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Daniel's Mountain
By Christine Ann Wolfe
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by

Christine Ann Wolfe

To Tracey, with my undying love and gratitude. Forever friends brought together by a trio of angels. Yes I'm crying. And no, don't even say it.

For Kerry, for always believing in me, even when I didn't.

For Greg, always patient, always loving, always waiting for me to hit the big time. Sorry. Looks like you're still waiting.

And to all of the grieving, may you find some joy and solace among the pages of this book. *Believe it and you shall see it.*

Thank you, Daniel, for showing me the way. I love you.

CHAPTER 1

Sarah's wailing suffocated him. The sound filled the room already crowded with medical equipment and doctors. John's own cry of anguish was stuck in his throat, unable to spill out. Next to him Sarah rocked back and forth, her tears covering the gray face of their son Daniel, whose body was wrapped in an over-washed white hospital blanket.

"Excuse me, sir," a nurse whispered softly, her face pinched by the agony filling the room, "but we need to take him to the morgue. The autopsy . . ." Her words trailed off as she watched Sarah flinch at the word. John nodded and pried Daniel from her arms as she sobbed in protest. John held Daniel's tiny body tightly, as if the strength from his arms could bring back the life into him. His son smelled faintly of breast milk and baby soap, a sweet mingling of memories that already seemed distant. John wondered if death always smelled so innocent.

The rest of the day became a blur of twisted agony and more pinched faces, all expressing some platitude of regret. John Stevenson wasn't sure what heck was like, but he was sure he had fallen into some suburb of it, if not the city center itself. Phone calls, well-meaning neighbors, family and friends – he wished he didn't have so many friends – all trying to help him make sense of something that would take a lifetime to do. John supposed it was only a natural response to such a horrific event, but the worst of it came from people like his boss, who didn't really have any social skills, let alone compassion.

"Uh, John, I'm so sorry for your loss," Fred stammered, his voice rough. Clearing his throat, he stumbled through more meaningless words, evidently searching for just the right thing to say that would break off one more chunk of John's heart. "You

know, it was probably for the best. Who wants to raise a child in a world full of war and poverty?”

John felt reality slipping away as he hung up the receiver on the rest of Fred’s diatribe. He must have looked like he was going to faint because his brother Sam rushed over to his side and guided him into the master bedroom and onto the bed. The blood rushed in his ears as his older sibling pushed a glass of water into his hand, along with a small white pill. Shaking his head violently, John pushed the drugs away.

“It’s only a sleeping pill,” Sam protested, pushing it back into his hand like a reverse game of keep-away. “Just take it this once. You need the rest. I’ll take care of Sarah.”

The last words were the only thing John registered as he shoved the pill into his mouth with a gulp of water. He let Sam lay him back and take his shoes off. His brother gently tucked John into the massive king-sized bed and kissed his forehead. The cries stuck in his throat came forth in a massive rush and John felt like he was throwing up all of the grief stuck inside him.

“Shh, it’s okay. Let the tears come. You’re safe now,” Sam crooned, holding John in his arms. He stroked his hair and wiped the tears from his face as they fell. John struggled to regain control, afraid that now the emotions were out, he could never stuff them back into the box where he kept them. As the sleeping pill began to make the world fuzzy, he heard his brother pray. For once, the sound of God’s word did not make him squirm.

“Our Father who art in heaven . . . “ Everything went to black as John let sleep take him away from the sharp shards of pain gripping his body.

The dream came immediately. His brother would later say John sat upright, arms raised out in front of him, calling out for Daniel. John remembered nothing but the words and the person who said them.

“Don’t cry, father. Climb the mountain and you’ll see me once again. I’ll be waiting for you,” said Daniel. His chubby baby hand gripped John’s chin, just as it had last night before bed. John panicked as the dream faded, but kept his eyes locked on Daniel’s. They were filled with the trust and love of someone far older than the three months his son had lived.

John struggled against the power of the sleeping pill and lost. He might have dreamed of other things, but upon waking he remembered only Daniel’s words. The darkness, broken by the splash of the hall light, illuminated the empty bassinet. His heart sank once more when John realized his son was still dead.

Rolling over, he gathered Sarah in his arms. She was clutching Daniel’s blanket, a blue and yellow number with ducks and trucks and other boy things scattered across it. Reaching for a corner of it John held it to his nose, letting the fading scent of his son wash over him. Tears rushed to his eyes and he let them fall, silent reminders of his broken heart.

CHAPTER 2

The days and weeks following were surreal, disjointed and blocky like a Picasso painting. An autopsy declared Daniel was in perfect health when he died, which led to more questions and Sarah's accusations of John's ineptness as a parent. In the end, the death certificate listed the cause as Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, but it didn't really matter to John. Daniel was still dead and there was nothing he could do about it.

John threw himself into his work, but found it unrewarding. His love of numbers faded; replaced by the monotony of accounting principles and the bureaucracy of rules the city had to follow. For the first time in his life, he hated going to work.

He hated more coming home. Sarah wore Daniel's death like a mantle, drawing it around her when John mentioned she might be drinking too much or spending too much money. Once a casual drinker, Sarah now consumed a bottle of wine a day. And where she used to be a happy, funny drunk, she was now obnoxious and mean.

"You know, if I had put him to bed, Daniel would still be here. I'm sure of it," Sarah would say just before she passed out. The first time she said it the words cut like a thousand knives, tearing at John's heart until he couldn't breathe. Now they were meaningless, just like his marriage.

Sam called every day and visited weekly – John had not seen his brother this much since high school, before he became deeply involved in the Catholic Church. The chasm created by Sam's vows of celibacy and piety festered but eventually scabbed over. An abscess of pain still existed, but was sealed off until Sam poked at it the night Daniel died. His brother's compassion was an unexpected poultice John wasn't sure he wanted. But his heart was too broken to examine his brother's motives, so he let him do whatever he wanted.

Stifled at work and home, John found himself looking for some way to check out from the pain. Not one for drinking or taking drugs, he sought pleasure in food until in two months' time he gained thirty pounds and his pants wouldn't fit. When he could no longer see his feet over his distended belly, he made the decision to begin some kind of physical activity. The thought of going to a gym made him claustrophobic, so he began to hike on some of the level trails that wound through desert parks in the Phoenix area.

John soon tired of looking at the same creosote bushes and Palo Verde trees and wanted to challenge the deadness of his life in general, so he sought a change in altitude. At 3,000 feet it wasn't much, but South Mountain was the first John hiked in search of Daniel.

The loose granite which marked the trail crunched beneath his boots as he hiked up the north side, the inside of the path worn down by the thousands of feet who used the park on a yearly basis. The March air was heavy with the pungent smell of creosote and desert sage and the ground adjacent to the trail swayed gently with orange-gold poppies and sky-blue lupine, courtesy of fall rains. Daniel's rains. The October day his son was born, two inches of rain flooded Phoenix. John thought he would have to take Sarah to the hospital in a boat. But he got her there safely, and five hours later, he cut the cord on his 10-pound, 2-ounce chunk of a boy.

Remembering the electrifying moment John touched his newborn son gave John the shivers. Before Daniel, John was like the Velveteen Rabbit - his awareness filled with stuffing and sawdust. The touch of his son cleared the way for John to become real. To notice the ebb and flow of the natural world. It had been lost to John for many years, since his decision many years ago to pursue a degree in accounting, instead of natural resources.

"Son, you'll need a career you can rely on," his father

advised. “Now pull your head out of your bottom and let go of foolish dreams.”

Dutifully, John listened.

Although it felt like ripping an arm off, John changed majors. He ground his teeth every time he stepped into the ugly tan building where his accounting classes were held. His mother tried to explain her husband’s reasons, which included words like “the Depression” and “not enough to eat,” but at the time, John was unwilling to see anything but his father bullying yet another family member into something they didn’t want to do. But maybe his father wanted John to have a dependable career because he didn’t have one himself. John was the accountant his father wanted to be.

The realization came swiftly and John had to sit down on the side of the trail, his lungs sucking air wildly in an effort to breathe. He closed his eyes to shut off the dizziness and focused instead on the granite rocks used as trail markers that cut into his hide.

“Son, are you okay?” A gravelly voice broke his concentration and he opened his eyes. In front of him stood a gnome, or what a gnome would look like had they really existed. His long gray hair blew gently in the wind, framing a face marked by wrinkles and two dimples that winked from leathery cheeks. Blue eyes the color of alpine ice water squinted in the glare of the sun. The gnome’s build was lean and wiry. A purple sports bra peeking from her tangerine shirt barely revealed the gnome was a woman and not a man like John thought.

“Do you have any water? You should take a drink if you got some,” the voice ground out impatiently. John shook his head and the gnome gave a snort of derision. “Darn kids, you all think you can just go for a hike and not pack enough water or food. Someone’s gonna die from dehydration one of these days.” She tore open her backpack and handed John a bottle of water.

“Thank you,” he muttered, taking a long drink. The coolness washed over him and he drained half the bottle. He handed it back to the gnome.

She shook her head. “You keep it, unless you’re turning around and high-tailing it back to your SUV. You don’t hike much, do you?”

John felt like a child when he shook his head no.

“Well, if you’re gonna hike to the top, you might as well follow me. Then I won’t have your death sitting on my conscious like a darned rock.” The gnome looked at John. “Let’s go. Daylight’s burnin’.”

The instant transition from fanciful gnome to Grandma Drill Sergeant caught John off guard. Her tone implied he should follow her directions. Just to be obstinate, John felt like turning around and heading for the car, but the compulsion to see if Daniel would really be waiting for him was too much to pass up. He shoved himself off the jagged pieces of granite and followed her up the trail.

His breath came in shallow gasps as he struggled to keep up with the old woman. The pleasant spring morning had turned hot and John found himself cursing his beloved desert sun. Wiping the sweat out of his eyes, he found the thirty or so pounds he had gained were a bigger strain than he could have imagined. For a forty-two-year-old in the prime of his life, he looked and felt like someone much older.

At the top of the rise Grandma Drill Sergeant turned and studied John’s heaving, huffing frame. She paused long enough for him to catch up then dug her walking stick into the soft granite littering the trail and pressed on. Over her shoulder, she advised him to take a drink from the water bottle he forgot he was clutching.

Gulping the cool water, John fought the urge to turn

around. He should have known the three-mile trail would be too much for his slovenly frame. The wildflowers gently swaying in the breeze were no longer beautiful. Instead they laughed at him for attempting to step out of the box and do something different with his life. Absently he followed Grandma Drill Sergeant and didn't notice the trail had started to incline. He realized too late as the ground rose to meet his face.

“Dammit!” He spit out gravel and wondered, after tasting blood, if some teeth were in there too. His chin felt like it was on fire and his knees were dripping blood from several large gashes. John pushed himself up and used curses normally reserved for losing sports teams.

“Feel better now?” Grandma Drill Sergeant stood before him, her gnarled hands on her hips, her hiking stick on the side of the trail. She pointed to a flat rock and commanded him to sit. When his wobbly legs wouldn't cooperate, she dragged him by the shirt and pushed him onto the rock.

“Now what did you have to go and do that for?” Grandma asked, the look in her eyes lacking the venom of her tone. “Coulda got yourself real busted up, you know? Did you even look at the ledge on the other side of the trail?”

John looked around her slight frame and the drop off behind her. He obviously had not considered the hundred-foot drop to the valley below or he would have been more careful. He sighed and shook his head. It was better to agree than to argue the finer points of paying attention, especially since she was holding a tube of what looked like antibiotic, pain-killing ointment in her hand.

“Here, hold still. Let me wipe your sorry butt up,” she admonished, carefully washing his wounds with cool water from her bottle. “This ain't gonna feel good, but it won't sting as much as when you hit the gravel.” She swiftly applied the viscous ointment. Reaching into her backpack, she retrieved a plastic

zipper bag full of bandages and spilled some out onto her palm as John peered at her crinkled and timeworn face. It didn't quite have the leathery look of rocker Keith Richards, nor did it look supple and smooth like the latest young thing to grace the cover of the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit edition.

"All right, let's see your chin. Look up." He did as he was told because despite her gruff admonishment and acerbic tone, she was the first person who had shown him an ounce of tenderness since Sam tucked him into bed on that terrible day two months ago. Sarah had taken to ignoring him, glaring at him from her easy chair, looking like a dragon about to fry him at the slightest suggestion of conversation. She still went to work, but more often than not she looked like a George Romero extra, her once-beautiful face haggard and pinched.

"Hey, dough-boy, pay attention. We'd better get going if you're gonna make it the last 500 feet to the top," Grandma Drill Sergeant said, poking him with her hiking stick. John's heart galloped in his chest and his lungs wheezed from his shallow breathing. Anticipation beckoned him up the crunchy path like a siren. How would Daniel talk to him? Would he appear like God did to Moses? John hoped not. One burning bush and the whole desert would go up in flames, along with him and Grandma Drill Sergeant. As they pushed up the last ten feet of hill John felt his vision swim and his breath come in shallow gasps.

"You gonna make it?" Grandma asked, poking him in the stomach with the stick. "You gotta lose some weight, boy, if you're gonna come up here and hike." She marched toward an outcropping of stone sprinkled with pink, black and white sparkles of color. She sat down and motioned for him to join her.

Reluctantly John sat down, his heart hammering in his ears. It nearly drowned out the sounds of the quail and doves calling to him. Grandma Drill Sergeant must have heard it, because she

tapped him on the chest and shook her head.

“Your ticker is telling you something. What’s it saying?”

“How the heck should I know? It’s beating too hard to hear anything,” John grumbled, his anger leaking out around his impatience. What if he couldn’t hear Daniel over the loudness of it? The thought made his stomach rise to his throat and he tasted bile.

Grandma Drill Sergeant let out a long sigh, filled with the impatience he felt, plus a liberal helping of derision. “Why did you come all the way up here if you ain’t gonna listen? I brought you to the best listening place on the whole darn trail and here you are, all self-absorbed and huffy.” She rose and moved back to the trail as a lone white butterfly circled around her head. John gasped and felt the world spin in his peripheral vision.

The first butterfly was joined by two others, all hovering around Grandma Drill Sergeant’s head. White wings fluttering, gray spots winking at John like a neon sign, they danced and flitted and then they were gone. John’s eyes rolled back in his head and he felt himself fall forward. Grandma Drill Sergeant rushed forward and grabbed his shoulders.

“Hey now, don’t you go fallin’ down on me,” she said, leading him to a slab of granite. “Those butterflies, they won’t hurt anyone. In fact, if you subscribe to the bedtime story my mamma told me, they’re angels, sent back here to watch over you.”

She pushed him towards a table of rock that overlooked the valley below. “Why don’t you go sit down here and wait for your angel?” When he didn’t move, she prodded him with her walking stick. “I’m gonna head down the other way now and leave you be. But I’m gonna tell you something that will make your journey a whole lot easier. “

John put his head in his hands, wishing the birdsong would drown out her four-pack-a-day rasp.

“The signs are there if you will only look for them,” she whispered, making him jump. He raised his head and found her face inches from his own. “Remember those words. You’re not going to hear from him if you don’t.” She pushed away in a swoosh of gravel and left him.

The tears he had stuffed for months began to flow down his cheeks and he was darned if he was going to stop them. Anger roiled through him and he picked up a fistful of granite pebbles and threw them as hard as he could. He was mad because Grandma Drill Sergeant knew he was waiting for Daniel and screwed up his chance to see or hear him again. And the butterflies? How could she have known about them? John shivered in the heat. Two white butterflies had danced around the crematory urn at Daniel’s graveside service. They didn’t leave until the last word of the last prayer was said. Even in his whacked-out grief, John noticed their odd behavior. His brother said it was a sign. John thought it was the white roses around the urn. Now he wasn’t so sure.

Sobbing, John raised his face towards the sun and shouted the questions banging on the inside of his head. “Why? Why me? Did I do something in a previous life that I have to pay for now? Are there no words of comfort, no acts of grace that can take away this pain?” His anguish poured out, his heart breaking anew. “God, what’s the point? What am I supposed to learn from this?” John shook his fist at the blue sky. He tasted bile in his mouth and swore.

Looking over the edge of the mountain, he fought the impulse to throw himself down the side. It wasn’t a steep drop, which meant he would suffer on the way down, impaling himself on the clumps of cactus and various outcroppings of rock. He made himself get up and return to the safety of the trail. With his luck, he would survive, and have to live his life as a grieving paraplegic.

Feeling the beginning of dehydration set in, John started

back down the trail to the parking lot. A new set of unused, flabby muscles took up the chore of getting him down the trail. The burning sensation in his legs felt good. He concentrated on it and tried to ignore Grandma Drill Sergeant's parting advice. Opening up his mind to the possibility that signs existed felt like it made sense, but would also mean he would have to acknowledge that a power greater than himself existed. He wasn't willing to admit he wasn't in control of his life. He hated the God of his childhood for stealing his son, yet couldn't say those words outright. It was all he could handle to be trapped in the circle of anger and blame.

John thought of his brother and wondered if he had moments of uncertainty. He shook his head. Probably not. Samuel Frank Stevenson always knew what he was doing. His conviction never wavered; Sam knew he was destined for the clergy as a child. Not even a viewing of *The Omen* could change his mind. A fleeting memory of John tying up Sam and forcing him to watch the horror flick brought a smile to his parched lips. It was a futile attempt—nothing could move Sam from his position of piety.

Reaching the bottom of the hill, John found his battered Toyota SUV and hefted his frame into the driver's seat. He turned the air conditioning on full blast and reclined the seat back and closed his eyes. An image of Daniel's chubby baby face flashed into his mind, as did the scent of Dreft baby soap. The vivid memories felt like festering splinters under his skin and he jerked awake. He rubbed his nose, but the scent lingered. He tore open the glove compartment and ripped open a package of cinnamon gum. Even then he could still smell the sweetness of his son.

Jerking the seatbelt across his flaccid belly, John slammed the truck in reverse and left the parking lot more quickly than he normally would have. Of course, normal didn't apply to him any more. There was nothing normal about burying your son. He cursed the God he didn't believe in, cursed Grandma Drill Sergeant

for being right about the signs, and saved his most obnoxious curse words for himself.

If he had been any kind of father, Daniel would still be here.

Maybe he should have jumped off the side of that mountain when he had the chance.