

ALLISON REGINA GLIOT, FSP

In Aeternum | Book One



The Curse He Chose

BOOK ONE OF THE IN AETERNUM TRILOGY

The Curse He Chose

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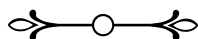
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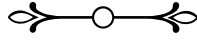
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For Kate and Amber, with whom I first entertained theological thoughts of vampires. The two of you encouraged me in my writing more than anyone except Jesus. Thank you. I love you.

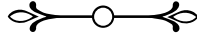


And for Celine. We only met once, but your love for our Pauline YA books inspired me to make sure there'd be many more in the future. This one's for you.



Without the assistance of grace,
immortality is more of a burden than a blessing.

—SAINT AMBROSE





PROLOGUE

This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood.

—1 JOHN 5:6

THE TROUBLE WITH VAMPIRES IS that they don't seem like they should be real. I mean, what is "undead" anyway? Either you're dead or you're alive, right?

Wrong. I've met plenty of people who breathe without living, and only a few of them were what we'd usually refer to as vampires. Most of them don't realize they're not doing either thing, being dead or alive. Vampires do. They own it, claim their status, give it a new name: *undead*. Quite fitting, really, since they won't die a natural death but they won't live a real life, either, one with mortality that ends in resurrection. No, they choose suspension. An infinite amount of the finite. I think it's the saddest thing I've ever seen.

Of course, the first time I saw this, I didn't know what I was seeing. I thought they were just normal people—people like you and me who live and then die. But sometimes the things that seem like

they shouldn't be real are real. And once I came to terms with the existence of vampires, there was another revelation just as startling:

Not all vampires *are* undead.

This is the story of how I, an ordinary, living person, got caught up in a world so far beyond me that, by all accounts, I should have died. But I didn't. That's all due to the grace of God and the efforts of one very not-undead vampire whose story needed to be told. He would never do it himself, so you're stuck with my account. You can believe it or not, but it *is* true.

Here goes.



CHAPTER ONE

And it was night.

—JOHN 13:30

THE DAY CHRISTOPHER AND I unofficially met also happened to be the worst birthday of my life. Not because of him—well, mostly not because of him.

The Crabby Hill Creamery was always crowded during the summer whenever it wasn't pouring down rain. Sammie haphazardly pulled into an open spot at the park across the street, bemoaning how long the line was as Kay tried to decide what flavor she wanted and Em cooed over the toddlers at the playground. It was all so *normal*, it made me want to cry because I knew we wouldn't have many more moments like this.

Tala must have noticed my expression as we were getting out of the car. While the others joined the line snaking down the sidewalk, she took my arm, pulling me aside. "Lizzy, you okay? You're even quieter than usual."

I forced a smile, but it came out more like a wince. "Fine. Just . . ." I wanted to tell her how much I'd miss them all, how much I wished

I was in their shoes. But I didn't want to complain when they were trying to do something nice for me on my birthday, so instead I shook my head lamely, "... fine."

She gave me a knowing look, pulling her silky black hair into a ponytail—it was muggy that night. "We're gonna miss you, too, you know. But we'll all be back for winter break. We can get together then." She was using her super-cheerful tone, the one she tried to pep Kay up with before tests. It wasn't quite enough to make me feel less depressed about everything.

"Yeah," I agreed listlessly, watching a lady walk by with her four tiny terriers so that I didn't have to meet my best friend's eyes. "I know, the time will fly by. I can pick up more shifts at the bookstore and keep applying for scholarships. It'll be great." My voice was mechanical as I repeated what they'd all told me a dozen times.

Tala frowned. "Lizzy, you know I—"

"You two coming?!" Kay yelled from across the street.

I glanced at my friends already in line, my stomach twisting in dread. I wasn't sure how much longer I could pretend to be happy tonight. Tala, as usual, read my mind. "We don't have to do this, Lizzy. I'll tell them you're not feeling well, we can just chill at my house. There's plenty of lumpia in the freezer."

The thought was tempting, but I shook my head, trying to pull myself together. "No, I'm . . . I'm fine, I just need a minute. Can you order for me?"

A look of understanding crossed her face and she nodded. "Double chocolate brownie swirl with rainbow sprinkles, hold the fudge?" She rattled off my favorite flavor from memory and I nodded, digging in my pocket for some cash. But she put her hand on my arm. "Lizzy, it's your birthday. We're covering you."

"You don't have to—"

"You only turn eighteen once, and you didn't let us do anything big for you. We're buying you ice cream."

I knew there was no point in arguing with her when she used that tone, so I just gave her a watery smile. “Thanks.”

She gave me a quick hug, which was a big deal since Tala isn’t a huggy person. Then she stepped back, and I thought her green eyes were teary too. Her voice was light, though. “Don’t take too long, or Sammie will eat all the brownie pieces out of your ice cream.” She would, too—it happened the last time I asked her to hold my cup while I ran to get my phone from the car.

“I won’t,” I promised, turning away before any more memories came back and made me really start crying.

I wiped at my eyes impatiently as I started on the short loop around the playground and baseball field. Why was this so hard? Why would God give me such wonderful friends and then take them away again? Why couldn’t we stay together? And why did my *birthday*, of all days, have to be the last day all five of us were together? I hated complaining, but it really wasn’t fair.

I wasn’t paying much attention to where I was going, keeping my head down as I passed parents pushing strollers and kids playing tag in the fading light. I felt trapped in my own small world, a world coming apart at the seams. I hated that, hated feeling stuck inside myself with no escape.

Just then, I thought I heard someone call my name. For a second, it sounded like Mom, and I looked up sharply, glancing around. But no one was trying to get my attention, and Mom certainly hadn’t come back from the dead to wish me a happy birthday. There was probably just someone else at the park with the same name as me—it’s not like there weren’t a million other girls named Elizabeth.

I shook my head at myself, about to turn back toward the parking lot. That was when I saw him.



CHAPTER TWO

I loathe my life; I would not live forever.

—JOB 7:16

HE WAS SITTING ALONE ON a bench, his back to the woods that bordered the park. He couldn't have been more than a year older than me, with dark hair and strikingly pale skin that made me look bronzed in comparison. He was handsome—Kay probably would have rated him an eight on her “cute guy scale” of one to ten—but that wasn't what initially drew my attention to him. No, it was the slump of his shoulders, the empty way his hands fell in his lap, the hopelessness in his eyes: it all screamed *despair*.

I stopped short, startled out of my own problems. I had never met anyone who was actually suicidal, but if you had asked me right then, I would have said for sure he was. The raw pain in his face was more than I had seen even at Mom's deathbed. Someone—anyone—needed to help him, before it was too late. Was he really all alone?

I didn't even realize I was staring until he looked up at me. For a heartbeat, his dark eyes met mine, and a strange sensation enveloped me. People were all around us, laughing and playing games

and having picnics, but they faded into the background until there was only the two of us left: him and me.

The despair in his expression was quickly replaced by a question, and he straightened, cocking his head to the side. I glanced away quickly, feeling flustered, and took the fork in the path that wouldn't go past him, trying to pretend like nothing had happened. But I was sure he could see my blush of embarrassment, sure he could tell I'd been watching him. I kicked myself internally as I turned back to the ice cream shop, hoping he didn't notice how I picked up my pace. Why did I have to make everything awkward? Why couldn't I have gone up and asked him if he was okay? *Was he okay?*

Feeling guilty, I hazarded a glance behind me, wondering if I could get Kay or Sammie to go talk to him. But he was gone. Probably weirded out by me staring at him. Not knowing what else I could do, I said a quick Hail Mary for him as I crossed the street, figuring that whatever he was going through, it wouldn't hurt to add the Blessed Mother's help.

My friends were waiting by the car when I walked up, Kay and Sammie bickering again. As Tala handed me my already-melting ice cream, Kay grinned. "Oh, good, Lizzy can be the tie-breaker: green or purple?"

"Green or purple what?" I asked warily, knowing better than to answer without context.

"Sammie's hair, obviously. Don't you think lime green would make an impression?"

Sammie cut in before I could reply, "I *know* I'd look good with green, but I've been saying since eighth grade that I'm dyeing it purple once I move out. If I do anything else, my dad will think he's won."

"Why not do both?" I suggested, my gaze drawn to the park bench where I'd seen that guy. It was still empty.

“Green hair with purple highlights? Or purple hair with green highlights?”

“What about pink highlights?” Em inserted hopefully.

“You know I hate pink,” Sammie grumbled, but I was barely listening to them, scanning the park until Tala jabbed me with her bony elbow.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I said a little too quickly, and she gave me a look.

“You haven’t taken one lick of your favorite ice cream and you’re telling me nothing’s wrong?”

I sheepishly ate one of the brownie chunks to appease her, chewing it slowly to give me an excuse not to answer. But Tala knew me too well. She watched me unwaveringly until I finally admitted, “I saw this guy in the park . . . I’m not sure why, he just caught my eye, but then he saw me looking at him and it was awkward.”

Tala frowned faintly, opening her mouth, but Kay spoke first, perking up as she caught a snippet of what I’d said. “Oh my gosh, Lizzy. Did you just say you noticed a guy? You? *Really?*” My heart sank. Kay was like a dog with a bone when it came to potential romantic prospects. When she couldn’t find any real possibilities, she invented them out of thin air.

Seeing my dismay, Tala jumped to my defense. “Kay, it’s her birthday. Leave her alone.”

“But this is monumental! Lizzy *never* talks about boys! Was he cute? What did he look like, what was he wearing?”

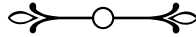
“Um . . .” I wracked my brains, but all I could remember clearly was his face, that hopeless look in his eyes. “I didn’t notice what he was wearing. He had dark eyes, and I think his hair was brown, definitely darker than mine . . .”

“Curly? Straight? Or the wavy in-between thing your hair does when it’s humid like this?” Sammie teased, and I shifted

uncomfortably, tucking a lock of my unruly hair behind my ear. I guess I should have put it up before we left Tala's.

"I don't think it was curly. It was short, but not super short, like long enough that it probably could get in his eyes . . . I really don't know . . ." I felt super self-conscious, so I added, "But it's seriously not a big deal. We just happened to make eye contact when I was walking by. That's all."

It wasn't all, though, because even then I was fighting the urge to look behind me and see if he was still in the park somewhere. I don't know why I was so worried about him, but it had something to do with that expression I had seen in his eyes. They were the eyes of someone who was desperate, someone who had been pushed to the edge. But the edge of what?



I tried to enjoy the rest of the night, I really did. But when I finally stopped thinking about the guy from the park, I was hit again by the fact that these were my last few hours with my friends. Snacking on homemade lumpia, listening to Sammie and Kay's never-ending arguments about video games, starting the book Tala had gotten me for my birthday so she could watch my reactions—when would we be together like this again? I was usually the second one to fall asleep during our sleepovers, right after Em, but I forced myself to stay awake as long as I could, savoring every moment.

Hugging everyone goodbye the next morning was one of the hardest things I've ever done. My one consolation was that I'd see Tala at Mass on Sunday before she had to catch her plane. That was a goodbye I was going to put off as long as I could.

I knew my sister wanted me home before she had to leave for her internship, but I had Sammie wait until the last possible

moment to take me back. When I came into our apartment, I could hear Becca rushing around her bedroom, late as usual. "I'm home!" I called, hoping she'd be out the door soon so she wouldn't see me crying.

"Oh, good! How was the party? Can you get my lunch out of the fridge, it's on the top shelf," she replied, pinning her auburn hair into a bun and trying to put her heels on at the same time as she came into the hallway. I went into the kitchen and got her sandwich out, ignoring her first question.

"Isn't your bus coming in six minutes? You're going to miss it."

"They're usually as late as I am," she shot back as she narrowly missed bumping into Mom's china cabinet and grabbed her keys. "Oh, now where did I . . . Lizzy, have you seen my purse?"

"By the front door," I answered without needing to look as I added an apple to Becca's lunch. She always set her purse down in random places, so I'd gotten in the habit of picking it up when I found it somewhere and putting it there. It cut down on about thirty seconds of panic every morning.

"Thank goodness, you're a lifesaver." She slung it on her shoulder and took the paper bag I handed her without looking in it. "So you had a good time?"

I gritted my teeth, faking a smile. "Yeah. It was good. A nice last hurrah."

She thankfully didn't pick up on the forced cheerfulness in my tone. "That's nice. You really don't want the two of us to do anything together for your birthday?"

"I told you it's not a big deal, don't worry about it." Becca was hassled enough between her internship and trying to pay our bills. She barely had time to spend with her boyfriend as it was. I didn't want her wasting any more trying to take care of me. Besides, the last thing I wanted to do right now was go out with my chatty sister and pretend everything was fine.

"All right," she said, but now she was staring at me like I was a bug under a microscope. "Are you sure? We could go out to dinner—"

"Becca, you really are going to miss your bus."

She glanced at the clock on the microwave and her eyes widened. "Oh, shoot, I'm going to have to run. Love you, we'll talk when I get home." I didn't bother telling her that I had to work the late shift at the bookstore and wouldn't be there when she got home. My schedule was on the fridge; she'd figure it out eventually.

Once the door slammed behind her, I went to lock it—even when she wasn't in a rush, she forgot every time. Then I stared at the closed door, numb inside. Sometimes it seemed like everyone had places to go and important things to do except me. I should have been grateful to have people in my life who loved me. But even when I was with them, I didn't quite feel like I fit. What was I doing wrong?

Suddenly, an image of the guy from the park flashed through my mind. He struck me as someone who didn't fit, either. Did he feel as empty as I did? No . . . remembering his face, I thought he had to feel worse. There were plenty of people worse off than me; there was no point in getting so upset. I still had good friends, even if they were far away, and I had my sister who loved me. I had a decent-paying job and a place to live, and at least I was going to see Tala at Mass on Sunday. Even if I wouldn't see her again for months . . .

I shoved those thoughts away, going to my room and shutting the door. Thinking hurt too much right now, everything hurt too much right now, and I needed to get some real sleep.



CHAPTER THREE

Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.

—MARK 13:33

IT WAS ALMOST A MONTH before I saw Christopher again. Of course, I still didn't know that was his name. Technically speaking, at that point it wasn't.

Becca had insisted that we go to the mall so she could get new winter boots. That was what she said, anyway, but I was pretty sure she was worried about me. She'd finally picked up on how I was purposely arranging my work schedule so that we wouldn't be home at the same time. It wasn't that I didn't love her. I just didn't feel up to dealing with her when I was missing my friends so much.

Going to the mall together was something of a tradition, though, so I couldn't say no. When I was around eight and she had just turned sixteen, Mom started letting us go by ourselves. We'd both pick out a chocolate from the fancy chocolatier and walk into every single store just to see what they had. I used to think it was so much fun, but now I found shoe shopping with Becca somewhat akin to

purgatory. We still went to the chocolatier, though, and got lucky—there were freshly dipped chocolate-covered strawberries.

We didn't have much money, but chocolate was the one thing my sister and I could both agree to splurge on. We got half a dozen of the strawberries and split them as we walked back to find the first pair of boots Becca had liked and then not bought because she wanted to "survey her other options."

Up until then, Becca had been pretty good about not bringing up the fact that everyone but me was finding new and important things to do with their lives. Once she felt I'd been sufficiently appeased with chocolate, however, she broached the subject, her voice deceptively nonchalant. "I saw in the bulletin this morning that Father Stephen is looking for volunteers to help teach religious ed. Have you thought about helping this year? You're old enough now that you wouldn't have to be an assistant, you could be the main catechist."

I shrugged. "I'm not really sure I'm qualified . . ."

"Oh, come on, Lizzy. With everything Mom taught us and all the books you've read, you know more about the faith than most people. Don't you remember how impressed the ladies were at that Bible study we did last year?"

I couldn't keep from smiling at the memory. "They were just excited to see someone there under the age of fifty. They fawned over you just as much. That doesn't mean I'm equipped to deal with a room full of fourth graders."

"You did fine when you helped me with the kindergartners," she contended, waving her last chocolate-covered strawberry for emphasis before popping it into her mouth.

"Are you going to help *me* with the fourth graders?"

She winced as she swallowed. "Well, actually, Miguel invited me to help with the Hispanic ministries this year and I don't think I'll have time to do both."

I raised an eyebrow at the mention of her boyfriend as I handed her a napkin for her chocolate-smeared hands—my own strawberries were long gone. “Becca, I realize the two of you are getting along really well, but you don’t even know Spanish.”

She stood up a little straighter as we walked, frowning. “*He estado practicando*, Miguel has been helping me. He wants me to meet his *abuela* when she comes to visit this Christmas.”

“All right, all right.” I grabbed her arm to keep her from colliding with a couple walking the other direction. The mall got crowded on a weekend night, and Becca tended to stop paying attention to her surroundings when she was worked up about something. “You’re practicing your Spanish, that’s great. But that doesn’t mean I’m going to volunteer as a religious ed teacher.”

“Why not? It would be good for you to get out and do something besides work—talk to people, make some new friends.”

“You know I’m trying to save up. And I *have* friends.”

“That’s why I said *new* friends. I know you’ve been getting along well with Richelle at the bookstore, but with Tala and everyone being so far away, it would be good if you got more involved . . .” She kept talking, but I tuned her out, frustrated at how she wasn’t understanding me. A lot of things *would be good*: it would be good if Mom hadn’t gotten sick, it would be good if we had enough money for me to go to college, it would be good if other people at the parish stepped up so that they weren’t constantly short on volunteers. A lot of things *would be good* but just weren’t.

Instead of listening to my sister, I turned my focus to the people we were passing: a dad trying to calm down his cranky kiddo, a gaggle of pre-teen girls who had just gotten their ears pierced, an older man with a buzz cut arguing animatedly on his phone, a squat woman carrying so many shopping bags that she looked like she was about to collapse under their weight. I watched them absently,

wondering what their stories were, what their lives were like. Better than mine? Worse? Or just different?

Suddenly, a face jumped out at me from the crowd: pale skin, dark hair, dark eyes meeting mine in a look of startled recognition as we passed each other almost too fast for me to register. The guy from the park.

I stopped short, turning around. I was half-ready to say something to him, though I have no idea what. But I couldn't find him in the steady stream of people. Had I just imagined it?

I nearly jumped out of my skin when something yanked my long ponytail; then I swatted Becca's hand away. "I told you to stop doing that, I'm not six anymore!"

"Who was that? Someone from school?" If she had seen him, I couldn't be imagining things. Maybe he had ducked into a shop?

"Uh . . . not really." At least he hadn't looked upset this time. Or maybe he had just disappeared too quickly for me to read anything more in his expression.

"You know him from somewhere else, then? I don't recognize him from church." My hackles went up as I realized she was digging for information. My sister could be as bad as Kay when it came to conjecture about boys. I shook my head firmly, hoping to nip any theories in the bud.

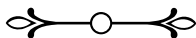
"No, we don't know each other. I just saw him in the park a few weeks ago, that's all." I started walking again to prove that it wasn't a big deal, resisting the urge to glance over my shoulder in the direction he'd gone. He'd definitely recognized me, which meant he probably remembered that awkward encounter in the park too. I hoped he didn't think I was stalking him or something.

"Are you sure?" Becca asked, a frown knitting her eyebrows.

I feigned a yawn, ignoring her question. "It's getting late. Can we

just get your boots and go home? I'm closing tomorrow at work, so I need a good night's sleep."

She sighed, but for once she agreed without arguing. "Okay, Lizzy. If that's what you want."



I pretended not to notice the nosy looks Becca was shooting me on the bus ride home, going straight to bed when we finally got back to our apartment. It was easier than trying to explain everything to my sister, easier than hearing another lecture about how I needed to be doing more things. Besides, I really was tired.

For some reason, though, I couldn't fall asleep. Maybe it was the dark chocolate I'd eaten, or the fact that I was still frustrated at Becca for trying to micro-manage my life. Or maybe it was that guy's face, which I couldn't seem to get out of my head. What had he been doing at the mall? Had he been with someone? Where was he now?

I told myself it didn't matter, that I'd never know and it wasn't important anyway. But it *was* important. I couldn't place my finger on why, but something about him stood out to me, something that made me feel like I was supposed to know him. It was the same feeling I'd gotten when I first met Tala in high school, before we were assigned to be lab partners. I'd felt like I *should* know her, I *wanted* to know her, but it still took me a while to work up the courage to talk to her. After we'd become good friends, she revealed that she'd felt the same way. She told me that she had asked God to send her a friend, and that I was the answer to her prayer. "*God arranged things for us to meet,*" she'd asserted confidently. When I asked her how she knew, she had replied, "*I just know.*" And I kind of knew, too. It was a gut-feeling that I couldn't deny.

The same kind of gut-feeling I was getting from this guy. But what was I supposed to do with that?

“Pray.” The answer came at once, this one a memory of my mom smiling at me, wearing her favorite yellow dress. That was her response to everything, good or bad. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply, reciting her favorite prayer—the Rosary—in my head until I drifted off. Even with that, though, I was still totally unprepared to encounter him again the next day.