
Chapter 1

CELESTE

I mark the day in my journal, I have officially been hiking for two months. I started in Mount Katahdin, Maine and am going to finish in Springer Mountain, Georgia, about five months from now. This life has become my world, camping each night. Stopping at the check points along the way and picking up my boxes I mailed to myself with fresh supplies. My next drop isn't far from here. A week or two from now I will be able to take a shower, get fresh boots and restock my supplies.

I am in Maryland, and today I plan to make a trip to Sideling Hill, where there is a circle of standing stones that I plan to visit. Then camp for the night before I continue on tomorrow.

“Well, two months down,” I tell myself as I close my journal and place it back in my pack. I'm down to plain granola for breakfast and begrudging myself for having eaten more than my allotted amount of dried fruit for breakfast

more than once this past month. I decide to take my meal on the go and get an early start. I roll up my sleeping bag and tuck it into my pack, slip the heavy thing onto my back and start toward the trail.

By the time I reach the circle of stones it is getting dark. The days are shorter, and I know I will need to find camp in this area. Looking around, I decide I'll make camp and come back to the circle tomorrow on my way out, back to the trail.

"Oh yes!" I cry when I spot it—a cave. "Perfect." I have come across a handful of them in my time in the mountains. They're few and far between, but when I get to have shelter from the wind bearing down on the outside of my tent it makes for an extra special night. There is a dusting of snow here and it looks like I'll be in for more tomorrow from the way the sky is shining down on me.

My family tried to convince me not to do this. Not after the sun failed to rise just before I left. It was a phenomenon like nothing anyone had ever seen. But it only made me want to take this trip more. To do the thing I have always wanted to do before our life on this planet is cut short. We, none of us, know how much time we have left.

I head for the cave and examine it from the entrance. Getting a flashlight out, I shine it inside and look for any signs of life—bears, or other animals that may have already made this place their home. I don't see anything as far as the light's beam shines and decide it is safe.

Slowly I creep into the cave and make my way to the far-right corner. It is a lot larger than I expected and I plan to examine the rest of the space after I set up my tent for the night. The massive space goes on further to my left than I am able to see. I know, in the back of my mind, it isn't safe to not explore before I set up camp, but my stomach growls. I want to get my fire started, get some more lights set up and then go look around.

I drop my pack and pull my tent from inside, it is a small, one-person tent, only large enough to fit me and my sleeping bag inside. Once it is set up, I turn to starting a fire. Moving back and forth from the outside of the cave to my makeshift camp set up in the back I collect kindling, searching in the dying light for anything that is dry enough to burn.

Once I have my fire set, I settle down and start to fill my tiny pot with water and the freeze-dried soup pouch for dinner. My stomach flips, I'm craving a cheeseburger, a big greasy cheeseburger, and fries. Maybe a chocolate shake. I look into the bottom of my pot and sigh as my stomach continues to grumble. This will have to do.

"You can do this." I take a deep breath and tell myself. Even if I don't, there is no shame in tapping out now. The winter has been mild, snow here and there but for the most part I haven't been having too hard of a time.

The blisters that I first developed when I started hiking soon turned to calluses and each day it is easier to get up and get moving after a night spent on the cold hard ground. I smile at all that I have accomplished, pulling out my map and tracing my finger along the crumpled thing, following the trail from Maine to Maryland. I have made it this far. I can do the rest of it, I think. I can do this. I stand, making my way back to the mouth of the cave again, still knowing I need to explore the rest of it, but wanting to see the stars. Wanting to look up into the dark night sky and see the beauty of the world around me that isn't blocked out by the ambient light that so often surrounds the cities we live in. It is gorgeous, I stare up at it and count them, each of the stars I can see. I feel like I belong up there with them, feel like I belong among them.

"You're my piece of heaven, my piece of blue sky, Celeste," my mother used to tell me when I was a child. I smile at the memories of her now.

Wishing I could share this moment with her. I will tell her about it when I get home. For now, I will write her a letter to drop off with the dozen or so others I have stuffed away in my pack at the next check point. She insisted I keep in touch along the way. Insisted I write down everything I saw. Tell her every detail of the trip. I squeeze my eyes closed, praying I will see her again. Praying she will continue to fight until I return. She is fighting an unseen battle with cancer. One she has been fighting for most of her adult life. Before I left, she was in remission, I only found out at my last stop when I called that she got her new diagnosis. She says it isn't bad, but she sounded so tired. So sad when I spoke to her on the phone. I told her I would come home. Told her this didn't matter. She insisted she would win this battle a second time and that I should keep going. For her. I made her a promise and she made one of her own. I will keep going until the end of the trail and she will be there waiting for me.

As I continue to count the stars I think about her, about being her piece of blue sky, her piece of heaven. I pray that she won't become my part of heaven too soon. I don't know what I would do without her. A tear slips down my cheek just as the first snowflake falls from the sky and lands next to it. Swiping them away, I sniff and turn back to the cave. Feeling her distance from me so profoundly in this moment is killing me, tearing my heart to pieces and I don't know how much more of this pain I can bear. It is going to be a cold night and I'm grateful for the shelter. I sit by the fire and poke at my warm soup. Sipping at it from time to time, then setting it down and working on my letter to my mother.

The stars are so bright here. It is like being in them, above the world, and the trees amongst the stars.

I scroll down the words. A poem that she read to me as a child comes back to me now. I include it in the letter.

“Not from the stars do I my judgement pluck; and yet methinks I

have astronomy, but not to tell of good or evil luck, of plagues, of dearths, or season' quality; nor can I fortune to brief minutes tell, pointing to each his thunder, rain and wind, or say with princes if it shall go well, by oft predict that I in heaven find..."

It is Shakespeare, her favorite.

"That was beautiful." A soft male voice floats across the cave to me and I freeze. My heart jumping into my throat. The hairs on the back of my neck stand as a chill runs up my spine.

"Hello?" I turn, peering into the darkness. I see his outline to my left coming toward me. Scrambling to my feet, I spin and face the stranger who has snuck up on me. I have come across other hikers along the way. I can only assume now that he is on the same trail as I am and that he too was seeking shelter from the night's storm.

"You scared the shit out of me." I chuckle, trying to ease my own frayed nerves. "Are you hiking the trail too? There is plenty of room for both of us to have tents. If you want to, feel free to sit by the fire." I motion to it as it crackles by my side. He doesn't move.

Squinting into the darkness I make an attempt to get a better look at him. I don't move toward him, something seems off. I don't see a pack on his back, he looks almost as if he is dressed in nothing but a t-shirt and jeans.

"You're not a hiker, are you?" I ask, wearily. The feeling of dread creeping through me again, deep into my bones.

"No, I'm not." I see him shake his head and take a step toward me. "My name is Blake."

"Celeste," I tell him, stepping backward as he takes a step toward me. My stomach rolls and the hairs on the back of my neck rise on end again as I try to put more space between us.

"Ah, the poem about the stars makes so much more sense

now. A piece of heaven right here with me.” He continues to move toward me.

When the light cast from my fire falls over his face it casts a dark shadow, his eyes are eerie in the darkness.

“He was a good man, Shakespeare.” I raise my eyebrows at his words, he speaks as if he knew the man.

“I...”

“I’m not going to hurt you.” He steps toward me again and the light of the fire flickers, it is burning low. I was going to let it die out and turn in for the night. It starts to sputter.

My eyes fly to my pack, my flashlight tucked away in it again. I would have to move back toward him to reach it, but the last thing I want is to be left in the darkness with this man who I can now tell is unmistakably covered in blood. Blake shifts, putting himself between me and the entrance of the cave and my mouth goes dry.

“Please,” I plead.

“I promise. I’m not here to hurt you.” He lifts an arm toward me. I take another step backward and bump against a rock, the stinging pain in my calf screams and I look down at it. The sharp edge of a rock juts out at me from the wall, having just sliced through my jeans and skin of my leg I look down as blood drips from the edge of the craggy thing.

“Shit!” The fire goes out just as I get the word out and reach down to my leg. My hand comes away wet, sticky with blood.

“Fuck!” I hear him mutter under his breath. Then the shuffling sound of his footsteps as he rushes toward me. I scream when hands wrap around my shoulders and pull me against his body.

. . .

I really thought I had it under control. I did. Up until the moment I didn't. I stare at her in the darkness, her heart racing in her chest, pumping the sweet blood through her veins. I can see the beat of it in her neck even with the fire light gone. I rush toward her, taking her in my arms and burying my face in her warm neck. As my fangs sink into her skin the rush of blood fills my mouth. It is warm and sweet. I'm instantly hard and ready to drain her. I fight my inner monster, fight the battle to let go of her shaking body. I'm losing, badly, so badly. I can't stop. I swallow another gulp of it, and it coats my throat. My still healing wounds knitting together more quickly with the fresh blood flowing through my veins.

At last, I regain control and step back from her, she collapses to the ground, and I look down at what I have done. Am I too late? I reach down and press my hand to her neck, her heart flutters under my fingers. She is still alive. Quickly I scoop the woman in my arms and take her closer to the fire. I relight it and let it warm her, pulling the sleeping bag from her tent and tucking it around her. I spin, looking for anything to use. My saliva having healed her wounds she will not continue to bleed, but I took too much, have taken too much from this woman in my desperate attempt to save my own life.

I make the decision. It is my only chance. I will not let an innocent die tonight because I couldn't contain myself. I dash from the cave. The one place I thought I would never return is my destination.