

# FALLEN

THE AFTER SERIES  
BOOK 1

TRACI L. SLATTON



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Fallen

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FALLEN

COLD LIGHT

FAR SHORE

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THE BOTTICELLI AFFAIR

THE LOVE OF MY (OTHER) LIFE

DANCING IN THE TABERNACLE

(poetry)

PIERCING TIME & SPACE

THE ART OF LIFE

*with Sabin Howard*

FALLEN



**1** THE WORLD HAD ENDED, AND MY HEART WAS shattering. Almost everything and everyone was gone, and now I was about to lose my five-year-old daughter.

I was flattened against a brick wall, watching in terror as she struggled not to inhale the killing mist that pulsed a few centimeters from her face. If she breathed it in, it would kill her. If she moved into it, or if it moved to engulf her, it would kill her. Dissolve her from within, filling her mind with madness before blistering her cells with heat until she ruptured into steam and water droplets. All that would be left of her would be a splatter of water on the ground and a fine beige powder sifting down from the air.

“Don’t breathe, Mandy! Don’t move,” I called. Mandy didn’t move, didn’t even blink to acknowledge she’d heard me. Had to be hard for her, with the nightmares roiling through her brain, deluding her. But we’d drilled for this, Mandy and I and the seven other children I’d come to care for, survivors I’d picked up along the way who now thought of me as their mother. They were lined up and pressed back against the wall. Bright yellow sunlight fell down upon us from directly overhead, the sky was cerulean, and in every other way, except for the deadly pearlescent mist, the May day was lush and perfect early summer.

“Don’t breathe! Be still, Mandy!” the kids shrieked. Genevra and Marco were crying. I crawled my hand out along

the brick to grip Geneva's bony shoulder, to calm her. She leaned her wet cheek against my knuckles.

We were in this together. We were all we had left.

The first mists came out of the ground ten months ago, out of caves and clefts in cliffs. White miasmas, smelling of both sulfur and lilacs, that floated and randomly scorched anything in their paths: objects, structures, pedestrians, animals, insects. Not plant life, though. Anything that contained chlorophyll was left untouched. At first, the mists burned without killing. People suffered third- or fourth-degree burns and their minds were filled with images that haunted them, but they survived. Buildings were strangely weathered and bleached. Cities took on odd pale hues, after the mists went through them. People did not know what to think. Scientists scrambled to explain the inexplicable. It was one of those years with special numerical significance, and as such, it called forth the crazies. From Bangkok to Boise, they preached sin and the end of the world. Our time had come. Who would have thought they were right?

But was it really about sin, about laying waste to the Sodom and Gomorrah that the world had become?

Mandy stood still, frozen, a skinny sculpture of a big-eyed little girl. The thick white mist moved closer to her face. We'd found a village with several dwellings still standing amid tall groves of sweet chestnut trees. We were looking for potable water, for a well or a cache of bottles, when the mists moved in. She was chasing a butterfly among the rock roses, and was caught out in the open. The mists ringed around her, a wreath of white that slowly squeezed in like a lasso. Sometimes they seemed to act deliberately, with awareness.

"Don't breathe!" I called again. My voice caught in my throat and trembled.

"Just pray," whispered Newt, who seldom spoke. Marco recited his catechism in Italian, Shoshana murmured in Hebrew, rocking slightly from side to side. I was afraid to

pray. Maybe too angry. In the beginning, when the mists first broiled people and buildings and vehicles and anything else they rolled across, I prayed. I sent out pleas to the Presence I'd always sensed in my heart. But then the mists rose up out of the oceans. They were powerfully reborn. They'd morphed into weapons of awesome power. They didn't just burn things; they fully dissolved them. Turned them into a splash of water and a scattering of sand, destroyed them utterly. The destruction accelerated and reached a crescendo of unimaginable dimensions. The entire world was vanishing inside them.

That was why I could no longer pray. I'd watched too many people die.

The mist shifted again, closer, almost touching the tip of Mandy's nose. A lock of her auburn hair sizzled and splashed out as water. I pulled the gun from my waistband and raised it. The kids and I had discussed this. We agreed that a bullet was better than the mists. The mists killed slowly, agonizingly. Sometimes it took hours. There'd been a day, five months ago, when the entire earth rang with screams. That was the Day that divided everything into Before and After.

I steadied the gun. I'd found it and taught myself to use it when it became clear that some survivors had gone mad. They were so unhinged with grief and shock that they would commit brutal crimes. Two of the children had joined me after I'd shot the men who were beating them. It was a shame to kill the men; they'd survived when billions hadn't. But they'd forfeited their lives when they had hurt children, and I did what needed to be done. I did it without shedding a tear.

So here I was, about to put a bullet in my own sweet little daughter's head. I looked at her through the white mists, which seemed to press memories into my head: Mandy dressed as Christopher Columbus at her preschool play, running offstage into the audience to hug her big sister Beth. Mandy as a toddler, drawing on the wall with lipstick. Mandy

as a nursing infant. We'd shared a blissful bond. I'd spent hours holding her, sniffing her cotton-candy-sweet hair. Her life meant more to me than my own.

It was starting to feel as if the mists were reaching into my brain and rearranging its electrons. All my will was required to stay present, focused, sane. There was so much I couldn't let myself dwell on. Mandy's tender connection with me was just the latest distracting thought. It was enough to know I could touch my past inside myself. More than that would be self-indulgence. Especially now, when I had to be strong and ensure that she did not suffer. Her suffering would be unbearable. I could not allow it. I pushed away the memories, of her, of her father and her sister Beth, both of whom I loved and missed. There were things I could not allow to linger in my mind. Memory was a debility. I aimed for the white spot between her eyes: instant peace.

In the distance, hooves pounded, fast. The earth reverberated. The white mist obscured the view but galloping horses were approaching—many of them. Sometimes that kind of resonant thrumming influenced the mists. Percussive sound was the only thing that ever seemed to alter the mists' movement. I paused, listening. The memories relinquished their grip on my mind.

And just like that, the mist receded. It rose like a smoke ring, a soft donut of poisonous white vapor, wafting up and collapsing in on itself until it became a cloud. But it was no fluffy benign cumulus thing. It was lethal. It would dissolve anything it encountered, wires or birds or planes or satellites—though at this point, no planes flew overhead. The satellites were probably mostly gone. Birds had adapted.

But I wasn't thinking of those things. I was hugging Mandy. So were the other children, all nine of us huddled together, laughing and whooping with joy and relief. It was so intense to wrap my arms around her that I forgot about the horses

until they'd come up around us, whinnying and chuffing and stamping. Forty or so horses with riders, all men.

"You almost lost her," a man said. "The mists would have consumed her for the iron and zinc in her body." I looked up into brooding gray eyes, a huge thicket of black beard, and the roan muzzle of a big friendly horse. The man's eyes lingered on my mouth but did not threaten me. I'd learned to trust my instincts about threats.

"The galloping sound drove it away," I said. "Thank you!"

"It came out of the limestone cliffs a few kilometers away, seemed headed somewhere, so we chased it," he said. He sounded American, like me, but a faint Brit tonality hung over some of his words, as if he'd spent a lot of time in England.

The man dismounted. His eyes effervesced as they touched mine again. He looked over the kids, and then he strode off through what was left of the town: a dozen homes and several standing stone or brick walls, some piles of debris, a few rusty bicycles and cars packed with belongings the vanished owners had thought they'd drive away with, before realizing there was no escape. One car was split down the middle, with each half flopped over, as if unzipped; a mist had cut through it like a laser.

The other men dismounted after he did. They looked at us briefly, but mostly watched him. He turned back to make a few gestures, and the men fanned out. They were scouting for food and supplies. He was the leader. I watched the men for a moment. A red-haired guy about my age, early thirties, touched his hand to his freckled forehead and grinned at me and the kids. Others nodded but didn't try for familiarity. They were mannerly. They were a mixed group, in terms of races and nationalities, and they went about their business with quiet discipline.

"They have a camp," Newt said, clutching my arm.

"Nearby?"

“A safe camp, with a well,” she said, and her lips made a quirky lift, which was as close as she ever got to a smile.

“Safe?” I asked, for clarification. She nodded. A safe camp. *Safety.*

Just like that, in a moment of total intentionality, I made a decision. I did not realize how far-reaching the consequences would be.

“Caris, take the kids,” I said. Caris, at fourteen years, was the oldest of my little tribe. She was the one who helped me care for the others. I trusted her completely. She carried a gun, too, in case I was the one trapped by the mists.

“Everything okay, Emma?” she asked. I nodded, and trotted off after the bearded leader. He’d disappeared into the remains of a house, one of those quaint stone residences with slate roofs typical of this region of southern France. I thought we were near the Lot river. I wasn’t sure, because we’d wandered for so long and the familiar landmarks had vanished, but it was my best guess. I wasn’t French and didn’t really know the country, or what was left of it. Mandy and I had been in Paris on business the day the world ended.

I went into the house after the man. I knew where he’d go because it was where I always went first, when I found an intact structure: into the kitchen. To look for food. Cans, bags, bottles, containers, anything edible. Anything that could be boiled into being edible. Then knives, can openers, and matches: useful items. Then I hit the closets to look for shoes and clothes. And bathrooms to look for tubes of ointment or bottles of medicine.

He must have heard the door open and close because he was waiting for me, leaning back against the sink. He was tall and broad-shouldered and that giant dark beard obscured his features. His head was tilted, and his gray eyes were bright and very intense. I sensed, without knowing why, that he was glad I’d followed him.

“I never heard it said that way, that the mists consume

people for the iron and zinc in their bodies. I don't remember that being said on the news, Before. Just that they were attracted to metal."

He looked away. "Iron, cobalt, nickel, copper, zinc. Palladium, platinum, and silver—but not gold."

"And they're attracted to flesh. It didn't occur to me that it was because of the metals in our bodies. But I guess that explains the pattern of destruction. Why they don't eat butterflies, for example."

"Butterflies have the right ratio of sulfur, phosphorus, and potassium to balance off the mists." He looked back at me. He was direct and intense. "You're not here to talk about the elemental composition of things."

"You have a camp, and we need protection," I said, coming to the point. "There are roving bands of survivors and most of them aren't friendly."

"You're doing well for yourselves," he said. He moved against the sink as if restless and I had the sudden tingly sense of his body responding to me. It came in a stupefying flash: he saw me as a woman. Of course I was, but it had been a long time since I'd thought of myself that way, as female, as desirable. Since December I'd been a survivor, a warrior, a scavenger, a nurse, and a caretaker of eight precious children, only one of whom I'd known Before. Sometimes I'd been an executioner, when someone tried to hurt one of my kids. I'd even been a dispenser of euthanasia. There'd been a couple of adults with me, Germans who had called themselves Bavarians. They'd come along for a few days. But they'd gotten trapped. They'd held their breath for as long as possible, but when I saw them gasp in the mist, I did the necessary thing—the kind thing.

"We need a safe group to live with," I said. I stepped closer to him. My cheeks were warm, but that wasn't going to deter me.

"We're a nomadic band of men..."

“You have a camp.”

“There’s no place for women and children with us,” he demurred.

“Make a place,” I said. His breath picked up and his pupils dilated.

“I’m not... not a good bet,” he said, hoarsely. He reached out reluctantly and pulled a strand of my fair hair off my face, rubbed it gently between his thumb and forefinger. The yellow strands contrasted with his deeply tanned hands. “I’ve done things.”

“Haven’t we all?” I stepped in so close that the toes of our shoes touched. He smelled of salt and cedar, sweat and leather and horses. He wasn’t rank, but he wasn’t clean. I didn’t know if I’d wash regularly either, if I wasn’t trying to civilize a group of children. This wasn’t a time for judging. We’d all been judged too harshly already, according to an arbitrary code that none of us understood.

He shook his head but didn’t release my hair. “There’s a women’s camp in the forests.”

“That’s a rumor.”

“It’s real. I know the woman who runs it, Tara.”

“I don’t know where it is, and we’ll be picked up by one of the bands. You know what they’re doing to women and children.”

“I can’t guarantee your safety with my men.”

“Yes, you can,” I said. I lifted to my tiptoes and put my arms around him. His body was warm and strong and vibrant with life. “Your men are devoted to you. We’ll be safe at your camp. And I’m here, now, so what do you have to lose?” I nuzzled him a little so he’d be clear on what I was offering. His breath accelerated and rasped in his chest. It smelled of meat and something tangy, like a citrus fruit or a radish. He was eating pretty well, I thought. It made me even more determined. If there was a way for me to ensure a steady food

supply for the children, I was going to take it. Safety and food: those were my purpose.

“This is not a good idea,” he said, his voice gravelly.

I said, “I’ll contribute to your camp.”

He moved quickly, and I was glad I was wearing a sundress. He undid his pants and lifted the dress up around my waist. Then he picked me up and set me on the edge of the kitchen table, a plain wooden thing with big black knots, could have been made last year or anytime in the last few centuries. A thick sueding of dust rubbed off onto my bottom. It didn’t take long. He handed me a rag that was stiff and dirty with disuse.

“Your contribution,” he started, then paused. I nodded as I cleaned myself. He said, shrugging, “No expectations, no demands, no commitments.”

“That works two ways,” I answered, which seemed to surprise him, because it brought a crinkle of amusement to his gray eyes.

“I would like a lot of contribution.”

“You betcha.”

“No backchat and no attitude,” he finished. He lowered his head and stared directly into my eyes, willing me to understand. I did.

“Agreed,” I said. “Lots of contribution, no attitude, and we get food, shelter, and safety.” I held out my hand to shake his. He hesitated and then shook my hand. His eyes glimmered. Then he turned away and opened the cupboard doors. Glasses, dishes. He kept opening cupboards until he found the pantry. He took out two glass jars of *marrons glacees*. He opened a box of crackers and saw the mealworms, closed it and replaced it.

“My men will give me shit for taking on a woman and a bunch of kids,” he said. His tone was conversational. Perhaps this was his way of being warm and cuddly.

“Probably so.”

“How’d you know I have a camp?” He set out a few jars of asparagus and a can of *choucroute garnie*.

“Lucky guess,” I murmured. What was I going to say, that a child in my care was psychic? A child whom I’d named “Newt” because she had no recollection of anything from Before? No memory, not of her name or her parents or her age or where she was from. It wasn’t unique; lots of survivors were like that, flayed of their old identity. When they weren’t crazy. Our girl spoke English with a broad British twang and her stringy hair reminded me of a child named Newt in an old sci-fi movie, so that’s what I called her. And now she didn’t speak except to voice prophecies.

The man gave me a sidelong glance but didn’t pursue it. I wondered if he’d discovered what I had, that the mists had not only killed most of the people on the planet, but had also changed the survivors. Even I had been changed.

“Someone’s been through this place,” he noted.

“We ate here last night.” I touched the can of *choucroute*. “This one’s dented, see? Possible botulism. May not be safe to eat.”

He turned abruptly and went out. I followed with the jars of *marrons glacees*. He paused in the doorway, watching his men and my band of children. I followed his gaze. Six men had remained on horseback and were posted like sentries on different street corners. My kids clustered around Caris, though Mandy, always the inquisitive one, had walked out a few paces to stroke the dappled chest of a horse.

He took a jar of *marrons* from me, opened it, and ate handfuls of the sweet nuts. He wasn’t rationing. It boded well for the kids and me.

“They’re watching for mists,” I noted, of his sentries. “We were lucky you spotted that one and came to check it out.”

“They’re watching for rogue bands. The crazy ones are

more dangerous than the mists. The mists dissipate skyward at the sound of galloping horses.”

“Usually,” I said. I remembered the early days, when there was still television and radio and Internet and newspapers, when scientists had discovered that the “global eco-disaster” frequently responded to rhythmic sounds. Not that it had helped us.

“The particular drumming of horses’ hooves sends them away. We’ve had good luck with that. Half the men joined us that way, when we rescued them with hoofbeats.”

“That’s why you ride toward the mists, instead of away,” I said.

His eyes took on a faraway look. “There’s got to be a way to drive them away for good, using percussive sound. They’re susceptible to it.”

“All the mists?” I asked. I was skeptical, but intrigued. We didn’t know how or why they’d come to be. We didn’t know what they were made of, or why they did what they did. How could we get rid of them?

His tone was determined. “I want to see this planet free of the mists. It’s the only way we’ll live safely. The only way we’ll rebuild.”

“I just want to get to Canada,” I said softly. Western Canada was a pocket of civilization. There were a few areas that hadn’t experienced the mists, and had never been swarmed: the South Island of New Zealand, the islands off the coast of Washington State, a broad swath of Uruguay, part of Iran, a strip of Eastern India. That was what I’d heard in the days Before. The first few days After, some cell phones still worked, and survivors reported that those places remained untouched. Europe had been devastated. It was scoured clean. There couldn’t be more than a hundred thousand people left, if that many. Besides the mists, there’d been gas explosions, building collapses, murderous hysteria, airplanes and

satellites falling out of the sky, a frigid winter with diminishing food supplies, and medical issues like infection that would have been routinely resolved Before, but that now meant certain death.

“Everyone wants to get to Canada,” he said. “Everyone who’s still alive.”

“Everyone who’s still sane.”

“There’s an ocean between here and Canada, and the mists destroy boats and airplanes.”

“Because they have the wrong ratio of sulfur, potassium, and phosphorus to metal,” I said.

“It’s all in the balance.” He gave me a sidelong glance. “Canada might as well be a million miles away.”

“There are planes left, and pilots who are brave enough to try. Private pilots.”

“That’s some dream you’ve got,” he noted. “Your fantasy private pilot would have to be more than brave. He’d have to be suicidal. I haven’t seen an airplane in the sky in months. It’s way too dangerous to fly.”

“I didn’t say it would be easy. But a woman’s grasp should exceed her reach, or what’s a heaven for?”

He grinned with one side of his mouth. “Gather your children. I’ll tell my men. We move out as soon as we’ve picked through the town.” He strode off. I watched him for a moment, a tall man with a tangle of black hair and a resolute demeanor, even from the back. What had I got myself into? I watched him speak to a wiry white-haired man who was somewhere in his seventies. The older man shrugged, looked across the empty town and caught my eye briefly. Maybe he was asking himself the same question: what has that blonde woman gone and done?

The kids waited in a tight cluster in the center of what had once been a cobblestone street. The red-haired man had given them chocolate *Baci* from a tattered box at his belt. Mandy had pulled him down so she could tuck a cornflower behind

his ear. He was grinning and wriggling like a puppy dog, and the kids were laughing, even quiet Newt and reserved Caris. My heart lightened a bit.

He saw me and straightened, stuck out his hand. "I'm Robert."

"Emma," I said, shaking his hand.

"Tasty group of wee ones you've got here," he said, with an Irish lilt.

"Glad you think so, because we're coming with you," I said. He beamed.

"About fucking time we had a juicy betty and some snappers," he said. "There's a coupla gangs be scooping you birds up."

"I'm trying to avoid that," I said.

"We're going with them?" asked Caris, anxiously. Caris was a beautiful teenager, half African and half Danish, who looked older than her fourteen years. She'd had a rough time of it before we found her, imprisoned by two men. We burned their corpses in a bonfire south of Paris, near Orleans. It took her weeks to speak to us. I didn't think she understood English or my high school Spanish. When she was finally coherent, it turned out that she was fluent in English, French, and German, along with her native Danish and Hausa. She worked hard and mostly kept her cool. She'd been a great help.

"Don't worry. They're good people," I reassured her. I stroked her forearm gently.

"You never know what they'll become," Caris said. She shifted her weight from foot to foot, her dark eyes tangling up inside themselves, looking as if she was about to have one of her keening episodes. I hugged her, hoping to calm her. Her episodes went on at length, and the bearded man, my new partner, wanted to leave right away. Genevra who was seven, Shoshana, who was ten, and Mandy circled Caris with their arms. Marco and Felix stepped closer. Even little Dragomir, who claimed to be four but who I thought was only three,

siddled up beside her and stroked her hip. Newt stood off to the side with luminous observant eyes, as always.

"You know that I take care of you," I said. "I'd never do this if I wasn't sure we'd be safe. But we can't go on forever the way we have been. The gangs are getting bigger and more dangerous, and food is harder to find. I don't know what we'll do when winter comes again. I need help."

"You don't have to worry, girly, there's not a wanker among us," Robert said. "We're too busy being soldiers for the big Mister." His tone was blithe, but his expression had saddened and aged, furrowing like a wax mask softening over a flame.

"But when the mists come, people die and change, they become something else," Caris cried. Her pretty face was twisted with anguish.

"Caris, they have a good camp," Newt said. It resolved the tension immediately. We'd all learned to listen to Newt. Caris' shoulders relaxed and she stopped swaying. The kids all hugged her some more because that's what we did, our group; we held each other. I touched in briefly to the past that held and supported me: my husband Haywood, my older daughter Beth, and Mandy, who was with me. They were my innermost heart. Reluctantly, I relegated Haywood and Beth to a closed compartment. They were not here, and I could not let my thoughts dwell on them. The kids put on their backpacks and lined up. Around us, men finished their sweep of the town and mounted their horses.

The big Mister himself rode up alongside us on his big roan horse. He carried the lead rope of a leggy brown horse with a tiny weathered saddle. "You ride," he said. His voice held a command, not a question. Frisky and ready to run, the horse gamboled alongside us.

"Not that horse, if you want me around to contribute to the camp," I said. "I know you're interested in my contributions." I was teasing, but he frowned. Was he humorless? It

didn't bode well for our arrangement. I sighed.

"I ride," Shoshana offered. She smiled a little. She was a sturdy-looking Israeli girl who'd joined Mandy and me in Paris on the Day, when we'd all been streaming out of the city on foot. A ball of mist the size of a skyscraper had rolled down the Cours de Vincennes like a giant tumbleweed. It had decimated the fleeing hordes. Shoshana's whole family—parents, grandparents, and three brothers—had vanished into the white clouds. Their screaming joined that of the others who'd been engulfed. Mandy and I were walking alongside, and I grabbed Shoshana's hand and we kept walking. I did not know why we three were spared. Random coincidence.

"You ride well?" asked Mister.

"I took the blue ribbons," she said shyly. He tossed down the lead rope to her and she immediately went to fix the stirrups and check the girth. He grinned, or at least I thought that's what it was; it was hard to tell because of the unruly beard. When she was satisfied, she vaulted atop the horse. The men who were watching applauded. Shoshana's cheeks turned pink. Devilish Marco called out something in Italian that elicited some laughs from the men who understood. I did not.

Mister sent the other kids to different riders, who fastened the backpacks onto their horses' saddlebags and then scooped up the kids to ride in front. Robert invited Caris onto his horse, and she twisted her fingers but agreed. I was the last one standing.

Mister's gray eyes crinkled. He was staring at me with both amusement and wry concern. At least, that's what I deduced, more from his vibe than from his expression. Finally he said, "You're with me."

"I know," I said. Maybe he wasn't so humorless after all.