

# COLD LIGHT

THE AFTER SERIES  
BOOK 2

TRACI L. SLATTON



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Cold Light

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FALLEN

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BLOOD SKY

THE BOTTICELLI AFFAIR

THE LOVE OF MY (OTHER) LIFE

DANCING IN THE TABERNACLE

(poetry)

PIERCING TIME & SPACE

THE ART OF LIFE

*with Sabin Howard*

COLD  
LIGHT



**1** MY DAUGHTER BETH WAS DISAPPEARING WESTWARD into the snowy horizon, caught up by a raider on horseback, and my husband threw his body over me, to keep me from going after her.

“No, Emma!” Haywood yelled. He covered me with his body, circled my struggling torso with his arms. “You can’t save her. We can’t lose you, too. Everything else is gone. Please, Emma! Not you too. Calm down.” He pressed his cool, pale cheek close to mine, willing me to calm. His breath, tart with morning coffee, came in short bursts.

Gun fire and war cries, screams of terror and hooves and explosive charges, rattled and boomed and whistled through the frigid air. I hadn’t heard the sounds of battle in a year and a half, but I knew them like they were branded onto the skin of my consciousness. I would never forget. The end of the world had brought chaos and madness. Inevitably, battle ensued. Even here in the Safe Zone of Edmonton, Alberta.

“Let me up,” I gasped. “We have to go after her!” I writhed against crunchy snow. My red ski hat pulled off my head and bitter sharp ice pebbles lodged in my scalp. I had to get to Beth. *She’s only nine. What will the raiders do to her?*

I knew too well what they would do. I redoubled my efforts to escape from Haywood.

“Not right now,” Haywood said. He clutched me fiercely. “I can see, Emma,” he whispered. “I can see the paths. If you

go now, you'll die. So will she. In every path. It's horrible." He lifted his head and his dark eyes burned into mine. His pupils were engorged; he was under the spell of prophecy. It had come upon him after the apocalypse, this skewed ability to read possibilities in the near future. They fanned out in front of him like multiple parachutes opening, several at once, and then they closed. Which, if any, would come to fruition? What choices would alter them? How could he prevent further catastrophe? It tormented him.

I lay still and breathed through my open mouth. The air was so cold that it seared my throat. The pain, as it always did, brought me back to myself. Haywood was right. There was no retrieving Beth in this moment: a bloody melee of shouting people, whooping men on horseback snatching up women and children as their horses raced past, and unarmed men throwing rocks and getting shot down where they stood.

Haywood sensed my surrender and rolled off me.

I stood and looked into the west, after the disappearing cavalcade of riders. I could just make out the gleam of Beth's blonde hair as it wafted out like a flag from where she was perched on the withers of a stocky black draft horse. A raider in a ragged gray parka rode with her captured in his arms. She was too far for me to hear her screaming, though my heart knew she was pleading for help.

A few feet away her pink fleece hat rolled toward me and then lay still on the ground near some shell casings. I walked over to pick it up, not taking my eyes from her as the bouncing dot of her blonde head grew smaller and smaller in the distance. My sweet oldest daughter was standing right next to me when the raiders thundered up around us. I turned to look—how had her hand slipped from mine? Suddenly she was shrieking, and our walk in the park had turned into a nightmare. I could still see the terrified look on her face. Why hadn't I been taken in her place?

*I'll get you back, Beth, I promise that, on my life.*

“They rode right up through the river valley, through the park system,” Brendan said. He trudged over to us, clutched my arm, and peered up into my face. His black eyes, from near my waist, searched my expression. His woolly black beard had caught white flakes. “The latter end of joy is woe,” he muttered. I knew it to be a quote but couldn’t place it. Shakespeare, maybe. Or Chaucer or Milton. Brendan was an African American dwarf who’d once taught literature at the University of Portland. When the mists had descended and consumed Portland, he’d survived. Like thousands of other survivors, he’d made his way here to Edmonton, the center of the largest Safe Zone in the world. After he was declared sane, the Office of Survivors Relations of the City of Edmonton had assigned him to us, to live in our home.

“Why weren’t the Canadian Forces guardsmen watching?” Haywood wondered as he helped an elderly man up off the ground.

A woman came to stand by the old man. She laughed. She was middle-aged, stocky, and square-faced, with long black hair and feathers woven into her ponytail. An aboriginal, probably Cree, Ojibway, or Sioux. She didn’t look Inuit but I wasn’t good at discerning. She was wearing a Juicy Couture track suit under her North Face coat. “The guardsmen can’t be everywhere. Not with rumors of the mists encroaching.”

“What do you mean, mists encroaching?” I asked. “The mists never come near Edmonton.”

She stared at me steadily. “They’ve been spotted north of Medicine Hat.”

“They don’t come north of Medicine Hat,” I said.

“They’re setting themselves free. That’s the balance of it,” she said.

I didn’t have time to quiz her because Haywood was calling my name.

“Em, come here! There’s a man down, and you can help him,” Haywood yelled.



I threw a look over my shoulder at the woman—but she'd vanished. *Where'd she go that quickly?* I shook my head as I went to Haywood.

He was kneeling over a young guy who'd been shot, an acne-stubbled kid in his twenties who was probably out playing football in the snow. His buddies stood in a ring around us, staring at him in dismay. The kid clutched his gut, moaned, gurgled blood out of his lips, and writhed.

"Stomach wound. I hate those." I sighed as I peeled off my gloves. The air was so cold, a typical February minus five, that the skin on my fingers contracted around the bones. But I was needed. I knelt and put my hands on the young man's middle.

Two years and two months ago, the mists had come—roiling white miasmas, often the size of battleships, that consumed living beings for the metals in their bodies, and that imploded buildings and destroyed cities. Billions of people and whole cities vanished into the white cloud banks with their sickly sweet smell of lilacs and sulfur.

The mists didn't just destroy. They were bioactive; they changed people. They wreaked pain and bewilderment on the unmapped psychic regions of the human brain. People were left with strange gifts: clairvoyance, precognition, telepathy, astral projection. I was left with the ability to heal. I hadn't asked for it, and I didn't want it, but I used it when it was needed. Like so many others, I had learned to be ruthlessly practical.

My hands found their way to the ragged edges of his down coat where his red-slicked viscera protruded. I winced a little at the copper-and-defecation stink. Then, of itself, a calm descended. The shouting and screaming faded into nothing. It was just me and the man who was little more than a boy, really—a boy who was suffering. I felt sorry that he was in pain.

The quieter the world got, the more relief he felt. He

stopped moaning and gazed at me, his eyes open to slits of indigo and black.

A force rose and came through me. I wasn't its origin nor its destination, I was simply a conduit—a pipe of flesh and bone. The force was soft and strong and sweet and powerful all at once, and it flowed out my hands and into him. His eyes liquesced. I didn't do anything, I just kept the small egoic part of myself out of the way. The more 'I' stood out of the way, the more intense the force grew. The boy's head rolled off to the side and he passed into something like sleep.

Lately, in moments like these, when I was healing someone (as I did every day at the Royal Alexandra Hospital), I experienced a presence with me. The healing current flowed through me and altered my state. I was expanded. I could feel things and see things that were normally veiled to me.

The presence was a man. He was black-haired and gray-eyed, with a perfection and symmetry of feature that thrilled me. I had once been an artist, and even still, in this failing and obliterated world, beauty made an impression on me. Arthur's beauty. Arthur who had loved me and hurt me in ways I couldn't have imagined Before.

I let the healing force pour out my hands into the wounded kid and looked at the vaporous presence that knelt on the ground opposite me. He was looking back at me; I could feel it. I could feel his heart beating, just as I'd felt it on my own chest a thousand times. It had been almost a year and a half since I'd last held him, and an ocean separated us. But I would never forget the feeling of being close to him. I ached for him. I hated myself for that. It wasn't fair to Haywood.

I owed it to Haywood to be true to him. We had children together, and they were what mattered. I looked down at my hands in the puddle of blood and torn flesh.

The presence remained.

"Let him go. You'll see him soon enough," whispered a voice at my ear.

I started.

It was the black-haired woman, leaning down close to me. The feather in her braid fluttered over my shoulder, tickling my cheek. She was looking over the injured young man—looking directly at Arthur.

I gasped. “You *see* him?”

She shrugged. “Everyone’ll see him, soon enough. You’ve called him.”

I started again. “I never call him. He just comes!”

The woman rolled her eyes, amused. “Soldiers are here.”

All at once I was aware of the commotion around me: horses neighing and horns blowing, soldiers riding in on horseback and driving up in Jeeps with chains on their snow tires. A uniformed medic sprinted over to me, pushed me back, and leaned over the kid. I was sprawled out backward but didn’t care. The medic began examining the kid. I rose and dusted the snow off my back and tush.

“Kangee,” the black-haired woman said. “Sioux.” She nodded and trudged off.

I watched her for a moment. Suddenly, just like before, she was gone. *A trick of the sunlight on the snow?* I blinked and shook my head, then looked for Haywood.

He was helping an elderly man whose arm was bent at an odd angle. Another medic ran to join them.

A soldier grabbed my shoulder with one hand, while his other arm cradled a rifle. “Are you all right, miss? Are you in need of medical assistance?” he barked.

“I’m okay,” I said. “But they got my daughter! She’s only nine!” I felt myself start to come unhinged. *We have to get Beth back! We have to save her!* A wild helpless feeling burned through my chest and throat.

The soldier’s brusque military face went soft, just for a moment. He patted my arm. Then he was gone, querying the next person.

The uniformed medic was hollering at me. It took me a few moments to refocus on him. “Whatever you were doing, do it again! We need to get him stabilized!” the medic was saying. I blinked.

“Em, I’ll see about going after her.” Haywood draped his arm around me. “Thank God, Mandy was home with my mum. I don’t know what I’d do if I lost her again.”

“We have to get Beth back,” I pleaded urgently. Haywood nodded and went to talk to the soldiers. The medic was yanking on my sleeve, dragging me back to a crouch on the crunchy ice.

I turned back to the boy, who was moaning again.

*I will get you back, Beth. I promise. No matter what.*