

Chapter 1

The moment Cloud Strife opened his eyes, he knew that it would be just another day. Another day in a life that he never imagined he would live six months ago. A fine luxurious condominium in Costa Del Sol, the fastest growing city in the world. A full and beautiful view of the ocean that shone like the blue of his mako eyes. The golden sun peeking through the thick white curtains of his bedroom that reminded him of his own golden crown. A soft bed, like one he's never slept in months ago. The fame, the riches the glamour of a living action hero. Like a star on earth, a celebrity who's hand could be touched by the crowd.

He could barely dream of it six months ago. He would have loved to live this life six months ago, rather than having to fear of not living to see the next day. He hated this life now. He hated all the attention they were giving him. Now the wishes are turned around. How he would love to have his friends back, running around the world. Living on the edge, on the wild side of life. It was an adventure, not a bore...and life is supposed to be an adventure, right?

The alarm clock bleeped the same old annoying ring five seconds later. He'd been waking up at that exact moment for months now he really did not need the alarm anymore. 5:30 a.m. As he'd expected every morning, the communication unit bleeped too, and a metallic female voice started it's "Good morning, Mr. Strife..." routine. Asking what he would be having for breakfast and telling him his list of activities. These activities, public appearances, morale boosting campaigns and more. Ever since Meteor and Holy destroyed Midgar, the number one city, the need for these campaigns have increased. He and his friends have become the talk of the world, their lives have become public property.

After finishing his big breakfast of ham, eggs and toasted bread and orange juice, Cloud jumped out of bed and began his daily exercise routines. Stretching and then flexing his muscles. Later, weight lifting and some shadow fighting. It always took his mind off the pressuring activities and the countless rumours that bore him down. After two hours of non-stop exercise, he slipped into the hot tub that was always ready for him every morning. Another luxury where he could relax and think of what he could do to escape from the boring prison of being a celebrity.

The warm water quickly eased his mind, though he had a good night's rest, he immediately felt his eyelids grow heavier. It was a good feeling, and he readily succumbed to it. The pleasure of the warmth brushing his skin. The water massaging his body, from his feet to his neck. The fragrant salts entering his nostrils and transporting his mind from the sheltered condominium to a field of flowers.

The flowers surrounded him, as far as he could see. Everything was in the shade of pink, yellow, white and green. Above him the blue sky was ribboned with cheerful white clouds that sang in the breeze. He was standing on a rock, a huge rock. He was wearing a white shirt that fit him smugly, enough to reveal his lean and well-built figure. He noticed that he wore his lose fitting SOLDIER pants and boots, but it didn't matter, what he was feeling now was important. He was relaxed, happy and tranquil.

The dream was cut short by the ringing of his door bell. He groaned and splashed some of the warm water on his face. The feeling of relaxation still not leaving him. Who ever was at the door was lucky, he was in a good mood now and would probably not yell at them as a welcome. He quickly grabbed a white towel off the rack and wrapped it around his waist, not bothering to wipe the excess water from his torso. The door bell rang again, making that good mood slowly turn into annoyance.

"What is it?" He said through another comm. unit that stuck by the door. A female voice spoke through and it was one that he recognised. He felt relieved that it was an old friend and not one of those pesky tabloid reporters. Although, he also felt that he was not yet ready to see her, not at this time of day...and not since they had a dinner last night.

Cloud opened the door and was greeted by the warm smile of a lovely young brunette. She hasn't changed very much as he remembered her six months ago. Still beaming with life. Her body as fit and as voluptuous as ever. Tifa Lockheart, his best and childhood friend. Another victim of this instant celebrity life. Only this time, she seemed to be enjoying it. She lived on the floor above his, another rich and very elegantly decorated condo. It was a great improvement for her, since she only used to work as a bar maid in Midgar's slums. He was happy for her, at least she is happy with her life right now. However, it did not mean that she was not an object of gossip and rumours. The biggest question on people's minds today :When were they going to tie the knot?

Not anytime soon, for Cloud. He was not ready. Not until he had his life the way he wants it. They'll just have to wait for him to be able to breathe again. Dammit! He thought, just as he remembered that he and Tifa were supposed to visit the re-developing of Midgar by their friends this morning. He wanted to curse out loudly, thanks to his forgetfulness, they were going to be late for their luncheon appointment and would have to call it dinner.

They arrived in Midgar five hours later via Mayor Reeve's personal helicopter and finished the dinner meeting three hours later. Cloud was happy to see how quickly the city was recovering from Meteor's attack. The people were certainly co-operating with the government, they did want their city back. They have been busy re-establishing businesses and industries after settling the housing problems. As more of the old city was being cleared, more new buildings rose from the ground. Cloud thought that it wouldn't take long before the city would be restored to it's former glory. Only this time it wouldn't be a place for only the rich. The lower part of the city, which was once known as the slums, has been united with the upper city with one of the fallen plates acting as a bridge. Elevators and the old sub-way trains have been re-constructed to make transportation easier. No more security ID checks. Midgar was beginning a new life. Starting over again. This time they were working with a new coal energy. They have been using it ever since the scientists which once worked for ShinRa discovered a chemical which, when added to the coal, would render it's fumes harmless to the environment. Coal energy from Corel was not as potent as Mako, but they all agreed that it would suffice until electric power could be discovered without having to suck Mako energy from the Planet.

Tifa, Cloud, Barret and the rest of the team that fought against ShinRa, Sephiroth and Jenova, were recognised the world over as heroes. They were celebrated where ever they went and enjoyed all the privileges of the rich and famous in an instant. Though they all gone their separate ways, Cloud never lost contact with his old friends.

Barret has left for Corel with Marlene, taking care of the coal business which is his second love after his adopted daughter. The last Cloud heard of him was that he was busy with negotiating with Dio, the owner of the renowned Golden Saucer into using coal energy for his theme park. Without ShinRa, Dio didn't have much of a choice.

Cid went back to Rocket Town and started working on smaller utility air transport vehicles. He still dreams of building another rocketship and bring them all to the stars, but unless the air transport business flourished, he would just have to be patient and wait. He never told, however, how he and Shera were getting along.

Yuffie, went back to Wutai, which was now well-known for its hometown hero. It was very surprising o discover that Yuffie had started a materia business and a ninja school of her own. Cloud and Tifa had debates as to where Yuffie's materia supply came from.

Red XIII, or better known as Nanaki, has gone back to Cosmo Canyon to take over as their guardian and protector. According to him, he has found a possible mate and only waits for the right time to pursue her.

There was no word from Vincent, though. A few months ago, he disappeared and haven't heard from him ever since. He told them that he could be reached through the PHS system and he would come to help them but only when they really needed him. Cloud and the others understood that he still needed some time alone to discover the strength needed to battle the ghosts of his past. They did have reason to believe that he was living somewhere in Midgar. He just had his way of hiding in the shadows.

Most of the time, they would act as sources of inspiration to the people. Persuading them to work together and convincing them that the use of Mako energy was dangerous to both them and the planet. Businesses would also come and ask them to endorse their products, appear as guests on T.V. shows and even make a movie of their adventures. However, only Tifa, Barret and Yuffie agreed. Cloud had nothing against publicity, but he felt that he is not deserving of this much attention.

As he and Tifa stepped out of the city hall, they were swarmed with a mob of fans crying out for autographs. Cloud adjusted the brown trench coat he wore over his deep green sweater and started for his hum-vee type jeep, but Tifa asked him to stay and satisfy the crowd. He grinned and reluctantly stepped before a thick line of raving females bearing notebooks and papers.

Almost an hour passed and he wanted to call the whole thing off. However he would glance at Tifa who was enjoying herself and just continued signing autographs. A few minutes later, there were sirens of police vehicles and ambulances which distracted the crowd. The people dispersed as three dead bodies were unloaded from the ambulance, causing a brief moment of panic among the fans. People started pushing against each other, while Cloud was surrounded by the city guards, protecting him from the people.

"Hey! I was next in line!" One of the women yelled as another woman was pushed to the front of the line by the panicking people. She continued yelling at the poor girl who seemed confused, even as the people started to relax again. Cloud shook his head and turned to Tifa. She was also protected by the city guard and has now resumed with signing autographs.

"Mr. Strife," one of the guards said, tapping his shoulder. He turned to him and responded with a questioning glare. "are you still going to sign autographs or should I tell them to go home?"

Cloud shrugged, "I might as well continue." He said picking up the pen which has fallen on the white marble floor of the city hall. He then stepped toward the crowd and noticed that the woman continued to yell at the brown haired girl who was pushed to the front of the lines. She was desperately trying to make her way back but the furious woman kept on blocking her path. When she saw Cloud approach, she stopped yelling and started fixing her hair, putting on her best smile.

"Excuse me?" Cloud said, tapping the girl's shoulder before she could leave. He thought that he may as well sign her autograph book for all the yelling that she went through. The girl jumped up, startled, and turned around to face him. Cloud smiled at her and lifted his pen only to stop and gawk in shock as her tender green eyes met his mako-blues.

The girl's eyes grew even wider with confusion and she stepped back as Cloud's hand reached out to touch her cheek. As his fingers brushed her skin she tensed and jumped back, making Cloud recoil his hand with equal surprise. "I-I'm not a fan..." she said. Her voice was the same, though trembling. "But I do hope that you continue with your success." She said quickly and held out a single white flower.

For a moment, time froze for Cloud as he continued staring at her face. The face that he hasn't seen in over six months. He could see her expression change from confused to frightened, then a curse from one of the people snapped him back to reality. "Thanks.." he said as he took the flower from her hand and inserted it in his vest pocket. The girl smiled, though still unsure and disappeared into the crowd before he could stop her.

"Wait!" Cloud called after her, leaping over the railing and chasing her down the streets. There was a violent reaction throughout the crowd, but he ignored it. Looking wildly from left to right searching for any sign of the girl who looked like her.

"You running after the flower seller too?" One of the bystanders said. Cloud nodded and he pointed to the direction of the subway "She's a pretty one, eh? She went that way!" . Cloud thanked the man quickly and dashed down the stairs in a hurry. Quickly acquiring a ticket for the train. He didn't know where he was going as he leapt on to the departing train, but he had a feeling that he knew where to find her.

The Blind man made his way through the gates of Midgar. It was guarded by two soldiers, but they let him in when they saw he was blind. The continued walking slowly, prodding the ground with his walking stick.

"The city of sin..." He whispered. "... this place shall come down once more. The place where the betrayal of my people began."

"Excuse me, sir." He heard a voice call out from behind him. He kept himself from growling at the man, an "innocent" that should not be involved in their revenge, yet. "What do you want?" He asked, turning around slowly to face the source of the voice. The other man obviously reacted upon realising that he is blind. "I can see more than you think, boy."

The other man cleared his throat and apologised quickly. "I was looking for someone. I believe she passed this way."

The blind man grinned. "We all are, aren't we? This woman you search, why are you not happy with the one you have today?" There was a long silence between them. The blind man shook his head and laughed. "Forgive me, but just by listening to people's voices, I can usually tell what they are up to."

"Yeah, you're really good at it too." Came the embarrassed reply. "Listen, did you hear or sense her pass this way? She's a little one, a flower seller."

The blind man fell in deep thought, drawing circles on the sand with his walking stick. "If you seek guidance, boy. You best go to your place of enlightenment. The place where you first felt your spirit at peace with the planet." The man he spoke to was almost transparent to him now. He could not understand why he could read the stranger, as if there was something that bonded them. It didn't matter, anyway, he thought. Midgar, which he calls the "city of sin" would soon fall, taking them all with it. He shouldn't attach himself emotionally to anyone, not when they would be taken away from him soon.

"Thank you. I think I understand what you're telling me." The man took his hand in his and shook it as an act of goodwill. As their gloved hands held tight, the blind man's sightless eyes widened with the electricity that ran into his veins. When

the other man left, he clutched his walking stick with both hands tightly before muttering the words: "He is one of us...he shares our creator in his veins..."

"Eila, you shouldn't have run off on him like that." The red headed girl told her companion. They were seated inside the old church of Midgar, where flowers bloomed everywhere. The other girl sat with the blossoms, picking out the weeds very carefully and slowly. "I was frightened, Janise." Eila answered defensively looking up to Janise and then back to her flower bed. "I did give him a flower, I hope that'll be enough to make him forget me." "With all his fans, he'd definitely forget you, Eila!" Janise said. The other girl looked up, a pained expression taking over her delicate features. "That was your chance to be recognised by Cloud Strife. Maybe he could get you out of this mud hole and get you a real home in Midgar."

"I'm not a fan. I didn't even know how I got there, in the first place."

Janise knelt down behind her friend and gently squeezed her shoulders. "Don't worry about it, Eila. The right guy will come soon."

"Excuse me." A voice called from the church's door. Both Janise and Eila gasped in unison as the figure of Cloud Strife entered their sanctuary. He looked around him in amazement. It has been so long since he last visited this place. Who would have known that it would continue to grow. This is where he first met her...and now, he was going to meet her again.

"Shit, you're a lucky one, Eila!" Janise whispered to her friend and skipped behind the altar, which placed her in a perfect position to eavesdrop while staying completely out of sight. "What do you want?" Eila said, her voice trembling while she unconsciously backed away from the approaching stranger.

Cloud couldn't believe what he was seeing. It was her, the same green eyes, fine features, except for her hair, which was chopped up to the shoulders. "Aeris?" he said. He couldn't help himself but call out her name once more. After so many months of trying to forget. The girl jumped back in surprise. "What?" she said, "I-I'm not who you think.."

"No...Don't you remember me? It's me, Cloud."

Eila shook her head. "I know who you are, Mr. Strife. I've been mistaken for her too, ever since I came here. But, I've been told that she's dead. She died a long time ago. My name is Eila, sir." She said, extending her hand to shake his.

He responded by taking her hand and kissing it gently. Eila would have taken another step back, if she hadn't seen the great sorrow in his eyes. His strange blue eyes that glowed softly in the dark. She gazed upon them for a long moment, while his, settling on the flower covered ground, not being able to look at her.

"I'm sorry. She must have been special...didn't you know that she passed away?"

Cloud squeezed on her hand gently and in disbelief. It wasn't easy talking about someone's death with someone who looked exactly like her. "I know. I was there when she was killed." He was unable to further mask the sorrow which he held deep in his heart and turned around, letting Eila's hand drop to her side. He bowed down his head, every memory was still as fresh as it were six months ago. In the Forgotten Capital. Her face slowly disappearing into the depths of the waters, forever.

"Then, why are you still looking for her?" Eila said, then suddenly covered her mouth with her hand upon realising the brashness of her question. Cloud, however, turned around and smiled at her honesty. Just like her...she never held her thoughts back and voiced them out. The same innocence in her making it more difficult to separate the face from reality.

"I always thought she'd come back. She brought me back from Lifestream. I saw her, but I couldn't bring her back with me."

"What's Lifestream?" Eila asked, again apologising to him for acting so insensitive. Cloud continued smiling at her, however. The girl continued asking him about Lifestream and he explained to her that it was where all the life energy of the planet goes when they die. She went on, asking about meeting departed relatives and she was pretty excited about it., while Cloud patiently explained everything to her as detailed as he could. The more she began to remind him of Aeris. The more he wanted to take her in his arms.

"What about Miss Tifa Lockheart? When are you two going to get married?"

Cloud gave her a nervous cough and looked up at the altar. "I'm not sure." Now that he's met Eila, he hoped that he may have another chance to make up for ...

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked something so personal." Eila said squatting down on the flowery ground. Then she burst out giggling, "Silly, me. I've been asking you all sorts of questions already. Me and my big mouth."

Cloud looked at her, feeling a little weak upon seeing her smile. "That's all right. Why don't you tell me more about yourself, Eila?"

Eila stretched her arms up in the air and brought them down to her lap. "There's not much about me. I lost my family and my memories when meteor struck."

"I'm sorry." He said, sitting down beside her. Eila smiled weakly and brought her knees to her chin.

"I was told that some rescuers found me somewhere in Sector 3. I was the only one who survived the collapse of an entire building. I don't remember anything before that, only my name. I was adopted by a nice woman, Miss Elmyra Gainsborough, who told me that I reminded her of her daughter who died some time ago. She promised that she would never let anything happen to me. And, I love her as a foster mother too." Eila smiled and shrugged away a wave of sorrow.

"You'll be all right with Miss Elmyra." Cloud said putting an arm across her shoulders and pulling her closer. "And, I'll always be here if you need help."

"Mr. Strife, I hope you're being so nice because I look like your friend."

"No, I'm not." Cloud felt his whole body grow warm inside. Holding the trembling girl whom he knew was just as surprised as he was. It was almost like being with her again. The magic of becoming so comfortable with each other in an instant, like they've known each other for a long time. But he had to shake his head to bring him back to reality. Aeris was dead, and this girl, Eila, was someone totally different.

"Don't worry, Mr. Strife. I know that my family is watching over me. This may sound strange..." Eila said sitting upright and turning to face Cloud. He looked at her intently as her green eyes sparkled with excitement. "But sometimes I hear the voice of my real mother, telling me to be strong. I know it's my real mother I could never forget her voice. She also gave me this materia when I was a child, it helps me talk with her when I'm alone." Eila reached into the brown leather locket which she wore around her neck and produced a glowing orb in her palm. A materia. White materia.

Cloud gasped and felt the color drain away from his face. His body began to shiver from the inside at the sight of the orb. He couldn't talk, he couldn't breathe, he just stared at it then at the girl who bore it.

Eila, startled by his reaction to the object quickly hid it away. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have shown it to you...I really don't know how to use it properly."

"No..no..." Cloud said, catching his breath and standing up. "You're doing fine." His hand went up to his forehead to wipe the sweat from his hair. Everything was starting to become stranger, not to mention more and more difficult for him to digest. First a girl who looks exactly like Aeris and acts like her appears. Now the white materia and the possibility of the girl being an Ancient as well.

"Mr. Strife, are you all right." He heard the girl speak from where he left her. He turned around to see her almost in tears. "Maybe it would be best for you if you never saw me again. I seem to bring too much painful memories of your friend. I'm very sorry."

"It's not your fault, Eila---" Cloud moved towards her when the church's wooden doors burst open, letting in the cold evening air.

"EILA!" A woman called, stepping into the church. She walked briskly in between her and Cloud and raised her lantern to the level of her face. It was Elmyra. She looked much older with all the lines on her face, her hair had started to turn white and her expression was most disturbed. "What are you doing here?" She hissed at Cloud. "Are you going to take Eila away too?"

Cloud tried to explain but no words came from his mouth.

"Mother, he's a friend of Aeris-" Eila whispered, but the other woman ignored her.

"He killed Aeris!" Elmyra pointed her finger at Cloud's chest. Her voice echoing through out the confines of the little church.

Cloud heard Eila gasp and cover her mouth in disbelief. She looked at him as if seeking an answer. "No, that's not what happened, Miss Elmyra..."

"You lied to me! You promised me that you would protect her and you let her die!" Elmyra's face was streaming with tears. He then realized that he never had a chance to visit the woman, during the six month period. He never had a chance to ask for her forgiveness. Now, she hated him, she must have sealed it in her mind that he killed Aeris.

"Now look at you!" Elmyra continued. "Aeris sacrificed her life to get you where you are today! Stay away from Eila, you hear me, SOLDIER?" the elder woman did not wait for him to answer, she grabbed Eila's wrist and in a flash were out of the church, leaving Cloud alone in silence and in the darkness.

"I can help you see her again." the red-haired girl said, stepping out of the shadows, much to Cloud's surprise. "My name is Janise, Mr. Strife. I'm Eila's friend." The girl continued walking until she was right in front of him. Cloud nodded in acknowledgment.

"That's all right. I don't think she'd want to see me again. And neither would Miss Elmyra. Thanks for your help." Cloud started for the door, sighing out deeply as he passed the flower bed.

"Give yourself a chance. Give her a chance too. I saw it in your eyes."

Cloud turned around. His Mako-eyes glowing against his silhouette.

"This Aeris you two spoke of---" Janise continued, "---you loved her, didn't you?"

He grinned, thanking the shadows that it concealed his blushing cheeks. "No comment."

Janise, herself, grinned widely. A juicy tidbit of information, directly from the man himself. "Don't worry, Mr. Strife. I'll get you and Eila together. And this won't reach the press."

Cloud guffawed out loudly, "I really don't care about the press! They don't know anything." He dug his gloved hands into the pocket of his trench coat and continued out the door. Turning back to thank Janise and telling her that they'd meet again.