

"Angels and demons clash in an epic story laden with spiritual warfare. I loved this book."

—HEATHER BURCH,
author of the Halflings series

CLOAK OF THE LIGHT



CHUCK BLACK

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“The invisible world gets a makeover in Chuck Black’s *Cloak of the Light*. Often reading like a thriller, this fresh take on the unseen inspires and entertains in equal measure. Reader of all ages will enjoy this one.”

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—HEATHER BURCH, author of Halfling series

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OF
THE LIGHT

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CLOAK OF THE LIGHT



CHUCK
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*Thanks to my lovely wife, Andrea, and my
wonderful children, who sacrificed many hours
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FOUR NOTES

His dad was gone.
Forever.

Drew might only be twelve, but he knew the sting of his father's death would last a very long time—a lifetime. The pain of loss was a fresh wound to his young, unscarred heart. There were no life calluses to impede the searing ache of death.

He sat there, staring at the casket, sorrow hanging heavy on his soul, threatening to pull him down to where he could not breathe. Though the sun darted between the clouds, trying to peek down from time to time, the day was a dark one. Long faces, black dresses, tears, tissues, and “Taps”—the four loneliest notes ever played on a trumpet.

Drew tensed up when the colonel knelt down in front of him. He struggled to look the man in the eye. He had quelled his tears, letting them spill only in the privacy of his bedroom. Here, in front of military statues made of flesh and blood, he wanted to be brave for his dad. He stared at the colonel's white-gloved hand covering the perfectly folded flag being offered to him. His mother had asked that the flag be given to Drew, not to her. He wasn't sure if the gesture was for her, for Drew, or for his dad. It didn't matter.

He just wanted it over.

The colonel's deep and sober voice resonated through Drew.

“This flag is presented on behalf of a grateful nation and the United States

Army as a token of appreciation for your father's honorable and faithful service."

As Drew reached for the flag, he looked into the man's eyes—and saw there the same sorrow crushing his own heart. And though he knew the words had been spoken thousands and thousands of times, Drew believed the colonel meant them.

Tears brimmed his eyes as he took the flag. He pursed his lips to restrain his hurt, but it didn't help. He felt his mother's hand on his shoulder and knew that the pain they each bore was additive in a vicious cycle that provided no escape. He leaned in to her. He had heard that time was the salve for such a wound. If that were true, Drew wished a million years could pass in an instant to separate him and his mother from the pain of his father's death, but instead the seconds took an eternity to pass.

The day lasted forever. Drew didn't want to feel the pain, but he didn't want to forget his father either.

So he walked through it all, painfully aware that his life was forever, irrevocably changed.

And there was nothing he could do about it.

A FEW DAYS LATER, Drew and his mother, Kathryn, received a visit from Jake Blanchard. He had attended the funeral but was silent through its entirety. Kathryn invited him in and offered an iced tea. The raw emotions of the week were still evident as the odd trio sat in the living room in silence. Jake held his glass with both hands, either to keep it from falling or to give his hands something to do while he worked up the courage to speak.

How ironic that a Special Forces soldier of Jake's caliber, with years of combat training and experience, could be reduced to a hesitant, irresolute man struggling to say a few meaningful words.

Drew had seen his mother have this effect on other men, for she was a beautiful woman, the kind of pretty that could not be diminished with dirt, sweat, or sorrow. In fact, the worse the condition, the more resolute her beauty shone in defiance. Her dark-brown hair usually fell loose across the right side

of her olive-toned face. Deep-blue eyes framed by high brows and accentuated cheekbones captured the gaze of both men and women. Drew remembered how he'd blush when his dad talked about how beautiful she was, but he was right.

As Drew looked across the room at Jake, he realized that his mother's beauty was not what was causing the man's unsettled beginning. Jake finally set the sweating glass of tea on the coffee table before him.

"Ma'am, I'm not very good with words, but I do have a few I need to speak." Jake dropped his gaze to the untouched tea and the ice still circling to find a resting place. His left hand massaged his right as he continued. He glanced at Drew and then back at Kathryn.

"Ryan and I were on a lot of missions together. We became good friends. In fact, he was the best friend I've ever had." He stopped and swallowed hard.

Kathryn teared up. "He wrote of you, Jake." She spoke with a sweet compassion. "I know Ryan considered you the same."

"What I'm sure he didn't tell you was that he saved my life in Iraq. I owe him everything."

Kathryn dabbed her eyes with a Kleenex.

Jake reached into his shirt pocket and removed a folded piece of paper. "I'm sure he would have wanted you to have this. It was a letter he was writing as we got called on our last duty together. He gave it to me just before—"

Drew's mother gasped, and tears streamed down her face. Jake leaned across to her, and she took the letter as though it were as precious as gold. She looked at Jake and mouthed the words *thank you*.

Jake turned to Drew. "And this is for you." He held out his father's Army Special Forces pin and green beret. "I know he would have wanted you to have these. He was very proud of you."

Drew held the pin in one hand and the beret in the other. Despite all the pain that came flooding back, these things helped. They were one more connection to his dad.

Drew sniffed. "Thank you, sir."

Jake smiled through wet eyes and nodded. He took a deep breath, as if to prep for a mission. "I don't mean to make this difficult, ma'am, but I need you

to know one more thing before I leave. I was with Ryan at the end, and he asked me to make sure that you and Drew were taken care of.”

“You’ve done that for us today. We will be all right.”

Jake shook his head. “I promised him, ma’am, and I intend on keeping that promise.” He leaned forward and handed Kathryn another paper. “This is my address and phone number. I will be stationed here in Fort Bragg for the next six months. No matter where you are, if you need anything, call me and I will be there for you and your son.”

Kathryn took the paper. “Thank you. That means a lot, Jake.”

He nodded, then stood up. Drew walked with his mother to the door to see Jake out.

On the porch, Jake turned. “It was an honor to serve with your husband, ma’am. He was one of those rare men of true honor and integrity.” Jake put a hand on Drew’s shoulder. “You can be very proud of your father.” He looked as if he wanted to say something else, but instead turned and left.

When the door closed, Drew and his mother retreated to their rooms to spend time with their new treasures. Later, Drew’s mother read the letter to him. One part stated that Drew’s dad had some exciting news to share but that it was too important to share in a letter. He wanted to tell them in person. Whatever it was, it was news that was lost forever. Worse than that was how the letter ended...

“Please tell Drew that I miss him and that...”

That was it.

News untold and a message undelivered. The letter hurt more than it helped, but it was worth it because it was a final memory of his dad. The ache in Drew’s heart was the painful tutor teaching Drew a new law that was as unbreakable as all the laws of the universe: life isn’t fair.

ONCE ALL THEIR AFFAIRS were in order, Drew and his mother moved back to Columbia, South Carolina, to live with her mother. Although Drew had always done well in school, the loss of his father and the move to another city in the middle of his sixth-grade year were too much. He struggled in school

and did not pass some of his classes. The next fall, his mother landed a teaching job at the same school Drew attended, so she decided to have him repeat sixth grade to help him get back on track.

Through it all, Drew struggled to be happy. But it was Jake who helped him smile again.

The summer before Drew started his second sixth-grade year, Jake finished his tour with the Army. He found a job with a security company in Charlotte, North Carolina, less than one hundred miles from Columbia. He invited Drew on a camping trip before school started, and Kathryn was grateful beyond words.

"Are you excited to go camping with Jake tomorrow?" Drew's mother asked as they ate supper.

"I guess." Drew poked at his potatoes with his fork. Then a thought lit up his eyes. "Do you think he'll let me shoot his 9 mm?"

"This is a camping trip, not a gun-shooting trip."

Drew's eyes saddened and Kathryn winced. "But if you ask him politely, and you're respectful, and you're very, *very* careful—"

"Really?" Drew got excited just thinking about it, even though he knew his mother wasn't really for it.

That night his mother helped Drew pack for the trip, and when she tucked him into bed, a little of the ache in his heart was gone.

"I'm going to miss you, but you have a wonderful time with Jake, okay?"

He nodded. His mother kissed his forehead a little longer than usual and then stood up and walked to the door. She reached for the light.

"Mom?"

She turned.

"I'm going to miss you too."

She smiled, turned off the light, and wiped her eyes. After she closed his door, Drew couldn't help but smile as he thought of the adventure the next day would bring.

The camping trip was a big hit, and for Drew, shooting the Beretta 9 mm was the highlight of the week. When they returned home five days later, Drew couldn't wait to tell his mother all about it. She thanked Jake three times, and

he promised Drew he would take him on more trips as soon as he could work them into his schedule.

Throughout the year, Jake checked on Drew and Kathryn and never left without completely stocking their freezer with meat and other frozen goods. Drew looked forward to Jake's visits, and because Jake didn't have much in the way of his own family, holidays and camping trips together became commonplace.

At first the camping trips were just a distraction and an avenue for Drew to get to know Jake better. But in time the trips transformed into something much more. Drew learned survival techniques from Jake, and both the teacher and the student loved it. Though Drew was just in his early teen years, he had an aptitude for the things Jake was teaching him. He couldn't help smiling at Jake's surprise every time he did better than either of them anticipated.

Jake took Drew all over the country to expose him to different environments. When Drew had mastered the environs in the States, their trips reached beyond the borders of the US to further expand his training. That's when Jake began infusing combat training into their trips—and Drew soaked it up like a sponge.

Drew watched Jake navigate the fine line of being a mentor while not trying to replace his father. He came to admire and respect Jake, and though their bond grew strong, the pain of losing his father never completely left him.



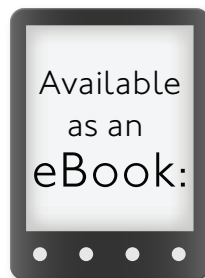
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