



WHEN YOU SLIDE INTO THE CAR, it's empty. Stuffy. You roll down the windows, sit for a minute in the garage. It's quiet, in the car. It's like a bubble world. You're in it; it's your space. It's your space until you park, turn off the engine, and get out.

Sitting in the garage won't get you anywhere you want to be, and you want to be somewhere, but you're not in a hurry, not yet. You start the car, back out of the garage, think about where you're going.

Radio says there's an accident on Eglinton you want to avoid. You're not the only one to take that advice; traffic is slow.

Here's a thing about cars. In the summer, when the humidity is 98%, you might as well be in an oven if your dad's air-conditioning is dead. Intersections are not your friend. Windows are. Still air becomes breeze, and breeze becomes wind—but only when the wheels rotate.

Here's another thing about cars. They have history.

Some of the history is in rust and nicks and dents and the taillight that's sketchy. Some of it's in stains on the vinyl; some of it's wedged between the seat back and the bench. Some of it, though, is memory. Where you went. More important, with who. You can think about the empty passenger seat on the hot, humid drive, and you can imagine that

Emma is sitting beside you, hair trailing back in the cross-breeze, elbow on the doorframe.

You can remember the first time you kissed her, when she got out of the passenger side and walked around to where you sat, behind the wheel, looking for words. Words have never come easily to you, but Emma gets that. She doesn't make you say anything you're not ready to say.

It was dark, but her eyes looked so bright. You didn't even get out of the car; you looked up to tell her you'd see her tomorrow, and her face was inches from yours; she was leaning into the open window, into where you were. And then you didn't want to start the car at all.

And maybe you didn't.

When you're on the inside of a car in motion, you're not really thinking about physics. When you're behind the wheel, you pay attention to red lights, green lights, stop signs, walk signals. If you don't, you've got no business being behind that wheel. But there's room for Emma in that, and you think about her when you're waiting for lights to change. You want to see her. You're going to see her.

But here's the big thing about cars: They're a couple of tons of metal and extraneous bits. Add wheels, and you get momentum. It's pure physics. You get momentum even if your car isn't moving, because the car that *is* moving doesn't stop until half your car is crushed between its SUV hood and the wall of a building.

The front half.

You see the SUV.

You see the SUV a dozen times.

You see it a hundred times. You're trapped in a loop where time slows down or speeds up randomly. You can see the license plate. You can see the driver. You can see his passengers, and you can count them. He's not much older than you are. They're not much older than he is.

You can see the front grille getting closer and closer. You know the license plate number by heart; it's burned into your memory. You can

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feel the car crumple around you, can see the windshield crack and shatter. You don't feel pain. It happens too fast for pain.

And you don't feel heat. It's summer, the sun made the car seats too hot to touch. Now it's cold in the middle of July. Cold, dry, endless July. It's still a bubble world, and you know you're trapped here until you can open the door—but you can't. There's not enough of a door left. Not enough of you.

You are dead.

You come to realize you are dead. It only happened once, the dying; this stupid looped repeat has nothing to do with life. Nothing to do with you, except you're *in it*. You don't know where you are. You know that people talk about heaven—or hell—and this is hellish, except you feel no pain. Only confusion and anger and cold. You don't know how many times their car has hit your car. You can't begin to count.

But until you realized what it *meant*, you had to live it over and over again.

Now you know.

Now you can leave the car. You don't even try to open the door. You just slide to the left of the steering wheel, and you pass through the car door. You're out.

Your car still gets crushed against the wall, but this time, you're not in it.

Your ears are ringing. You can see the street. You can see pedestrians, freezing, turning; you can hear the sound of a woman screaming. That grabs you, makes your blood freeze, but you don't recognize the voice, and you can move again.

The thing is, you can't see very well. You know people are here, but they're blurs. You shout. They can't hear you. You stand in front of them. You jump up and down like a four year old, but nothing changes. They're still blurry. Some of them move. But they move past you, around you, as if you're not there. As if they're not here.

There's no sun here. No heat.

You spend an hour screaming. You can scream forever. No one hears you. You jump up and down, you try to throw things. You go nuts. You haven't gone nuts like this since you were five. There's no reaction. No one sees you. You can barely see them, they're so fuzzy. Its like you died and you suddenly need glasses. Or worse.

You need to get out of here. You need to leave.

You can go home. That's what you should have done. You should have gone home. You didn't even think of home. Why?

Thinking of home. Mom. Dad. Gotrek the hamster. You'll go home.

You don't recognize the street you're on. You don't recognize the intersection. You *know* how to get home. You know this part of the city. But . . . you don't. The streets are too long. The buildings are the wrong shape, the wrong size. You can see them more clearly than the blurred smudges that are people—but they make no sense.

You've had this nightmare before. You leave school, exit by the front doors, and stare out at a totally unfamiliar neighborhood. It's as if the entire building had been teleported to some other borough while you were in history or math. In those nightmares, you end up wandering the streets, lost, until you wake up.

But you can't wake up here. You've never been lost like this.

When it gets to be too much, you sit down. Just sit, in the middle of the road, staring at nothing, wondering where the hell the sun is. Wondering why there's no blood on your clothing, no dirt on your hands. Wondering why you're even here at all. This isn't how death is supposed to work.

You have no sense of time, because time makes no difference. You have no idea how long you've been sitting on your butt in the middle of this street. You are cold, you are silent. You don't scream anymore. You don't move. The world moves around you, leaving you behind. You miss

Emma. You miss Emma, but you're terrified because you don't remember what she *looked like*. You don't remember sunlight.

So when sunlight comes, it's almost too much. You curl in on yourself, because it's too much. But it gets stronger and brighter. It's not going away. You stand, you turn, you face it; it is so bright and so warm and so close you can almost touch it. And you can *hear* it. If you can reach it, you know you will never be cold again.

You won't be lost, either. Maybe this is why you couldn't find home when you tried: you can't live there anymore. You can walk toward the sun. You don't need the road. You can run, and you do.

Scattered throughout your childhood are memories: *Cover your eyes. Don't stare at the sun. Do you want to go blind?* Different voices, different ages, same advice.

So you know this isn't the sun because there's no pain. Your eyes don't water. Your vision doesn't blur. The light doesn't become a spread of painful brilliance; it takes shape and form. And you have no words for the form. It's not round; it's not square; it's not flat. It's not person-shaped, but . . . it's alive. You are certain it's alive. It's alive the way home is alive: it promises warmth. It promises what you need—what you've always needed: quiet space, and company in which you can be entirely yourself.

No defenses. No shields. No prescriptive behavior. No need to define yourself by other people's desires, by other people's approval or disapproval. No need to talk if you've got nothing to say, no need to shut up if you've got too much. People are waiting there, on the other side: people who see you and know you and accept everything about you until the fear of the things they can't accept becomes meaningless.

You can't see that—how could you? You're not even certain what it would look like, if you were still alive. You've seen glimpses of it in Emma. In your parents. In moments of time. But you can't put a shape to it, so what you see is diffuse. But it's solid, and you understand that you only have to reach it, touch it, and you will be fully, finally, home.

But as you approach, you hear wailing. It is the most distinct sound you've heard since your car collapsed around you.

You can hear it as if it's your voice; it's inside you, inside your mouth and your ears. Your hands freeze with the strength of it because it is loss. It is loss; it is death.

You thought you were dead. No, you *knew* you were dead. But until this moment, you didn't understand what that meant.

The light is where you belong. It's where you want to be—it's the only thing you want. But you can't reach it. No one—you understand this as the screams take shape and form—can.

You can see shadows moving in the light. You know what they're doing: They're trying to touch it. They're trying to reach it. You want to do the same. You don't. You don't because you know you'll be up there screaming with the rest of them if you try and you fail.

And it's true. You would be. You'd scream for years, and you'd feel every passing second as if it were a century. It's what the dead do. This is their birth, their rebirth; this is when they come, at last, to accept their eternity. Like any birth, it's painful and of interest only to parents—but, of course, yours aren't here.

If they knew what awaited the dead, would they have children at all? It's a question that no one has asked. The living who can speak to the dead don't care, after all. The dead are dead, and they serve at the whim of their Queen, when they are at last presented to her.

Rare indeed is the dead boy who does not need to journey to the city to greet her. How many times do you think she has left her palace within that city and walked the paths the living walk to find the newborn dead?

Ah, but you *are* newborn. You don't know. You have no idea of the honor done you.

You know only that there is a light that reaches for you, a light you can touch. In form and shape it is familiar: human, only slightly taller

than yourself. But it casts no shadow, and it offers warmth—the only warmth you’ve found in the land of the dead.

Is she beautiful? To you, yes; you are dead. You see what lies beneath the surface of life, and you see it purely. No age, no experience, no prior vision blurs your sight. You would kneel, if kneeling made sense; you are immobile, instead, staring; you are afraid to blink, because in blinking, you might lose sight of her. Thus do all of the dead who understand their state stand before her: transfixed. Helpless.

Here. Take the Queen’s hand, and she will lead you to the only real home you will have for the rest of eternity.



Some people cry in public. They’re champion criers. They cry when they see a familiar name in a phone book, or when they’re signing year-books, or when they’re talking about anything more emotional than grocery shopping. It’s as though all of life is a big box of tissues.

Nathan’s mother has never been one of them. Nathan’s never *seen* her cry. Maybe her mother did, when she was a kid; if she did, she never shared. Nathan learned about crying from his mother, but it took him longer.

Maybe that’s why he fell for Emma. Emma was a total failure as a crier. She wasn’t like his mother in any other way, except gender. Which is also why he liked her.

But she and his mother had this in common. It wasn’t that they didn’t *want* to cry; it was that they chose not to and made it stick. No tears in public. Nathan never understood why.

“If it’s the way you feel, why hold back?”

“If I feel like punching Nick in the face,” Emma replied, “I don’t see you encouraging me.”

“Your fists, his face. Not practical. Get a tire iron.” He shrugged. “It wouldn’t bother me if you cry.”

“It would bother *me*.”

“Why?”

She kissed him instead of answering, which was a cheat. But it was a *good* cheat.

He knows the answer now. He knows, and he should have known it then, would have, if he'd known how to think about tears the same way he thinks about circuit boards. He is standing in his house. He is standing in his room. His room hasn't changed. Transistors, wires, solder, tweezers, in neat boxes, like a wall at the back of his desk. His clamps, his light, his computer. It's been three months.

He knows because the date is marked on his calendar, the calendar that hangs from the corkboard to one side of his bedroom window. Someone's been marking the date. He watches as his mother puts a neat, red line through a square box in October. She doesn't need it; her calendars exist in the ether.

But she puts the pen on his desk, draws his curtains shut. Stands behind the closed curtains, her shoulders curving toward the floor, her arms bending at the elbows until she wraps them around her upper body. They're shaking. No, she's shaking. Her head drops. Nathan stands frozen for one immobile moment, and then he reaches out for her back in a kind of terrified wonder.

She cries.

God, she cries. It's a terrifying, horrible sound. No quiet tears; it's like someone is trying to rip the insides out of her, but they've got nowhere to put them. It's paralyzing; it's worse than walking into his parents' bedroom when the bed was heavily occupied. He feels like he's violating her, just standing here in his own room.

And then the guilt and the paralysis break, and he's reaching out for her, he's trying, *trying*, to put his arms around her—from the back, he's not an idiot—but he *can't*. He can't. They don't *go* anywhere. He calls her. He shouts. He shouts louder than he's ever shouted—and she hears nothing, and her knees give, and her forehead is pressed against his goddamn desk, and it is the worst thing he's ever seen.

Worse than an SUV driving toward the side of his car.

He can't *do* anything. He knows, watching her back, that no one can. She's here, in his room; his door is closed. She *isn't* crying in public. There's no public here, because no one lives in his room anymore. And he knows she won't cry like this outside of her own house. Because it would have to practically kill anyone who could see her and hear her; a sound like this could burn itself into your brain, and the only way you could avoid it would be to plug your ears and run screaming.

You couldn't help her. You couldn't do anything to make the pain go away—and you'd *want* to. You'd be immobile, your own helplessness and uselessness made clear. You couldn't escape it unless you avoided her, avoided any hint of her grief, and let what you witnessed fade.

She doesn't cry in public because of what it would do to everyone *else*. It's not because of what other people will think of her—that's what he assumed, once—it's because of what they'll think of *themselves*, afterward. He knows because he *hates* himself, now. He hates himself for dying. He hates the people who killed him—first time, for everything—and he hates that he can't *touch* her, can't *reach* her, because if he could, it would stop. Or change.

This is the first time Nathan's been home since he died. He wants to flee. He almost does. But he waits it out, because in the end, he has to know that it does stop. If he leaves now, he won't believe it; every other memory of home will be buried beneath this one.

It does stop.

It stops. The rawness of grief peters into an echo of itself—but the echo speaks of pain as if pain were an iceberg, a colossal structure beneath surfaces that hide nothing if you know how to look. When it's once again submerged, she stands, slowly and awkwardly, as if she's spent months living on her knees, her forehead propped up against the edge of his desk.

Her father died when Nathan was a child. He remembers it clearly,

now. He remembers the phone call; he remembers her eight-hour absence. He remembers arguing with his dad about bedtime because he wanted his mother. His mother did not come home that night. When she returned the next day, she told him his grandfather had died. He wanted to know why, because death made no sense. Death had no impact.

He asked her if his father was going to die.

“No,” she told him softly. “Not for a long time. But, Nathan, everyone eventually dies.”

She didn’t cry. He didn’t cry because she didn’t. He asked her if she would miss Grandpa, and she said, “Yes, very much.”

She carried him—at five years of age—for most of her father’s funeral. He thought it strange, because babies were carried and he was a Big Boy. But she still didn’t cry. For the whole, long day, she didn’t cry.

People came up to talk to her. He recognized some of them; some were strangers—but not to his mother. They told her they were sorry (But why? They hadn’t killed him). They told her he’d had a good life. A full life. But some of them told her stories about her father, instead, and they made her smile.

No one tells his mother stories in this room. He knows. No one can tell her that her son had a full life, or a good life. There is nothing to make her smile, here. Seeing her gaunt face in the evening light, he wonders if she’s smiled at all in the last three months. He thinks she must have—but he can’t make himself believe it.

She straightens her clothing. No one can see it, but she straightens it anyway. Then she turns, walks to the door, opens it, and turns again. Into the darkness that contains her son, she says, “Good night, Nathan.”

She closes the door.

Nathan has learned a few things about being dead.

He’s learned, for instance, that the dead don’t eat. They can’t. They don’t feel hunger, and physical pain is beyond them. They never get

thirsty. Snow, hail, storms, and blistering desert heat don't bother them. He assumes that bullets won't hurt; knives don't.

He's learned that the dead have their own version of sleep. It doesn't involve beds, and it doesn't hold dreams—or nightmares. It's a kind of darkness and stillness in which even memories fade. It's the ultimate silence. The silence of the grave.

It's not boring, this sleep. It's not confining. It's . . . nothing. Just nothing. But sometimes, nothing is good; right now, he's not keen on the alternative.

Because tonight, he's learned that the dead are useless. They can't touch anything. They can't change anything. In any way that counts, they've got no voice. They can speak—but no one can hear them.

Not no one.

I want you to go back to your home, Nathan.

“Why?”

Because there, you will find an opportunity that most of the dead will never have.

He didn't ask what the opportunity was. Even the first question had been a risk. The Queen of the Dead doesn't like to be questioned.

Go home. I will give you no other orders yet. Just go home. Watch your family, watch your friends. Her smile was winter, her eyes sky blue. They were wide, and looked, in the radiance of her face, like windows. Beyond those windows: clouds, lightning, destruction. As if she were the only thing that kept the storm out.



Promise me, when we're old, you'll let me die first.

What kind of a promise is that, Em?

The only one I want. I don't want you to die first. I don't want to be left behind again. Promise?

* * *

Emma's house is half lit. Her mother's office lights are on on the second floor, but her mother's probably working—as she usually does—in the dining room. Emma's bedroom is dark. Nathan stands between two streetlights, looking up. He wants to see Emma. He wants more than that, but he'll settle for what death has left him.

The moon is high. The night sky is a different shade of gray. Nathan slides his hands into his pockets and waits. He's got nothing but time, and he hates it. But he hates it less when the front door of the Hall house opens and Emma steps out, surrounded by Petal, the rottweiler who refuses to stand still. Nathan can't take his eyes off her; for one long moment, she is the only thing he sees.

He watches her lead Petal toward the sidewalk in silence.

Nathan joins her, stopping when she stops and moving when she moves. He can pretend, for a few minutes, that he's still alive, that this is a normal night, a normal walk. He doesn't have to fill the silence. Silence has never bothered Emma.

There's a difference between being alone and feeling lonely. Emma is alone. Nathan? Doesn't want to think about it.

The breeze lifts Emma's hair. Petal's name leaves her lips. She keeps walking. Nathan watches her go. He wants to talk to her. He doesn't try.

The problem with death—this version of death—is that it feels pretty much like life, at least to the dead people. He's not dragging bits and pieces of corpse around, because he's pretty sure that's what he'd be doing if the manner of death defined him. He's not spouting blood. He's not a poltergeist.

He's Nathan. She's Emma. They haven't seen each other for three months, and the last thing Nathan did was break a vow. He left her. He left her behind.

It was a stupid promise. He knew it was stupid before he made it. But she was there, lying in his arms, curled against his chest, her hair tangled, her eyes wide. She wasn't joking. She wouldn't *let* him make a joke of it.

He promised. He promised because to him it was just a different way of saying *I love you*.

And he does. He meant every word of it. She knows—she *must* know—that dying wasn't his choice. It wasn't his fault. She must know that he'd be out here by her side, walking her half-deaf dog, if it had been up to him.

He shakes himself, hurries to catch up with her, and stops when he finally realizes where she's going. The cemetery.

Emma. Oh, Em.

Nathan has no desire to see his grave. He'd had no idea, until he followed Emma from her house, where he'd been buried. But he knows now, and he almost leaves. He doesn't want to see Emma cry. He doesn't want to see her go to pieces the way his mother did. He can't comfort her. He's got nothing to offer her at all.

But when she slips behind the fence, he walks through it. He keeps her in sight. The night sky is clear. If there's a breeze, he can't feel it; he can feel the cold, but it's always cold now. He doesn't read the headstones. He doesn't read the markers.

To his surprise, Emma does. She reads them. She lingers. But she doesn't stop; she hasn't reached the gravestone with his name on it. Petal's tongue is hanging out of his mouth as he trots back and forth between the markers. He's happy. Emma is silent. She's not in a hurry.

Emma finds a standing wreath of white flowers before one marker. She kneels in front of it, picks up a petal, blows it off her fingers. Tucking her legs to the right, she sits; Petal flops down to her left and drops his head in her lap. She scratches behind his ears.

She doesn't speak. She doesn't weep.

Nathan listens to the ever-present sounds of passing cars. Mount Pleasant isn't a small cemetery, but it's in the middle of a city. He looks up, as Emma does, to see the stars. To see the moon in the night sky. To know that they're seeing the same thing.

He's never minded waiting for Emma. He could wait for her forever. He doesn't interrupt her. He doesn't talk. He knows she'll come to him in her own time.

She picks up Petal's leash as she unfolds, straightening her hair and brushing petals off her legs. Her head is bent as she walks back the way she came; Nathan knows, because he's standing there.

But she lifts her chin, and as she does, she slows. He can see her eyes so clearly, even though it's dark. He can see their shape, the way they round; he can see the edge of her lashes. Her mouth opens slightly as she approaches. Her eyes are brown. They've always been brown. But they're also luminescent. It's not an exaggeration: They glow; they're alight. He's seen light like that twice since his death. Only twice.

And he knows, then, that Emma can see him. He knows how to hide from the sight of anyone but the Queen of the Dead; if she's looking for someone among the dead, she'll find them. But he can make himself so still, so quiet, that no one else who can see the dead will see him.

It never occurred to him to worry that Emma might see him. It doesn't occur to him now. If he's afraid at all, it's of the sharp edge of ridiculous hope. He has never loved anyone the way he loves Emma. When she lifts a hand, palm up, it's the most natural thing in the world to reach out to take it.

It's the most natural thing in the world, but he's dead, and she's not. She can *see* him. He can see her. Touching doesn't happen, for the dead; it's too much to hope for.

He feels the shock of her palm beneath his. His hand doesn't pass through hers. Before he can withdraw, she closes her fingers around his, tightens them. And, god, she is so *warm*.

"Hello, Nathan," she whispers.

"Hello, Em."

There's so much he wants to say to her. So much he wants to explain. There's so much groveling to do, for one. Maybe he'll start with that.

But the words stick on the right side of his mouth, and as he stares into her eyes, his gaze drifting to her parted lips, they desert him.

He hugs her, instead. He reaches out, pulls her into his arms, tucks her head beneath his chin. He's dead. He's dead, but he can *feel* her. She smells of shampoo and soap.

He wants to apologize. He doesn't. He holds her instead, amazed at the warmth of her. But he always was. They stand together in the darkness until Emma begins to shudder. He thinks she's crying, but he pulls back to catch her chin, to pull her face up.

She's not crying. Oh, she *is*, but she's not weeping. She's shivering. She's shivering as if it's winter and she's caught outside without a coat.

He lets go of her. He feels the loss of her touch as a profound physical pain. He feels cold again, but this time, the cold is harsh. Isolating. And he understands, as her eyes widen, as her brows gather in the way they do when something confuses her, that the warmth he feels—he's stealing it.

Emma . . . Emma is like the Queen of the Dead. Like her, and nothing at all alike.

I want you there, Nathan. You have an opportunity that very, very few of the dead will ever have.

Nathan is afraid. Three months ago, Emma was his quiet space—one of the few in which he could be entirely himself. She knew him. He knew her. He thought he knew her. But the Emma Hall he fell in love with couldn't touch the dead.

Emma is a Necromancer.

Petal whines, and Emma glances at the wet nose he's shoved into her palm. She feeds him a Milk-Bone, but she tries not to take her eyes off Nathan, as if she's afraid he'll just disappear. Nathan knows the look.

Emma is a Necromancer with a whiny, half-deaf dog. She goes to school. She lives alone with her mother. She visits her dead boyfriend's grave. She lives *here*, among the living. And her eyes are still round, and she's still shivering. And grieving.

“You promised,” she whispers. She’s not smiling. There’s no humor in her voice.

“This is the best I can do.” He almost hugs her again, but balls his hands into fists instead.

Her face is wet with tears, shining with them. He always hated making her cry. Being dead hasn’t changed that. He can’t stand so close to her without touching her. He wants to kiss her. He wants to cup her face in his hands.

He heads toward his grave instead. The wreath of standing flowers is new. The petals that adorn Emma’s legs—the few she hasn’t managed to brush off—are scattered across the ground in ones and twos, but the flowers themselves haven’t wilted or dried. He recognizes his mother’s hand in this. His mother. He closes his eyes.

When he opens them, Emma is standing by his side. She’s still shivering.

“Does my mother come here often?”

“Often enough. I don’t see her. I think she must come after work.”

“You?”

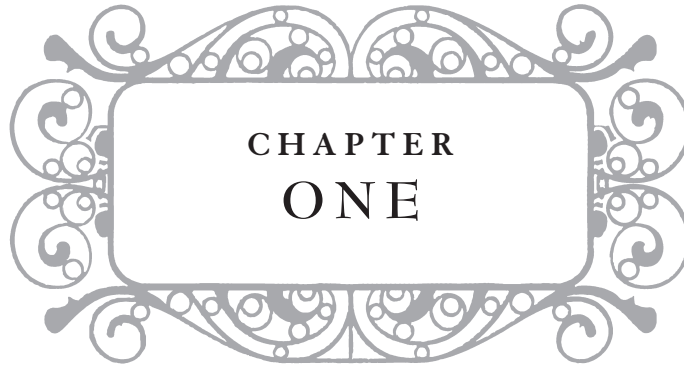
“It’s quiet, here. Good quiet.”

Which isn’t an answer. He doesn’t press. It’s never been hard to talk to Emma before. It’s hard now. What can you say to your girlfriend when you’re dead? Apologies won’t cut it, but beyond apologies, there’s not a lot he can offer.

She holds out a hand. Nathan keeps both of his in his pockets. When she says his name, he shakes his head. “I’m making you cold. I’ll walk you home.”

“I’m not sure I want to be home right now.”

Home, for Nathan, is where Emma is. God, he wants to touch her. He finds it hard to look at her; she’s always been beautiful, to him. Now, she’s luminescent.



CHAPTER
ONE

“GET YOUR FEET off my dashboard.”

Chase, slumped in the passenger seat, grinned. “What? My boots are clean.” The skin around his left eye had passed from angry purple to a sallow yellow; it clashed with his hair. In Eric’s opinion, everything did. “And I’m wearing a seat belt.”

“Seat belts,” Eric said, sliding behind the wheel and adjusting its height, “are supposed to be worn across the hips, not the ribs. What did the old man say?”

“Long version or short version?”

“Shorter the better.”

“Tell me about it.” Chase’s grin sharpened. “But I had to sit through the long version. No reason why you should get off easy.”

“I’m driving. Don’t make me fall asleep at the wheel.”

“Couldn’t make your driving any worse.”

Eric pushed a CD into the player.

“You bastard.” Chase was flexible enough to remove his feet from the dash and hit eject before more than two bars had played. He wasn’t fond of perky singers. Gender didn’t matter. Eric ignored them, but Chase

couldn't. They were fingernails-against-blackboard painful to him. "You know I'd rather you stabbed me. In the ear, even."

"I'm driving or I'd seriously consider it. What did the old man want?"

"We've got a problem."

Eric reached for the CD again. Chase grabbed it and threw it out the window, barely pausing to open the window first.

"We've got three Necromancers, just off the plane. Old man thinks there's a fourth." Chase appeared to consider throwing out the rest of Eric's collection as well.

"Thinks?"

"Yeah. He can't pin him down."

Eric grimaced. "Why does he think there's a fourth?"

"Margaret insists."

Shit. "She recognized him."

"I wasn't the one questioning her. The old man was in a foul mood. You want to tell him he's wrong?" Chase fished in his pocket and pulled out a phone. Eric glanced at it.

"Driving, remember? When did they get in?"

"Yesterday. We had two addresses; neither was good."

"They take a cab?"

"Yeah. They were careful," he added.

Eric swore.

"He also reminds you we've got two midterms tomorrow."

"Midterms? Are you kidding me?"

Chase dangled the phone under Eric's nose again.

"This is getting unreal."

"Tell me about it. I've got the same midterms, and apparently my marks are crap compared to yours." Chase slid his feet back up on the dashboard. "We've got two addresses. Margaret supplied them. We're supposed to head over to the first one tonight." He frowned as he glanced out the window. "Is that Allison?"

Eric glanced at the side mirror. Allison Simner, in a puffy down coat, head bent into the wind, walked through the crisp November air beside another classmate. “And Michael.”

“Stop the car and let me out.”

“Chase—”

“What? She took notes.”

Allison walked Michael home after school, as she had done for most of their mutual school life. It wasn't that he needed the company or the implied protection of another person, although he might once have. Now it was just part of their daily routine, and it was almost peaceful.

But Emma usually joined them. For the past two days, she hadn't. She'd explained her absences to Michael, and Michael—given his natural difficulty recognizing subtle social cues, such as white lies—accepted her yearbook committee excuses at face value. Allison tried. She wasn't her mother; worry was not her middle name, maiden name, or, on bad days, her entire name.

But her mother's best friend hadn't developed the ability to see the dead. She hadn't been targeted by Necromancers. She hadn't almost died in a fire that no one else could see, let alone feel, in an attempt to save a child who was *already* dead.

Allison's best friend, Emma, had. And it wasn't just that Emma could see the dead; if Emma touched ghosts, everyone else could see them, too. They'd learned that the hard way, at the hospital: Emma had grabbed onto her father's ghost because she didn't want him to leave.

And who could blame her? She hadn't seen her dad for the eight years he'd been dead.

But Allison had seen him, that night in the hospital. Michael had seen him. Emma's mother had seen him. And Eric. Eric had seen him as well. It had been disturbing, but—being able to see your dad, when he wasn't dangerous and he didn't look much different from the last time you'd seen him—wasn't inherently scary.

All the stuff that had happened after was.

Well, not Andrew Copsis, the child who had died in the fire. And not his grieving mother, because if Emma wanted or needed to see her dad, Maria Copsis was a hundred times worse: She *needed* to see her son. Emma was willing to walk through fire—literal fire—to help that happen, and Allison got that. She understood why.

What she didn't understand were the parts that happened directly afterward: the Necromancers. Two men and one woman, armed, had stopped their car outside of the house in which the child had died, gotten out of it, and pulled guns. Allison had been carrying Maria Copsis' youngest child, a son. They had pointed the gun at the *baby*, and they had dragged Allison to Andrew Copsis' burned-out house—in order to threaten Emma.

To threaten Emma, and to—to kill Eric and Chase.

Eric and Chase had survived. The Necromancers hadn't. But it had been so close. And the death of the Necromancer in charge, Merrick Longland, if he hadn't lied about his name, had been anything but fast. Chase had been covered in blood before he'd stopped stabbing and slashing at him.

Allison didn't watch horror movies. She found the violence in most of them too intense. She knew people who loved them, and she'd never understood why. Now she felt as if she were living on the edge of one. Predictably, she hated it.

She hated it because Michael was trapped on the same edge, and Emma was at the center of it. Allison could step away. She could turn her back. She could hide under the figurative bed with her hands over her ears. But if she did that, she was walking away from Emma. And Emma was no better prepared to be the star of a horror movie than either of her friends. Allison's fear was intense, and it made her feel so guilty.

Michael didn't know how to walk away. Michael didn't talk about the Necromancers—but Emma had asked him not to. Allison didn't

talk about them because to talk about them, she had to think about them.

Then again, when something wasn't actively distracting her, it was hard not to think about them.

There had been no new Necromancers, but Chase had made it clear that it was only a matter of time—and at that, not a lot of it.

Allison usually walked Michael to his door, where she would wait to say hello to his mother. As a much younger child, she would then give his mother a report of the school day; as a teenager she'd continued more or less out of habit. She filled Mrs. Howe in on the positive or outstanding things, upcoming field trips, or perturbations in Michael's schedule.

Allison had avoided that at-the-door conversation for the past couple of weeks.

Michael's mother, being a mother, was worried about her son, because she knew there was something wrong. Michael didn't lie, so he'd told her he couldn't talk about it. His mother was not an idiot; she was pretty certain that Emma and Allison had some idea what was going on.

Allison wasn't Michael; she could—and on rare occasions did—lie. But she'd never been great at it, and it left her feeling horrible about herself for weeks afterward. She did the next best thing—she avoided the questions.

It was only as she was scurrying away from Michael's driveway, like a criminal, that Chase caught up with her.

Chase was almost a head taller than Allison.

Allison had never been tall. Emma was taller and more slender, with straight hair that fell most of the way down her back. On bad days, Allison envied her and wondered what Emma saw in her. Emma had a lot of friends.

Stephen Sawoski, in eighth grade, had answered the question. "Pretty

girls don't want to have pretty friends—they hang around the plain girls 'cause it makes them look better." He'd sneered as he said it. Allison could still see his expression if she tried. She didn't really avoid it, either, because of what happened next: Emma had taken her milk, in its wet, box container, opened it, and then poured half of it into Stephen's lap.

The expression on his face then was *also* one Allison never forgot.

"If I wanted to hang around ugly people just to look better," Emma had said to Stephen, while Allison gaped like a fish out of water, "I'd spend more time with you. Come on, Allison, Michael's waiting."

Allison was plain. It was true. Emma offered, every so often, to help her change that if she wanted to do the work. But she didn't. No amount of work would make her look like Emma. Stephen was obnoxious, but he wasn't wrong—about the being plain. He was wrong about the friendship. She held on to that.

She glanced up at Chase.

He smiled. "You took notes," he said.

"I did. I can email them, if you want them. Biology?"

"And English. You're heading home?"

She nodded. "I have a pretty boring life."

"Not recently."

"I *like* having a pretty boring life." She started to walk. Chase shortened his stride and fell in beside her, hands in his jacket's pockets. Fire had singed his shock of red hair, and he'd been forced to cut it—but even short, it was the first thing anyone noticed.

"You really do," he replied. "Look—things are going to get crazy."

She didn't miss a step. "When?"

"Does it matter? You're not cut out for this shit. You, Michael, the rest of your friends—you've never lived in a war zone."

She had a pretty good idea of where this conversation was going: straight downhill. Allison didn't like confrontation. She didn't like to argue. Usually, there wasn't a lot to argue about. "None of us are cut out for this."

“Eric and I are.”

Allison nodded agreement and stared at the sidewalk. She was three blocks away from home.

“Emma’s part of this.”

She shoved her hands into her pockets, which weren’t really built for it, and lowered her chin. Chase had saved her life. She had to remember that Chase had saved her life. He’d almost died doing it. What had she done? Nothing. Nothing useful. “Emma didn’t choose to be part of it.”

“Choice doesn’t matter. She has none.”

Allison started to walk more quickly, not that there was any chance of leaving Chase behind if he was determined. He was.

“But you do. You’ve got the choice that I didn’t have.”

She stopped walking, her hands sliding out of her pockets to her hips. “And I am *making* a choice.”

It was clear, from his expression, that he thought it was the wrong choice. “You think you can just duck your collective heads and the bullets will miss.”

“No, I don’t. But I know Emma.”

“Really? I haven’t noticed she’s spending a lot of time with you recently.”

That stung. “I’m her friend, not her cage.”

“You don’t understand how Necromancers work. You don’t understand what they *become*.”

“I understand Emma. Emma is *not* going to become a monster just because you’re afraid of her!” Straight downhill. Like an avalanche.

“Why don’t you ask her what she’s been doing the past couple of days?”

“Because I trust her. If she wants to tell me, she’ll tell me.”

“And will she tell Michael?”

She could see him switching lanes. She let him do it, too; she was angry.

“If you’re capable of making the decision to put your life on the line, is he? Are you willing to let him make the same choice?”

“Michael. Is. Not. A. Child.”

“That’s why he needs an entire clique of babysitters?”

“If Michael hadn’t been at Amy’s party, Emma would already be lost. In case you’ve forgotten, Merrick Longland had us *all* ensnared. None of your party tricks saved either you or Eric!”

“. . . Party tricks?”

“Training. Whatever. Michael wasn’t affected by Longland—but *you* were. And Michael knows it. We all know it. I get that you don’t understand how we work—but if you try to break it, I’ll—”

He folded his arms across his chest and stared pointedly down at her. “Yes? We’re finally getting to the good part. You’ll what? Scream at me? Cry?”

She wanted to punch him. Sadly, she’d never punched anyone in her life; if she’d thought she had any chance of landing one, she might have tried.

Chase saved your life. He almost died saving your life. “Probably both.”

He looked down at the top of her head, and then he laughed. It was almost rueful. “You understand that I don’t want to see you hurt, right?”

She did. But she also understood that there were all kinds of hurt in life, and he didn’t count the one that she was most afraid of: losing her best friend. “I have to go. My mom’s staring out the window.”

“And she’s not going to be happy that her daughter’s shouting at a stranger?”

“No.” She took three deep breaths, because deep breaths always helped. Chase made her so angry. She’d never met anyone who could make her so angry. Stephen Sawoski had made her feel ugly, invisible, unwanted—but never angry. Not like this. He’d made Emma angry though.

And maybe that made sense. Allison wasn’t much good at sticking up for herself. She never had been, not when it counted. But she could stick up for her friends. She trusted her instincts where they were concerned.

“Your mom just disappeared,” he told her.

Allison exhaled. “You might as well come to the house,” she told him. “Because if you don’t, she’s going to come out.”

“I really don’t need to meet your mother.”

“You should have thought of that before you followed me home.”

Chase could be friendly. He could be charming. Allison had seen both. He had a genuine smile, a sense of humor, and a way of turning things on their side that mostly suggested a younger brother. Someone else’s younger brother. Allison, however, was full up on younger brothers, given Tobias, the one she had. She searched the windows of the upper floor with sudden anxiety. If he embarrassed her in front of Chase, she’d have to strangle him. No Toby was visible from the street.

Allison headed toward her front door. Chase lagged behind, losing about three inches of height at the top of the driveway. She looked back at him. “Don’t even think of running.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“You smile when you’re facing armed Necromancers. You charge *into* green fire. Compared to that, meeting my mother is terrifying?”

“I don’t meet a lot of mothers.”

“No, you don’t, do you? Mine doesn’t bite. Mostly. I’d suggest you drop any discussion of Emma, killing Emma, or abandoning her, though. I come by my temper honestly.” She put her hand on the door-knob and added, “She also approves of Michael.”

“Everyone does.”

“Not really. But Michael’s a kind of litmus test. People who see Michael as a person are generally people you can trust. People who dismiss him or treat him like he’s a two year old, not so much.”

“I don’t follow.”

“People who treat him as if he’s a child see what they want to see; they don’t see what’s there.”

“Me being one of those people.”

“Not sure yet. You might have been trying to be manipulative.”

“And that’s not worse?”

“It’s bad—but it’s not worse. Not really. I know how to handle guilt.”

Chase laughed as she opened the door. Her mother was buttoning up her coat. “Mom, I’d like you to meet Chase Loern. Chase, this is my mother.”

Her mother held out a hand; Chase shook it. “I’m one of the new kids,” he told her. “Allison finds me when I get lost between classes. I’d have built an impressive late-slip collection without her.”

“He’s lying,” her daughter added cheerfully.

“Lying? Me?” The slow smile that spread across his face acknowledged a hit with a wry acceptance and something that felt like approval.

Allison’s mother took her coat off as Allison removed her scarf. “Chase is behind on assignments,” she said. “And he hasn’t figured out how to use the electronic blackboard—yet.” The last word was said in a dire tone. She took off her coat as well, reaching for a hanger to hand to Chase. He stared at it.

“You’re not wearing that jacket in here—my mother will turn the heat up twenty degrees if she thinks you’re cold, and the rest of us will melt.”

He slid out of his jacket. Allison noticed that his eyes were sharper; he surveyed the hall—and the stairs and doors that led from it—as if his eyes were video equipment and he was doing a fancy perimeter sweep. She should have found it funny. Or annoying. She didn’t.

She wondered, instead, what Chase’s life was actually like. She didn’t ask; her mother had headed directly for the kitchen, and Allison was about to drag Chase up to her room, which was the one room in the house in which her younger brother was unlikely to cause *too* much embarrassment.

Chase followed, looking at the staircase the same way he looked at the rest of the house: as if it were alien, and hostile at that. She didn’t

know a lot about Chase. Except that he made her angry and that he'd saved her life.

She headed straight for her desk when she reached her room and counted her pens. "I don't really need a brother, do I?"

Chase laughed. "What did he do?"

"He seems to think that he's working in an office, and stealing office supplies is a perk. This," she added, pointing to the penholder, "would be the office supply depot."

"He's younger?"

"Yes, or he'd already be dead."

"None of you seem to use pens much."

"It's the principle."

He laughed again. He had an easy, friendly laugh. Hearing it, it was hard to imagine that he'd killed people. But she didn't have to imagine it; she'd seen it. She took her tablet out of her backpack and plunked it on the desk, plugging it in before she opened it. "Biology and English. You'll actually get these? I notice you didn't bring your computer with you."

"I'll get them. I don't have much study time in the queue tonight." And there it was again: the edge, the harshness.

Wouldn't you be harsh? If your entire life was devoted to killing mass murderers, wouldn't you? But . . . he'd come to kill Emma, and Emma was not a mass murderer. And maybe he was staying to find proof that she would never become one. That was the optimistic way of looking at it. The pragmatic version was different: He was staying until she did, at which point he'd kill her.

Which meant he'd be here a long time.

She turned around; Chase was standing in the middle of the room, staring at the walls. The walls in Allison's room were not bare. She had posters, pictures, and one antique map, which had been a gift from her much-loved grandfather, covering everything that wasn't blocked by furniture. Even her closet door was covered; the one mirror in the room was on the inside of the door.

“This is a scary room,” Chase finally said, staring pointedly at the *Hunger Games* poster to one side of the curtained window.

“Scary how?”

“If that bookshelf falls over, it’ll kill you in your sleep. Who thought it was a good idea to bolt it into the wall *above* your head?”

She raised a hand.

“Have you read all of these?”

“Yes. Multiple times. I don’t keep everything, just the ones I know I’ll reread. My brother knows better than to touch my books,” she added, as he reached for the shelf.

He grinned. “I’m not your brother.”

“No. You’re a guest, so you get to keep your hand.” She smiled as she said it, but he wasn’t looking at her; he was looking at *Beauty*.

“So . . . you come home, you do homework, and you read a lot.”

“Mostly.” Her phone rang. She fished it—quickly—out of her bag because she recognized the ringtone. It was Emma. Or someone who had stolen Emma’s phone.

“Hey, Ally—are you doing anything after dinner?”

“Studying a bit.”

“Want to come walk a deaf dog with me?”

“Not a random deaf dog, no—but I’ll come for Petal.”

Emma laughed. “He’s the only one I have. Is something wrong?”

“No. Nothing. Want to come pick me up or should I meet you at your place?”

“I’ll head over there. Mom’s not home, so I’ll make something to eat here.” She paused. “I have something to tell you. It’s not a bad thing,” she added quickly, because she knew Allison came from a long line of champion worriers. Petal started to bark in the background. When Petal set up barking, it never stayed in the background.

“I’ll talk to you later,” Allison said.

Chase was apparently still perusing her bookshelves, but Allison wasn't fooled. "That was Emma?"

She almost didn't answer. *Chase saved your life, but he also probably saved Emma's.* "Yes. She wants to talk—later. You've met her dog."

Chase nodded, putting the book back on the shelf and withdrawing.

"We're going to walk him. Look, can you sit down? I don't care where. It's hard to talk when you're standing there looking down at me."

He sat on the edge of the bed—probably because it was the farthest away.

She turned to her computer and found the Biology and English notes he'd asked for. She wasn't sure they'd do him much good; Chase didn't really understand how to study. But she sent them to him anyway before she turned.

He was sitting absolutely still, watching her, his elbows on his knees, his hands loosely clasped between them. "I don't hate Emma," he said.

"No?"

"Let's pretend that I believe you. That Emma—the Emma you know—is never going to become another Merrick Longland. She's never going to learn how to use the power she has. It's never going to define her."

This was not a surrender, and Allison knew it; the tone of his voice was too measured for that. But she nodded, waiting.

"They're not going to leave her alone." He exhaled, running his hands through his hair. "They know—roughly—where she is. They'll know exactly where she is, soon."

This, Allison believed. "How do we stop them?"

He stared at her, his eyes rounding, as if he couldn't believe the stupidity. "Eric's spent his entire adult life trying to do just that. So has the old man."

"Yes, but you're hunting proto-Necromancers, if I understand any-

thing. You're stopping their numbers from growing. How do we stop them, period?"

"Kill their Queen," he replied. He might as well have said, *kill their god*, given his tone.

She stared at him.

"It's complicated. I'd say it's impossible."

"If we kill their Queen, it stops?"

"If we kill their Queen, the dead are free," he replied. "Wherever it is the dead go, they'll go."

"Andrew Copis—"

"Yes, there'll always be some who get stuck or trapped. But they won't stay that way forever, and they won't be able to hurt anyone who isn't a Necromancer by birth. But it's not going to happen."

She swallowed.

"I don't think you have it in you to kill. Not yet. Probably not ever. It's not a problem the Necromancers have."

"I noticed."

"Good." He lifted his chin, exposing his Adam's apple. "Emma might not have it in her, either. But they won't stop. So let's go back to that: Emma is in danger here."

"And because she's in danger, I'm in danger."

He tensed; he heard the edge creep into her voice. She tried to stop her hands from balling into fists, since she wasn't going to use them anyway.

"If you can't step away, yes. I know you don't want to do it. If you were the type of person who could, I probably wouldn't be here. I mean, here, in this room, in this house. I wouldn't be having this moronic conversation. I wouldn't be—" he fell silent, and his expression was so raw, Allison had to look away.