

The Pilot's Son

A Glimpse of Project Dream's Untold Love Story

What happened to the kids in the desert?

Readers of *Dream Wide Awake* asked that question, inspiring the stand-alone prequel, *Project Dream*. *Project Dream* delves into the time one hundred teenagers spent in a Nevada desert set deep in the belly of Area 51.

There, military officials taught them to dream.

The *Pilot's Son* depicts the feelings and emotions of one of those teen dreamers, Chase Finley. In love with the charismatic Rachel Callahan, Chase, like all of the one hundred teenagers, has a story of his own.

Read Chase Finley's story and see *Project Dream's* main characters, Izzy Jimenez, Rachel Callahan, and Lenny Emling through Chase's eyes.

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By CJ Zahner

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“Share how your mother reacted when she realized you had a sixth sense.” Ms. Sherman glances around the room for a victim. “Izzy?”

The quirky little girl named Izzy tosses tangled hair over one shoulder and reacts. “She said not to talk about it.”

Her expression changes. A hint of regret burrows out of her brown eyes. She’s forgotten to be timid. Answered too eagerly for a girl who has few friends.

“I mean, she didn’t criticize me,” she murmurs. “Just cautioned me.”

I strain to take a better look at Izzy. She has toothpaste caked in one corner of her mouth. Her uniform falls loosely over her scant frame. She is the tiniest of the girls, awkward and clumsy. The other kids at Project Dream tease her relentlessly.

Embarrassed, her gaze shoots across the room to see if anyone noticed her sudden boldness. She makes eye contact with me, accidentally. I give her a half wink. Flash her a smile. She blushes, but my little gesture boosts her confidence and she continues—slower, now.

“My Belo Jimenez had the sight, too, so my mother did believe in clairvoyance.”

“What did your grandfather say about your gifts?” Ms. Sherman asks.

“He told me I should use them sparingly. That they would come for me.” The red on Izzy’s face deepens. “And I suppose you—they—did come for me.”

Ms. Sherman raises an eyebrow and smiles as if she contemplates that verity. Then she moves on to another one of us top-ten seers, the best of the best. We all have clairvoyant tendencies. It’s why they selected us.

“John Michael?” Ms. Sherman chooses a boy, one of my fellow mates.

Izzy relaxes her shoulders, and my gaze shifts to the thin, scrawny John Michael, sitting in the back of the room. There aren’t many people I don’t care for, but John Michael is one of them. I don’t like him. I don’t like him a lot.

“My mother said Satan inspires visions.”

Ms. Sherman corrects him. “You mean she blamed negativity.”

“Yes,” John Michael strokes the smooth spot on his face above his upper lip. He’s having a hard time keeping up with the rest of us boys. He’s sixteen but doesn’t need a razor. “Your negativity; her Satan.”

“Touché.” Annie Sherman nods. She’s an attractive thirty-something. An army brat who grew up to be a decorated Air Force pilot. Some called her the girl who flew with the angels. That’s the reason she’s here, teaching at Project Dream. “Some people believe in God and the Devil. Some of us choose to call those entities positivity and negativity.”

She’s the sort of woman who takes everything in stride. I wonder what my dad would think of her.

“Who’s next?” Her gaze scans the room again. “Rachel? How did your mom feel about your abilities?”

I close my eyes because I don’t like to get worked up looking at Rachel during class. But not seeing her is not helping. I hear her raspy voice and every inch of my skin crawls with desire.

“Not going there. How about I tell you what Gee said?” Rachel barks.

The ends of my lips twitch upward. Her unbridled manner grabs me every time. Even here, trapped in Project Dream, Rachel's long legs, perfect face, and abrasive demeanor allow her to call the shots.

The tone of Annie Sherman's response implies she finds humor in Rachel's sidestepping of the question. It's as if Annie is as amused with Rachel's stubbornness as I am.

"Okay, I'll cave. What did your grandmother say about your gift?" Annie says, and I wonder if everyone who gazes into the Caribbean blue of Rachel Callahan's eyes caves.

"That no one had my ability. So you all might as well move aside and let me identify where the birds hid the machine guns."

The entire room moans. I laugh. My desire grows.

"What?" Rachel reacts haughtily. "Most of you haven't a clue where they hid the guns. I got it right. Didn't I, Ms. Sherman?"

After a year of training for most of the Project Dream participants and over two years for a few of us, we are having some luck with this mind game they teach: remote viewing. Birds are officers who hide weapons in the desert around us. We meditate, raise the vibration level of the room we sit in, and remotely search Area 51's desert for the munition.

Rachel is very good at it.

"Yes, you did." Annie's response is sandwiched between two chuckles.

"See, it's a fact. I'm the best."

"One of the best," Annie Sherman clears her throat. "Izzy, Lenny, and Chase identified the location also. And if I'm honest with you, Rachel, Lenny's estimate was a tad more accurate than yours."

Lenny Emling is sitting beside me. His face lights up worse than a desert sunburn. He stares at his desk, nervously scratching his legs. I lean across the aisle and slap him on the back. I like the big monstrosity of a guy even if he is a little odd. Rachel likes him, too. He is the only person at Project Dream whom Rachel would allow to outshine her.

"Well now, that just helps prove my point. We Erie people are the best."

They grew up together. Lenny introduced me to Rachel. But those first moments spent with the charismatic beauty were awkward. I never liked a girl with an ego. Later, Lenny pulled me aside and told me the truth about her. She was all talk. She had a soft spot for underdogs and, like me, an unwavering allegiance to family. She had taken her sister's place at Project Dream—sheltering her from the hot desert sun.

Another loud moan from the others draws my attention back into the room.

"Okay, we will leave that be." Ms. Sherman's gaze serpentine across the room. She's laughing, forgets herself, and calls on me.

"Chase, what about—" She stops, but it is too late. She realizes her mistake. The floodgate opens and memories come rushing at me. I do what I always do when I remember my mother. I smile and pretend I'm a normal sixteen-year-old boy.

If only I had told her. If only I had said, "Mom, I had a dream. Don't go jumping."

Annie Sherman's question does for me what I could not do for myself. It obliterates the vision of Rachel Callahan that has been dancing in my head all day. My mind wanders far away from last night, from the picture of Rachel's half-dressed body hugging mine under the stars.

Inside my head, I travel back in time to a day I will never forget. Inside our classroom, I sit and smile and pretend I am merely the pilot's son.

I close my eyes. I'm no longer sitting in a classroom in the middle of a Nevada desert. My memory takes me back to my thirteenth year. I am twelve-years-old, just shy of my birthday. It is before Rachel, before Project Dream, before I slid into the backseat of a limousine after saying goodbye to my little sister and war-hero father.

"I don't want you to do this, Chase," my mother says.

"I'll be fine. Dad will be right beside me."

"In another plane! He'll be flying in a plane next to you, not sitting beside you. What can he do from there?"

I turn toward her, squint, and realize she's crying.

"Mom, stop." I'm at a Salt Lake City airfield, walking beside her in the pitch-black morning, so excited I can barely contain myself.

"He'll be fine." My father catches up to us and stretches an arm around her shoulder. I see a hint of white teeth peeking from behind his proud smile. "He's a natural."

"He's not a natural." She whispers, cries harder. "He's my son."

No one should ever cry. It's bad luck.

Right then I decide not to tell her about my silly dream of her parachute not opening. I see tears trickling down her cheeks, and I'm sure that I've mixed up my fears with hers in my dream. She wasn't going to die. She was afraid I was going to die.

Never doubt your intuition, Chase. It's how your father stayed alive those times.

"I've been training for this for over a year, Mom." I try to comfort her. "Dad wouldn't let me go if I couldn't do it."

The day had arrived—my first long-distant, solo trip. I was flying from California to Hawaii.

"I suppose not." She pulls me close. We stand eye to eye because I'm nearly as tall as her now. "You be careful. I'll be at the airport waiting for word. And I'll be here when you get back."

She sniffles. I let her coddle me. I do love my mother, but I just want to get off the ground before she puts a kibosh on the whole trip.

I can't be delayed. I must do this before my thirteenth birthday.

"Great," I say. "Try not to stress over it. Stay busy, Mom."

"Oh, believe me, I will. Just be careful, honey, I love you."

I don't like that she still calls me honey, but this one time I don't contest. I kiss her back. Say I love her, too. Then as I leave, for some odd reason—maybe because of the exhilaration of the moment or maybe because of something else—I do an about-face, throw my arms around her for a hug, then hurry away toward my plane.

With hardly a thought of her, I take off and realize what my dad said was true: I'm a natural. I could have flown that plane and landed smoothly with my eyes shut.

That flight was everything I had dreamed of and more. Chilling and magnificent. We landed on a small California coast airfield, fueled to capacity, and took off into a crystal-clear sky. A conveyor belt of cobalt blue moved beneath me. The metallic hum of Foxtrot, my dad's plane, vibrated around me. Long riveting hours passed serenely by me until my eyes focused straight ahead and searched for that sliver of jade. Anticipated a mass of trees that would grow tall and wide and verdant as I neared.

Then the trees did rise. I flew closer. Descended. A brown patch in the middle of the green earth widened and lengthened into a landing strip, and I wallowed in the sheer ecstasy of the moment. The success. The thrill. The sudden donning that I am no longer just the pilot's son.

I am the pilot.

They don't tell us until we land. I suppose they were afraid I'd crash the plane. And maybe I would have.

That moment in time is forever etched in my memory. I'm running toward my dad on a small, secluded Hawaiian runway. He's laughing. I'm whooping. We embrace. He rubs the top of my head. "I knew you could do it," he says. "Broke the record."

We see a man walking toward us; my dad's friend is coming to congratulate me. I am the first twelve-year-old to complete this task, though it must remain a secret—I'm too young, not even a teenager.

But as the man nears, there is no joy in him. A ragged look of despair sags on his face, and my memory spits out my mother's last words, her haggard face. I remember the dream. I remember how I hugged her goodbye.

And I know.

She went jumping to pass the time. Practice her aerial photography. She used someone else's parachute because she left hers at home. Something's not right with it. But she isn't thinking clearly. Her mind is far away. She jumps. Photographs the sun rising. Deploys her chute late—I've seen her do this hundreds of times. It tangles. She deploys her reserve, but she's too low.

She is gone.

Ten days later I'm headed to a juvenile detention center because of a joy ride I took three days after my mother's funeral. I brought two friends up with me in that single-engine airplane that sat idle in a small Utah airfield, keys in the ignition. One of the passengers was the son of a Senator. I would have gotten away with everything if I hadn't run out of gas and landed in a hayfield.

The senator failed to acknowledge my emergency-landing skills.

It wasn't the first time I'd been accused of stealing away in someone else's plane, so the judge was harsh. He had let me off on a prior offense, saying if I walked into his courtroom again, he'd send me to a detention center. That judge had also had several run-ins with my dad. He reprimanded my father more than me at my hearing, blaming my escapade on reckless parenting and ordering me to counseling—in juvi. Six months.

Five months in, I'm so depressed that my dad tells me he's planned a second solo trip for me when I get out. He's hoping to keep my mind engaged, I know. Get my mind off being in a detention center—off my mother.

Off the dream, I didn't tell.

And the promise of that flight did alleviate some of the angst. I thought about it the moment I opened my eyes in the morning and never stopped turning it over in my mind until I fell asleep at night.

I loved flying. Days before every flight I took with my dad, I wallowed in anticipation that almost hurt. He had been letting me fly planes since I was little. Sitting beside him with my hands working the controls gave me such a rush. And my solo trip? Sheer ecstasy.

Then this. Project Dream.

My nightmare.

The movie in my head fast forwards.

"Goodbye, son. I'm sorry," he says on the day my world changed.

I watch helplessly as he leans in and hugs me, his eyes rheumy. That was the first time I witnessed tears in my father's eyes—the first time I realized that the decorated pilot was human. Even when my mother died, my father hadn't shed a tear in front of my sister and me.

"I will get you out." He whispers. "Make no mistake. I will come for you."

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My thoughts wander back to the square room with the sandstone walls. I'm in my sixteen-year-old body once again. Ms. Sherman is staring at me and I at her. Everyone in the class knows my mother died. The silence of the room stings. Then I hear her. That rasp. That niggling jab.

"Personally." It's Rachel. She doesn't have to pretend she's in a mood. She's in one. She hates sitting in a classroom.

I sit stock-still and listen as she changes the subject and rescues me from myself. "I think Chase cheats off Lenny and Izzy cheats off me. East Coast kids are smarter. You gnarly West Coast kids took too many surfboards to the head."

Again, the class moans.

"Technically, Erie isn't East Coast," John Michael says.

"Shut the hell up, Turnbull," Rachel is sitting next to him. I turn in time to see her shove him. He nearly falls out of his seat but catches himself at the last moment, and she continues her bullying in a perfect Bostonian accent. The rest of the kids laugh. No one likes John Michael. He's a bully himself. "You think you're so tough because you're from Boston? I can beat the crap out of you with one hand tied behind my back, you little weasel."

And she can, too.

"All right, Rachel," Ms. Sherman interjects, half-heartedly. She doesn't like John Michael either. "That's enough."

Kids laugh and shout West Coast versus East Coast versus everything-in-between comments. One boy hollers a remark about Mississippi, his home state.

"I hear Mississippi's governor flunked his GED test, so how good could you be?" Rachel yells, and nothing Ms. Sherman says can stop the laughter.

Rachel can do that to people. Get them riled up. Make them laugh when there's nothing funny in a situation. Smile when a sad song plays. Have fun when only sand and sun and a whole bunch of hot anger rolls around you like tumbleweed.

She looks at me. I glance into her big blue eyes, and I swear she's teasing me with that pout she has set on her lips. I don't hear anything else in that class. I forget about my mom, my dad, and my little sister who handwrites letters to me once a week. I can't eat much dinner after class, and I wait for the sun to set. The only thing that will get me through this unsettling world is Rachel's hand pressed into mine, keeping me sane.

When the black night falls around us, I take her hand and we run toward the first mountain range where we fall to the ground and forget everything. Sand cakes in every fold of our bodies as we whirl and twirl in a passion so deep, I think I might forget my father's crazy escape plan and stay here in Project Dream.

How can I leave her?

But my father has gone to so much trouble to make the arrangements. He's called in the favors that only war heroes are due.

I am the only one who can get out alive.

I close my eyes for a long time and take in her form pressed against mine, so I can remember it for an eternity. I keep still in the sand beside her. When I finally open my eyes, I expect her to be sleeping, but those Caribbean blues are staring up at me, the moonlight reflecting in them, and I realize the horrific truth of my plight: I don't have the strength to leave her, but I don't have the strength to stay and spend my entire life controlled by a government.

I take a deep breath and drink in her beauty. “This is not a good time for this,” I say.

“A good time for what?” She’s curled up like a fragile kitten, content in my arms. How can one girl be so hard and so soft all in one?

“For me to be falling in love,” I say, then the look in her eyes pulls me in. My lips fall onto hers and before I know what I’m doing, I find myself making love to her again like we hadn’t just started this a few months ago. Like we’ve always been together. Like we always will be.

But...I know I am going...

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Six months later, everything is set. My father’s money has been transferred to foreign accounts. He’s attained the necessities: new identities, new citizenships, new home, new job and schools, new lives for him, my sister, and me.

We just have to wait for the perfect storm. Literally. No one can fly a plane through the mountains in the middle of a dust storm—no one except, of course, my father. He learned to fly low, out of the radar, during the Gulf War.

There is a reason your father flew through that desert and lived.

I hear my mother’s voice in my head as if she were still alive. And while the impending flight is risky, remembering her words gives me hope. I have confidence in my father’s ability to get me out of this godforsaken program despite the odds.

Six kids have left Project Dream, and Rachel doesn’t know this because I cannot tell her, but the rumors are true. All six of those kids are dead. My father has sworn me to secrecy. Just telling Rachel may put her in danger.

And dissuade her from leaving with me.

So I tell her nothing. I don’t explain how deep and ugly this program is. Even when she reveals her deepest secret to me, and it takes my breath away, I still don’t tell her the truth: that none of us can ever leave this program.

Am I willing to risk her life to get her out? Now?

Our remote-viewing abilities and accomplishments have caught the eye of the President, the Secretary of Defense, Homeland Security, and Cabinet Members. We are no longer a bunch of kids in a far-reaching program. There’s a real possibility that we can prevent future 9/11 attacks with our minds. Our “dreamer” status has turned into a lifetime commitment.

This escape plan is more dangerous now than ever.

Still, I’m in love with her, and I can’t help myself. I try to convince her to come with me without revealing too much. But even when I tell her that my father is willing to buy a new identity for her and take her with us, she refuses.

“Don’t leave me,” she begs one night. “If you stay, we can go away to college together.”

“No, they’ll separate us.”

“No, they won’t. I’ll convince Jerry McDaniel to keep us together.”

My blood boils when she mentions Project Dream’s director.

“Stay away from him,” I say, but I know she won’t. She’ll do anything to be with me. She believes she can convince McDaniel to keep us together.

I warn her not to confide in him. He’s dangerous. Again, I ask her to leave with me.

“Can I come back someday? Visit my sister?”

“No, you can never come back.”

You don't understand the gravity of our situation. We can never come home. We can never tell a soul where we are.

"Then I can't go. I won't leave Lisa forever."

I beg and plead and pray she reconsiders, but time slips away like sand in a bottle, and I begin to doubt myself.

Do I risk her life?

When the storm approaches, I know that if I don't go now, Rachel will be so desperate she'll turn to McDaniel to keep us together, and my father will lose his life waiting in the night, refusing to leave without me.

Everything happens for a reason, Chase.

I hear my mother. I don't even know if I will get out alive. Do I coax her into this?

Not now. Not now. It's too risky now.

I have no choice. I must go without her...

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That evening, I kneel at her bedside. I remove a cross on a silver chain from my neck and place it around hers. She removes her gold medal and places it on me.

"I will come for you," I whisper. I slip my arms around her and kiss her goodbye. "It may take ten months, or it may take ten years, but never forget. I'll come for you."

Five hours later, in the middle of the night, I, Chase Finley, disappear.