could smell pasta sauce, a familiar aroma mixed with that of red wine.

Wine ... That's it, I was drinking with the usual group, we were definitely drinking, but that can't be what hit me. I don't remember having more than a few glasses. It had to be something else.

His father came in with a plate of pasta.

'It smells delicious.'

Papà responded with a faint smile.

After eating in silence for a few minutes, Andre asked,

'How is the factory, Papà?'

'It's the same.' As much as Andre did not want to let the conversation end, he knew it was painful for his father – the sadness which came over his face at the word 'factory' spoke volumes. He switched topic and returned to his own broken and distracted thoughts, desperately hoping that he would remember something as he talked.

'I don't know what happened that evening. I'd just had a few drinks, not too much ...'

His father was listening to him, staring over the top of his bifocals, his eyebrows raised and his breathing becoming deeper. He continued to listen as Andre related the broken fragments of a reality which was wiped from his memory.

When he got to the last piece of penne, Andre said, 'I want to speak to Giovanni. We were together – he will know.'

'It does not matter, Andre. You are fine and that's what matters.' His voice was firm, in complete contrast to the way he looked. 'Talking about it is meaningless. What happened is in the past – it's the future you need to embrace.' He took the plate from Andre and let him slip back under the sheets. Andre had a feeling his papà was not merely talking about the incident. His words meant more than that.

Andre looked up at the ceiling and said, 'Same holds true for you, Papà.' He closed his eyes, immediately regretting his words.

He heard his father shift in the leather chair as he replied, 'I am trying, son ... I'm trying.'

Andre felt the pain in those words, and when he turned his bandaged head towards his papà, what he saw made him feel worse. Here was a father standing helpless and broken, trying to come to terms with reality and worried for his twenty-year-old son. Andre wanted to soothe those lines on his forehead, see his lips curve into a smile again and brighten his face as they used to. He extended his bruised hand to meet his father's, told him that it would all be fine; then the sedatives started to kick in and he was floating again, into a state of delirium.

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