

TABLE SCRAPS

By

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“For a ghoul is a ghoul,
and at best
an unpleasant companion for man.”

-H. P. Lovecraft

CHAPTER ONE

Most couples break up in December. It's also when most babies are conceived. I'm not sure if the two are related, but it's kind of funny. It's as if the cold forces people to find comfort one way or another. Erin isn't cold or pregnant, it isn't even December, but here we are, stuck in an uncomfortable silence. I suppose every relationship either ends in death or some kind of divorce, so it could be worse. Then again, she's still staring at me like she wants to kill me.

"Cole?" Erin's voice somehow gets softer when she's angry. Right now, it might as well be made of marshmallow. "Are you listening?"

"Yeah, I heard you." My shoes smack their lips against the saturated grass as I pace in front of her. "You brought me out to the woods to murder me."

"Come on, this is serious."

"You still haven't given me a reason."

"I just--"

"I can't believe we're breaking up after ten years. It isn't even December."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"We've spent almost ten years together." I stop pacing. "You don't think that I deserve a reason? Is it the ring? I knew it was a stupid idea."

"That's not--"

"Then what is it?"

"You're just..." Her expression is lost in the shadows, silhouetted by the moonlit halo above her head. "You're not listening."

"You haven't said anything."

"I have." She spins the silver ring on her left hand. "It's just not what you want to hear so you choose not to listen."

"That's not fair."

"It's true."

"What am I supposed to do? I ask you questions, I try to figure out what's wrong, I tell you what I'm thinking, but you just stare at me. It's like you're waiting for me to run out of breath or something. You never say anything."

"Because it doesn't matter." She pushes and pulls the ring, flirting with her knuckle. "We both know what's going to happen."

"Yeah," I say, "I'll try to get you to have an actual conversation and you'll just do this. You'll sit there and then you'll start crying, and there's nothing I can do. This is ridiculous."

"It doesn't matter what I say. You'll have some excuse or story or promise." She wipes the tears from her cheek with the back of her hand. "And yeah, I'm crying. I'm allowed to fucking cry."

"That's not what I meant."

"It's always like this."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Fix it."

"I'm trying."

"You're not," she says. "You're talking."

"I'm not supposed to talk now? Wonderful."

"Of course you are, but sometimes, you're supposed to just say sorry or thank you or, I don't know, I love you, and then act on it, you know? You'll just keep talking and talking until one of us hates you."

"Why would you bring me all the way out here to do this?" The little muscles around my eyes twitch as they grow warm and heavy. I turn my back to her and look toward the dark expanse of forest. "You could have just changed your relationship status or sent me a text or something, I mean, this seems excessively

cruel. Do you know how many spiders live in these woods? Almost all of the spiders."

"I didn't plan on this," she says. "I thought coming out here would be good for us. Like Henry David Thoreau type stuff, you know? We could just be together and actually do something. I didn't expect—" Her voice fades with a heavy breath.

"What? You didn't expect to rip my heart out and throw it in a campfire? Cool. As long as it was unintentional, it's fine."

"Cole." The softness of her voice calcifies. "Do you see it? There's something there. I don't think it's—" Her shriek is punctuated by a powerful, tree toppling roar.

With a wall of muscle and dark hair covering its body, the animal hunched over Erin looks as massive as the forest itself. Her feet kick wildly, slipping through the mud as she tries to escape from beneath the creature's claws.

"Erin!"

Liquid spills from between the animal's teeth, rattling into a broad mist as it lifts its snout from Erin's shoulder and roars.

"Oh my god. Oh my god."

As the beast lowers itself toward Erin, she

punches upward furiously. Her fists are tiny but they're fast. Strong. Desperate. Despite her size, the throttling is enough to push the animal backwards. With a pained groan, the creature lifts itself onto its hind legs and snarls, grabbing at its neck.

"Cole," Erin screams. "Run."

Standing upright, the beast's silhouette is like a tidal wave. Before I can say or do anything, it crashes over me, engulfing my entire body in teeth and fur and claws. The shadow tears through me, ripping at my chest and neck until my vision begins to blur. What little I can see comes in short strobing bursts like a flip book with missing pages.

A waterfall of red saliva.

A thin white border around enormous black eyes.

The red grass.

The trees.

The moon.

Erin leaning over me, holding her shoulder and crying.

My heartbeat jumps from the tips of my toes to the center of my throat, shaking the space in between as I gasp for air. I feel lighter somehow. Deflated. Empty. Everything is loud, and wet, and bright, and painful.

And then it isn't.

CHAPTER TWO

I've never really understood reincarnation, possibly because the idea of coming back to life as anything other than a human scares the shit out of me. I mean, it seems pretty obvious that if the universe just rolled the dice, or randomly flipped a coin, the odds are overwhelmingly in favor of being reborn as something with a depressingly short and horrifyingly violent life.

Imagine what it would be like to wake up in a beautiful little bird body, all ample and featherless. You'd nervously peck around a loud, dark room for a few weeks, trying your best to get used to the smell of bird shit as you learn how to walk on your brand new, french fry, chicken legs. Just as you're starting to get the hang of it, when you realize that those thin-skinned nubs that you've been calling your arms are actually wings, and you know that if you tried hard enough you might be able to fly, just as you're about to jump out of that incoherent clucking madness,

you're strapped to a conveyor belt murder machine and cookie cut to death. But, don't worry, you'll be back, resurrected as happy meal nugget juice dripping down the chin of some five year old.

I could come back as something fierce and majestic like the king of all lions, and still spend my entire life in a cage, again taunted by the obnoxious junior nugget eater. I've come to terms with the fact that the whole death and rebirth thing is just not for me. So, when the lights come back, and I wake up on an iron slab with a staple gun to my throat, and tapioca pudding dripping into what's left of my face, I'm surprised to say the least.

"Say something." The heavily bearded, pudding-eating man standing over me whispers to himself as my eyes open, "Come on. Speak."

My chest is fully exposed, stapled together down the left side, and Jackson Pollocked with blood. I'm not in any pain, but that might have something to do with the complete mind numbing shock of waking up in a morgue with this lab coat wearing lumberjack staring at me.

"Say something, please?" he repeats, pointing a staple gun in my direction as if it's a revolver.

Out of focus and squinting, I turn my head to the

left, and see that my slab is only one in a long series of morgue beds. When I look to the right, I see an indiscernible mess of body parts on the slab beside mine, chopped to pieces and staring me in the face.

The gun toting, bearded psychopath yells, "Say something!"

I sit straight up and panic-scream like a six year old with night terrors. Jumping off of the slab, I stumble forward, surprising beardy enough to make him drop his gun. He throws a stiff, meaty palm into my forehead and knocks me backwards into the morgue bed. Before I can recover, the man lifts a bedpan from a tray of tools and holds it over his head. As I watch him chop toward my face with the tin bowl, I catch a glimpse of a laminated name tag clipped to his coat pocket. This is Terry, your friendly neighborhood mortician.

The bedpan smacks me across the temple, and I hit the floor. My arms raise instinctively as I yell, "What the hell is wrong with you!"

Terry takes a few more shots at my forehead before he drops the pan and lowers himself to my eye-level. "Did you say something?"

"Yeah," I say, "I told you to stop hitting me in the freaking face. What the hell?"

He reaches toward the Smurf-blue fanny pack velcroed around his waist and tugs at the zipper. He tells me to sit and lifts a small plastic cup from his pouch without breaking eye contact. It's more pudding. "I hate this part," he says.

"So far, I'm not a big fan of any of this." My head isn't bleeding. It isn't even hurting, but that doesn't stop me from rubbing it. "Why am I here? Is this one of those stupid hidden camera shows? Did you drug me?"

"No," he says. "You, um, how can I put this delicately..." Terry takes a bite of pudding, and chews with pursed lips as if deep in thought. "Got it. You died."

"That's-- um... No?"

"I'm sorry," he says. "I thought it would be best to just rip that band-aid off as quickly as possible."

"So, I... got better?" I say, staring at my hand and curling my fingers. "I mean, I'm obviously not dead."

"No," he says, twirling a plastic spoon around the mouth of his cup, "I never get this part right."

"Never?" I ask. "How often do you beat people with bedpans?"

"Not that part," he says.

"Are you saying that I didn't die? I mean, of course I didn't die. Shouldn't I be in a hospital or something? People are going to be looking for--"

"No, you totally died," he mumbles through a bite of his pudding. He clears his throat and wipes his lips. "You're dead. Like, still dead. I mean, look at you."

"I look... fine." A bead of blood runs down my stomach as I look over my body. I look like something Freddy Krueger might dress up as for Halloween. "I just need a shower and a shirt."

"You look like a thrift store Frankenstein, there's no way you should be walking around, right now." He reaches beneath the slab, pulls a white t-shirt from one of the shelves and tosses it toward my chest. "You're dead," he says. "Well, living dead. Undead. Whatever you want to call it. Wash all you'd like but showered or not, you're a ghoul, plain and simple."

"A what?" I pull the shirt over my head. Some of the blood on my chest isn't completely dry, so the white cotton is stamped with a brand new red-speckled ink blot pattern as it settles over my skin. "I can't be dead. There's no... I mean how would... This isn't a thing. How can this be a thing? Dead people don't do

this." I wave my hands rapidly, shaking my body like I'm practicing with an invisible hula hoop.

"Nothing should ever do that."

"I'm serious," I say. "Dead people don't just get up and start talking."

"You're right. But you're not just any dead person. You didn't get hit by a car or choke on a Big Mac. Think about it for a second," he says. "Try to remember what happened." He casually pushes part of the decomposing body aside to make room and then hops into a sitting position on the slab in front of me.

"I woke up, and then you hit me in the forehead with a piss pan," I say. "That's what happened."

"You were attacked," he says. "Think about it. It was a full moon, right? You saw something. Something big. Something unusual. Something that rhymes with bear bolf."

"No," I laugh. "Come on."

"Yeah."

"It was a bear."

He makes a game show buzzer sound, "Fraid not."

"It was a freaking werewolf," I say. "There. Are. Freaking. Werewolves!"

"Ding Ding." He points his spoon to the ceiling.

As he hops off of the slab, Terry's labcoat floats

behind him like a cape and I see that beneath the filthy white fabric, he's wearing a dark blue flannel shirt and khaki pants. He begins to pace back and forth, gesturing with his spoon as he explains what he does. I try to listen, but I can't stop hearing the word "werewolf". It's playing over and over, echoing through my mind like white noise drowning out most of what Terry says, but I think I get the gist.

Usually, a mortician is expected to operate with a certain level of professionalism. Most people would prefer to have the remains of their loved ones cared for by the meticulous, and impossibly delicate, hands of Mr. or Ms. Perfectionist, or at least someone who might consider wearing gloves. Working as a sort of terminal for creatures of the night leaves Terry with very little time for these sort of formalities, which is why he eats his lunch mid-autopsy, and his tool belt consists mostly of duct tape, staples, and super glue. Needless to say, unless you're starting a new life as a Vampire, Zombie, Goblin, or some other beastie, this is not the mortician you are looking for.

Terry goes on to explain that, as the "Second Life Inductor", a title that he seems to have given himself, he's responsible for easing the transition of the recently undead into whatever disappointing

afterlife they might be stuck with. For me, this meant that I would be punched in the face with a bedpan until Terry was sure that I wasn't a zombie. Thankfully, he tells me, despite the obvious deformities, lack of a heartbeat, and black liquid oozing through the staples in my neck, I am not a zombie.

It's hard not to squirm as I watch Terry set his half-eaten pudding cup on a slab full of mutilated human parts. He might as well be using this guy's kidney as coaster. "This is The Book," he says, showering the floor in spit and tapioca. He lifts a stack of paper from beneath his tray of tools. "It has everything you need to know."

It isn't as much a book as it is a series of poorly folded, haphazardly stapled pamphlets. He rifles through the stack, searching for something and muttering to himself, and as he shuffles I read the chunky lettered titles printed across the front of each page. Things like "Gargoyle", "Troll", and "Squirrel Thing" catch my eye but before I have a chance to ask any questions, Terry shoves one of the pamphlets in my face and starts talking.

He tells me that the original "Book" was your standard Ancient Evil fare, made from the skin of

virgins, with all of the blood and guts. Mine is a black and white xerox pamphlet with the word 'GHOUL' stamped across the front page in red ink. Inside of the pamphlet there's a short list of rules that makes me feel like a gremlin. Terry says that the gremlin pamphlet looks nothing like the movies would have us believe, and I'm not sure if he's kidding or if there are actually gremlins out there somewhere. Until a few minutes ago, I had never heard of a ghoul but here I am.

"It's pretty simple," he says. "I know that all of this might seem a little crazy right now, and I totally get it, trust me. It's not an easy pill to swallow, with the dying and the monsters and all. But, the truth is, there are werewolves and one of them, well, you know." He runs his thumb across his throat and sticks out his tongue. "This is what happens when a werewolf doesn't finish his meal. It's not the best hand to be dealt but, honestly, you're one of the lucky ones. Most of the time, the wolves don't leave leftovers. Once, I saw a guy who had his eyes ripped--"

"Wait. Stop. Wait. When the moon is out, will I? Am I going to... Am I a werewolf?"

"No. No. No. Read the thing," he says, shoving the pamphlets back into their basket beneath the slab.

"Read Ghoul Rule Number 1."

I open the pamphlet and read aloud. "Number 1. Okay. When a werewolf kills a human, the corpse will rise from the dead and walk the earth. Seriously?"

"Keep reading."

"Number 2. If the werewolf that created the ghoul dies, the ghoul is set free." My eyes immediately lift to find Terry's. "What is that supposed to mean? So, if I find the..." I seriously can't believe that I'm even going to say this out loud. "If I find the werewolf that did this to me, I can be human again?"

"If you find it?" he laughs. "Finding a wolf isn't the problem, the problem is staying alive once it finds you."

"But, if I can kill it."

"You won't."

"But, hypothetically, if I was somehow able to--"

"You wouldn't be."

"If I killed it, would I actually get to be alive again?"

Terry's fingers ruffle through his beard in search of a chin to scratch. "Honestly, I don't know," he says. "I've never actually seen it happen." He sighs and throws his empty pudding cup toward a small, black trash can. He misses. "Crud. It's an ancient book, the

translation can get a bit muddy. It could mean anything."

"Are you sure we can't--"

"We don't have time for this, just read the rest."

He lifts a laundry basket from behind my slab and dumps the clothes into a pile beside me. "You need to understand what you're dealing with."

Looking over number three makes me want to crumple the paper and shove it in Terry's mouth. "It says I have to eat living flesh."

"Yeah," he shrugs.

"As in, living human flesh?"

"Uh huh."

"That's not going to happen."

"What, are you a vegetarian or something?"

"No, but--"

"Then what's the problem?" He sifts through the pile of clothes as he speaks. "I know it doesn't sound so appetizing now, but after a few days you won't even miss your precious quinoa and kale sandwiches. You're gonna be surprised by the sort of things you can learn to love." He tosses a white button up collared shirt into my lap.

"This is just too much. What am I supposed to do?" I ask.

"Get dressed."

"Do I just go back to my job and hope no one notices the peanut butter and gray matter crackers in my lunch box? People are going to know that I'm a zombie."

"You're not a zombie," he says. "You're a ghoul. There's a difference."

"I didn't mean to offend your delicate sensibilities." I push my arms through the sleeves of the shirt. "But, it doesn't make sense. I mean, if this isn't some stupid joke and somehow I died."

"You did."

"I'm pretty sure if there were ghouls and goblins walking around people would notice. It would be all over the news, wouldn't it? Dead Grandpa eats family cat, story at 11, that type of thing."

"You mean the way people notice alien abductions and government conspiracies?" He raises a bushy eyebrow.

"Are you saying there are actually aliens abducting people?"

"No," he says. "Don't be ridiculous. I'm saying that, even if you heard something like that on the news, you wouldn't care. If you heard about someone being attacked by a werewolf, would you really believe

it was something out of a fairytale, or would you write it off as a wild animal and get lost in the endless stream of cute kitten videos and TV show memes?" He tosses a blue tie onto my lap.

"But. I mean. Shit. How could you possibly keep this a secret?"

"We have a system," he says. "We don't let things get out of hand. Every once in a while, something goes all FUBAR, and we take care of it, but most of the time it's quiet. There are rules to follow, they keep us going. Keep everything in check. You know, hence The Book. Read the next one, it's important."

"I don't know how anything could be more important than the fact that trolls exist, but if you insist." I open the pamphlet and run my finger down the column of numbers. "Four. If a ghoul bites a living creature, that creature will walk the earth as a brain-dead zombie. Great. Makes perfect sense."

"You have to eat the brain," Terry says. "Or at least destroy it. It's wasteful, but it's better than having a horde of you-know-whats walking around." I feel my face contorting into the "Did you seriously just say that out loud" expression of utter disbelief, disgust, and pure, unadulterated hatred.

"What is that? What does that mean? I'm not really

good with facial expressions, but I'm pretty sure that's one of the bad ones."

"You just told me that I have to eat human brains. What part of 'you have to eat human brains' feels normal to you?"

"So, you're upset?"

"Yes, I'm upset."

"Nailed it." He seems pretty pleased with himself. "Okay, look, I know what you're thinking."

That someone must have destroyed your brain?

"You're wondering if you're going to have to kill people to get food."

"Well, I am now."

"Someone will explain everything to you when you're picked up," he says. "But, don't worry, you don't have to run around the streets with a hatchet or anything like that. I think Roman has a delivery system, I'm not sure exactly how it works, but I know that it works."

"Who's picking me up? This Roman guy?"

"We're running out of time," he says. "Put on the tie and read the rest."

After clipping the cheap blue tie to my shirt, I run my finger across number five. "What's this about hallucinations?"

"Think of it like going through withdrawal," he says. "If you don't eat enough, there are side effects. Just keep track of your feedings and you'll be fine."

"So, is that it?" I set the pamphlet on the slab. "Now that I know not to bite anyone after midnight, can I go home?"

"Not all of the rules are written," Terry says. "Some things need to be heard to be understood." He leans against my slab and lowers his eyes to the floor. "You can't contact anyone from your past. I know you're gonna want to. You'll be real tempted for a while. It's only natural. We all had parents to apologize to, boyfriends to kiss, or wills to write, but there's no going back."

"No," I say. "You don't understand. Erin was with me--"

"I'm sorry," he says.

"I have to know what happened to her."

"You don't want to know," he says. "If there was a wolf involved, you can probably guess but it's better that you don't know for sure."

"Wouldn't she come back? If the wolf got both of us, she would be a ghoul, right? Why isn't she here?"

"Like I said," he looks to the floor, "you're one

of the lucky ones."

The assortment of body parts on the slab beside me suddenly catch my eye. "No, please tell me--"

"What? Do I have pudding in my beard?" He looks at me, then at the slab, then at me, then at the slab.

"Oh, yeah, that's not her. That guy was the worst."

"Maybe she's in another morgue."

"This is it," he says. "If she isn't here, she isn't here. Come on, we have to finish getting you ready."

"Ready for what?"

"Your funeral."

CHAPTER THREE

Terry stuffs cotton balls into my mouth and paints my skin the color of the living. He has to plaster a slight smile on my face so I don't accidentally move during the funeral service. If my expression changes while some unsuspecting Aunt or Uncle happens to be admiring Terry's handy work, things will get really weird, really fast. All of that uncomfortable "he looks so peaceful" talk will turn into a crazy horror show of confused screams and vomit-covered old people fainting on top of one another. Nobody wants to see that.

Once my cheeks are locked and loaded, Terry explains the plan like a bored high school science teacher. There's going to be a funeral and a burial, and then, once my relatives return to their regularly scheduled lives, someone will dig me out of my grave so I can start doing whatever it is that ghouls do.

Just the thought of being buried alive, even temporarily, makes my stomach turn. Terry assures me that my stomach doesn't do much of anything anymore, but I feel it sinking into an empty, terrified rumble.

"This should be about the right size," he says, handing me a one-size-fits-all tuxedo that looks like something you might find in a Vegas assembly-line wedding chapel.

The pants and jacket fit well enough but shaking the dead skin from the tux sleeves is pretty unsettling and I can't help but wonder what happened to its previous owner. As I get dressed, Terry pushes a rusty stretcher into the room. On top of the stretcher is a coffin. My coffin.

"Get in," he says.

"I don't think I want to do this," I mumble through the cotton balls.

"Don't make me get the bedpan."

My face is still trying to shake off the PTSD war flashbacks from our first encounter, so I lower my head and shamefully climb into the casket. It's surprisingly comfortable.

"So, this is the awkward part," he says, looking into the coffin.

"You told me that I'm dead and have to eat brains,

what could you possibly--"

He closes the lid over me, mid-sentence, and I hear the metal scrape and click of a lock. What the hell?

"What the hell!" I yell through the cotton balls.

"If I told you about this part, you would have panicked," he says.

"What do you think I'm doing now?"

"I don't know," he shouts, "you're in a coffin, so probably just laying there."

He starts yelling something about sitting still but it's hard to concentrate when you're being chauffeured around in a casket. The gurney moves over the linoleum, swaying back and forth, and bouncing up and down like a Halloween themed roller coaster. After a few bumps and a solid drop, I hear the engine of a car cough itself awake. I must be in a hearse. The volume on the radio jumps to 11, and all I can hear is Terry yelling the words to Respect over Aretha Franklin.

When the car finally stops, the roller coaster ride starts up again. There are several twists and turns, and then Terry says something about not moving, but it's all muffled bass tones through the top of the casket. The only thing I can make out for sure is,

"Don't panic."

After a few hours of panicking, crying, tossing and turning, and generally doing the opposite of what Terry suggested, my body seems to shut down completely. It's as if someone suddenly hit the pause button on my nervous system, and I'm frozen in time. For some reason, I'm completely paralyzed, and there's nothing to do but wait.

I hear the click, pop, and scrape of the lock being removed over the sound of monotone voices. My eyes are sealed shut, just as paralyzed as the rest of my body, so I have no idea what's going on until the coffin opens and the backs of my eyelids go bright red. A soundtrack of songs that I haven't listened to since middle school plays as a small crowd shuffles into the room. Everyone seems to have the sniffles, tissues scrape across cardboard, and chests fall into one another. This is it. This is my funeral.

Sporadically, strangers come forward, lean in close, and whisper to me. You don't introduce yourself to a corpse, so I only have the scents, and half-coherent babble between sobs to figure out who's who. One after another they approach, they speak to themselves, to me, to God. Some of it is sweet, and some of it is barely audible, but the majority of it

is, well, depressing. It's not sad in the way I imagined it would be. Sure, there are dozens of people here, bawling endlessly like someone might weigh their tears and post the results online, but it just feels wrong. I know that they mean well, but the truth is, everything these people are saying is kind of generic. It's like they were handed a "Grieving For Dummies" pamphlet at the door, so they're all equipped with the same uninspired lines. After suffering through a dozen or so whispered variations of "You were too young," and, "It was too soon," I'm starting to think that I might be at the wrong funeral.

I don't recognize anyone specifically until I finally smell my mom's signature perfume, Eau De Cigarette. Her hand touches my cheek and she tells me that she loves me. After she kisses my forehead, I'm assaulted by the sharp, razortooth end of her comb against my scalp.

"There you go," she says, brushing my hair to the side, "that's my little guy. That's my... my..." She starts crying, and her voice trails off. I hate that my mom had to see me like this, but at least I know that I'm in the right place.

For a couple of hours there are no interesting anecdotes or horror stories. No one says anything

really personal or exciting. It's just a sad assembly line of obligatory sobs, and generic compliment salad. Most of these people haven't been a part of my life in years, and now here they are, saying goodbye to the person I haven't been since whenever I last saw them. Once everyone has made their rounds, there's a hushed hum of conversation, and I'm relieved to finally have a break. Being dead is exhausting.

The quiet talking seems to speed up, growing louder until the room is a whispered roar. Thin, soft fingertips, as cold as mine, prod my hands apart and slide between them as warm tears run down my knuckles and into my shirt sleeve.

"I'm so sorry." It's Erin. She's here. She's alive and she's here. Her lips shake the breath from her body as she speaks, so she has to stop herself a few times before I can understand what she's trying to say. "It's my fault," she whispers, lowering her face to my chest. "Cole, please. I'm sorry. It's my fault. It's all my fault."

My lips won't let me stop her. I do all of the things that you normally do when you're trying to scream, but nothing happens. The muscles around my face tighten and stretch, or at least it feels like they do. Erin doesn't make a sound, so I know she

can't see it, but I feel like my eye is about to pop out of its socket from all of the pushing and flexing.

"I don't know what happened," she says. "I woke up and you were gone. Just gone. I'm sorry."

She must have been in shock. Even with Terry, the morgue, and The Book, I'm still not used to the idea of a Bear Bolf. She's already been through so much, and now she has to see me like this, and I can't even tell her that it's not her fault.

"I blacked out," she says. "In the morning, I didn't even know what happened. I didn't know what to say. It was... I don't know what it was. I didn't know what to tell the police or your mom. What am I supposed to say to your mom? I don't know what to do. I'm so sorry." She kisses my eyelids, and as she pulls away, my fingers fall to my chest.

The funeral director asks if anyone would like to stand and say a few words to the crowd, and there's a long, pregnant pause. She's answered by a room full of sniffles and a few loud coughs, but no one comes forward.

"Well then," she says, "that will conclude the viewing portion of the service."

I should be thankful that it didn't last longer, but to be honest, if I could, I would jump out of this

box and cause a few heart attacks. It's not that I wanted someone to grab the microphone and give a long, eloquent speech praising how great I was or anything, but yeah, okay, that's kind of exactly what I wanted to happen.

The coffin shakes for a moment, and the backs of my eyelids go black again. Here we go. The weight of my body shifts unevenly, rising and falling at random as my feet lead the way, and it's obvious that some of these pallbearers aren't exactly Arnold Schwarzenegger. They're ushering me toward my final resting place the way most people bring a worn out couch to the side of the road. My head and feet totter like opposite ends of a seesaw, never quite balanced or steady until my coffin is finally dropped into, what feels like, a water bed. This must be the harness they use to lower caskets into graves.

The voices from above sound like every adult in a Charlie Brown special. The last chance for someone to give a beautiful, well prepared speech to send me off into the eternal whatever and all that I hear is Wahh Wahh, Wahh Wahh, Wahh Wahh. This goes on for a while, and then there's a long silence. I expected to hear a smattering of dirt as my family sprinkled the earth over my coffin, but instead an engine bellows like a

mechanical T-rex and shakes everything around me. The machine dumps the soil over my box in a matter of seconds like a giant cat burying its droppings. I can't see, or hear, or feel anything at all. It's just dark and still. I'm not even cold. Just here. Useless. Motionless. Dead.

The worst thing about being paralyzed isn't the lack of movement, but the complete loss of hope. When I do my best to shake a foot, or make a fist, it isn't as if I feel some force holding me back. It's nothing like being chained down, or sat on. There's really no resistance to fight against or barrier to overcome. My entire body is just a phantom limb. No matter how much I think about moving my arm, or leg, or big toe, or whatever, I feel nothing. Instead of being hopeful that all I have to do is try a little harder, or push a little further, I know that it's impossible, and all I can do is wait to either die or be saved.

After several hours, when the feeling in my body finally returns, it begins by sucker punching me from the inside. It's as if there's a hamster wheel in my stomach, tumbling around excitedly in search of food. I stretch as far as possible in the coffin, allowing my joints to do the snap, crackle, and pop thing as I test every finger and every toe. It's a relief to be

able to move again, but the fact that I'm buried six feet under in a pitch black grave sort of dampens any chance of a lively celebration.

My temples begin to throb as the hamster in my stomach jolts back to life. A pulsating shock runs through my body, shaking the darkness of the coffin like an etcha-sketch until I can see everything. My legs, my hands, my chest, the white silk liner of the casket, it's all lit in a gray-scale, silent movie, filter. Everything is bright and impossibly crisp but colorless. The hunger has me and I'm seeing the world through Ghoul-colored-glasses. Suddenly, I'm considering the endless possibilities of hoagies, wraps, and desserts a la human brain, and they all sound delicious. This wasn't in The Book. Where the hell is Terry?

CHAPTER FOUR

The center of the coffin is caving slightly, bowing under the weight of the earth piled over me. There isn't enough room to throw a punch, so I kick my knee into the casket, hoping to make a new sunroof. There's a loud crack and I'm not sure if it's me or the wood. Either way, it doesn't hurt, so I do it again and again until the casket splits and a thin stream of sand spills through the opening. I feel like I'm trapped inside of the wrong end of an hourglass.

I continue to tear at the splintered roof, ripping and punching the wood and, after a while, the hole is wide enough to fit most of my body. Things are looking up. Sure, my wrist is broken and the skin on my hand looks like melted wax, but at least I'm also drowning in dirt.

The soil feels better than I expected as it pours in over me, but there's way too much of it. Kicking pounds of gravel into the ends of the coffin, I force

my head through the hole and push myself into a sitting position. Layers of filth continue to shower over me, filling my ears and nose with god knows what as I try to stand.

For some reason I thought this would be easier. The coffin is only six feet deep, and I'm about 6'3. If I stood straight up and jumped it would look like a game of zombie-whack-a-mole, but it isn't easy for me to stand, or jump, or really do much of anything. Pushing the dense earth away from my face enough make any real progress seems impossible. The soil is heavy and thick, but still loose enough to drag me under as it pools into the casket, making the climb to the surface almost unbearable. It's really nothing like climbing, it's more like swimming in a pool of Play-Doh, but instead of a fun smell and festive colors, I get mouthfuls of manure and bug guts. If I had to breathe, if I wasn't already a walking, talking monstrosity, I'd be worm chow by now.

When my lips reach the surface, I take a big, beautiful, entirely unnecessary breath and smile. The air tastes clean and perfect compared to the smörgåsbord of crap I was eating a minute ago but the novelty fades as quickly as the hunger returns. Within seconds, I'm out of the grave and sprinting toward

something that smells like an all you can eat buffet of irresistible delicacies.

After a few blocks, the aroma is overwhelming and I feel like I'm in an alternate universe. I've been to Downtown Fort Myers hundreds of times. I've seen the few tall buildings towering over the suburban skyline like the first adult teeth in a child's mouth. I've been in every one of these bars, eaten the pizza, choked on the cigar smoke, and avoided the alleys. This is where I met Erin. It's where we sang drunken karaoke versions of Jimmy Eat World songs and let our fingers get close enough to kiss. Now, it looks like a forgotten cigarette, doing everything it can to hold itself in place while waiting to be flicked to the floor. I've been here. I know this place, but I've never seen anything like this.

Black monoliths with bright white eyes tower over me, watching like bored gods waiting for a sacrifice as I stumble down the sidewalk. With the color washed from my eyes, the street, sidewalks, trashcans, and litter are all painted various shades of gray, and look like tattered movie backdrops from the silent film era. All of the living things, the things with a pulse, have an unnatural, bug-light glow and I feel myself being pulled toward them.

The people on the sidewalk don't exactly have faces, they're just brightly lit, moving blurs of unrecognizable features. In the center of the crowd, looking in every direction and surrounded by fireworks of visible heartbeats, I feel like Pac Man thrown into a pool of white orbs. The harder I try to make sense of what I see the more ridiculous it all becomes.

Those blinking flesh dots start to change shape right in front of me, and suddenly I'm in one of those cartoons where the starving cat looks at the mouse but sees a big, juicy, steak, or chicken leg walking around in its place. This must be what The Book meant by hallucinations. Ghoulvision.

"How you doing?" The voice is behind me. It's raspy and quiet but stern. "You got the time?"

The smell of bacon passes into my nostrils and my eyes close.

"Yo bitch, I'm talking to you." Thick sausage fingers grip my left shoulder and squeeze. "Let me get some money."

It's not just bacon. It's a freshly cooked, hot off the grill, bacon cheeseburger and I need it to be mine. I'm starving. Once that smell hits me, it's all I can think about. I open my eyes and continue to breathe in the sweaty, cheesy, grease perfume. I need

to figure out where it's coming from so I can marry it.

"Are you fucking deaf?" The hand on my shoulder gets heavier. "Gimme what you got," he says. "Fucking now." I feel something sharp in my lower back as the fingers squeeze my neck.

It's as if I'm lost in a beautiful bacon mist. Like a cloud of breakfast is passing over and through me. I can't stop smelling it. It's everywhere and nowhere. I see a bar. A few closed down shops. A laundromat. No food stands. No restaurants. No bacon.

"Yo," he says, pulling my shoulder enough to spin me in his direction, "Don't be stupid."

And there it is. Spitting its beautiful onion juice burger breath into my face, and shining like the heavenly arches of some dreamy fast food paradise. A bacon cheeseburger. A living, breathing, bacon cheeseburger. Burgerman sneers, "Gimme your fucking money."

I'm not quite sure what I can believe, or how to react to anything, right now, so, when the five-foot, thrift store sports coat wearing bacon burger grabs at my tuxedo, my reply is simple, and to the point. I bite it in the face.

"What the shit," the burger yells. He raises his awkward bacon strip arms into the air and turns to run.

Despite his appearance, the handsy, lunch-shaped thief is quick on his feet. I don't hesitate, or pause for consideration, I just run after him, chewing the savory burger bite and watching his movements the way a wolf watches a rabbit. Drops of glowing ketchup trail behind the running burger as he sprints. I suppose when someone bites off the larger part of your nose, your apt to feel a bit of a spring in your step. This is fast food at its finest.

I know that I'll catch him. Not having to breathe has its advantages. Sure, being a reanimated corpse, I may not be as agile as I once was, but in the long run, when there's no need for a second breath, when cramping is no longer an issue, I might as well be a superhero compared to most people. Cole, The Super Ghoul. I should make some business cards.

After a few blocks, this guy is out of gas, wheezing and stammering, still holding onto what's left of his nose, while I'm all slobber and baby bibs. I might as well be running with a fork and knife in hand. He turns wide, stumbling into a dark alley, and I'm only a few steps behind him. Around the corner, I see a couple of trashcans, a lot of litter, and a high fence blocking the far side of the alley. There's no exit. I step in his wet footprints, following one

after another, sniffing my way toward the middle of the alley.

His burger juice fingerprints shine like dashes on a glow-in-the-dark map leading toward the unbearably delicious bacon strip "X" waiting for me behind the trashcan. I hear him whispering every curse word imaginable as I get closer and closer. He's whimpering. Asking me to stop. Threatening my family. Crying. As I swallow the bits of burger, the color comes flooding back into the world and the blood lights dim. Mr. No-nose is behind the dumpster, crying and cursing, and I'm standing in the middle of a crime scene, looking like I just spent the day at a vampire barbecue. What the hell was that?

"Sorry," I say.

As the man yells every obscenity imaginable, I turn and sprint away, hoping that no one will notice a dirt-showered, tuxedo wearing, dead person running through the streets. Thankfully, they don't. Among the dozen or so cart pushing, drug-addled vagrants who occupy the downtown portion of this city, I look like the pope or, at the very least, a crazy, drug-addled vagrant who thinks he's the pope. Either way, nobody seems to care.

Some burger bits are still stuck between my teeth

as I run, and I hate myself for savoring them. The entire spectrum of flavor is cycling through my mouth. Sweet, then sour, then spicy, then salty. I feel like I spent the night at an all you can eat buffet, but really, I'm just burping up dreamy memories of Wonka-esque nose meat. It's kind of gross. Okay, really gross, but it makes me feel strong somehow like I could run forever. I guess these are the the perks of being undead. A nose can taste like a bacon-sprinkled milkshake and my legs are unflappable.

When I finally stop running, I'm startled by a grotesque creature staring at me through the dust covered window of an abandoned dollar store. It takes me longer than it should to realize that I'm staring at myself. It's the sort of reflection that should be accompanied by the words: Objects in mirror may be uglier than they appear. I look like a monster. Like an actual, lurks in the shadows and goes bump in the night, monster. I can't let Erin see me like this.

There was some part of me that thought this might all work out. They would lift me from the earth, and I would emerge spotless and well dressed. I would take the flowers from my grave, go directly to Erin's house and explain everything. She'd slap me for making her worry, but we'd eventually laugh about the entire

situation. In reality, I see this filth-laden, undead, ghoulish thing with fresh blood still dripping from his chin, and I know that it will never happen. She thought I was bad enough when I was alive, if she saw me like this, there would definitely be pitchforks and torches involved.

Digging through the suit, I find Terry's business card folded in the jacket pocket. The address is only a few miles away. I'm not really excited to see him again, considering the fact that he left me to rot in a coffin, but I have no money and I just ate a guy's face, so I'll take whatever help I can get.

With the neatly manicured flower bushes, brightly lit entrance, and small Koi pond out front, Terry's funeral home actually looks like a legitimate business. The blinds are all shut and the sign on the door is turned to "Closed", but I try the handle anyway. It's unlocked.

Two empty office desks greet me as I enter the dark room. There are no pictures on the walls or calendars marked with anniversaries and birthdays. I don't see nametags or motivational posters. There aren't even chairs. This place is just a front. There's a muffled shout from the back of the building. I follow the sound past the desks, through a narrow

hallway until I finally reach a metal door.

As I push the door open, Terry is standing between two slabs. He's doing some awkward pelvic thrust near the corpse of an old woman with his back facing me. The James Brown song is too loud for him to hear me come in, or to notice as I get closer. After a minute he stops dancing and just stands there staring at the body on the slab.

This would be the perfect time for revenge. I've never been one for violence but here he is, this mouth-breathing creeper, perving over someone's decrepit grandma, when he should be saving me from the grave. I want to tear out his throat. I want to rip off his face, and make s'mores with his eyeballs. Where the hell is this coming from?

In the movies, characters have their lines written for them so, whenever they're in this sort of situation and it's time for one those badass one-liners, their tongues wag like bullets with the sort of witticisms that just don't come easy to most of us. So, not being one of these fortunately fictional characters, instead of sneering a, "you should have killed me when you had the chance", or fumbling through a, "I have come here to eat brains and kick ass, and you're all out of brains", I just yell,

"ASSHOLE." It's simple but effective.

Terry jumps onto the slab, screaming and knocking the elderly corpse onto the floor with a loud, meat-juice pop and squish. For a second, I forget that I'm only threatening, and lunge toward his throat. He falls backwards and lands face first into spongy, naked granny guts. "You were gonna leave me."

"Who are you?" Terry isn't kidding. He seems to genuinely have no idea who I am.

"I'm the guy whose gonna make a Lunchable of your intestines." Who needs a writer?

"You're a Ghoul," he says, shoving a pamphlet in my face as he lifts himself from the body. Where does he keep these things?

He turns the music down, and I remind him of the plan. I tell him about the pudding, the funeral, and the uncomfortably delicious nose meat patty melt, and he laughs. Not just an "oh yeah, I remember that" sort of chuckle, but an annoying, saliva to the face, spit-take of a laugh. Apparently, with everything that's been happening, I forgot to take the gauze out of my cheeks so I sound like Don Corleone. Terry lifts the old lady onto the slab, puts on his best Brando face, and makes a few "Ghoulfather" jokes. None of them are funny.

"Wait," he says, choking back the Brando voice.

"Did you say that you bit some--"

Before Terry can finish his sentence, the old woman on the slab opens her eyes, sits straight up, and screams in my face. Her disgusting, tar-colored witch fingers grab at my collar bone and push me to the floor. So, that's why Terry was staring at this poor old lady. Granny Ghoul is a freaking monster.

Terry yells for me to hold her still as he looks around the room for a weapon. I have Granny safely locked at arms length until she breathes something that tastes like a fish and bowel cancer chowder into my mouth, and I buckle. The flesh tears from her shoulders like she's some kind of Zombie kabob, leaving little more than bone and an army of maggots to hold onto. As her muscle meat drips toward my face, Granny never stops screaming. She never stops convulsing. She never stops trying to eat me. This is why there's no Zombie pamphlet. I might have some issues, being undead and all, but this thing is a nightmare.

Granny chews around the staples in my neck with her three remaining teeth until a bedpan kicks her in the back of the head hard enough to knock my flesh loose from her gums. She collapses beside me as Terry

stands over both of us shaking his head with the bedpan in hand. Without hesitation, he stomps her head into the floor until the screaming stops, and I'm covered in fishy zombie sauce.

"Who did you bite? Where were you? Where did you get that awesome knife?" Terry asks, grabbing his keys off of his tool tray.

"What knife?" I look down and see the handle of Burgerman's knife sticking out of my ribcage. "Whoa, whoa, whoa."

"It's fine," he says, pulling the blade from my skin. "Now, I'm the King of Britain."

"That's not funny."

"It's a little funny." He lifts a cup of pudding off of one of the slabs. "You need to tell me who it was."

I'm still picking chunks of Granny out from between my staples as I stand. "It was a homeless guy. He was trying to mug me. I didn't really see his face."

"You said you ripped his nose off!"

"When I bit him, he wasn't... he didn't look like... he was..."

Terry sighs. "He looked like a human-sized pizza, didn't he?"

"Cheeseburger," I say.

"It happens."

CHAPTER FIVE

The parking garage behind the funeral home is empty with the exception of a single hearse that looks like a dead tooth on wheels. It's an unwashed 1960-something Cadillac that Terry has inexplicably named Tony Robbins. When I ask why he would name a hearse, he pets a streak of dust from the hood and tells me that he doesn't have time for a cat. Whatever that means.

As soon as I tell him where I last saw Burgerman, Terry hits the gas and Tony Robbins takes off the way a five year old might play with Hot Wheels in the bathtub. My shoulder beats against the door, my palms play patty cake with the dash, and empty pudding cups crunch beneath my feet with every turn. There are no seat belts. If I wasn't already dead, I'd be writing a will, right now. And to Terry, I bequeath this middle finger. May he treasure it always.

"Take off the tux," he says, "I can reuse it. There are clothes in the back."

A black garbage bag, overflowing with used clothes is shaking beside a casket in the tail end of Tony Robbins. There's something inherently creepy about a rocking coffin that takes me a second or so to get over before I can finally reach into the backseat. Ghoul or not, if something pops out of this thing I'm definitely going to speak in little girl screams for at least a week.

The bag is incredibly heavy, and it's a struggle just to get it over the seat and onto my lap, especially with my hand in this condition. Most of the clothes in the bag are big enough to make me look like a toddler playing dress up in his parent's closet. I find a pair of jeans that fit, but the only shirt that's even remotely my size is light blue and has an adorable cartoon muffin on it with a caption that reads, "There's muffin to see here." Ugh. Puns are like the Pig Latin of the dad world.

"What happened to your wrist?"

The fact that I just broke through a coffin, climbed out of my own grave, and then slap boxed a witch-faced granny monster should excuse me from answering such a dumb question. I just squint and shake my head into the shirt.

"There's tape in the glove box. I'll set the bone

for you after."

"After what?" I ask. As I pull my head through the collar of the shirt, the car stops and I get my answer.

The entire downtown area is made of monsters. Of the twenty or so people running, staggering, and yelling through the streets, about half of them look like possessed scarecrows. These things have all of the usual human features: a head, two arms, two legs, eyes, ears, etc. But, they're whipping their bodies around like gawky, uncoordinated puppies still getting used to being alive.

Despite the awkward learning curve, the undead bodysnatchers seem to have perfected the art of gnashing their teeth and screaming. Each of their expressionless faces have been stained red across their lips and cheeks like a horrific milk mustache. They've been busy. I see a noseless screamer wandering through the chaos with his eyes fogged over and someone else's blood on his chin, and it hits me. This is my fault. I should have stayed in the coffin.

The tape in the glove box is neon pink but it does the trick. Terry says I look like I'm ready for a 1980s style dance fight, and I wish that were the case. If I could just do The Carlton, or Robot Dance

my way out of this, it would be the best night of my life instead of the worst slash last.

Parking in the middle of the street, Terry pops the trunk and opens his door. "When I get to the back, turn the radio up as loud as it goes."

"But--"

"Just do it." He slams the door.

Of course, I don't listen to him. I'm not a complete idiot. If I turn the radio up, every zombie within a mile radius will come running, and even if this were a dance fight, there's no way Terry and I could take on an entire Thriller dance crew of monsters. The trunk pops, and I turn to see Terry opening the coffin in the back. He lifts a medieval times era weapon from the casket that looks like something Thor might use as a toothpick.

"Turn it up," he says, pointing the rust colored pickax in my direction. "Now."

Despite having a baby face beneath his red, pudding-stained beard, Terry is an intimidating man. He's taller than I am, much heavier, and it's obvious that he's been doing this for a while. He knows what he's talking about. He also happens to be pointing a razor sharp weapon in my face, so I do what he tells me.

As I get out of the car, he marches forward with his pickax in hand and a stern expression on his face. He looks like a Ten Star General, leading a pathetic new recruit into the throes of war. I feel like I could follow him anywhere, and know with absolute certainty that we can do this. We can stop these things. With him in charge, we can do anything.

Then, the radio makes a clicking sound and that song from the movie Ghost starts to play. Terry swings his hips, lip-syncing Unchained Melody into his pickax and in the blink of an eye, he goes from a merciless badass to Demi Moore being romanced over a pottery wheel. We're doomed.

There's a small box of assorted silverware in the coffin. Actual silverware, spoons, forks, knives. Most of it looks used. Beside the box, there's a hand grenade, and a bright yellow, four-pronged pitchfork. I grab what I can and join Terry near the hood of the car.

At first, having a grenade in my back pocket makes me feel like I'm playing Russian Roulette with my pants. I'm not really worried about it, I've seen enough movies to understand how these things work. I know that there's a pin that has to be pulled, and there's always enough time to make at least one last

snarky comment before you have to play hot potato.

What I am worried about is the fact that less than an hour ago a 90 year old woman almost made a meal of my Adam's apple. This isn't just one little old lady with a Jack-o-lantern smile, this is a starving mob of brain dead, supernatural a-holes who want to eat our guts.

The second verse of the song kicks in and Terry stops singing. "Here they come, aim for the neck."

I ask why the neck, but he doesn't have time to answer. He starts singing again and within seconds they're everywhere.

He slow dances around the horde of screaming corpses, high-fiving throats with the sharp end of his pickax. It isn't entirely effortless, his cheeks are like high school dodge balls, bright red, bloated, and full of dimples, but he's doing it. I'm busy practicing my nervous shiver, still stammering and watching the heads fall when something tackles me to the pavement and takes a bite out of my cheek.

The creature hunched over me looks like one of those skeletons from science class if it put on a human suit and tried to murder you with its mouth. Its loose skin dangles from a thin, shirtless torso, bruised and flaking and half devoured. It kind of

looks like a cannibalistic, humanoid version of Droopy Dog. I try to push him off of me but his hunger makes him strong.

The zombie's exposed chest cavity oozes entrails over the handle of the pitchfork as I hold it between us. Blood-stained drool soaks my shirt as the creature thrashes wildly. I try to fight back, but I can feel the tape on my wrist stretching with every attack. He pushes and pushes until my grip slips and the pitchfork falls to my chest.

With my back to the pavement and chattering teeth flailing an inch from my eyes, I'm completely useless. I cover my face and as the creature's shoulders smack against my hands, his spongy flesh peels apart like a moldy cantaloupe. Intestines rain over me as the zombie rises, mouth agape and shrieking. It dives violently toward my face, over and again, until the duct tape finally tears and my wrist collapses beneath the zombie's weight.

My hand hangs limp beside my wrist, tethered by a few thin strands of skin as if I'm some loosely strung marionette. This thing doesn't stop yelling at me, he doesn't give me time to get used to my new stump, or even apologize. Droopy just uses his teeth to tear the rest of my hand from the wrist and he starts chewing.

He straddles my chest while enjoying his meal and actually looks pretty pleased with himself. Watching this undead jerk munch on my hand, I get the distinct impression that he's the kind of guy who would make finger sandwich puns if he still had the ability to form words. It makes me hate him even more.

I grab at the creature's throat to stop it from swallowing, and do the only thing that I can think to do. I shove my bone-exposed wrist into and through the zombie's eye, tearing a new hole in its head. It doesn't flinch, or waver, or stammer, or slow in the least. Despite taking a wrist bone to the brain, it still continues to yell into my mouth, and gnash its horrible, well-fed teeth.

Terry's axe comes down quickly and quietly, taking the zombie's head clean off. The pointed blade stops inches from my nose, and Droopy's lifeless torso falls over me, rolling to the pavement.

"I said, the neck", he says.

The creature's head dangles from my wrist, still chomping away at my hand, ignoring the fact that it was just decapitated. This is too much. I close my eyes but it doesn't help. It's the sound that's getting me. I can't focus. Those little pops of cartilage breaking between the zombie's teeth, that

raptor-like gargle scream of falling heads harmonizing with the last bit of Unchained Melody. It's too much and I'm about to cry.

"Come on," Terry says. "We have to go."

When my eyes open, there are over a dozen bodies, motionless and rotting beside lively, starving heads. Despite the shrill soundtrack of the shrieking undead, Terry did it. Sure, it was a clusterfuck of inconceivable gore but it was done.

"We have to get the heads in the coffin before the cops show up." He says this as if it isn't batshit insane. Of course, it's crazy as hell but it's also exactly what we do.

Terry grabs the garbage bag of clothes from the front seat and empties the laundry into the coffin of decaying heads to muffle the sound. We get in, and he throws my severed hand onto my lap.

"Not bad," he says, starting the car.

"What? Are you joking? In what way was that not a complete freaking disaster?"

"Your hand still has most of its fingers, I'd call that a solid win for the day."

"Is this what you do? Is this a normal Tuesday for you?"

"It's Sunday," he says.

The muffled wailing from the casket sounds like a low-tech police siren as we drive. It isn't loud enough to draw attention, but it's kind of hard to focus with a Greek chorus of severed heads yelling from the backseat.

The hand on my lap looks like one of those baby teething rings, all chewed up and useless. I know that I probably shouldn't stare at it but it's just now sinking in. The fingers are intact, but just barely. Droopy ate the better part of my pinky flesh, and most of my palm, so some of the bone is exposed, making me look like an obsolete Terminator. But, this isn't fake skin over metal machinery, this is my hand. My fucking hand. I don't even know if it can be fixed. It's not twitching or moving around like that butler from The Addams Family or anything. Was the hand the butler? No, that was Lurch. Why was there a hand running around their mansion, anyway?

"Stop worrying about your hand," Terry says. "I can fix it." He holds up his left arm, and the sleeve of his lab coat falls enough for me to see a bracelet of staples and stitches holding his wrist in place. "I've been doing this for a while."

He turns the windshield wipers on and I watch the smeared blood paint circles across the glass, giving

Tony Robbins red blood-shot eyes. Everything is tinted the wrong kind of rosy, but I'd rather look out a blurry window than down at my lap.

"You can't just go around biting people," Terry says. "There are rules."

"Rules?" I laugh.

"Yes," he says. "And rule number one is don't ever do what you just did. I can add it to the book, but I kind of thought not murdering human beings was standard procedure."

"Seriously? I had my hand ripped off by a zombie after you left me to die in a coffin, and now you're going to lecture me on ethical behavior like this isn't all absolutely bonkers?"

"This is not how we do things."

"I watched you curb stomp an old woman after she came back from the dead. Is that how you do things?"

"I'm sorry," he says. "This isn't something I'm used to dealing with. I know you didn't mean to do what you did, but you have to understand the serious quicksand pit of crap that you're shoving me into, right now."

"What the hell was I supposed to do?" I ask. "I couldn't stop it. I couldn't do anything. And even if I could, ghouls have to eat the living, right? Isn't

that what it says in your book? I'm not saying it's a best case scenario, I'm pretty sure that went out the window like one werewolf attack ago, but still, what did you expect?"

"Not that."

"I'm sorry I decided to inconvenience you by not wanting to starve to death in a coffin."

"I didn't mean that," he says. We pull into the parking garage. "There's a system, you know? Roman is going to freak out. I have a job, we all have jobs. There's a reason that we have The Book."

"It's a pamphlet! It has five things written on it and one of them literally says EAT PEOPLE."

Terry stays calm. He remains objective, almost nonchalant, despite my outrage. It's infuriating. His head nods toward me, but he stares out the window while he speaks through his teeth, "It also says no doggy bags. If you're gonna go around eating randoms, you could at least follow the rules."

"I had no idea that there was a correct way to eat a human being," I say, "I must have skimmed over the chapter on zombie table etiquette."

His eyebrows lower and his nostrils flare, "You are not a zombie, you're a ghoul."

"Yeah, and you're an asshole."

After sighing through a half hearted apology, Terry shuts the engine off, and pops the trunk. In the back of the car, there's an old accordion style gurney beside the coffin waiting for us. It looks like it was made of tetanus, or carved from the hull of the Titanic.

"Help me with this thing", he says, "it sticks."

I put the chewed up hand in my back pocket, and help Terry pull the heavy stretcher out of the car. We roll the coffin into the morgue, through the puddle of Granny, still marinating in her own decomposing fluids, and my stomach turns. I abandon the coffin and stagger toward one of the slabs, holding my side.

"So, who's Roman?" I ask. "Is he like, monster management?"

"You're hungry."

"I'm pretty sure that I'm the opposite of hungry," I say, averting my eyes from the geriatric soup on the floor.

Terry walks past me, between the slabs, and toward the refrigeration wall. It's like an enormous filing cabinet, but instead of manila folders and paper work, it holds dead people. Pulling open the bottom left drawer of the human freezer, he lifts a cup of his pudding from beside one of the cadavers.

"Eat this", he says, tossing the plastic cup across the room.

My left hand isn't used to catching, or doing much of anything, so I juggle the pudding between my elbow and chest before dropping it onto one of the slabs. Thankfully, it doesn't spill. I'd hate to waste one of Terry's desserts, I've seen what he can do with a pickax.

"I don't remember seeing anything about pudding in The Book," I say, lifting the cup from the slab.

"Try it, I made it myself." He pushes the coffin into an adjacent room, and leaves me alone with the pudding.

The plastic cup is sealed with an aluminum cover that I have to peel back with my teeth. There's no writing or logo on the cup, but otherwise it looks like your average Swiss Miss or Jello pudding pack. The goop itself is an off-white, chunk laden slop that looks deceptively like a delicious tapioca dessert but smells like an indiscernible hodge podge of decayed deli meats. I put the plastic to my lips and tilt my head back enough to let some of the pudding slide into my mouth. Surprisingly, it tastes a lot like Burger-Man's nose, only charbroiled as if flavored to taste.

"It's good, right," Terry snorts as he enters the

room. "A few of these a day, and you're golden."

"What is it?"

He lifts some super glue from his tool belt and asks to see my hand. "It's pudding," he says.

"It doesn't taste like pudding." I pass him the hand without really looking at it. It's still too bizarre to see a part of my own body separated like a broken action figure.

Lifting my wrist and aligning the bone, Terry focuses intently as he speaks. "It's the dead. Well, the undead, we can't eat the dead."

"What do you mean, we? Wait, undead? As in-- Am I eating zombie meat, right now?"

"Yeah, and you're loving it." He trickles glue between my wrist and hand, then lifts the staple gun from his tool belt.

"You can't just feed someone zombie slop without telling them."

"Well, that's what I did," he says. "Hold still."

"Seriously, is this really zombie brain?"

"Why do you think I told you to aim for the neck," he says, punching misaligned staples around my wrist.

"Did you think we were collecting the heads for souvenirs?"

"I thought maybe we--"

"What? You thought we were going to do some arts and crafts together? Do you want a glittery zombie paper weight? We have to eat something, staple-neck, we do what we can."

"The Book said I had to eat living flesh. Ghouls, I mean. Don't we have to, you know--"

"It is living flesh," he says. "If I cut the meat properly, the brain doesn't die. It doesn't taste as good as the fresh stuff but it gets the job done."

"Great, I finished my cup of pudding just in time to find out that I'm eating meticulously carved zombie brains." I'm not sure which is worse, the fact that I just ate zombie meat, or the fact that I definitely want seconds.

The feeling in my fingers begins to come back as Terry holsters his staple gun. I crush the empty pudding cup with my reattached hand to see how it feels. I might never be a hand model but, aside from the teeth marks and staples, I'm as good as new.

"So, you're a ghoul?"

He takes off his lab coat and hangs it on one of the meat hooks sticking out of the far wall, then unbuttons his flannel and tosses it beneath the slab. He's wearing a black t-shirt with the word 'RELAX' written in large, white stencil-print. Beneath the

white letters, in red ink, it says 'or don't, I don't care, shut up.' This guy saved my life, twice.

"Yeah," he says. "I'm a ghoul."

The watch on Terry's wrist begins to beep as he walks toward the morgue bed at the end of the row. Of all of the slabs, it's the only one with any sort of bedding. There's a thin green sheet spread across the length of the metal and a throw pillow at the head of the slab. He lifts his hand and pushes a button to quiet the alarm then lays his head down on the pillow.

"Who's Roman?" I ask.

"He's the reason we have a place to sleep," he says, laying on the slab.

I hop into a sitting position at the foot of my bed. "But, I mean, who is he, really?"

Terry turns onto his back, lets out an exaggerated yawn and opens his eyes to stare at the ceiling. His voice cracks in a way that scares me as it falls into a deep, sincere whisper. "He's the one who showed us how to make it work. You have no idea what it was like before. It isn't perfect. I know it isn't perfect. But it works."

"So, you just do whatever he tells you?"

He shifts onto his side to face me. "He gives me a place and a name, and I do what I can to help."

"Because he says so?" I ask, stretching my legs.

"Because it works," he says. "I do this every night because I know what will happen if I don't. You might not have realized this, with all of your constant complaining," he turns onto his back and closes his eyes, "but you and I are what some folks would call 'alive'. Alive enough, anyway. It might not be the perfect life, it might not be the life you thought you would have, but it will always beat the alternative. If you would prefer option two, be my guest."

"What is he?" I ask. "He can't be human, right? If he runs all of this. If you're so afraid of him, he has to--"

Without warning, my muscles contract and my body contorts into a frightened mummy shape and falls to the hard linoleum floor. My face lands a few feet away from Granny's remains, and there's nothing I can do but stare into her like one of those magic eye posters. Her crushed nasal cavity isn't going to morph into a majestic unicorn or a portrait of Abe Lincoln. There's no hidden picture. This poor woman's mangled face, pulverized and dripping into the small cracks in the floor, looks like an abandoned Play-Doh sculpture, and smells like a tuna fish and sauerkraut cheesecake.

I can't close my eyes, or turn my head. Ghouls don't sleep, so I can't even escape into a dream and pretend for a second that I'm still alive. All I can do is watch the slow drip of Granny Ghoul's leaky face faucet and wait for sundown.

CHAPTER SIX

The harsh white and blue flicker of the fluorescent bulbs overhead makes the room look like a wax museum. Everything has an unnaturally deep texture beneath the light, so with her cracked skin and open wounds, Granny seems more like an abused haunted house prop than a real person. It doesn't make her any easier to look at. At some point, probably not too long ago, this was a woman. A human being. Sure, she tried to eat me, but to be fair, I probably looked like a loaded baked potato through her flesh fiending zombie goggles. So, who could blame her?

There are no windows in the morgue so it's hard to have a real sense of time. I feel like I've been lying here for days, counting the rings on Granny's protruded fork tongue when Terry's phone begins to vibrate. It taps against the slab, ringing like a cowbell until finally bursting into an obnoxious rooster crow.

It's his alarm. It must be time to get up. The muscles in my neck tighten as I try to lift my head

but it's just dead weight. Nothing actually moves. Within a couple of seconds, he's up and walking around, while I'm still here shaking my body from the inside as if I'm trying to swim out of a block of carbonite. I guess it's appropriate, since Terry's morning voice sounds exactly like Jabba the Hutt.

"Don't try to fight it," he mumbles coarsely. I hear his popping joints, long, exaggerated yawns, and Hutt-like gargling, but I still can't see him.

The fingers on my left hand spread slowly, peeling themselves from the linoleum like fleshy Band-Aids, leaving a chalk line of warmth where my palm used to be. It feels good to move. Even on the hard floor, stretching only a few inches, it's like switching to the cool side of the pillow. I try to close my eyes, but they're still glued to the zombie stain in front of me.

"Are you awake yet," Terry yells from another room. "It took me a few months to get used to the rigor. The more you fight it, the longer it takes to break."

All hail Terry, provider of information, and the king of too little, too late.

"Think of it like being trapped in a block of ice, and it's melting all around you," he says. "It'll fall

away on its own. Take three deep breaths and let it go."

I'm starting to understand why his car is named Tony Robbins. This is ridiculous. My first instinct is to throw my shoulders back and forth, kick my legs and toss my fists around. On the inside, it's working like gangbusters. I feel like the Tazmanian Devil, spinning around and thrashing my arms free of invisible chains. But, on the outside, I'm still a statue. My left hand is the only thing moving, and it's trying as hard as it can to compensate for the rest of my body.

Terry comes around the corner, pushing one of those rolling, yellow mop buckets. I can see him in that blurry area, just past Granny Ghoul's face. He stops and stares at my hand with a confused look.

"Are those gang signs?" He asks. "Is it sign language? I don't know sign language."

I let my hand fall to the floor.

"You're not doing the ice thing, are you?"

My middle finger pulls the rest of my hand into the air.

"Oh good, you're making progress," he says, snickering.

Using every ounce of energy in my body, I lift the finger a little higher.

He smiles and gestures to the grotesque mess on the floor. "Clean her up," he says, "then we'll figure out what to do with you." He drops the mop beside Granny and walks out of the room, leaving me alone with my finger stuck in the upright position.

Fine. Fine. My wrist falls back to the linoleum, feeling like a failure. Instead of shaking my fist, and doing what I can to rattle through the invisible ice chains, I just stare forward and try not to think. Erin. Death. Werewolves. Erin. Burgerman. Severed hand. Zombies. Erin. Dammit. Fine. Ice.

Melting fucking ice.

Trying to actively do nothing after an entire day of sitting still seems counter productive, but I relax, and slowly push the air through my lips and after a minute, it actually starts to work. As the daytime rigor loosens its grip, I feel like my whole body is taking a deep breath. Every joint on every limb cracks as I lift myself from the floor like a waking gargoyle shaking the stone from its skin.

"We live again," I groan, stretching my arms.

"What do you mean we?" Terry yells. "You mean you and the mop?"

"It's from a show I used to watch."

"Was it a show about mopping?"

"It was about gargoyles living in New York."

Ignoring the mop bucket, and wide stepping over Granny, I try to follow Terry's voice toward the adjacent room. My legs are made of jello, so it's impossible to walk in a straight line. I'm basically figure skating my way around the morgue, making sloppy loops and figure eights all over the place.

"I'm not a fan," Terry says.

Rather than a door, the rooms are separated by a curtain of thick vinyl sheets hanging from the ceiling. It's the sort of doorway protection that restaurants use to keep hungry insects from freezing in their meat supply. I push through the heavy, blue-tinted plastic, and see Terry searching through a metal drawer of assorted sharp objects. In the center of the room, there's a large island counter top with vials, beakers, and assorted trays, organized neatly around its surface like something you might see on a mad scientist's cooking show. If Martha Stewart wanted to piece together her own macaroni and pom pom version of Frankenstein's monster, this is what her craft room would look like.

The walls are lined with countless shelves of jarred, pickled-meat substances, each labeled in black marker with a date, and various names from Anatomy 101

scribbled on Post-it notes.

"You don't like gargoyles? Like, real gargoyles?" I ask. Terry looks up for a second then continues to search through his drawers. "Isn't that kind of, I don't know, racist?"

"I was talking about the animated soap opera with winged lizard people who turn into stone during the day. I just don't buy it."

"Are you serious?" I lean against a shelf of adhesives to keep my balance. "You're an undead mortician who just spent the day as a motionless corpse, and you have trouble believing that something is possible?"

"That's what I said." He lifts a tray of tools from one of the drawers, and sets it on the counter top. "I've never seen a gargoyle fall asleep on the edge of a skyscraper. That's just careless. It doesn't make sense."

"It's a cartoon."

"That doesn't mean it has to suck," he says, picking through his toolbox. "Episode one should have ended with the bad guy pushing the gargoyles off of the building while they were statues. Roll credits. End of the show."

"Why are we even talking about this? It doesn't

matter," I say. "I don't care about Gargoyles."

"So, we're on the same page." He lifts a long, thin scalpel from the pile of tools.

"Why didn't you tell me I was going to be paralyzed?"

"I did." He bends behind the counter top, reaches into a cabinet, and returns with a decapitated head in his hands. "It's part of the process. Book, staples, gauze, suit, coffin, rigor mortis, funeral. Every single time."

"I thought you were just telling me to sit still during the funeral."

"Well yeah, that was the gist of it."

"There's a pretty big difference between sitting still for a couple of hours and being paralyzed all freaking day, underground, in a coffin. Shouldn't that be in the book? Why isn't that in The Book?"

"There's a lot that's not in there." He carefully sets the head into a vice grip, tightening until the zombie's eyes bulge slightly. "Do you know how much money it costs to print those things? It not like I'm raking in the dough working here."

"What else haven't you told me?"

He lifts his scalpel from the counter, and begins to examine the head, thinking aloud, "There's the

vampire silver-blood thing, troll jelly, the fast food ghouL eyes, you know about that one. Something about Amish ogres? Gargoyles definitely don't sleep on the edge of buildings. I don't know, there's a lot. I think you pretty much know all of the important ghouL related information."

What the hell is he talking about? I try to ask about the troll jelly, but he's too focused on his game of Undead Operation to care about my question. The head in the vice begins to growl as the scalpel slides into its temple. I'm waiting for a glowing red nose and loud buzzer sound, but all I hear is the sad death rattle of a starved animal stuck in a trap. Terry continues to stare intently, cutting through layers of skin in silence until a large chunk of brain falls to the surface of the countertop. The zombie's jaw drops and everything goes quiet.

Pulling his hands toward his chest nervously, Terry jumps away from the counter. "Come on," he whispers. "Come on." He stares at the head, sweating with all of the concern of a bomb squad rookie. "Wake up. Just wake."

"What are you--"

"Jesus! You're still here?"

"Yeah. Where else would I be?"

He slaps the zombie across the cheek, and the head roars itself back to life. Terry wipes the sweat from his forehead. "That was close." He takes the fallen piece of meat to the fridge, and places it in a plastic container marked, 'Tuesday'. "Put him back in the cabinet."

"What? I... um... Sure." I loosen the vice grip and grab the zombie by its hair. It looks up at me, stretching its lips toward my wrist as if it wasn't just lobotomized. I toss it into the cabinet and there's a harmonized groan as it settles into the pile of similar heads.

"Are you finished mopping?" Terry asks, looking at me as if I just walked into the room.

"I've been here the whole time. You were literally just talking to me."

"Right, stapled neck, brown hair, ghoul. Sorry, I'm not good with faces. I don't know if you've noticed but," he points to the large scar above his ear, "looking this good comes at a price."

"So, you honestly don't remember me?"

"Sure I do, staple-neck, brown hair. You're one of a kind." His pocket begins to vibrate and his expression sours. He lifts the phone, glances at the screen, and shakes his head. "We have to go."

"Where could we possibly have to go?"

In a single motion, like a street magician, Terry pockets his phone, lifts something from his tool belt, and drops it in my hands. "Hold this." It's another pamphlet, a page from his book, that looks a lot like mine except that it has the word 'VAMPIRE' stamped across the cover.

"What am I supposed to do with this," I ask, following Terry into the main room.

"Just hold on to it, we'll need it. And, grab that suitcase." He points to a dust colored box sitting beside the rear entrance.

"What's in it? More pamphlets? You know I'm not your personal assistant, right?"

"First of all, that's exactly what you are. And second," he closes his eyes and grabs the bridge of his nose, "if you need to know, which you don't, there are weapons in the case."

"Wait, what? No. Why? Why do we need weapons?" I feel the grenade roll against my hand as I slide the pamphlet into my pocket. "Are there more zombies?"

"Hand it over," he says.

"Hand what over?"

"I could just let you run around with it in your pocket," he says. "It would go off in your pants and

I'd have one less mouth to feed. Problem solved."

"I didn't--"

"But then again, grenades are expensive." He extends his hand, palm up, like he's asking for money.

I hand him the little metal potato and try to avoid eye contact. "Sorry."

"It's fine." He breathes hot air onto the grenade and wipes it against his khakis the way some people clean apples. "Just grab the case."

The suitcase is pretty heavy. I don't feel the painful strain of overworked muscles or joints anymore, but my staples drift a bit as I carry the case into the garage.

Terry pops the trunk of the hearse, and puts his grenade in the coffin. "Bring the case up front."

Using both hands to hold the case, I penguin shuffle toward the passenger side door. "Is this thing made of lead?"

"Silver, obviously." He gets in the car, reaches across the passenger seat, and opens my door.

"Thanks," I grunt, holding the door with my knee.

When the suitcase hits the floor of the car, a cloud of dust bursts upward through the crushed pudding cups.

"Open it," he says.

There's no lock on the case, just a simple, rusted clasp and the letters "TK" monogrammed across the front in white, cursive letters. I pop it open, and the inside has the distinct smell of a brain tumor. Nestled in perfect, factory-formed, black padding, there's a cartoonishly large silver revolver, a row of 12 bullets, and a shiny, metal stake.

"I thought it had to be like a wooden stake. Isn't that how you kill vampires? Where's the cross and holy water?"

Terry doesn't take his eyes off of the road. His fingers grip the steering wheel tightly as he speaks in a slow, foreboding manner, "Of course. Everyone knows the only way to kill a vampire is with a sacred stake carved from the original cross of Jesus Christ, himself."

"Wow, what? Seriously," I lean in to hear more. "I mean, I guess that makes sense."

"No, you idiot," he says. "It doesn't make sense. Silver. It has to be silver. Did the wolf eat the part of your brain that helps you listen when other people are talking?"

"Oh, I'm sorry." I put the stake back into the case, and close the clasp. "I forgot to mention that I failed Supernatural Studies in college."

"This is your college," he says. "The pamphlets are your textbooks, and I'm your new dean."

"I think I'm going to have to drop this class," I laugh. "I don't even know what I'm doing here."

"You're earning your room and board." We pull into the parking lot of a small, dimly lit diner. "Get the page ready."

"So, what do I do?" I ask. "Do I just hand the paper over to the vampire and say 'Welcome to the club'?"

Terry reaches over, grabs the suitcase handle, and lifts it onto his lap with ease. He hands me the silver stake, and loads the gun as he speaks, "If anyone's alive in there, hand them the page, and get behind me." He closes the loaded chamber, holds the gun low to his side, and gets out of the car.

I take the page from my pocket and stare at its cover. Vampire. It says, vampire. There are vampires. I have a stake in my hand, and I am going to meet a vampire. Even saying the word feels ridiculous, but that doesn't make me any less afraid.

Terry knocks on my window. "Class is in session, come on."

CHAPTER SEVEN

From the outside, through the glass double-doorway, the diner seems to be closed. There's a single light coming from somewhere behind the bar and kitchen area, but most of the restaurant is pitch black. Terry holds the door open and waves his hand like a bellhop, signaling for me to go inside. He smiles as if he's doing me a favor by letting me go first, but we both know that I'm just vampire bait.

Some sad guitar ballad whines through the speakers overhead as I enter. It's the usual sort of oldie-but-goodie elevator song that you might imagine your grandparents falling in love to. Of course, Terry knows every word. He walks in behind me, humming along as if we didn't just wander into a nest of vampires.

The light from the bar isn't bright, but through its flickering glow I can see that everything is covered in the shattered glass of broken ceiling lamps and smashed bulbs. It feels like I'm walking into a cave full of dragons, but instead of a suit of armor

and Excalibur, I have a pointy stick and a piece of paper to protect me.

"It killed the lights," Terry whispers. "It might still be here."

Apparently, vampires don't know about circuit breakers.

Ahead of me, there's a desk beside a wooden podium with a few soup stained menus and some silverware scattered between them. Four thin red lines of liquid travel in a long drip from the top of the host stand like rain on a window, racing and fading toward the floor. I take a step closer and see the broken circle pattern of desperate fingerprints all over the podium. It isn't Kool-Aid.

Beyond the host area, the tables are still cluttered with half-finished sandwiches and cheese fries, but there are no people, only small, indistinguishable, pieces of people. Chunks of flesh in the center of red puddles but not much else. My eyes follow streaks of viscera lining the black and white tile floor like human snail trails leading into or out of the host stand. I lift my hands from the desk.

"Holy shit."

"Shh." Terry taps his ear twice then points to the

desk in front of me.

I can't stop seeing the blood. A maze of long, thick red lines cross over one another in every direction with fragments of broken hand prints scattered like pieces of a puzzle. They're everywhere. All shapes and sizes. Small wet fingertip stains on little cups. Large imprints of gripping hands smeared across every corner and on every piece of furniture.

Something was dragging these poor people across the restaurant and they were doing everything they could to fight back. There's enough blood for me to know that they didn't win.

"Listen."

Squinting my eyes and staring forward, I try to hear what he hears. As the song fades to a close, I notice the quiet bug zapper smacking sound from the light in the kitchen. There's a distant chirp from a leaky faucet, and the air conditioner wheezes and coughs from above. I lower my head, turning my ear toward the podium as the next kitschy love ballad begins.

"What am I supposed to hear? I can't--"

He puts a finger to his lips.

I look at the podium, trying my best to see through it. The wood grain blurs and separates into a

tan fog as I strain my eyes. I guess I can scratch X-ray vision off of the list of possible ghoulish side effects. After a minute of catchy background vocals, buried somewhere beneath all of the Sugar Sugars and Honey Honeys, I hear it.

There's a soft, desperate whimper, a restrained cry hidden behind an open palm, coming from the other side of the desk. This is the kind of breathing usually reserved for hiding in the closet when the monster is already in your room.

Terry gestures with his index finger, pointing to me and then over the counter as if he expects me to go puddle jumping through the blood with a smile on my face. No thanks. I shake my head, copy his gesture back at him and silently mouth the words, "No freaking way."

He points at me again, this time with a more serious expression on his face, and repeats the hand signal, and mouths the word, "Go."

"No," I whisper. "I don't want to go. You go."

He gestures again, only this time with the revolver and a heavy hand.

Crap.

Holding the stake in front of me like a reluctant dousing rod, I tiptoe around the desk. That hushed cry

gets louder and louder until it's all that I can hear. The sounds from the other side become amplified, thick and full of echoed bass tones. What was once a subtle hint of crying is now an outright sob of fast, waterlogged panic breaths.

I stop, crumpling the pamphlet in my shaking fist and look to see if Terry is hearing any of this. Of course, he isn't. He's dancing in place, rocking from side to side with his eyes closed.

As I turn the corner, the crying pushes itself into an almost animalistic grunt, building into a string of heavy, painful coughs. There are six of these deep, lung destroying, lifelong smoker coughs and then there's nothing. No sound, no creature. No vampires. I still feel that last hacking breath bouncing between my ears as I inch forward, peering into the shadow below. My ankles are shivering, waiting to be grabbed or slashed or eaten. But, there's nothing there. At least, nothing that I can see.

"Hello?"

The shadowed tile looks like a bottomless pit beneath my feet. My eyes are losing focus, shifting back and forth between the crumpled pamphlet in my hand and the nothing below. I turn my head to look at

Terry, hoping that he'll realize how unqualified I am to be doing any of this. I want him to tell me that I failed the test and that he's revoking my ghoul license, but he doesn't. Instead, he takes a step forward and aims the barrel of the gun over the counter.

"Just go," he says, flicking his wrist, and waving the revolver like a lazy conductor.

I feel like a little kid who's too afraid of monsters to peek under his bed. Only, I know that the bogeyman is real, and I don't even have a blanket to keep me safe. I'm not going to look under the podium. Why would I do something so unbelievably stupid? Oh, that's right, he has a gun. Still, he wants me to stick my hand into some hornet's nest of vampire teeth, and I'm supposed to just go along with it. Yeah, sure, getting shot would suck, but, I mean, if there's some fang-faced bat creature from hell behind door number two, I think I'd rather just take the bullet and call it a night.

I'm done with this. If he wants to see what's over the counter, he can just look for himse--

Slipping through a syrupy puddle of something unspeakable, I grab at the desk to try to slow my fall, but my feet have no traction. Despite every

attempt to keep from crashing, I Scooby-Doo run myself right into the ground. My hands mostly break my fall, but the tile is hard enough to pop one of the staples loose from my wrist.

Lifting myself onto my knees, I look up to see that I'm facing a false wooden wall backdrop. It's the kind of useless architecture a corporate restaurant might place behind a host stand to create the illusion of a cubical. There's a dollar bill taped to the wall in front of me, with the words "Good luck" written in black marker across George Washington's face. I hear a faint thud from the podium and before I can turn around, there's a soft hot breath on my neck. Shit. It's behind me. Whatever it is, it's right behind me.

My eyes look as far to the right as possible, trying to somehow circumnavigate my head, but it's no use. Through a heavy breath, with its wet quivering lips spitting into my ear, the creature speaks.

Its voice is broken in that way voices tend to break when someone has something serious to cry about. It's a thick, punctuated stammer, and I can't make out exactly what it's trying to say, but I know that it's English. More importantly, I know that it's a human voice, speaking human words, and I'm still here, not being digested by vampire intestines.

With my eyes completely closed, and the rest of my body contracted as if I'm ready to be throat punched by serrated knife-teeth, I turn with the stake held high.

"Help...me," the voice gargles into the side of my face. "Puh-Please."

A hand grabs at my chest, and I drop the stake. "Shit," I say, throwing my back against the cubical wall. "Terry!" My eyes open and there's a blood red hand reaching toward me, grasping at the air.

"Help me," the voice chokes. The extended arm falls to the tile, exhausted and limp, and I see his face. This open wound in the shape of a man, wide eyed and still crying, retracts his hand and takes hold of his neck. He's been bit. Attacked. When Terry mentioned vampires, I imagined two small puncture wounds behind the ear, little black dots an inch apart with a cartoonish drizzle of blood for effect, but this poor guy looks like he took a bear trap to the jugular.

"I... I'm here to help."

"Please," he whispers, "Don't let it--"

"It's okay." I fumble around for the stake without taking my eyes off of the man's neck. "I won't hurt you."

"It took them." Globbs of red liquid bubble from the man's wound, spilling through his fingers.

"They... all of them, they were screaming and-- God."

A drop of blood falls from the man's saturated wrist and lands on a white plastic employee badge pinned over his heart, highlighting his name in red.

"Scott," I say, finally finding the stake, "That's your name right? Scott. I need you to come with me."

My knees crack as I lift myself from the floor, using the stake as a temporary crutch until I get to my feet. "It might still be here. We need to go, now."

"It was... I mean, all of them... they were..." the man grunts as he takes hold of my hand. "They were monsters."

I help him to his feet, but he doesn't look like he'll make it to the door.

"It's okay," I tell him, and honestly I don't know if I'm lying. I probably should have read the vampire portion of the book, but I've been too afraid to really do much of anything. I lift the pamphlet, and reach out slowly.

"Here," I say, unraveling the paper as I extend my hand toward the stranger.

"What is it?" He moves the hand from his neck to take the page, and there's an audible squishing sound.

"This is The Book," I say, "It has everything you need to know."

The man trembles, leaning against the host stand to keep from collapsing entirely. He wipes a bead of sweat from his cheek, and his bloody knuckles paint three red lines across his face as he stares at the paper. He doesn't say the word out loud, he just moves his eyes over the thick red letters for a few seconds and then sort of grins and shakes his head. He laughs softly, looking to me with sad, dead eyes and a weak smile.

"Vampires." The word trembles from his lips through a brief smirk. His expression sinks into the 'where were you ten minutes ago' look of someone who was just handed a map of safety zones after walking through a minefield. He opens the pamphlet, and begins to read aloud in a strained whisper. "If you are reading this," he says, lowering his eyebrows in confusion, "I apologize in advance." He looks at me, and waves the pamphlet in the air between us, "What the hell is this?"

Before I have the chance to say a word, or apologize for knowing just as little as he does, I hear something click, and then the top of Scott's head explodes like a balloon filled with haggis. Chunks of

human shrapnel paint the floor and walls around the host stand as the scalped body falls behind the counter. I look over the podium and see Terry standing there still pointing a smoking gun in my direction.

"Stake him," he says, "we have to destroy the brain."

"What the fuck," I scream.

Terry lowers his gun, and repeats loudly, "Stake him, now!"

My upper torso is tinted red and I'm shaking uncontrollably. The man's body, Scott's body, is laying motionless at my feet and I can't stop my hands from shivering. "He wasn't a vampire," I yell. "You fucking shot him. He was just a guy."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Terry says, staring into the darkness of the restaurant, "You need to stake him in the forehead, now. And grab the page, ink is expensive."

"I just watched you murder someone." My back kisses the cubical wall. "I'm not going anywhere with you, you psychopath."

"We don't have time for this," he says. "We have to go. If we don't burn this place soon, they'll spread."

Above Terry, it looks as if the ceiling is

breathing. The shadows pass in dark waves, splashing and breaking across the tile. I haven't eaten. This must be the onset of Ghoulvision. I should probably get out of here before Terry starts to look like a fuzzy baked potato.

I shake my head and try to blink through the hallucination, but it only gets worse. Figures begin to form in the shadows as the darkness separates into silhouetted limbs, spreading across the ceiling in every direction. I see them moving slowly over one another, inching toward us from above. This is no hallucination.

There are about ten of them. Vampires. I guess they're vampires, but they look nothing like a spooky old man with a widow's peak and a cape. I don't know what I was expecting. Two small fangs, maybe some bat-like features, glittery diamond skin. Nothing like this.

These things are animals. Forgotten beasts from some deranged fairytale too terrifying for sharing as bedtime stories or over campfires. With the flesh of their bodies outstretched beyond the point of tearing, each creature seems to have been distorted from the inside out. It's as if their skeletal structures were rearranged into something that sort of resembles a

giant spider wearing a human shaped skin-suit. Only, somehow, more disgusting. Thin muscular limbs have sprouted from their shoulder blades while their facial features have been relocated by over-sized, newly formed dagger teeth. Some have eye sockets for cheeks, others are wearing their old noses like little pointy hats, but all of them have a garbage disposal of shark teeth where their faces used to be.

I point the stake at the ceiling and scream. No actual words come out, but Terry seems to get the idea.

He looks up, tracing my line of sight with the gun, and immediately fires into the darkness as machete mouthed monsters descend all around us. "Run!" he yells.

I'm already three steps into the kitchen when I realize that the door was right there. I could have been out of here, back in the car safe and sound, but instead, I'm running further into this shitstorm of arachnovamps. I am not a smart man.

Diving behind the bar, I cover my face, and prepare to be swallowed whole. At least, if there is some sort of secondary after life for those of us too stupid to take advantage of a second chance, I'll get to tell people I was killed by a werewolf and a vampire. That should trump any car crash or cancer

story at the pearly gates.

Something grabs my shoulder, and my first instinct is to cover my eyes and yell, "No thank you."

"What are you doing?" Terry says, loosening his grip on my shirt.

I peek between my fingers and see that the light from the kitchen is shining like a vampire-proof fence, keeping the creatures just out of reach.

"We're okay," he says, lifting new bullet shells from his fanny pack. "They won't come into the light. They're basically blind."

"I thought you said we were going to see a vampire. A. Vampire. Not a freaking horde of saber-toothed spiders." Claws reach over the bar, swinging into and out of the light.

"They're vampires." Pointing his gun at one of the deformed arms, Terry fires and there is a pop and hiss sound, like acid eating its way through layers of fat and bone. The arm falls back into the darkness, smoking from its new wound. "Not vampire vampires, but they're basically the same, you know?"

"Yeah, saying the word twice really explained a lot."

"Oh, a sarcastic comment from the guy who ran deeper into the vampire den instead of just taking

three steps to the left."

"I'm not good at improvising. I'm more of a make a plan and stick to it kind of person."

"Was your plan to find the fastest way to die, because if so, I applaud your dedication." He walks slowly through the kitchen, rolling his eyes as he speaks. "Look. There are two types of vampires. There's the kind you can talk to, your average run of the mill, pale skinned, fang toothed, human-looking loner type, you know, vampire vampires, and then there's the kind that you shoot in the face. Which do you think these are?"

"Not vampire vampires."

"See, you're gonna pass this class, after all." He walks two fingers along the prep area counter top like tiny dancing feet, avoiding crumbs, and hopping over plates.

"Why isn't any of this in the book? Why make a vampire page if you're just going to shoot them in the head while they read it? It doesn't make any sense."

His fingers stop at the oven, as he looks over his shoulder to answer. "It's easier to put someone down if they're busy thinking about the rabbits." He turns one of the black knobs on the stove and gas whistles into the air like a deflating balloon only, instead of

a light head and squeaky voice, we get a rotten egg smell and an extremely flammable restaurant.

I ask Terry how he plans on getting out of here before the firework show and in true Terry fashion, he lifts a silver lighter from his utility belt and says, "Through the front door."

"Is your entire life just one big John Carpenter movie?"

"Only when I'm lucky."

The distorted arms reaching over the bar are getting deeper into the light before retracting. Their hunger is making them brave.

"How long will the light hold them back," I ask, watching inhuman claws scratch through the shadows.

"I don't know," he says. "Depends. Could be forever, could be two minutes."

"But, if they jump over, they'll turn to dust or something, right?"

"Is that a serious question?" He raises an eyebrow. "It's more of an adapted precautionary measure."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"If being in the sun could turn your body inside out, you might be a little nervous around flashlights, right?"

"So, the light doesn't actually do anything?"

"It buys us time."

"But, when they figure it out."

"They probably won't." He peeks through the small window of a walk-in freezer.

"Probably?"

"Maybe, I don't know, it isn't a perfect science."

He opens the door. "Just stay here, and watch them."

"What am I supposed to do if they get over the bar?"

"I'm sure you'll think of something." Terry disappears into the freezer, and I throw my back against the wall to keep watch.

One of the creatures screams into the light and then paces in the darkness as if gathering the courage to try again. I watch it push its way through the crowded restaurant, stomping over unnaturally stretched limbs and growling. It turns its teeth my way for a second and the light from the kitchen glistens across the creature's neck. It's wearing a necklace. With all of the monster teeth and arachnid limbs waving around, I almost forgot that these things were people. Earlier today, this thing could have been someone's wife or mother. She could have been a doctor, a senator, or a stay at home mom just out to

grab her kids some late night milkshakes, but now Spider-mom is making angry circles around an army of blood hungry creatures of the night instead of reading bedtime stories.

I crack the freezer door open and see Terry rifling through boxes in search of something. "What's the plan," I ask. "Do we just start a fire and run?"

"Usually, I'd torch the place from the outside and get them while they're stop, drop, and rolling out the front door, but since you decided to run into the kitchen, that plan is kind of mute."

"Moot."

"Are you mooing at me? Is that a fat joke? I'll have you know that I'm in perfect shape for someone of my age, and size, and weight."

"No, I-- What are we supposed to do?"

"It's simple vampire 101, just backwards. Which is technically still 101 because of the law of palindromes."

"And that is?"

"It's a word that's the same forward as it is backwards." He smiles. "First we stake them, then we burn them."

Some of the arachnovamps swipe their claws into and out of the light, shaking imaginary fire from

their fingertips. Behind them, Spider-mom's steps get faster and more erratic.

"Can I at least have the gun?"

"I gave you the stake, use it."

"But. But."

"Close the door, you're letting the cold out."

"Why are you even in there?"

"I need flour. I don't see any in the kitchen. Hopefully, there's some in here." He continues to talk as the door closes between us.

"Cool, we get to die eating cupcakes."

A misshapen limb reaches slowly past the bar with enough confidence to catch my attention. As the light passes over the creature's elbow, I see a black tribal tattoo with the word "Unbreakable" scribbled from its wrist to elbow.

"They're getting closer," I knock on the freezer window. "Terry. They're getting closer. What do I do?"

He opens the door just enough to stick his head through the crack. "Stake one." He says this as if he were telling me to tie my shoe.

"Come on! Just give me the gun."

"No, just stake the first one you see. It'll buy us some time."

The door closes between us as I look at the stake

in my hand and shake my head. This is ridiculous. Mr. Unbreakable is aggressively inching forward over the counter. Three of his arms are swinging wildly over the bar, tossing silverware and french fry baskets all over the floor. I guess this is his way of volunteering.

I take a step forward and the creature keeps his teeth aimed in my direction. I've never even seen this guy before tonight, and for all I know he was an absolute sweetheart when he woke up this morning, but now, with his saber-tooth banana fangs chewing the air, spraying a red mist of spit and who knows what else, I know that he's done something horrible. And really, when it comes down to it, I think I'll feel a little less guilty staking someone with tribal tattoos.

"Okay, there are two ways we can do this." I inch toward Mr. Unbreakable. "One, you jump over here and drink my blood and stuff like a serious jerk, or two," my fingers squeeze the stake, "you just let me kill you, and it's a win-win for both of us. I get to live, and you get to not be a disgusting spider-creature thing. What do you think?"

The vampire's face doesn't really seem capable of any expression other than the standard "hungry and

pissed about it" look that all of the undead monsters seem to have perfected. As it grips the bar top and roars, the red goo dripping from its teeth glistens, and I get the feeling that Mr. Unbreakable is opting for choice number one. I was hoping we could do this the easy way. In the future, if I have a future, I'm going to call dibs on freezer duty.

I can do this. I can do this. I'm really not looking forward to knowing what happens when a vampire dies. I've seen the movies. Explosions of body parts or fiery piles of ash and bone. It seems like standard vampire practice to die in a blaze of horrifying glory and to bite as many people as possible in the process. In this case, there's only one person to bite, and he's standing alone in the middle of a kitchen, surrounded by herbs and spices. I might as well put an apple in my mouth.

My feet aren't exactly cooperating with the rest of my body. Instead of the large, confident steps toward the bar that my brain thinks I should be taking, my shoes are refusing to lift from the ground. If there was a scale to measure the intimidation factor of a walk, my reluctant kindergarten shuffle would rate just below skipping.

Across the bar, the wet smacking hiss of tongues

against teeth gets louder as I shuffle forward. The creatures are forcibly snaking over one another, piling inward toward the bar as if they can smell me coming and, in all of their pushing, they trap Mr. Unbreakable. He shrieks and thrashes his body loose enough to jut a hand out in my direction. He's stuck. Pinned against the bar, with his fingers outstretched, Mr. Unbreakable almost looks like he's asking for help. It's sort of sad, except I know that if I extended a helping hand, he wouldn't hesitate to punch me in the face with his teeth and take the Pepsi challenge with my blood.

Avoiding his reach, I get close enough to smell the buffalo sauce still lingering on his breath. My arm struggles to lift the stake any higher than my hips. I don't know if it's just my nerves or the missing staple finally starting to wear on my wrist, but I can't do it. Five unnaturally stretched fingers, like dark gray knives protruding through knuckles, wave toward my face, scratching the air beside my ear. I grip the stake with both hands and raise it over my head. "I'm sorry."

"They don't have any flour!" A voice yells.

"Holy shit!" My chin tucks into my chest and I grit my teeth with my eyes closed.

"At least they have some grease. It's not as good, but it'll do."

My head raises timidly as I lower my shoulders and turn toward the freezer. I see Terry, standing a few feet from the door, smiling into a white plastic bucket. "Seriously! Why do you hate me?"

Lifting his face from the grease, Terry's eyes and mouth stretch into wide, horror-struck circles. He drops the bucket and immediately extends the revolver in my direction. "Get down!"

I try to turn around, but before I can even think to lift the stake, I'm on the ground and Mr. Unbreakable is sifting through my organs. Spider-mom and the others jump over the bar with a new found bravery, scattering in every direction throughout the kitchen. Gun shots boom and fizzle all around me, but all I can see is the blinding kitchen light above and this silhouetted blood-sucker lifting my heart into the air like he just won a game of Operation. The creature's jaw stretches as it lowers the ball of meaty tissue toward its mouth.

Through squinted eyes, I watch as a thin, wet tongue slithers out from between its teeth and licks a bead of juice from my heart. There's another loud thunderclap from the gun and half of Mr. Unbreakable's

head disappears.

"Stake him!" Terry yells.

I hear him but I can't stop staring at my open chest as the vampire's body falls to the tile. Lifting myself from the floor, I do what I can to push my small intestines back into the giant crater in my torso. They're slick, wet and slippery, but solid in a way that I couldn't have imagined. It feels like a jump rope made of thumbs, covered in rancid pancake syrup. We're going to need a lot of duct tape.

"Stake him," he yells again, shooting one of the creatures in the neck.

Mr. Unbreakable is on the ground, spewing a dark goo from his cheek and still clutching my heart. It looks like a thick, red Jello mold of a rotisserie chicken jiggling in his fist.

Terry shoots the teeth off of two of the creatures. "Seven, Six," he says. Explosions of red and white enamel spread across the floor as he continues to fire. He's aiming carefully and methodically, counting his bullets out loud. He's trying to disarm them while he can, and it's working. "Five." The bullet hacks through the side of one of the vamps, splitting its head into two uneven halves. Broken teeth and empty shell casings fall to the tile

beside my hand.

There are still about ten of these line-backer sized tarantulas jumping from wall to wall, crawling around the kitchen and circling Terry. "Are you just gonna sit there?"

I can't move. I'm not made for this.

Spider-Mom drops from the ceiling and lands over Terry's arms, taking him to the tile. "Get the stake," he says holding the revolver between himself and the creature's fangs. "I could use some help."

"My heart."

"I'll fix it later," he says, swinging the silver revolver like a torch, "just get up!" He pistol whips the gun through Spider-mom's nose, caving in the better part of her face with a burning sizzle. The mob of arachnovamps encircles him as he shakes the blood from his fist and punches, gun-first, through Spider-mom's chest. With his fist sticking out of the vampire's back, Terry fires the revolver into the horde of fangs. "Four, Three, Two."

One of Mr. Unbreakable's arms lifts from the tile and swats into the empty air beside my face. I jump to my feet, take a step back and look directly at his teeth. It's just a muscle spasm. Mr. Unbreakable isn't awake, not entirely. Not yet. His arm swings wildly

like a live wire smacking the tile and splashing around in my blood. The flailing fist pulls the rest of the creature's weight, flipping it between its stomach and back like a fish out of water. The stake bounces out from beneath Mr. Unbreakable's ribs, clanging against the tile as it rolls toward my foot.

The creature's movements are becoming more pronounced. His head is shaking back and forth like a finger smashed in a car door, trying to wave the pain away. I see my heart trembling in his fist with every little seizure and it's pissing me off. I kind of thought that I might get to live a peaceful, stab-free afterlife. I was hoping to just watch a lot of movies, catch up on some reading, maybe travel a little, but now, I'm staring at this bullet-blinded, heart-licking asshole, and all I want to do is set him on fire.

Terry is on his feet with Spider-mom's body still wrapped around his wrist. Her arms, legs, and head are slowly burning to a deep black ash from the outside in, fizzling like one of those Fourth of July firework snakes, leaving only a puffy, toasted Cheeto in the shape of a vampire. A large, trucker hat wearing vamp jumps onto the stove, then dives toward Terry from above.

"Look out!" I yell.

He raises the gun into the air, ripping through the sculpted ashes of Spider-mom as the trucker vamp belly flops toward him with arms and jaws spread wide. Terry fires through the cloud of mom dust, cutting the trucker's watermelon head into a party platter of red single serving chunks. The rest of the vampire's massive body crashes to the tile and begins to burn to ash. "One," Terry says as the rest of the vamps surround him.

Mr. Unbreakable sits up, shaking his head and grunting as his arms and legs continue to shudder and jerk themselves back to life. I wrap my knuckles around his shoes and pull until his shaved head smacks the tile, splashing into the puddle of blood. I stain my fist in red, lifting the stake from the sludge covered floor and Mr. Unbreakable growls into the air between us. Every tendon in his neck stretches and tightens as he sits up and roars.

Using its second set of arms, the vampire pushes against the floor, launching itself skyward. With both hands, I meet him in the middle, driving the stake directly into his forehead and forcing him back to the tile. I stake him again and again, until his skin boils over and he melts into an indistinguishable ooze. Nothing is left but wet ash and the little

meatball of gelatin that was ripped from my rib cage.

When I lift my heart out of the vampire soup, it's much heavier than I thought it would be. I know that I don't need it, but for whatever reason, I feel better knowing that it's not being digested by a man sized spider creature, so I shove it back into the hole in my chest. My ribs drop the heart immediately, and the ball of fatty tissue plays Plinko down my organs until finally settling somewhere in my gut. It'll do for now.

"I got one!" I shout. I turn around to see Terry standing in a kiddie pool of vampire dust with five monsters tearing at his skin with their teeth. I should probably just run while they're distracted, but as ridiculous as he is, Terry is kind of the closest thing I have to a friend. He also happens to have the keys to Tony Robbins.

I clutch the stake in my bloody fist and take a step forward. "Hey... you," I say to the gang of feasting spiders. They turn in perfect unison when they hear my voice. "Get your damn hands off him."

Standing there with Mr. Unbreakable's blood on my fists, facing the horde of drooling monsters, I feel like my knuckles are made of dynamite, like I could turn bodies to ash with a single punch, like these

things don't stand a chance.

Within half of a second, two of the creature's are all over me and it's pretty obvious that I'm no Superman. One of the vamps, a tall man in a greasy off-white chef apron, lowers his body to the tile as if preparing to pounce. The other, the saggy-skinned grandpa in the Hawaiian shirt, leap-frogs over the cook's back and lunges at my chest. I put my hands up to block the old man's jaw but before I can even point the stake in his direction, he takes a bite out of my shoulder.

I scream, and grab the back of his neck, pulling on his cold, loose turkey skin until he lets go. I'm swinging the stake with my right hand, while punching his face with my left, but none of it is very effective. This old man must have been an Olympic-grade badass when he was alive. You don't get moves like this from speed-walking through the mall. With the stake pushed against his chest, I throw Grandpa's body forward and he falls to the tile in front of the cook. For a second, I can see Terry in the distance, doing his best to lift himself from the floor but he's still surrounded.

"Terry," I yell, "are you alive?"

"Not since '64." He smacks one of the vamps with

the revolver and pulls himself to his feet. "But, I'm okay. How about you?"

Cook's back arches, lowering his shoulders to the ground as all four of his arms spread wide and push against the tile. He snarls and springs forward, extending his claws toward my chest. Grandpa leaps to his feet with his hands raised and mouth open, he's already growling and ready to swallow me whole, but Cook slams into him like a monster truck hitting, well, an old man.

As both vampires rocket toward me, Grandpa looks a lot like a bug trapped on a windshield until Cook pushes him, face first, into my fist and into the stake. The wrinkled bloodsucker falls to the floor as blisters erupt over his skin, melting away anything remotely human and decaying into a puddle of monster slop.

Cook is a freakishly tall, terribly emaciated, prison tattooed savage, but he just helped me kill my second vampire, so I kind of love him. Before I have the chance to say thanks, or invite him to my birthday party, Cook lifts me off of my feet with one set of arms, and grabs at my neck with the other. His skinny spider-claws pull my head and shoulders in opposite directions, as if he's trying to pop the cork from a

wine bottle.

I try to raise the stake high enough to reach the creature's head, but there are too many arms blocking the way. My hands stop at the top of his rib cage and there's a gaping hole where his heart was torn out. The flesh around the wound is a mangled mixture of grays and reds with white specks like bacon fat surrounding the outer layers of skin. Mostly, it's just disgusting. I spike the stake into the keyhole of Cook's chest and twist until I feel the sizzle and click of his spine unlocking. His fingers tighten around my neck, squeezing and lifting at my jaw like he's trying to turn me into a ghoulish-shaped Pez dispenser.

Over Cook's shoulder, I see Terry still swinging his revolver to keep the vamps at a distance. There are three of them left, timidly circling around him, all with deep, burnt, gun-punched dents decorating their bodies. Terry kicks the bucket of bacon grease, tipping the container and spreading the liquid fat across the floor like a flammable, indoor Slip'n Slide. He whistles loud enough to drown out the popping and cracking sound of my spine, and Cook's grip loosens slightly. Instead of using all of his energy to play pop goes the weasel with my skull, the

vampire turns his head and roars in Terry's direction, as if to say, "Wait your turn".

I feel his grip tighten but, with all of my weight, I walk up the creature's elongated torso, and chest-stomp the stake deeper into his spine until my foot kicks the silver through his back. The creature's grip loosens as his flesh boils over, foaming around my ankle, and we both reverse belly-flop onto the hard tile.

My right foot is still stuck in Cook's rib cage as his body flails wildly. He's trying to simultaneously escape from, and eat, my leg, and there's really not much I can do to stop him. The stake is lost somewhere between my foot and the bubbling pile of ashy, decomposing flesh, so all I can do is slap box his teeth and dodge his claws until my foot is free.

The vampire raises its second set of arms to swipe away my hands and does a full sit up, pushing its body up the length of my calf. His teeth sink into my leg and I scream. It doesn't actually hurt, but it definitely looks like it should.

With Cook's face only a few inches from mine, I can see the deep, intricate texture of the monster's gums, the sweaty, bruised, pasty skin folded over and pushed toward the back of its neck like the wrapper of

a candy bar. His shaved head is bulbous and full of wet dimples like an unripe, cherry kissed, tumor-laden kiwi that just happens to be eating my leg.

Without the stake, I'm left with only two options. I can either allow Cook to gnaw through my leg and live out the rest of my days as a stump-leg pirate zombie, or I can resort to more drastic measures.

I close my eyes and bury my face into the vampire's skull. Its long limbs beat against the tile, slipping through the blood as Cook tries to tear my mouth from his forehead. With the creature's cheeks in both hands, I continue to chomp until I get to the chewy taffy center, and Cook falls lifelessly to the tile, bubbling and melting around the imprints of my teeth.

The three vampires are still trudging through the bacon grease with their mouths all open, shrieking and slobbering, but I don't see Terry anywhere. No. He was out of bullets. I took too long with Cook. I wasn't paying attention. I should have been there. I should have helped. They got him. They fucking ate Terry. I grab the stake from the floor and growl.

My arms spread wide as I charge teeth first, battle-cry and all, into the crowd of slippery vampires. A vengeful rage plays puppet with my body as

I dive headlong into the trio of arachnovamps, tackling all three of them to the floor. I slide across the tile, punching the stake into everything I see. My knuckles force themselves into and out of boiling skin until we stop sliding and all three of the creatures are on the floor, riving and contorting under me, dissolving into one another.

"Holy crap! Where did that come from?" I turn and see Terry standing in front of the manager's office, holding a lighter. He's completely fine.

"I thought you-- I thought they..."

"I knew you loved me." He throws me the keys to Tony Robbins. "Start the car, I'll be out in a second."

Still shaking pieces of vampire from my knuckles, I turn to leave and feel my heart move over my stomach. It rolls with a heavy, awkward tumble as I walk toward the door. Everything is a little harder. My leg feels like it's made of marshmallows and toothpicks. Weak, and limp, and half devoured. Resting against the door, I turn to watch the show, waiting for Terry to come up with something clever to say. He flips the top of the Zippo open with a wave of the wrist and walks toward me slowly.

"How do you like your burgers?" he asks. "I like mine..." Terry flicks his thumb to ignite the flame,

throws the lighter behind him and raises an eyebrow.

"Flame-broiled."

"I prefer... stake."

"No, you son of a--" The kitchen explodes into an incredible firework display of flaming vampire parts as the door closes behind us. "How dare you."

"Sorry."

Something shrieks from within the flaming diner, and we both turn. Through the door, I see a monster-shaped ball of fire sprinting toward the glass. It's Scott, the guy I gave the Vampire pamphlet to, only now, he has an extra set of arms growing out of his shoulder blades and a deathtrap where his face should be. Terry grabs the stake from my hand and holds it in front of him, dropping his head like he's more annoyed than anything else.

"What are you doing?"

The burning creature bursts through the door and impales itself on the stake, setting Terry's fist on fire before falling into a liquefied mass. Terry turns to me, waves the flame from his hand, and says, "I prefer stake."

"What the hell?" I say, as we walk toward Tony Robbins. "You can't just steal my line."

"You're not allowed to talk to me, right now," he

says. "I need a ten minute time out, so I don't hate you for the rest of your life."

"What did I do?" I search through the glove box, sifting through the pamphlets and loose papers until I find two cups of pudding. I toss one of the cups to Terry.

"Thanks. You know what you did," he says. "You stole my explosion."

"Sorry," I say with a mouthful of pudding. "It won't happen again."

"Here," he drops the revolver onto my lap. "Make yourself useful. There are extra shells under the seat. Put them in the case along with the gun and lock it up. And get changed, you look like you learned how to bathe by watching Carrie."

There are three boxes of shells beneath my seat. I grab one and empty the bullets into my lap. After securing everything into the case, I hand it to Terry, and find the bag the bag of clothes.

"Where to next," I ask, slipping a clean shirt over my head, "a coffee shop full of trolls?"

"Of course not," he says. "If we were going to see a troll, I'd already be wearing my poncho." He flips one of the pamphlets over the center console. Two bold words are stamped across the front in bright blue ink.

"This is where we're going."

I read the title and look at him to see if this is some kind of terrible joke.

"What?" he checks his face in the mirror. "Is there pudding in my beard?"

"Nothing." I lift the page from the console.

"Let's do this."

CHAPTER EIGHT

With the headlights and radio in the off position, we're slowly coasting down the street like a two ton cat, tip-toeing on the prowl. Ahead of us, there's a woman sitting alone at a bus stop, bobbing her head softly and playing the edge of the bench like a chair made of piano keys. From here, she looks close to my age. No older than 25. Definitely human. I don't see any extra arms and she doesn't have one of those nightmare-inducing toothy Predator faces.

She's sitting there, tapping her boots on the sidewalk, and adjusting her sweater as if there aren't lions, and tigers, and werewolves in the world. She just looks like a normal person, patiently waiting for the bus, but Terry is pretty convinced that she's a blood-sucking creature of the night. After the diner fiasco, I should probably err on the side of not being eaten, and just listen to what he says.

"So, what's the plan?" I ask, still wiping dried blood from my cheek. "You aren't going to shoot her,

are you?"

"Probably not."

"Do I need the stake?"

"No." He pulls up to the curb. "Just get out, and give her the pamphlet."

"What if she goes all Venus fly trap on me?"

"She won't. It'll take a while to digest all of those hearts. Real vampires eat to maintain a balance, kind of like us," he says. "Some of us see giant corn dogs when we get hungry, and some of us turn into spider monsters and rip through chest cavities." He shrugs. "You have to play the hand you're dealt, I guess."

"What am I supposed to say?"

"Start with 'hi' and work your way toward 'you're a vampire'." He reaches across my chest and opens the door for me. "I'm sure you'll think of something."

"What if she--"

"Just give her the pamphlet, you goon. It's not that hard."

The glow from the streetlight overhead cuts through the darkness in a perfect circle around the bench, highlighting every little detail that Terry somehow saw through the haze of the windshield. As I get closer, I begin to understand why he's so sure

that this is our vampire.

I see the little red polkadots across the front of the bench where the woman was tapping her fingertips. I see that instead of boots, she's wearing the dried blood of a diner full of people from her toes to her calves. I see that the oversized hoodie that she is pulling around her knees has the word 'Unbreakable' printed across its front in bold white letters. The entire spectrum of red drips through the wooden slats, pooling beneath her as she rocks in place. CSI or Forensic Files could make an entire season based on the DNA contents of this bus stop alone. Then again, it's probably pretty standard for a bus stop.

"Please," the woman says. She lifts the hood of the sweater to cover most of her face. "Don't look at me."

"Hi," I say, standing as still as possible.

"I don't want to hurt you."

"Oh good, we have something in common."

She doesn't laugh.

I clear my throat. "I'm Cole."

The woman turns enough for me to see that her face is awash with a soft watercolor like residue. Her skin is tinted in the kind of red that you can't just wipe away. "Cole. Cole. Cole." Her voice is all whispers.

She lowers her head and continues to talk to herself, repeating my name.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"Do you see me?"

"Um, yeah?" I take a slow step forward. "Can I sit here?"

She nods.

"Thanks." I leave two feet of bench between us, just in case.

The woman lifts her right hand and wiggles her fingers in front of her eyes. "What do you see?"

"What do you mean?"

"What do you see when you look at me? Do these look like fingers to you?"

"I don't know what you mean."

She turns to face me and lowers her hood. "What do you see?"

Her eyes are a crisp, light brown. Her lips are small but supple. The coarse curl of her short black hair is blown back and pinned up so she looks like a windswept Rosie the Riveter. She is surprisingly beautiful for someone covered in blood.

"Am I a monster?"

"I--" I don't know what to say. "Yes. I mean, no. No. You know, kind of but mostly no. You're not a

monster monster, but uh, you're a... Well." I hold the pamphlet between us. "Here."

Her eyes widen as they swell with tears. Little droplets sprinkle the paper as she looks over the title. With a deep breath she brings the pamphlet to her face, covering her eyes, nose, and mouth as she drops her head.

"I know this all seems impossible, and you probably feel like you're going crazy, right now."

She exhales through her nose in short, wet, intermittent bursts. Half laughing, half crying.

"You aren't. These things happen. I mean, look at me. I'm not sure if you've noticed, but I look like a Batman villain, and not even a good one."

She glances over the page and snorts a quiet laugh. "I'm Tessa."

"Cole."

"Yeah, I remember," she says. "What happened to you?"

"Would you believe that I cut myself shaving?"

"You look like Eddie Krueger," she says. "Freddy's older, uglier brother."

"I don't know about older." I laugh. "But, yeah, it's been a long night."

Her eyes narrow and she seems to focus on the

sidewalk in front of us. "Are you really here, right now?"

"Unfortunately, for both of us. Yeah."

"And, I don't look like a..." She exhales with a quiet grunt. "I look like a person to you?"

The enthusiasm in my nod is embarrassing.

"This is fucked up," she says, laughing. "It makes sense, I guess, but damn. Is this real life? Vampires? There aren't really vampires. I'm a vampire?"

"Vampire vampire."

"I just can't even." She taps her fingers on her knees. "It was like being in a video game," she says. "Like watching a movie from a first person perspective. Something was dragging me around. Like, I wasn't in control. I don't know what was, but it wasn't me. It wasn't like voices or whispers telling me what to do or anything. It was just happening. Like when you end up in the kitchen in the middle of the night and don't remember walking from your bed to the fridge."

"I get it."

"No."

"Trust me, I--"

"I killed people. Killed. People. Some of them were children, and I... Oh my god. They were dying and

I was just there, watching. And now they're gone and I'm just sitting here, waiting for a bus like nothing happened."

"It wasn't your fault."

"You weren't there," she says. "You didn't see their faces." She taps the pamphlet against her leg as she speaks. "I watched it happen. I watched my own hands, they didn't feel like my hands, but they were. They were my hands and my teeth. It was me. They were looking at me and begging me to stop, but I couldn't. All I could do was scream."

"When the hunger takes over everything else fades, right?"

She nods. "It was like I was stuck on some insane rollercoaster."

"Yeah," I say. "It's the worst."

"Does that mean that you're a..." She looks me up and down. "Are you a vampire?"

"I wish."

"You wish you could kill a room full of innocent people and look like this?" She unzips her hoodie enough for me to see that her stomach is protruding through her shirt. It isn't the smooth, seamless beach ball baby bump of a pregnant woman, it's a misshapen, oddly arranged mess. She looks like a snake that just

swallowed a huge bag of marbles. "What is this? Is it gonna stay like that?"

"Hearts," I say. "Terry said it takes a while to digest all of the meat."

"That's the most disgusting thing I've ever heard in my entire life."

"I'm here to help." I shrug.

"Why do you know this stuff? Who are you?"

"Me? I'm no one to be trifled with."

She almost smiles. "Are you serious, right now? The Princess Bride is basically my boyfriend."

"It's like the perfect movie."

A car door slams, and Terry lumbers toward the bench with his phone in hand. He's mumbling to himself and thumbing the screen.

"Is that your friend?"

"He's my something."

"Hello, young lady," Terry says as he pockets his phone. "I'm Terry, the official second life inductor for creatures of the night and the recently inconvenienced. I see you've made the acquaintance of my assistant." He extends his hand toward Tessa.

"Why are you talking like that?" I ask.

"Please forgive my intern." He shakes Tessa's hand. "The undead have a disgusting habit of leaving

their manners six feet under. So, are we all set?"

"For what?" She looks at me. "Who is this guy?"

"You haven't told her?" He scowls. "He's not very good at his job, is he? We are going to be your chauffeurs this evening."

"Yeah, I'm totally just gonna get in a car with two strange dudes in the middle of the night." She looks at me. "No offense."

"I'm as confused as you are."

Terry paces near the edge of the sidewalk. "We don't have long until sunup, and none of us want to be out and about when that happens, so we should get going. I'm sure you have a lot of questions and concerns--"

"Yeah, I do," Tessa says. "For one, I'd like to know who writes this crap? It's just a bunch of nonsense rules and regulations. Am I a vampire or a gremlin?"

"That's exactly what I said," I laugh.

Terry groans. "Like I was saying, I'm sure you have plenty of questions, so if you'll get in the car, I'll be sure to address each and every one of them on our way."

"On our way where?" I ask.

Tugging at his beard, Terry huffs through his

nose. "We're going to see Roman," he says. "That's what we do with vampires. We round them up, and he gives them a place to live. So, if we're all good with the explanations, I'd like to make it home before breakfast."

Tessa stares down the length of empty street between the bus stop and the traffic lights. "Who's Roman?"

"He's like the district manager of supernatural activity," I say. "Apparently, he's kind of a big deal."

"Uh huh," she says. "But, what do you mean he gives them a place to live? Does he have like a kennel full of vampires?"

"It's more like a half-way house," Terry says. "Free room and board. Basic cable. I think they even have Wifi now. It's a nice place. It definitely beats taking the bus."

"And I'm supposed to just live there?" she asks. "Like forever?"

"You're supposed to be thankful that you get to be alive, at all." Terry gestures toward the black smoke still lingering over the skyline. "There are a lot of people in a diner somewhere who no longer have that luxury."

"Whoa," I say. "That's not fair."

"No," Tessa says, "he's right." Her left leg begins to bounce up and down. "But, I'm not going."

"I don't think you understand," he says.

"I think I do."

"You're dangerous." Terry sighs. "You've hurt a lot of people. A lot of people. If you come with us everyone will be better off."

"Do they pay you to make people feel bad about themselves?"

"Listen," he says, "I don't want to make anyone feel anything about anything. I just want to take you to where you need to be, so no one else gets hurt. Think of it as a really long vacation."

"You mean a permanent vacation?" There's a hiss and squeal from the end of the street as the bus rounds the corner. Tessa grips the edge of the bench and pushes herself to her feet. "Nah. I'll pass."

"This isn't how it works," he says. "You're going to kill someone."

"I'll find a way to make it work," she says. "I'd rather eat rats, or steal blood from butcher shops than spend the rest of my life in some vampire retirement home."

"Grampires," I say. "Coming this fall to a theater

near you."

"You aren't helping," Terry says.

"What am I supposed to do, grab her?"

She balls her fists. "You can try, motherfucker."

"No," I throw my hands up in surrender, "I just meant."

"You have to come with us."

"In the immortal words of Morgan Freeman," she says, stepping toward the edge of the curb, "I don't have to do nothing but stay black and die."

"You're going to kill again," Terry says. "And when you do, we're going to be there. But, next time, we won't be handing out pamphlets."

"Terry," I say, stepping between them. "Come on, let's just go."

"You guys are pretty good at this innocent cop, asshole cop thing," she says. "Do you think I feel good about any of this? Do you think I was sitting on a bench, crying, alone in the dark because I had nothing better to do? I'm fucking mortified. I'm a wreck. I've had constant thoughts of throwing myself in front of the bus since I sat down."

"Wouldn't work," Terry says. "It has to be silver."

"I don't know what I'm going to do, or where I'm

going to go," she says. "But I do know that it's none of your damn business."

The bus exhales like Darth Vader as it stops in front of us.

"You don't know what you're doing," Terry says.

"No, I don't," Tessa says, stepping onto the bus.

"But, who the hell does?"

CHAPTER NINE

The building is a four story tall, faded pink brick surrounded by an empty moat of parking lot. With the wooden boards nailed across every window, and the leather and lingerie clad men and woman posing near the neon "Vacancy" sign, it's as if the occupants of the hotel are preparing for, or already living in an awkwardly sexy apocalypse.

"Who are they?" I ask, avoiding eye contact with one of the women. "Are they all--"

He nods. "They're vampires."

"You said this place was a half-way house, not a brothel."

"They're here."

The only car in the lot is a celebrity-smile-white, baby diaper wiped, monopoly piece of a vehicle that's parked across three spaces. Standing beside the car is a tall, thin man in a dark suit and white gloves. His skin is a broken, cracked, stone gray color, like charcoal carved into the shape of a person. He kind of looks like one those living statues who try to charm tourists out of their money, except

somehow more creepy.

"Is that Roman?" I ask. "I expected a little less Alfred and a little more Bruce Wayne."

"I don't know what language you're speaking," Terry says. "That's Roman's chauffeur. I don't know his name, but I don't think it's Alfred."

"Wait--" I say. "Do you seriously not know who Batman is?"

"We don't have time for this." He looks at me as the car comes to a stop. "I think you should stay here."

"What? Why?"

"You're a mess," he laughs. "You look like a used dog toy."

"They already know that I'm here. Alfred's been staring at us since we pulled up." I gesture to the chauffeur's pupilless white eyes shining into the car like flashlights.

"So he has." He rakes through his beard. "I suppose we should figure out what Roman has planned for you, since being an assistant is obviously not in your wheelhouse."

"I'm not your assistant."

"Not with that attitude." He opens his door.

"Okay, come on, but let me do the talking."

Up close, the living statue looks like something out of a Ray Harryhausen movie or one of those out-of-date animatronics from Disney World. Without saying a word, the chauffeur walks to the rear passenger door of the pristine car and grabs the handle. The cement trembles beneath my feet with each of his steps.

"Don't say anything," Terry whispers.

"You mean like, hey thanks for leaving me in the grave to die, it was a real learning experience?"

"Please." His beard flattens as he buries his chin into his chest. "Just don't."

The chauffeur straightens his back and holds the door open wide. A clean-shaven man steps out slowly, softly setting one foot on the pavement and then the next. He lifts his body from the car, keeping his eyes closed, and he begins to stretch. His red, carefully styled hair hardly moves as he dips his head from side to side, cracking his neck. He extends his arms to the side and shakes the sleeves of his black sports jacket until both of his elbows pop. His hands slide along the fabric of the burgundy tie around his neck, tightening the knot as his eyes open.

"Hi. Hello," he says, aiming his blue eyes directly at me. "You must be our new friend. What was it? Staple-neck?"

"Cole."

"Ah, that's more like it. Terry is good at many things, Cole," he says, "but unfortunately, remembering names is not one of them."

"Sorry," Terry mumbles. "We had a problem with the girl."

"Oh, no worries," Roman says. "I'm sure we have someone around here who can help her find her way home."

"I'm sorry." Terry lowers his head.

"Don't repeat yourself, Terry. It shows a lack of faith in my ability to listen." He smiles. "You know I'm here to help. I hope that you've explained that to our new friend, Cole, here. What it is that I do. What we're all building together."

"It looks like you're building a red light district."

Terry slaps a palm over his face and shakes his head.

"That's a very astute observation, Cole. Very smart," Roman says. "Why didn't you tell me that he was so smart, Terry?"

"Sorry. He doesn't know any better. It's my fault for not explaining more."

"You see those intriguingly dressed individuals,

Cole?"

"Uh huh."

"They're what we call, in the business, fucking vampires. All of them. Have you ever seen a vampire, Cole? Probably not before tonight, right? Of course. Now, here you are, surrounded by dozens of them."

"Uh huh."

"Are you familiar with Greek mythology? You know, gods, monsters, heroes, villains. Well, regardless, in Greek mythology there are these creatures called sirens. You may have heard of them. Beautiful singing women, luring unwitting sailors to their deaths, that sort of thing?"

I nod.

"Good. Well, these fine ladies and gentlemen are a lot like that, except they aren't relying on sharp rocks and high tide to finish the job."

"They're killing people."

"That really depends on your definition of people, now doesn't it?" He smiles. "I understand your apprehension. I do. But, the fact is, we've made an actual, objective, quantifiable difference in the area. These aren't innocent people crashing into rocky shores, these are adulterers, rapists, drug dealers, burglars, and killers. Bad people, truly sick

individuals, taken off of the streets because of us. The numbers don't lie. I am proud to say that crime rates are down across the board. Have been since we set up shop."

"Except, you know, murder."

Terry kicks my shin.

"Ow, dammit."

"Terry," Roman says, "I trust that the next time we meet--"

"I know," he says. "I'm sorry. I'll make sure it doesn't happen again."

"Oh, Terry." He brushes dust from Terry's shoulder and then holds the side of his face. "My faith in you remains unshakable. You're a good man, and I appreciate all of your hard work."

Terry shudders as Roman walks toward the open car door.

"Wait," I say.

Roman closes his eyes and takes a slow, deep breath through his nose. "Huh." His eyes open, immediately staring into mine as he cocks his head to the side slightly. "Go ahead, ghoul. Speak."

"Weren't you supposed to..." I shake my head, trying to find a way to say it without sounding dramatic, or petty, or getting myself punched in the

face. "Terry said that you would have someone..." It's hard not to stutter, especially with the statue man standing there like a seven foot tall guard dog. "Why didn't anyone come for me? Why did you leave me to die?"

Roman raises both hands to his face and taps his fingertips against his lips. "Are you saying that you climbed out of your grave all on your own? How fascinating. Don't you think that's outstanding?" He looks to Alfred but gets no response.

"I killed someone. A lot of someones," I say. "You should have--"

"I apologize," he says. "My people will be sure to hear about this. I'll see to it that this little snafu of ours is taken care of, don't you worry."

"That's it?"

Roman closes his eyes again and grabs the bridge of his nose. "Terry, our new friend is not being so friendly. Need I remind you how important it is that we all remain friendly?"

"We better go," Terry says. "I'm sorry, Roman."

"Gentlemen," Roman says, "it has been an experience. One that I would rather not prolong, so, I am off to salvage what's left of the night. Terry, I'll be in touch."

"Come on," Terry says. "We need to get back before sunup."

"I don't like it."

"Yeah," he says, "the sun is an asshole, but there's really not much we can do to stop it. For now."

"I don't trust him."

"Get in."

"Did you get the feeling that he hated me?"

"It would surprise me more if he liked you. Have you met you? You're like the most hateable person I've ever met." We get into the car. "There are so many of us that just can't stand you. I've been thinking about starting a club."

"Can I join?"

"I've seen your wallet," he says. "You can't afford the membership fee."

"Can you fix this?" I pull the collar of my shirt down enough to reveal the fist-shaped hole.

"You know where we keep the duct tape, right?"

"Yeah?" The glove box looks like a freshly stocked craft store shelf. Duct tape of every color.

"Well, use it." He isn't joking.

The red tape tears easily enough. I pat it across my chest like an asterisk and tap on the center to make sure that it's stable. I'm basically a bongo

drum.

"So, I just keep this stuff on all the time?" I ask. "That seems sanitary..."

"What's the issue? I'm like 45% duct tape." He lifts his shirt to show that the majority of his pasty, spare tire of a torso is wrapped like a shiny, silver mummy.

"Gross."

"It's slimming in the gutular region, don't you think?"

I pull down my shirt, place the rest of the tape back into the glove compartment, and ask Terry where we're going.

"Home," he says. "We're going home."

CHAPTER TEN

The daytime rigor isn't as bad when you remember to close your eyes. Without our constant talking, the patter of our footsteps, and the wet smacking sound of Terry's pudding covered lips, the morgue is actually kind of peaceful. Soft mechanical whispers from the various appliances around the room etch images into my eyelids and I almost feel as if I'm dreaming. The buzz and crack of the freezer cabinets behind my slab transforms into a swarm of giant bees eating honey-dipped popcorn while watching tv. The dense pop and hum of the florescent bulbs overhead might as well be an epic lightsaber battle between two warring toaster ovens fighting over who gets the last slice of bread. Sure, it's all absolutely bonkers, but it's better than staring at zombie guts for eight hours.

There's a loud thud from the back door, followed by a slow, high pitched creak. A voice mumbles from the doorway. A man's voice, unfamiliar and quiet. As his labored, evenly paced footsteps get closer to my slab, his whiskey-rasped grumble gets louder. I don't

know what he's saying because I don't speak "old angry morgue guy", but he seems to be complaining about his entire life, out loud, to himself.

The throaty marble mouthed complaining turns into a sequence of pained grunts as something smacks against the slab to my left. There's a little bit of shuffling and then I hear a ripping sound, like fingernails scraping across vinyl, and then the mumbling begins again. The man's voice gets quiet as I hear the entrance door hit the wall. He's gone, but he left something behind and, whatever it is, it's alive.

The thing beside me begins to spit rapid, wet, hard breathes into the air. It sounds like it's trapped behind a glass wall, or wrapped in a thick sheet of plastic. Probably a body bag. It hisses coarsely for a second then bursts into a fit of very high-pitched, very human screams. If I had to guess, I'd say that this is definitely the sound of a man being set on fire. I'm close enough to know better. There's no heat. No flames. No flickering warmth over my eye lids. But, this thing is still shrieking into the side of my face like it's being burned at the stake.

I hear the metal crunch of an aluminum can being stomped into the ground. Then another, and another. It

sounds like the thing beside me is breakdancing its way across the slab. After a minute of thrashing and banging, everything goes quiet. The creature hisses as its breath slows and softens into a moist whistle.

My foot begins to tap nervously on its own. I've been so distracted by my impending murder I didn't even realize that the rigor was fading. That wet hissing exhale from my new neighbor gets louder as my foot bounces on the slab. Crap. I got its attention. Holding my legs as still as possible, I listen as the thing beside me begins to flail rapidly against the metal.

Terry should be awake by now. He's more of a morning person than I am. He should be slapping this thing with a bed pan, cutting off its head, or at least shoving a pamphlet into its mouth, but I don't hear him. What I hear instead is the slow, unmistakable sound of a zipper being pulled across the length of the slab. I hear the shuffle of limbs and claws against vinyl and then a long, slow exhale. Now would probably be a good time to run and or pee my pants.

I open my eyes and immediately look to my left, entirely expecting to be swallowed whole by a refrigerator sized worm creature or something equally

as undignified. There's a discarded black body bag, unzipped and wet with sweat or saliva or both. With all of the fluids spilling through the teeth of the zipper, and the way that it's been torn open, the bag looks a lot like a cocoon after being abandoned by a butterfly.

My eyes follow a drop of clear goo as it travels in a winding snail trail from the mouth of the bag to the thin puddle of liquid forming between the vinyl and the slab. The rest of the bed is wet, dark, and stained by large, human-like handprints. I'm still hoping that it's a butterfly.

Moving as little as possible, I turn my head and see that Terry's slab is empty with the exception of two piles of folded sheets beside a greasy pillow. He's gone. I haven't heard him, but Terry isn't exactly the screaming in terror type. It's equally possible that he's in the kitchen cooking breakfast, in the garage with Tony Robbins, or currently being digested by some sort of trollasaurus moth monster. In any case, I'm alone.

Keeping still, I listen for any sign of the thing from the bag but there's nothing. I'm alone. No Terry, no creature, no butterflies. Then, from somewhere beneath my slab, there's a long, drawn-out slurp

followed by a thick, wet exhale.

I pull my wrists away from the edge of the bed, tucking my fingertips under my legs. I'm a full grown adult person, but I'm pretty sure that I'm about to be swallowed whole by the boogeyman. If I had a blanket, it would already be over my head. The creature's long, stammering, vibratory breath gets louder, and then softer, and then louder, and then softer. It might as well be beat-boxing the Jaws theme. The breathing falls to a whisper but I can still hear the quivering lipped gargle of the creature, circling beneath my feet.

"Did you know they say that 3 out of 10 people actually enjoy the smell of skunk? Where do they get these numbers? Everyone loves that smell." Terry shakes his way through the kitchen curtains, butt first. He's alive. "I think what this poll really tells us is that 7 out of 10 people are horrible liars." He turns as he enters the room, wearing oven mitts and an apron, holding a tray of blueberry muffins.

"Terry. Terry," I whisper. "What the hell is that?"

"They're muffins," he says. "You know, I go through all of this trouble--" He turns. "Oh, that. I

have no idea."

A four-fingered, catcher's mitt-sized hand rises over the foot of my bed. I try to move my legs, but they won't budge. With my knees still frozen in place, my feet are left to kick back and forth like foosball figures, unable to reach the ball between them. The creature's hand smacks the metal between my legs, digging into the slab as it pulls the rest of its body over the bed's horizon like a drooling, toothy sun.

A mound of flesh, slightly larger than a basketball plops itself between my knees. This thing looks like a giant, fleshy peanut with a Sylvester Stallone face, and two Schwarzenegger-sized arms.

"I don't think that thing was in the book," Terry says. "Do you know how rare this is? It's like finding a unicorn having sex with a Bigfoot. We might even get to name it."

"I don't care," I yell, "just get it off of me!"

"Hey there, little guy," Terry says, lifting his phone from his pocket. "Do you have a name?"

The angry peanut's eyes roll back and forth, independent of one another as Terry snaps several pictures. It doesn't seem to care that he's even in the room.

I sit up enough to smell the creature's breath.

It's like an old, overused kitchen sponge. It smiles with teeth like drill bits. All shapes and sizes. I struggle to lift my leg, hoping to punt the thing across the room, but my knees just shake slightly.

"What should we call you?" Terry hops onto the slab beside mine and lifts a muffin from the tray. "Duane? No... Bradley? Maybe..." Terry takes a bite of his muffin and kicks his feet as he chews.

Mr. Peanut shifts his weight onto his meaty fingers and begins to walk toward my face, straddling my chest. I raise my hands, covering my eyes and mouth.

"Why aren't you killing it? What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to name it," he says. "I can't just kill something without knowing what it is. I'm not a monster. How about George?"

"Fine," I yell. "I don't care, just kill it!"

"Aw, man," he says, "these pictures are terrible. Hang on a sec, I just need to turn on the flash."

Clear goo spills between the monster's jagged, widely-spaced teeth and drips onto my neck. He growls, and the tendons around his face tighten. He's about to lunge. I don't know if he wants to kiss me or kill me, but I vote for none of the above. My fingers grip the smooth, rubbery skin beneath George's mouth and push upward, forcing his teeth as far away from my face as

I can reach. I grab onto his wrist and pull as hard as I can, hoping to throw him from the slab.

"What are you doing?" Terry asks. "You can't arm wrestle George. Look at him. He could bench press a car."

He's right. The creature's massive hands grasp my arm and pull me over the side of the slab. We flip over one another until I'm on my back and can see my reflection in George's teeth.

"Hold still," Terry says. "I need to get a picture of this."

"This isn't helping," I grunt, trying to wrestle free from the creature's fist.

"You're the one who started it," he says. "He was just saying hi and you decided to go all Over the Top on him."

"I get it," I yell, "he looks like Sylvester Stallone, congratulations. Now, help." George puts his hand over my mouth.

"I'm just saying, you drew first blood."

The flash on Terry's phone goes off and the peanut man screams.

I still feel the warm pressure of fingers shaping an island across my face as the creature releases its grip and quickly scuttles toward the door. "Should we

go after him?"

"No," he says, watching George headbutt his way through the exit. "He's free now. Let him run, naked into the world in search of a home. Muffin?"

"Fine." The good news is, my legs decide to wake up and I'm able to stand. Impeccable timing, as always. The bad news is, the muffins aren't really muffins.

"I have a confession to make," he says.

"Is it that these aren't blueberries?" I ask.
"Because, that's pretty obvious."

"I lied about the skunk smell statistic." He lowers his head. "I just wanted you to think I was hip and worldly."

"There are so many things wrong with that sentence, I don't even know where to begin."

Terry's face sours.

"But... yeah. Thanks. And, you know, I kind of like it too," I say. "I wouldn't wear it as a cologne or anything, but it's not so bad."

My shirt feels like blood encrusted dental gauze, all sticky and awkwardly hardening. I reach into the basket beneath the slab and search for something to wear. I find some jeans that'll fit, and a red and white baseball tee. "Can I have these?"

"Are you going to get blood all over yourself?"

"Probably."

"Fair enough. The bathroom is over there." He hops off of the slab and flips open his phone.

The bathroom is littered with books. Mostly fiction. A lot of horror stuff, some young adult novels. Things like HP Lovecraft, Jim Butcher, Stephenie Meyer. There's an entire basket of Stephen King paperbacks that look like they've been through the wash a few dozen times.

Some of the larger hardcover books are incredibly old, and look like the mummified versions of younger books. I can't read the titles through all of the plague dust on their jackets, but if I had to guess, I'd say that they're probably titled a lot like Terry's pamphlets. Each stack is labeled with color coded sticky notes, and just about every book has some sort of homemade bookmark between the pages. Terry obviously doesn't get out, at all.

The mirror is cracked along the left side, splitting my face and chest in half. It's the first time that I've really seen myself in a full mirror since becoming all ghoulish, and it's pretty terrifying. Half of my face looks basically human. A little pale, spotted with blood. Nothing a shower

won't fix. On the other side of the crack, I'm an unbelievable monster. I could almost pass as an extra in a zombie movie except, these days, people would probably think that my make up looks terrible. I'm not some dark gray, sunken eyed corpse in a suit. I still have all of my hair, and you can only see one of my teeth through the hole in my cheek, but I look unmistakably dead.

The baseball tee and jeans fit well enough but even after changing, and cleaning the blood from my skin, I still look like something you might see hanging in a haunted house or in the cobwebbed closet of some medical school.

Terry has his nose buried in his flip phone when I leave the bathroom. "What do we do now?" I ask.

"We wait for instructions. Until then, we just hang out. Read. Watch movies. Kill time."

"So, this is really it? This is what you do every night?"

"That's what we do every night, yes." He pockets the phone. "What else are you going to do with your time, work 9 to 5 as a department store mannequin?"

"If it's between that and being torn apart by spider monsters--"

"They were vampires," he says, looking at me with

stern eyes and a furrowed, muffin peppered mustache.

"Vampires."

"Fine. But yeah, I'd rather stand in a window, selling underwear, than have to spend another second with one of those things. Or George. What the hell was George?"

I follow Terry into the kitchen. "I told you, I've never seen anything like that," he says. "Every once in a while Grumbles drops something off. Usually, they're zombies that haven't turned yet, or ghouls like you. It's mostly uneventful. But sometimes, there's something waiting for me when I wake up. Something not in the book. George was one of those somethings."

"So, who is Grumbles? He works for Roman?"

"Everyone works for Roman," he says. There's a hum from Terry's pocket. He checks his phone, thumbs on the keypad, and then quickly removes his apron.

"What about George?" I ask. "What happens to those somethings that don't have simple names to stamp on pamphlets? Do they work for Roman?"

"I don't know."

"How can you not know?"

"There's a lot I don't know," he says. "Why did they fake the moon landing? Were the Dursleys only

mean because Harry was a Horcrux? What was ET's real name? If you want, I'll make you a list. For now, we should probably stick with the basic facts of life. You're here. With me. And we have to go."

"Because of Roman?"

"Because if we don't, people will get hurt." He pushes his way through the plastic curtains. "Come on."

"You can't keep dodging my questions," I say, following him into the garage. "Do you trust Roman?"

"Get in the car." He hands me a page from the Book with the word "Werewolf" on the cover. "We can talk about this later."

"I'm not doing this."

"It's really not that bad," he says, as if he didn't just hand me a pamphlet about friggin' werewolves. "The moon isn't even full tonight, we'll be fine."

"I'm serious, Terry, I don't want to do this anymore. I quit."

"You can't quit. There is no quitting," he says, pushing both hands against the hood of the car. "This is what we do."

"You're kidding, right?" I drop my elbows onto the hood and let my face fall into my hands. "You keep saying 'WE' like we're some kind of dynamic duo, but

all you've done is drag me along like I'm a toddler on a leash. I'm not going to be your sidekick."

"Let's just put a pin in that because we both know that you'll come around eventually," he says. "But, I understand. If you want to talk about this now, fine, we'll talk, but we have to go."

The street is a thinly sliced canal, slick and reflective. Terry turns the dial on the windshield wipers and they begin to tick away slowly, doing almost nothing to help our vision. The glass is permanently saturated in little explosions of water that seem to hop over or through the wipers. I sip a cup of pudding. Terry chugs his.

"I don't think Roman was ever going to come for me."

"It was a mistake." He wipes a glob of pudding off of his nose. "Did you listen to what he was saying? He'll talk to whoever he has to talk to and it won't happen again."

"I don't know. The way he spoke to me, it was like I was annoying him by just being alive. What if he wanted me to stay buried?"

"If Roman wanted to kill you, you wouldn't be here annoying me, right now. I've told you, we have a system and it works."

"It works? There are actual, living monsters running around killing people and you honestly believe that your system works? What are you talking about?"

Terry tosses his empty pudding cup into the trunk, and lifts a stack of pamphlets from the center console with a groan. "This is what I'm talking about." He waves the thick bundle of pages in my face. "It isn't always like this. Most of the time, these people are just scared and need someone to tell them that they aren't crazy. We're here to help. That's what we do. We give these to people who need them--"

"And then we shoot them in the head. You're right, that's a great system."

Terry closes his eyes and growls to himself, "Fine." He pinches the bridge of his nose and begins to rock back and forth. "What do I have to do to get you to shut up about this?"

"Easy. Tell Roman that there's a ghoul in the cemetery," I say. "If he sends someone that night, I'll never bring it up again."

Terry's eyes open. His right eyebrow creeps up his forehead as he squints at me. "You want me to lie?"

"Yes."

"To Roman?"

"Uh huh."

"And, what happens when someone shows up with a shovel?" he asks. "These aren't exactly the sort of people who like to have their time wasted."

We pull into the 'Emergency Vehicles Only' entrance of a hospital. It looks peaceful enough, from the outside. There are a lot of broken arms, bandaged heads, and runny noses, but no streaks of blood or screaming people.

"We'll tell them that we made a mistake. I'm the new guy, right? New guys make mistakes."

Terry stares at me for a minute while scratching his beard. He pulls his phone from his waist, flips the top and taps away with his thumbs. The phone claps shut and he takes a deep breath. "It's done."

"So, let's go."

"We will," he says. "First, we have to take care of--"

There's an explosion overhead, and suddenly, it's raining glass and corpses all over the sidewalk. A body smacks the pavement a few feet from Tony Robbins with an audible thunderclap, splashing its insides onto my window in a tidal wave of gore.

"Curse words," Terry says. He kills the engine, "We're too late."

A swarm of screaming nurses, doctors, and patients

push through the automatic glass door entrance of the hospital, hurdling over one another like they're running from a time bomb or, more accurately, a freaking werewolf.

"You told me that this would be easy," I say, watching the stampede of scrubs splash and kick through the human debris.

"I was hoping to get him to the morgue before he changed. This isn't good. This is the opposite of good." He steps out of the car and I follow. It's still drizzling glass from above. Most of the hospital seems to be conducting business as usual, but the entire fourth floor is flashing its hazard lights and screaming for help.

"Change? What do you mean change? What about the moon," I say. "Werewolves only change when the moon is full, right?"

"Not exactly," he says. "Don't worry, we'll be fine. We just have to trap him."

"Wait, what? No. No. No. No. No." My head can't shake fast enough.

"Fine," he says, popping open the trunk, "just walk away and let the werewolf slaughter all of these innocent people, then you'll have some friends to mope around with. It'll be fun. You can start a band or

something."

"You know I hate you, right?" I sigh.

"We're the best of friends." He reaches into the trunk and begins to tug at the metal gurney until it falls to the pavement. "Now, shut up and help me get this open."

"Why do we need the coffin, anyway?" As it stretches, the gurney shrieks like a fork scraping against a dinner plate.

"It's lined with silver," he says. "A full blown wolf would kick right through this thing, but he shouldn't be that strong tonight."

"Shouldn't be?"

"We're fine. Get that end."

"How do you expect to get him in here?" I ask.

"Are you gonna make a trail of Scooby Snacks?"

"Something like that."

We push the loaded gurney through the entrance, past the waiting room and toward the elevator. With a quiet ding, the doors open and terrified people in gowns file out of the overcrowded box like it's a clown car on fire. They stagger out desperately, tripping over one another and rushing around us like a stream passes a boulder. No actual words, just babbling and waterworks.

The casket fits comfortably, with plenty of standing room. "Four," Terry says. He nods at the strip of numbered buttons in front of him.

"Yeah, they came from the fourth floor."

"That wasn't a question," he says, taking a step backwards. "Push the button."

"You're seriously right there." I gesture at at the five feet of empty space between he and I. "Just push it."

"Do you know how many germs live in hospital elevators? All of the germs."

"Holy crap. Never mind." I push the button.

"So, when we get up there, I'm going to need your help." Terry drums his fingers on the casket and smiles. "We're going to need to lure him into the coffin. In order to do this we will--"

"I knew it," I yell. "This is why I quit, there is no way that I'm going to be bait for a freaking werewolf."

The elevator dings and its doors slide open. There is a sign-in desk and waiting area a few feet ahead. Chairs are toppled over and magazines are scattered about the floor. A low, wet growl vibrates through the halls, echoing in every direction as if it's coming through a sound system.

"Shhh," Terry whispers. "I'll be the bait, you just have to close the box once I get him inside."

"You're the bait?"

"Yes."

"And, I just have to stand here?"

"I can write it down if you're going to have trouble remembering."

"I got it," I say. "So, that's it? That's all I have to do? Just wait here? I can do that."

"Help me get this thing down."

The coffin is heavy and awkward as hell to get into a standing position. After a little wobbling and weight shifting, we get it to balance on its own at the mouth of the elevator. Terry sticks his hand into his fanny pack and comes out with two chunk-laden, pudding stained spoons, and a smile on his face.

"Do you really think this is a good time for a snack," I ask, raising my voice over the din of werewolf carnage in the distance.

"They're silver," he says. He licks the solidified sludge from one of the spoons. "How else am I going to protect myself? Use your head, Staple-neck."

"What was I thinking..."

"So, when we come around the corner, I'll give the signal and you just wait for him to run into the

coffin," he says. "Once he's in, all you have to do is close the lid. Simple, right?" Terry spins the spoons between his fingers like drumsticks and begins to walk down the corridor.

"Wait, Terry!" I whisper scream, "what's the signal?"

He stops at the end of the hall, where the path splits in either direction. "I'll yell oh no, oh no a werewolf. Can you remember that?" He shakes his head and then tilts his left ear to the sky as if he's listening for something. After a few seconds, he looks back at me and gives a weird finger-gun gesture using one of the spoons, then turns and walks left toward the growling, and grunting, and screaming. The second he turns the corner, I hear him whistling and calling out like he's looking for a lost puppy. He's an insane person.

I could leave, right now. I'm sure he'd be fine, I've seen him survive worse. He's right though, I don't know what I'd do. I could try to work from home. Maybe I'll get a paper route. Do people still read the paper? I'm a mess. I can't live in the world like this, I'd probably take a bite out of the first talking brownie that knocked on my door. At least I'm not--

"Oh no, oh no, a werewolf!" Terry yells, from around the corner. "Repeat. Oh no, oh no, a werewolf!"

My fingers tighten over the cold metal sides of the coffin as I hear the escalating stomp of something entirely inhuman. My feet separate, one in front of the other and I lower my shoulder into the back of the box, preparing for impact.

"Spoons were a terrible idea," he yells. "What were we thinking?"

Peaking around the edge of the coffin, I see Terry racing in my direction, out of both breath and spoons. Just behind him, barreling around the corner like a rubber cannonball, is a six foot five monster of mythical proportions. It doesn't look anything like a dog, or even a wolf. Most of the creature is covered in short tufts of wet hair, with patches of over-stretched, broken human-looking skin cracking around its elongated joints. Its head is still mostly human shaped, but the skin of its face has been forced back by a full mouth of needle teeth. I expected a long, furry snout and a dark, wet dog nose but this thing's face looks like it was designed to be an aerodynamic monster mouth missile of doom. This is, without a doubt, a fucking bear bolf.

"Terry, run!" I yell.

The creature's exaggerated limbs alternate between running on two and four legs as it closes the gap between itself and Terry. It's weight shifts beneath its feet, bending at the knee as it prepares to pounce. Terry's legs are buckling, and he's beginning to waddle more than run. He's losing momentum. He's not going to make it.

Growling furiously as it leaps into the air, the wolfbeast smiles with a welcoming mouthful of red-stained arrowheads. Through my wincing, I see Terry throw his shoulders to the floor and slide, feet first toward the coffin. The confused wolf passes by overhead, missing its target, and slipping across the slick tile like a wrecking ball in a bowling alley.

My shoulder hugs the metal wall as I watch the beast glide toward the mouth of the coffin. This is going to suck. The wolf tumbles into the box and I close my eyes as everything collapses over me. Between the weight of the silver casket, the large monster thrashing inside, and Terry jumping onto the lid to keep it closed, I'm pretty sure that my bones are already dust.

"See," Terry says, shifting his weight around the coffin. "Simple."

"I hate you," I groan through my squished face,

"so much, right now."

Terry kicks the coffin aside, and I do what I can to peel myself from the floor. It's like scraping gum from the bottom of a shoe. Once I'm up, I grab one side of the box and lift. It's unbelievably heavy and the thing inside won't stop shaking, so even with the gurney it takes us a while to get back to Tony Robbins and even longer to load the box into the trunk.

Once we're in the car, the wolf is unbearable. His loud, whistling growl is like a pissed off police siren, demanding attention from everyone we pass. "How far is the cemetery from here?" I shout.

"We're almost there," he says. "Prepare to be disappointed."

We pass through the old downtown district, and it's creepy in a Twilight Zone sort of way. This is where the Burgerman fiasco happened, but you'd never know it. New vagrants are pushing new shopping carts along the same filthy sidewalk with no evidence of the bloody footprints or Terry's decapitation dance in sight. It's as if we were never here. I don't know if it's the city, or Roman, or what, but someone must have an entire storage unit full of paper work, solely dedicated to cataloging all of Terry's supernatural disasters. Folders upon folders of unsolvable,

unexplained cadaver sightings and massive monster mess recoveries. I'm glad that I don't have that job.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

This is the road to the cemetery. My cemetery. I wasn't in the best state of mind the last time I was here, but some things you just don't forget. It's not every day that you dig yourself out of hell, get stabbed in the stomach, and eat a guy's face. There are three empty hearses parked in the darkest corner of the lot. Between two of these spit-shined, newer models, Tony Robbins looks like an Oreo filling that's past its prime. It isn't the perfect hiding spot, but it will have to do.

When we get out of the car, the wolf lets out a loud growl then settles into a soft series of annoyed snorts. It's breathing heavily enough to rock the car but at least it's quiet.

As we walk toward the entry gate, I'm almost thankful to see that my dirt stamped footprints are still there on the pavement. Evidence that I was here, that I escaped. It's like carving my name in a tree or

making a snow angel or something. It might not last forever, but neither will I.

"Are those your footprints?" Terry asks.

"Uh huh."

"Clean up after yourself, you savage." He kicks the dirt into a patch of grass, clearing the sidewalk.

"This is a sacred place."

So much for carving my name into the world.

"Roman's people should be here any minute," he says. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"We're going to be here until either the sun comes up or you admit that you're wrong." I can't help but look at the names and dates on the headstones as we walk. Some of these graves are hundreds of years old. Centuries of sloppy werewolf eating habits. The soil in front of one of the headstones is oddly tilled, and tossed aside as if some zombie popped his face out of the earth to spell check his name. The tombstone reads Cole Chaplin 1989-2019. "Hey look, that's me."

"Congratulations." Terry shakes his head and pulls his phone out of his pocket. "At least they won't have to dig another hole when they bury you for wasting their time."

There is a wooden gazebo in the center of the graveyard, a few rows away from my grave. We sit on

opposite sides from one another and stare toward the parking lot. The street is dead. There doesn't seem to be a car for miles. Terry taps on his phone and checks the time, then sighs.

"Here," he says, tossing a cup of pudding across the gazebo.

"Spoon?"

He slides his phone into his pocket, and his hand comes out with a silver spoon. He throws it and it smacks my chest like a bass drum. I'm pretty sure this is the spoon that he licked earlier but I'm too hungry to really care. I've eaten worse, anyway.

"He's going to show up," Terry says. "Someone is going to show up."

"Why won't you just accept it?" I ask. "He's been using you."

Terry stares toward the entrance.

"What makes you want to believe so badly that--"

"Because I have to," he says, tugging his beard.

"I have to believe that if I do what I'm supposed to do, Roman will keep his promise. It's the only way I'll ever get to see my wife again."

"I didn't know you were married."

"Because you never stop complaining long enough to let me get a word in edgewise." He scowls and swallows

his pudding. "She was the one who gave me this." He runs a finger across his temple, tracing three vertical claw marks.

"Sounds like a keeper."

"I woke up in the woods, undead and alone," he says. "I thought it was the devil. He was in me, making me chase villagers, see things. I thought I was possessed. Then she found me, cleaned me up, explained some things."

"Apologized for murdering you..."

"She did," he laughs. "I never could stay mad at her."

"What happened to her?"

"She left. Said she'd find me if she found a cure. She didn't want to risk hurting me again, so naturally she ripped my heart out."

"What does that have to do with Roman?"

"He's a man of infinite resources. If anyone can help me find her, it's him." Terry tosses his pudding cup. "Every once in a while he gives me some news. A word of a wolf matching her description. One vague lead after another. Never anything substantial."

"Just enough to keep you wanting more." I toss my cup in the garbage. "But, never enough to help you actually find her?"

"Exactly." He continues to stare toward the entrance for a second, and then drops his head. He stands. "Come on."

Once we get in the car, I'm actually thankful for the wolf's noise. There is a thick, sad silence coming from the driver seat. It's weird to see Terry this way. Usually, he's all carefree and ridiculous but now he's wearing the sort of sad bastard expression that makes it impossible to stick out your tongue and say "I told you so". And, I really want to say I told you so.

As we reach the morgue, Terry's pout shifts into a stoic look of ambivalence. His nostrils flair as he kills the engine and stares forward in silence. I don't know if I should pat him on the back or run.

In an explosion of fist shaking and short punches, he screams as he assaults the steering wheel. "What the fuck," he yells. "What the fuck, what the fuck, what the fuck. This is an actual nightmare. I can't believe I'm so stupid. I've been doing this for so long. Do you even realize, of course you don't, you're an idiot. No offense."

"Some offense."

"I couldn't have known. I swear, I thought it was just part of his system. He promised to help me find

me, Nadya," he says, calming himself. "I didn't know what to do. I just went along with it. It never even occurred to me that you were the first."

"The first what?"

"You were the first to come back," he says. "There have been so many. I've buried so many people. Holy crap, I'm an idiot. We belong together. This is kismet. If it wasn't for you--"

"I'm seriously not a big fan of being called an idiot."

"I always thought... There is supposed to be a system, you know? I hand out the pages, do the make-up, get them where they need to be. Book, staples, gauze, suit, coffin, rigor mortis, funeral. Every time. I've done it so many times, and it's always been the same. No one has ever... Someone is supposed to be there to get them. That's what I was told. Someone should have been there to get you. Someone should have been there tonight. I'm sorry. I hate this but," Terry's head hits the steering wheel, "you might be right about Roman."

"I told y--" Dammit.

My jaw locks mid-sentence. Corpse o'clock. Having spent the last several nights being tossed around like an undead pinata, the stillness of rigor mortis kind

of feels like heaven. Sure, it's the sort of heaven where instead of beautiful harp music, you get to listen to the sound of a werewolf tearing its own flesh from its body, but at least the seats are padded.

CHAPTER TWELVE

After about two seconds of relaxing stillness, the deep, unearthly growl from the coffin in the trunk does its best to ruin everything. The wolf's singular beastly grunt evolves into a chorus of screams, and there is nothing I can do to ignore it. Its dense, vibrating howl somehow harmonizes with a softer version of itself, shifting its volume in waves from a deep, primal groan to the highest conceivable screech. It's all pain and frustration and fear and anger. There are a few loud pops, small explosions, like fistfuls of fire crackers and then the animalistic snarl begins to sound more desperate and familiar. More human.

Terry was wrong. The creature in the coffin isn't just some random John Doe Werewolf, or a John of any sort. There's a woman locked in our trunk. A woman I love. A woman named Erin.

Her voice is delicate, soft like someone who has been on fire for the last ten hours and would be happy

to just be a pile of ash for a while. The words stammer through her lips as if she's shaking uncontrollably as she speaks to herself in short, breathy bursts of confusion. I can't make out what she's actually trying to say, but through the white noise of whispering, I can tell that she's afraid. I can tell that it still hurts and that it isn't going to stop any time soon. Her breathing speeds up and she begins to pound on the lid of the coffin.

"What the fuck," she screams. I've never heard a voice so sad and angry at the same time. "Help me, anyone, please. Where am I? What the fuck is this-- Help. Please, help me! Is anyone there? Oh god, please."

I feel like a monster for helping Terry lock her in the box. This is all my fault. My arms and legs keep trying to move but nothing happens. I know better. I know that I can't do anything to help her or change what I've done but it doesn't stop me from trying. I just want to open up the coffin and apologize. I want to beg for forgiveness, drop my head, and wait for her to punch me in the face for doing this to her.

I can't even imagine how afraid she must be. She's strong, and she's braver than I am, but that doesn't

mean that she should have to prove it. Her voice breaks into a hoarse, tearful whisper after several hours of screaming, but she never stops. She never gives up.

I just want to let her know that someone is here. Tell her that she's not alone and that she'll be alright. Despite the fact that her life is an unspeakable nightmare of supernatural proportions, she will be alright. But, I can't do anything. I'm stuck. I'm a statue. A popsicle. A useless assortment of body parts in the shape of a person. I don't get to be her knight in decaying armor.

As the dim light at the edge of the parking garage begins to retreat, Terry's door opens. He's awake. I'm still stuck facing the dash, fighting to yell to Erin and failing while he's already wiping the crust from his eyes.

My head smacks the passenger window as he shuffles out of the car and slams his door. I'll let this one go. I know it can't be easy for him. After living this way for so long, believing the things that he's believed, I can't imagine what he must be thinking. He has spent the better part of his afterlife burying innocent people. He has to be feeling it. Sure, he's a big, lumberjack looking, pick-axe swinging badass, but

he's not a monster. Even with all of his talk about Roman's perfect system, Terry doesn't exactly strike me as the type of guy to shrug his shoulders and say he was just following orders. He must want to kill Roman. Maybe we should start a club.

Trying to shake the rigor mortis is like trying to chisel out of an iceberg with a toothpick. It's a slow, painful process, and there's little I can do to speed it up. I try Terry's ice melting method, but with Erin crying in the back, it's kind of like doing yoga in the middle of a plane crash.

When the feeling finally comes back to my legs, I kick open the door and try to jump out of the car. As my feet hit the ground, my knees buckle and throw my chest to the pavement. Thankfully, my uncoordinated belly flop seems to crack the rest of the ice around my joints, so I'm able to pull myself back to my feet.

When I open the trunk, Erin is screaming again, only this time there are no words. It's all tears and agony, like someone is sliding swords through her body or cutting her in half with a chainsaw. It's the kind of horrific magic show usually reserved for Vegas night clubs, except no one is going to applaud when the trick is finally over because instead of being back to her normal self, Erin will be a fur-faced,

bear toothed, rampaging lunatic.

"Erin," I yell into the coffin. "You're going to be okay. I'm sorry we didn't know--"

"Cole?" she shouts. "Cole, please..."

I take a step back. There's a world of difference between believing that something is possible, and hearing it yell your name from the inside of a coffin. I know her voice. I've heard it every single day for seven years of my life. I've heard its cheerful sarcasm, its insecure stammer, its whispered arrogance, its exhausted, early morning, pre-coffee grumble. I've heard this woman love me and I've heard her hate my guts. I would know her voice through a tin can walkie talkie across mountain tops. But, I wanted to be wrong. I didn't want to believe that it was actually her.

As Erin repeats my name, her voice toes the line between terrified and relieved. She's getting louder and more desperate with every word. As I pull on the lock, every ounce of Erin's humanity explodes from her lips. She isn't asking to be released, or screaming my name, or really saying anything at all. She's just erupting audibly. Breaking, tearing, and changing until everything human is gone. Erin disappears and all that's left is a low, persistent washing machine

hum of a wolf's growl.

I fall to the pavement, elbows on my knees, and stare into the open trunk. The casket trembles enough to rock the car up and down on its shocks, nearly lifting the back wheels. I can't believe it's her. I watched the wolf grab her that night. I watched as it tore into her shoulder with its teeth. I should have known. I've seen enough movies to know what happens when a werewolf bites someone. Then again, I've read enough books to know that there's no such thing as werewolves.

The morgue is immaculately clean, at least, immaculately clean for a morgue. The floor and slabs have been scrubbed and polished to the point of almost being reflective. The garbage bins are empty, and there's no George goo left on the floor. It even smells sort of piny in here. Aretha Franklin's voice fills the autopsy room as Terry backs out of the kitchen, singing over a steaming medical tray.

"I hope you're hungry." He tips the tray to show me his freshly cooked scrambled eggs ala brain matter, and smiles as if it isn't made of rotten zombie flesh. "It's a new recipe, I've never made it before but it smells eggcellent."

"She said my name," I tell him, ignoring his

stupid egg pun.

"What do you mean?" He shovels a fistful of blubber into his mouth.

"Erin. It's Erin. She's in the coffin."

"How'd she get in there?" he asks. "What happened to the wolf?"

"She is the wolf!" I say. "That's what I'm trying to tell you."

"I'm pretty sure that wolf was a guy."

"I know that you heard her. You had to. You were right next to me."

"I don't know. I guess it sounded a little effeminate but I don't see how that's any of my business." He chews his egg and licks his lips, avoiding eye contact. "I guess it could have been a girl."

"It isn't just some girl, it's Erin," I say. "My ex-girlfriend. Erin. She said my name. She said Cole."

"Maybe she said cold," he says, spraying egg juice with every word. "We do have a giant wall of corpsicles in the other room. It gets cold in here."

"I know what I heard."

"Eat some," he says. "You're getting... moody."

"I'm not getting moody." I lift a wet, rubbery egg bit. "I'm getting sick of this."

"Sorry, I'm all out of es cargo and caviar at the moment," he says. "Also, you're welcome."

I wince as I slide the graying, yellow pig slop into my mouth. After the first few bites, once I forget that I'm eating the frontal lobe of someone's uncle, it actually tastes kind of amazing. It's as if Terry stole a cookbook from some 5 star, gourmet chef, and replaced all of the meat ingredients with zombie flesh. Whatever it is, it works.

"We have to let her out of there."

"Okay, go ahead and open it up." He laughs.

"She'll turn you into confetti. It'll be festive."

"There has to be some way we can talk to her," I say. "We can't just leave her in there."

"There's nothing we can do," he says. "If she's a wolf, which she obviously is, then she's gone. You might as well say goodbye to her now."

"But--"

"I'm sorry. If it was anything else we could have found a way. A vampire, a gnome, whatever, but a werewolf?" He huffs. "Forget about it."

"Are you seriously going to lecture me about your stupid system after what we saw last night?"

"It's not my call." He lifts the cookie sheet to his mouth and shakes his hand until the rest of the

egg slides between his teeth. "We don't have a choice." He throws the empty tray toward one of the slabs and misses.

"I know it doesn't mean anything to you, but I know that girl. I know her, Terry. She isn't just some fucking werewolf to me."

"What do you want from me?" He runs his palm down the side of his face, tracing the scars across his temple. "I know that you're new to this, and you're feeling all sorts of feelings right now, but you have to understand that Roman has a zero tolerance policy for screwing around when it comes to wolves."

"I don't give a shit about what Roman has to say. This is my--"

"That isn't your girlfriend," he yells. He covers his mouth and paces for a second, taking long, slow breaths. "There's a werewolf in that box, and there's only one thing I can do with a werewolf."

"I'm not going to let you kill her."

"Will you just read the pamphlets? Geez, man. We don't kill werewolves. We never kill werewolves. You would know that if you paid attention."

"So, then what? What do you do with wolves?"

"Well." He removes his lab coat and hangs it on the wall. "First, we trap them. So far so good. And

then, usually I take them directly to Pavel, but of course that didn't happen since you and I took our little detour to the cemetery."

"Who's Pavel?" I follow Terry into the garage. "Is he a ghoul? A vampire?"

"No," he says. "Get in."

"I'm not just going to let you take her." I stand in front of Tony Robbins.

"Just get in the car, we don't have time for this."

"We don't kill wolves?"

"I can't say the same for ghouls." He revs the engine.

"Promise me, Terry."

"Sure," he says, revving again, "I promise I'll run you over."

"Promise me that she'll be okay."

"Just get in," he says. "Pavel will help us sort this out."

"Say it."

"She'll be fine."

That's probably the best I'm going to get. It'll have to do. I get in the car. "Which pamphlet will we need, this time?"

"We don't need the book for this one," he says,

"Pavel knows what he is. He's been that way for a long time." He reaches for the volume knob on the stereo, and some Bon Jovi song tries to kill the conversation.

"Is he like a werewolf whisperer?" I ask, turning off the radio. "Wait, is he going to teach her to control her transformation or something?"

"No." He turns the volume up. Terry does a pretty good Bon Jovi impression, but it's obvious that he doesn't actually know any of the words to this song.

I turn the radio off and stare at him for a second, watching his rock star expression droop into a disappointed grimace. "What is Pavel?"

He reaches for the stereo again, ignoring my question, and returning to his Bon Jovi face. As he belts out the only part of the song that he knows, his chubby fingers stay wrapped around the volume knob like a child safety lock. I'm getting sick of this. I smack his hand away from the dial, and shut the radio off.

"What is Pavel?"

"Don't smack my hand," he says, reaching for the radio.

"Don't ignore my questions," I say, smacking his hand. "What is Pavel?"

"Fine," he says. "Pavel is--" He huffs.

"Yeah?"

"He's an asshole."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The strip mall is the color of a used diaper, an uneven smearing of browns and yellows with no discernible evidence of a pattern. Five of the seven units are completely deserted. Blue neon signs still shine over the abandoned failures with sensationally intriguing business names like "Laundry", "Food", and "Pawn". It's like a secondhand graveyard for stupid investments. The only two units still in business are "Bar", a hole in the wall, regulars-only sort of place with a couple of flatbed trucks out front, and "Pets", the kind of store that looks like it has more roaches than puppies inside. There's a dingy, white work van double parked in front of the pet store with the words "Pavel's Pets" poorly graffitied in green spray paint across its side.

"Is it like a cover for a secret organization of gnomes or something?"

"It's a pet store," he says. "You know, with pets. I should have known that you were illiterate."

"Why are we at a pet store?"

"I've been thinking about getting a cat," he says. "They don't ask stupid questions." We park in the space beside the van. Terry shuts the engine off, leans at me, and grumbles, "Stay here."

"What? No. I'm not going to--"

"Just stay here." He opens his door. "Pavel isn't a person person."

"You mean people person?"

"I know what I said. One of us is more than he can stand. It'll be easier if I go in alone."

"What are you gonna do?"

"I'm going to find out as much as I can about the wolf."

"You can't just keep calling her 'the wolf' like she isn't a person."

"Does that sound like a person to you?" He nods toward the bouncing, growling casket in the trunk.

"Does it seem like she's ready to sit down and play a game of Scrabble? Are you going to hold her hand and binge watch twelve hours of TV together? No. You know why?"

"Because she's a wolf," I whisper.

"Because she is a wolf."

"She still has a name."

"And, if everything goes according to plan, maybe

I'll learn it someday. For now, we have work to do."

"So, I'm coming with you?"

"No. Did something happen to your ears?" He pulls the keys from the ignition. "I already told you he doesn't like people. You might look like half eaten beef jerky, but you're still people."

"Are you trying to flatter me into submission? Because it's working."

"Look, if you come in, it'll get all messy. We don't want that. Just trust me."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Stay here and watch the wolf until I get back."

"Her name is--"

He slams the door and walks toward the trunk.

This is insane. My eyes scan the bright blue letters above the door one by one. P-E-T-S. My hands are shaking. I don't even have a functioning nervous system, but these sort of things seem to work on instinct. This is a pet store. This is a pet store and Erin is a werewolf.

"This thing is heavier than I remember," Terry grunts. "I can't get it to budge."

This is the place where monsters go to buy other monsters. That's why he doesn't want me to go inside. He thinks that we're just going to leave Erin here so

someone can put a leash on her and call her Fuzzball. It's not going to happen.

"We can't do this, Terry."

"I told you," he huffs, "we have no choice."

Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe it's just a pet store. Maybe I'm overthinking all of this. I do that. Right? Still, I can't just sit here. I can't just let him take her. I have to do something. The gun. There's a gun here somewhere. Keeping one eye on the trunk, I reach beneath the driver seat. I know the gun case is hiding somewhere in the mass of empty plastic cups. I just have to find it.

"Come help me with this thing," he grunts.

"I'd love to help you." I turn between the seats and shrug. "But, I was told to stay here. I don't make the rules."

Probing through the spider webbed and gunk infested terrain beneath the seat, I swat wildly to shake the dewy remnants from my fingers. In all of my waving, I smack a hard metal wall. Found it.

The rusted handle is sharp against my fingers as I try to maneuver the case. It's heavy but it slides easily enough, flattening pudding cups as I pull it from beneath the seat. I pop open the case, lift the revolver onto my lap and then try to push open the

chamber to check for bullets. "Try" being the operative word.

I've never used a revolver. This is only the second time I've ever even seen a gun in person, so this might take a while. Movies have trained me to believe that I can just flick my wrist, toss shells into the air, and then, by some divine miracle of gun-genie bullet magic, this thing will be loaded. Apparently, that isn't the case. Thankfully, Terry is busy rocking and heaving, trying to get the casket onto the gurney, so I have some time to figure out how this thing works.

After a minute of playing Bop-it with the wrong side of the revolver, I finally manage to get the chamber open. It's empty but there are plenty of shells still in the case. More than enough. Once they're in my hand, the bullets feel alive in an eerie way, like the highly evolved version of some Cro-Magnon-era rock ancestor, perfectly sculpted through natural selection to tear through flesh with ease.

Terry is still heaving and grunting, sliding the casket inch by inch. In all of his pulling, he lets out a warrior growl and the car bounces enough to shake the shells from my fist and onto the floor. He looks up at me, holding the coffin in place with his

shoulder. "Could you just push from your end?"

"Yeah." I trace the floor of the car with my fingertips. "I'm on it."

This car is filthy. It's like a time-machine that runs on garbage, except the flux capacitor is broken, so it's just a junkyard of forgotten relics and half devoured zombie flesh. I find one of the bullets behind a crusty sock, and another lodged in a substance that looks a lot like silly putty but smells like someone's year old, severely over-used dental floss.

"It doesn't feel like you're pushing."

"Oh, you wanted me to push?" I'm out of time. Two bullets will have to do. "I've been over here pulling like an idiot." I load the shells into the chamber.

"You're the worst sidekick I've ever had."

"I'm not your sidekick." I hop out of the car.

Hiding a gun in the back of my pants is almost as bad as having a grenade in my pocket. The extra weight of the revolver digging into my spine forces me to walk like a Muppet, but I make it to the entrance before Terry notices that I'm gone.

"What are you doing? I told you to stay in the car," he yells. "You don't understand!"

As I push the door open, a small bell chimes

overhead, and with it comes a nasally, panicked voice from somewhere in the reptile section. "Holy fucking fuck! Roman? I didn't know you were coming. I-- uh-- I would have cleaned up."

The entire store smells like a urinal cake. It's as if the walls have been coated with that cheap, pink liquid soap you only find in convenient stores and highway rest areas. There are a few rows of puppy display boxes to the left with a sign overhead that reads 'Paws and Claws'. There are no dogs or cats or werewolves, just empty beds of old, peed on, newspaper scraps. To the right, there are four aisles of fish tanks full of live snails and not-so-alive fish. The sign overhead reads, 'Davey Jones Locker'.

The entrance bell chimes behind me, and I turn to see Terry standing in the doorway. He pulls the hood of a black poncho over his head, and screams, "You're a moron!"

When I turn back, there is an eight foot tall, glasses-wearing wart monster breathing wet, sticky garlic into my eyes. This must be Pavel. I have no idea what the hell he is, but he's insanely disgusting. I haven't read the wart monster pamphlet, so I don't know if it's just a natural reaction, or if he has some supernatural ability to teleport puke into

throats, but I'm tasting bile and chunks of egg just looking at him.

"Holy shit," the creature wheezes. He sounds like an asthmatic death metal singer. "Get out of here."

"Don't eat me," I yell, moving from beneath his drooping, fatty lips.

"Eat you?" he groans. "I wouldn't eat you if you were wrapped in bacon. I'm allergic to ghouls."

"Wait, you can talk?"

"And you can hear, but somehow you're still in my store."

"And you know that I'm a ghoul?"

"Of course he does, you unbelievable idiot." Terry steps between me and the goliath monster and separates us with his hands. "Pavel is a troll."

"We prefer Trolldfolk, you racist."

Terry adjusts his poncho. "He could tell you were a ghoul just by smelling you."

"That and the fact that you look like someone beat you with a lawnmower," Pavel laughs.

"I don't care what he is. I don't care what you are. I know what you're trying to do, Terry. I know what this place is. I know what you do here."

"Is this for real? Is he serious?" Pavel asks. "It isn't a big mystery, man. There's a sign on the door

and everything."

"I'm not kidding." I run my knuckles across the back of my shirt, tracing the outline of the revolver. "This isn't happening. Erin isn't going to be someone's pet."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Pavel looks at Terry. "I haven't seen you in two weeks and you bring this into my life? I thought we were friends."

"You sell werewolves as pets," I say. "Don't play dumb. I know that's why we're here."

"I told you why we're here," Terry says. "Pavel can tell us which wolf turned your girlfriend."

"Who would want a werewolf as a pet?" Pavel snorts. "Can you imagine trying to sweep up all that hair? Yikes."

"What?" My hand falls to my side. "So, you aren't going to..."

"Sell the wolf?"

"Erin."

"No," Terry says. "We aren't going to sell Erin."

"Oh. I thought--" This is embarrassing.

"Are you guys going to hug?" Pavel asks. "Can you do it outside?"

Terry tugs at his beard and turns toward the troll. "We need you to identify a wolf."

"Ugh." Pavel leans over, sniffs the top of my head, and begins to cough. "Yeah, just like I thought. You're dead, dude." He clears his throat and wipes his nose with the back of his hand. "Does Roman know about this?"

"What?" I ask. "Know about what?"

"I'm not here about him," Terry says. "Forget he was here. I need to know about the wolf outside."

Pavel lifts a small fish bowl off of one of the shelves and carries it toward the front desk. "You know I can't just act like he wasn't here. If Roman doesn't already know, he's going to find out soon."

"Find out what?" I ask.

Two of Pavel's gray, fat-knuckled sausage fingers dive into the fishbowl like Godzilla stomping through a city. He grabs a baseball-sized snail from the tank and shakes the fish juice from its shell. "You're one of Roman's," he says, pulling the tongue-like tail out from the bottom of the snail shell.

"Are you sure?" Terry asks.

Pavel's eyes roll back into his head as his mouth opens into a wide, hippo-esque configuration. His teeth are yellow and black, broken, jagged, and covered in mossy barnacles. He takes a bite out of the snail and then scowls at us as he speaks. "Am I sure?"

I'm sure that you and your friend are screwed. I'm sure that one of you isn't supposed to be alive and probably won't be for much longer. Am I sure? Of course I'm sure."

"What does he mean?" I look at Pavel. "What do you mean, I'm one of Roman's? One of his what?"

"He doesn't know?" He takes another bite of the snail. "This is hilarious."

"He made you," Terry says, scratching through his beard.

"Roman?"

"Uh huh."

"Roman's a werewolf?"

"Uh huh."

"And he's the one who did this to me?"

"I told you," Pavel says. "You're dead."

What the hell am I supposed to do with this information?

"Wait," I say. "If Roman did this to me, doesn't that mean that Erin--"

"You don't know if it's actually her," Terry says.

"It's her, Terry. I know what I heard. And if I'm one of Roman's, then so is she. He did this to us."

"Can I go back to not talking to you now?" Pavel asks. "Because I can think of seventeen other ways I'd

rather be spending my time and none of them involve you being in my life." He tosses the rest of the snail husk into his mouth.

"We're not here to talk about the ghoul."

"Oh good," Pavel groans. "So, what'll it be? A bearded lizard, a goldfish, one of those little balls with the fuzzy tail to chase around the morgue?"

"No, not today. There's a wolf outside."

Two large bubbles begin to form over Pavel's forehead as if his brain is boiling beneath his skin.

"Come on, Pav, don't make this into a thing."

Terry lifts the hood of the poncho over his head and takes a step back. "I need you to just give her a sniff for me."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Pavel says, rolling his round, bulging fish eyes in a wide arch, "I forgot that the sign outside says Werewolf Sniffery." The boiling skin settles into a protruding, pickle textured brow.

Terry groans and steadies his eyes, squinting.

"You know what I mean. And, you know what will happen if you don't help me with the girl, especially if she's one of Roman's."

Boils erupt across the troll's head, arms, and neck as he stands. "Yeah, I do," Pavel snorts. "The same thing that'll happen to you, when I tell him

about your friend."

"I think he already knows," Terry says. "We saw him a couple nights ago and he didn't seem happy."

"No shit. Why do you think he has you bury the ghouls? They're a liability."

Exhaling slowly, Terry rests his face in the palm of his hand and then kneads his fingers through his beard. His expression is vacant, sad and empty. For the first time since I met him, he looks like a corpse.

"He can't have a bunch of pissed off skeletons running around trying to kill him," Pavel says. "It's bad for business."

"He's never sent me after a newborn wolf so close to the full moon. He's not that sloppy." His cheek stretches as he runs his fingers through his beard. "We usually get them before they turn. Early phases, you know, when it's easy. I don't think this was an accident."

"So, you think that Roman might be trying to kill you, and you decided to come here of all places?"

Pavel's hands and forearms begin to bubble.

"I'm sorry, Pav."

"I don't want to be dragged into this, Terry. You know Roman already hates my guts." Dense, fatty masses climb from the troll's fingertips toward his

shoulders. As the boils spread, they solidify over one another, forming large chunks of new muscle. Pavel's entire body is growing right in front of us. "I can't do anything for you. If he wants you dead, you're dead. That's how that works. It's like the... What do you always call it? The process?"

"The system." I say.

"Yeah," Pavel sneers. "If there's a system, there's only one real rule, and it's you don't fuck with Roman."

"I think we can make it right," Terry says. "We just have to convince him that there won't be anymore issues. That's why I need you to help me."

I grab Terry's shoulder. "We can't--"

"Stop." He shrugs my hand loose. "This is what we have to do. We have to know. Will you help us?"

"Hm." Pavel stares at the ceiling, drooling heavily and breathing through his teeth. His boiling skin has settled into a new, larger, impossibly more grotesque, and decidedly more fish-like figure. He slowly plucks a new snail shell from the bowl and lifts it to his nose. He sniffs twice before taking a bite. "No."

"Fine," Terry says, staring at his feet. "If you help us... If you tell us where the wolf belongs, I'll

do it."

The troll's eyes sharpen as he leans onto the counter. "You'll do it?" He takes another bite from the snail, then gestures at Terry with the hollow shell. "For real this time?"

"Yes."

Pavel wipes the goo from his lips and leans toward Terry. "You'll go all the way? I mean it. Full regalia. I don't want any of that no frills, mom's basement crap. I want the real thing."

"I said, I'd do it," Terry grumbles.

"Every Thursday? Full costume?" Pavel asks tipping snail intestines toward Terry.

"Uh huh. Full costume."

"What are you guys--"

"We used to play D&D," Terry says. "Dungeons and Dragons."

"Oh," I say. "That's much worse than what I was thinking."

"We had to stop because someone gets a little too into it." Terry tightens his grip on the hood of the poncho.

Pavel's eyes seem to shrink into his huge gray cheeks. "You killed me."

"Not this again," Terry says. "I had no choice."

You were being a jerk."

"The town made me Overlord, Terry," Pavel shivers through his words. His face begins to turn red. "And what the Overlord wants, the Overlord gets."

"You made me call you Big Papa for six hours," Terry says. "Six hours."

Pavel's skin seems to crawl, moving in slow spirals around his cheeks. "You didn't have to kill me."

"Calm down, Pav," Terry says. "Everything is fine. I said I'll play."

"You were my brother."

"I know, I know. I'm sorry!"

"Fine," Pavel says, sitting back in his chair. "I get it, you love me. So, where is this wolf?"

Terry turns to me and nods toward the door. "Go get the coffin."

"What's the point?" I say. "He already told us everything we need to know."

"This is what we do with wolves," he says. "We have to know who made her, so we can drop her off."

"We know who made her," I say. "And there's no way we're going to leave her with that sociopath. You just said that he was trying to kill us. We can't just--"

"Look," he says. "Maybe it's your girlfriend in

there, maybe it's not, but we have to know for sure."

"This is so messed up," I say, backing away from the counter. "So, when we bring her in here, he's going to do his thing and if it is Erin, when you find out that it's her," the metal revolver digs into my back, "you're going to let her go, right?"

"We'll figure it out once we know what we're dealing with," Terry says. "We have to find a way to make this right."

"Is there any way I could just slip her a note and a flashlight or something? Anything? There has to be a way to talk to her."

"I don't know anyone who speaks werewolf," Pavel says. "But you could always--"

"Stop," Terry interrupts. "If it turns out to be your girl, we'll find a way for you to say what you need to say. But we need to get her in here and get this done."

I hate this. "Fine. But, you go get her."

Terry shakes his head and huffs. "I'll be right back," he says. "Watch my idiot."

The bell chimes as Terry leaves, and Pavel stares at me. He sits expressionless for a full minute and then leans forward. "He was talking about you," Pavel says.

"Yeah. I got that."

"Have you ever played Dungeons and Dragons?"

"Um, no," I say, looking into an empty terrarium.

"I don't think I'd be very good at--"

"You'd love it," he says. He lifts another snail from the tank near the register and takes a bite.

"Okay."

"You should play with me and Terry, next Thursday," he says. "Should I pencil you in? You're coming right? I mean, if this whole Roman thing works out and you're not dead. You'll most likely be dead, but if you're not, you'll be here on Thursday. Right?"

"Uh... I guess, but--"

"I play a half-elf paladin, and Terry plays as a human rogue. It's fun, you'll love it. It's a good way to feel like you're a part of something bigger than yourself."

"There aren't a lot of things bigger than you."

"Is that a fat joke?" Pavel jumps from his chair and leans onto the desk.

"No," I say, covering my face with my hands. "No, no, no, no, no. It's, um, I've never seen a troll before. You're, you know, you're big. I'm not so big in comparison."

"Oh, I get it," he says. "Just remember that we

don't tolerate that sort of prejudice in Kazool."

"What is Kazool?" I ask.

"It's the fictional realm where we--"

The bell chimes and Terry pulls the growling coffin into the pet store.

"Oh, mother of shit, Terry," Pavel yells. He walks around the counter, and sets a slobbery hand on the side of the gurney. He leans over the top of the coffin and sniffs twice. "The ghoul was right. You have to leave her."

"What do you mean, leave her?" I ask, stepping between Pavel and the coffin. "You said you would help us if Terry played, right?"

"I agreed to sniff a wolf, not kill myself," Pavel says. "If I let you take her, Roman will murder me. I don't exactly want to be murdered. You see my dilemma?"

"You said I could talk to her," I say, pointing at Terry.

He lowers his head.

"She can't go with him. We need to just let her go."

"Let her go?" Terry says. "Did you forget what it was like in the hospital? People screaming, running for their lives. Is that what you want? Even if it is your girlfriend, she's still a wolf. There's no

changing that. She has to be with others. That's just the way it is."

"Does it have to be him?" I ask. "I get it. I do. It wouldn't be safe for anyone if she was just free to werewolf around town, but does she have to go with Roman?"

"That's the whole point," Terry says. "If it was anyone else, we wouldn't be having this conversation."

"It's a pack thing," Pavel says. "He's pretty serious about his people. Especially the ladies, if you know what I mean."

"Shut up," Terry says. "That isn't helping."

Pavel's eyes narrow and he snorts.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"She's a part of his family now," Pavel says. "You know, like a wolf pack. For wolves. Because your girlfriend is a wolf now."

I set a hand on the edge of the coffin. "What about a cure?"

"There's only one cure." Pavel taps his fingers, walking both of his catcher's mitt hands toward the top of the coffin. "You could kill the wolf that made her. If her maker dies, she'll be human again."

"We shouldn't be talking about this," Terry says.

"But, you know," Pavel says, "if Roman dies you go

with him."

"What do you mean? I thought-- Ghoul Rule number 2, right Terry?"

"Why are we even talking about this?" Terry says. "Nobody is killing anyone. Especially Roman."

"Tell him," I say. "Ghoul Rule number 2. Remember? If I kill the wolf that made me, I mean, if it dies somehow, I get to be free, right? That's what you said. That's what it says in the pamphlet."

"That's kind of right, I guess," Pavel says. "If by 'free' you mean dead."

"But--"

"I've seen it happen," Pavel laughs. "Do you remember Scott? He was the one with no left arm, always in a bad mood."

"Yeah," Terry grunts.

"He was in here one day, picking up food for his fish. I watched him drop dead in the plant section. It took me two hours to clean up the mess. Anyway. A few days later I found out that someone killed his wolf. He was a ghoul. You're a ghoul. Are you seeing my point? That's the way your cookie crumbles."

"There are other ghouls?"

"Well yeah," Pavel snorts. "Werewolves are sloppy eaters, they leave scraps all over the place. Most of

them don't have the resources that Roman has."

"So, now what?" I ask. "How can I--"

"You have to leave her here, Terry," Pavel says.

"You know you do. Stop teasing him."

"Teasing me?" I say. "You said I could talk to her."

"I'm not teasing him. I'm not teasing you. You will," Terry says. "We just have to figure this out. We have to think."

"She's his," Pavel says, spreading his fingers and pushing both hands firmly against the casket. "There's nothing to think about. She stays here. No matter what you do now, you're both fucked."

"You're wrong," Terry says.

Pavel slides his hands across the edge of the coffin and grips the metal bar on the end of the gurney. "He's going to find you. He will. You know he will. And, if I let you leave, he'll come after me next."

"No," Terry says. "There has to be another way. We just need to buy time."

"Sorry, Terry, I can't let you have her." The troll begins to pull the gurney toward the back of the store. "You know I want to help but there's nothing I can do. She belongs to him, they both do. You know how

he is."

"She what? Do you even hear yourself?" I grab the opposite end of the casket, plant my feet, and try to stop Pavel from pulling any further. He doesn't seem to notice.

"Just let us take her, Pav, I told him I'd give him another night," Terry says. "We'll bring her back."

"You know I can't," Pavel says, shaking the gurney handle. "If it was just the ghoul, I would, but you know how he is about his... brides."

"His what?" I ask, holding firm to the gurney.

Pavel turns his back to me, and continues to pull the coffin into the fresh water fish section, dragging me along with it. I can feel the wolf kicking the lid as I try to slow the gurney. This isn't going to work. I'm too weak. It's like using a paper-mache anchor to hold an aircraft carrier in place. What did I expect? Pavel is strong in the way I imagine a chimpanzee might be if it were bitten by a radioactive rhino. It's the sort of strength reserved for nightmares of bullies who take your best punch to the face and just keep laughing. By the time he even realizes that I'm trying to slow him down, we're near the back of the store.

"What are you doing?" Pavel asks.

"I can't just let you take her," I say, straightening my shoulders. The revolver digs into my back as if to remind me that there's no way I could beat this troll in a thumb war, let alone a fist fight. I lift the gun from my waist and point it at Pavel's shiny new head. "I won't let you take her."

The troll turns slowly, drooling and growling. His brow is lowered, covering nearly half of his beady, wide-set eyes. The blistering mountains across his temples begin to move, growing and bubbling over one another like a river of tumors as he speaks, "Put the gun down. Now."

"Cole, don't!" Terry yells.

"She's his," Pavel says, still holding the coffin. His arms and shoulders balloon rapidly as he speaks, bulging with coarse, unnatural muscle. "It doesn't matter what you do. You can shoot me if you want, but it won't stop him from taking her."

"Calm down," Terry says, taking a step toward me. I shake the gun in his direction, and he freezes.

"Shut up, Terry," I yell. "Just, shut up and push the coffin outside. And you, let go." I aim the revolver at Pavel's mouth.

The troll's entire body begins to inflate as he steps away from the coffin. He grunts anxiously

through violent snorts, taking small steps as I wave the revolver.

"He's going to kill you," Pavel says, balling his fists at his sides. "He's going to kill both of you, and then... then, he'll come for me."

Terry slowly pulls the gurney toward the front of the store. "You have no idea what you're doing," he whispers.

"I'm not assisting in human trafficking, for one," I whisper back.

"She's a werewolf," Terry says. "It's just how it goes."

"Not today."

Pavel is making me nervous. He's rocking back and forth with his eyes fixed on the coffin, basically steaming from the ears. I keep the gun fixed in his direction as I walk backwards toward the exit.

"I can't," he grunts. "I can't let you. This isn't how we do things." Pavel takes a step forward.

"Please. Please stop. This isn't-- What do I say to him? You don't understand. You're going to get us all killed. He's going to... What do I say when he--"

"When you see Roman," I say, glaring into Pavel's engorged eyes, "tell him to go fuck himself. No, tell him I'm coming for him. That's stupid, um, don't say

anything, just forget we were here. You know what, let's go with the go fuck yourself thing, I like that. Yeah. When you see Roman, tell him to go fuck himself."

"You're making a mistake," he growls and lowers his shoulders. "If I were you, I'd just give up now."

"If I were you," I say, cocking the gun, "I would find a new dermatologist."

He's grunting and panting like a bull ready to charge. A thick stream of drool vibrates from his teeth as he speaks in a deep, echoed voice, "You can't leave."

I can feel my bones trying to escape my skin as Pavel bends into a football player, oncoming train, get the hell out of the way or be crushed position. This thing could literally run through me and paint the walls with my insides.

As Pavel stampedes forward, I squeeze the trigger until the gun lets out a thunderclap. A tank of fighting fish explodes about six feet to the right of the troll. I missed. He screams and continues to rush toward me, leaving a trail of slobber along the way as his eyes roll back and his mouth widens to Jabba the Hutt proportions. He's twelve feet tall now, and looks like a hungry landshark in torn jeans and a Robocop t-shirt. My finger pulls the trigger back again, firing

the last of my bullets and blowing the brains out of the cash register. I wasn't even close. At least I tried.

I cover my face and wait for Pavel's jaws to send me off to snail heaven, or ghoul hell, or whatever comes after being eaten by a troll. There's a loud popping crunch, and I close my eyes as a fishy, syrupy warmth envelops my body. He must have swallowed me whole. Now I know what a tv dinner feels like.

When my eyes open, I half expect to see a small ship with an elderly puppeteer living inside of the troll's stomach. Instead, I see a fist holding a statue of The Eiffel Tower and dripping with what looks to be Pavel's intestines. Leave it to Terry to save my life with a plaster fish tank accessory.

I'm completely covered from head to toe in thick, rubbery, chunk laden troll extract, while Terry, aside from his hand, is perfectly spotless. The poncho suddenly makes a lot of sense.

"What the hell was that?"

"Troll jelly," he says. "It's a thing."

On the floor in front of us, there's a pile of skin and fatty tissue that looks like Buffalo Bill's laundry bin. Twelve feet of troll muscle deflated and heaped together into a discarded mountain of blubber.

"Is he dead?" I ask.

"No, he's fine." He kicks the pile of flesh.

"Pavel?" He kicks again. "Pavel, just come out of there."

The mound rattles as a hole opens at its peak like the mouth of a meat volcano. Tiny fingers force the gap to widen and a three foot tall creature climbs out of the opening, wearing a Robocop shirt like a cloak. If Pavel was a toad, this would be his tadpole.

"Sorry, Pav," Terry says. "If we left without hurting you, Roman would think you were working with us."

The small troll lowers his head and nods.

"We'll see you Thursday, if we're not all dead by then."

"And, you'll call me Big Papa?" Pavel asks.

"Not even once," Terry says. "But, I'll play."

"The Brothers of Kazool will ride again!" Pavel says.

I wipe the Pavel from my face and grab one side of the gurney. "Why didn't you just let him eat me?"

"Well, then I'd have to kill Roman by myself," he says, grabbing the other side of the gurney.

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

Terry tosses the statue, and begins to pull. "I'm

sure that I don't want to call anyone Big Papa ever again."

We load the coffin into Tony Robbins and drive. I'm still trembling a little, trying to ring the troll juice out of my shirt. It's a thick, blubbery mess that makes me feel like I'm being strangled by a cup of Jello.

The garbage bag of clothes is mostly empty. There are a few women's blouses, some extra large floral-patterned Hawaiian shirts, and a yellow v-neck tee that's about my size. I'm tempted to wear the flower print, but my staple-stitched, patchwork zombie look already attracts enough attention so I grab the v-neck. I use one of the Hawaiian shirts to wipe the slime from my face and turn to Terry. Since leaving the pet store, he's been shaking his head, talking to himself beneath his breath and looking at his phone every few seconds as if he's expecting a call.

"What's the plan?" he asks.

"What do you--"

"You have a plan, right?" he says, alternating glances between me and his phone. "Don't tell me that we're just winging this."

"Kind of," I say. "We have to talk to Erin. Tell her what's happening."

"And she'll be able to come up with a plan?" he asks.

"No. I mean, maybe. I don't know. It doesn't matter. That's not the point."

"What? Yes, it matters. Of course it matters. Are you kidding?" he says. "It's looking pretty freaking likely that I'm going to die because of this, and you're telling me that you have no idea what you're doing? And, you don't think that matters?"

"We'll think of something."

"This is a mistake," he says. "Is this a mistake? I'm making a mistake. We're making a mistake."

"Would you rather just give her to Roman, and call it a night? Seriously? Take a second and actually think of how many people you've handed over to him because it was part of your system," I say. "How many people have you left in the ground because he told you that he had a plan? Yeah, I don't have a plan. I don't know what the fuck I'm doing, but I know that it's better than doing nothing."

Terry lets out a deep breath and puts his phone away. "Where do you want to go?"

"We can't keep dragging her around like this," I say. "We need to talk to her somehow."

"Do you speak werewolf?" Terry asks.

"I honestly don't know if you're being sarcastic," I say. He stares at me without a word. "No. No, I don't speak werewolf."

"Crap," he says. "That means we have to do it the hard way." We take a quick left turn and Terry steps on the gas.

"What's the hard way?" I ask. "You mean, you know how we can send her a message?"

"You said you wanted to talk to her, didn't you?" he asks.

"Yes."

"Then we have to go to the cemetery."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

There are plenty of open parking spaces in the cemetery. It's late and all of the mourners are long gone, crying into their pillows or drinking themselves to death. Either way, we're alone. Instead of coasting into the shadows and hiding in the back of the lot, beside the other cars, or finding a nice spot near the entrance, Terry tightens his grip on the wheel and pushes his foot to the floor. Tony Robbins squeals as we speed through the handicap parking area and jump the curb toward a field of tombstones.

"What are you doing?" My voice hiccups.

"She's too heavy to carry," he says. "The gurney won't make it through the grass." Muck spews from the tires, raining over a row of graves as we skid in a semi circle. Once we're facing the entrance, Terry shifts the car into park and pops the trunk.

"But, why are we here?"

"We have to feed her," he says, stepping out of the car. "It's the only way."

"Right, feed her." I follow him to the trunk.

"Wait. Feed her what?"

"Get that side." He nods toward the coffin.

I set my foot on the car's bumper, grip the silver bar along the edge of the box, and pull. It doesn't even budge. I don't know how Terry ever did this by himself. She's a beast. I mean, in wolf form, of course.

"Together," he says. "One, two--"

Despite the rumbling and pounding, and the unbelievable weight of the box, we manage to get Erin out of the car without dropping her. Carrying her through the uneven, muddy grass is another story. The coffin is awkward and bulky, and we can't really walk in a straight line with Erin jumping around and shifting her weight. I see why Terry wanted to go all *Fast and the Furious* with the hearse. There's no way we could have carried her from the parking lot. A few steps in, my knuckles begin to pop and stretch beneath the weight. If I don't take a break soon I'll be able to wear fingerless gloves unironically.

"Alright, there are a couple here," he says. "Set her down."

"A couple of what?"

"The full moon is tomorrow night." He points a

finger at one of the headstones, and then another, and another, continuing down the line as if counting.

"So," I say. "What does that have to do with the cemetery? Why do you always--"

"She hasn't gone full wolf," he says. "If we feed her now, she could fight off the change for a while. You might be able to talk to her."

"But, she has to eat something?" I ask. "Like Wendy's or Mcdonald's?"

I already know the answer. Wishful thinking.

"No." Terry stops pacing, leans toward a faded tombstone, and runs his pointer finger across the shallow, broken letters written on its face. "More like Niles. Joe Niles. Beloved father, husband, and midnight snack."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Well yeah, it doesn't actually say that, that would be absurd."

"Are these all ghouls?"

Terry's smirk flatlines. "Not anymore."

"So, now what? We dig this guy up, and just let Erin out of the coffin?"

"If by we, you mean you, then yes, that is exactly what we are going to do."

"Can I, at least, use your pickax?"

"Dr. Occam?" He asks, sitting on a nearby headstone.

"You named it?"

"I did."

"And, it's a doctor?"

"Dr. Occam is an integral part of my operation, and if you want to earn the privilege of his company, you should probably learn to respect him."

My chin tucks into my chest. "Can I please use Dr. Occam to help me dig?"

"No," he says, "Just dig. Next time, try to remember to grab Steve."

"Is Steve your shovel?"

"No. Steve is the guy you're going to pay to dig graves for you." He thumbs on his phone. "Who names a shovel? Seriously."

The grass is short and thin but soft enough to cushion my knees as I lower myself over the grave. My fingers knead through the various layers of dirt, tearing roots and tossing rock after rock as I get deeper into the earth. Terry hops off of the tombstone and begins to whisper to himself. He's mumbling with a soft melody, singing beneath his breath, and walking back and forth.

"What are you singing?"

"I'm not singing, I'm thinking."

"What are you thinking?"

"That you should be digging faster."

After an hour of hand-shoveling dirt, and ripping through most of the skin on my fingers, the hole is only about four feet deep. In the center of the crater is an off-white rock that won't budge. I'm stuck. "I need the ax," I say, looking over my shoulder.

"And I need a time machine, the lottery numbers, and new friends," Terry says. "Just dig."

"Fine."

Standing to straighten my back, every joint in my body pops. As I stretch my arms it's like an orchestra armed with bubble wrap. I'm not really tired, but I know I should take a break. Being a walking corpse, I don't have to deal with the slow building ache that comes with hard manual labor. I can just keep digging until my skin becomes a banana peel like something out of Terminator. But, my bones aren't made of metal, and what little cartilage I have is wearing thin. Another hour of this and something might actually crack. My skeleton might eventually topple like a house of cards and I could end up living as a severed head in a shallow hole a few feet from my own grave. I would love to read that police report.

We don't really have the time for serious repairs, so I need to be careful.

The enormous rock that's been plaguing me looks the way I imagine a dinosaur egg might have looked. If the top of this thing cracked open, and an angry, alien-spider creature jumped out and hugged my face, I wouldn't really be surprised.

It's moments like this that make me wish that I was a boot connoisseur. I've always been more of a canvas shoe or sneaker guy, and unfortunately stomping the life out of something with moccasins doesn't exactly have the same crushing effect as a hard steel-toed work boot. I begin to kick the rock with my flimsy rubber soles and continue until enough sand is dislodged to form an unusual hairy moat around the boulder.

"There's something here," I yell. Kneeling again, I get a closer look at the blueish halo sprouting around the egg. I guess it could be some kind of moss, or fungus. It feels soft, like thin strands of cotton candy. "Come look at this."

"Are you finished?" He's laying on the coffin, staring at the stars.

"I think I found a mushroom." I brush some dirt away from the peach fuzz.

"That stupid thing you just said reminds me of something less stupid." He sits up. "We need to eat, so you should probably hurry up."

"It would go faster if--"

Dirt explodes around the mushroom rock as two filth covered hands emerge from beneath the earth. The annoying white boulder rockets to the surface, tossing dirt and gravel into the air like a mud-covered dog.

"It's Niles!" I yell.

Clawing its way out of the hole, the zombie moves quickly, and with the ferocity of a hungry, hungry hippo that's been set loose in a Chinese Checkers factory.

"Terry!" I scream, stumbling backwards, toward Tony Robbins.

"It's about time." He uses the pickax as a sort of cane to help him shift his weight from the coffin to his feet. "Help me lift this thing."

"Was this guy like me?" I ask, heaving the casket into a standing position.

"Seriously?" he says. "This guy was probably much cooler than you. Look at him, he's amazing."

Terry has a point. Above ground, when he's not a mossy looking boulder ruining my night, Joseph Niles looks like an absolute gentleman. Sure, the top half

of his head happens to be an exposed skull sparsely peppered with worm chewed skin flakes, but otherwise he looks pretty frigging dapper. As he lifts himself to his feet, I can see by the look of his suit that he was definitely buried before disco died. I'm not sure if he was a hippy, or a pimp, or an actor who died while playing the role of a hippie pimp, but I'm pretty positive that now, he's just a pissed off, starving zombie.

"He was stuck," I say. "He was stuck this whole time. Did you just leave him there like you left me? How could you--"

Terry takes a key out of his fanny pack and aims for the padlock on the front of the coffin. As the gentleman cadaver gets close enough to smell, Terry turns the key. "There are a lot of them here," he says. The lock pops open with a click. "A lot."

Niles grabs the front of the coffin, bears his teeth and hisses. I almost feel bad for him. This poor bastard has been stuck in the ground for who knows how long, and now, just when he thinks he's going to have his first meal in years, when he has two unsuspecting, Muffin-shaped fools trapped behind a thin metal wall begging to be devoured, he's about to be ripped apart like some suede covered pimp pinata. Bearing what few

teeth he has left, Niles growls as Terry lifts the lock from the side of the casket. I kind of wish I had popcorn for this.

The wolf bursts out of its box and dives directly into the zombie's groovy suit, forcing Niles to the ground and tearing through his chest cavity with starved, determined teeth. The wolf trembles viciously in a blur of teeth and fur, ripping skin like it's opening a candy bar. It's hard to imagine that Erin is in there somewhere.

Some part of me expected something magical. I don't know why, but I kind of thought that she might see my face and immediately float through the air, led by a choir of angels or birds or something. I pictured her spinning through the cemetery, glowing majestically, as she transformed into the Erin that I know. But, the thing that came out of the box wasn't Erin, it was a wolf. More than a wolf. It's a fucking monster. This thing might be wearing Erin's skin, but there's no mistaking it. If Niles wasn't here, I would already be dead. Again.

The wolf is singularly focused on the undead labyrinth leading to the zombie's heart. It's distracted enough to ignore me as I stare in stupefied horror and amazement at the surreal, mythical beast

gorging itself before my eyes. She looks close to how I remember her from the hospital, hair and fangs mostly where they should be but, somehow, she seems different. She's larger than before, the way a polar bear is larger than a grizzly. Her skin is stretched a little more, and her limbs are overgrown like a clumsy, disproportioned, puppy that could, and wants to, eat you for breakfast. By the time she's finished her meal, Niles is little more than a head tossed over a pile of discarded bones.

Long, muscular forearms lead the beast's body as it turns to face Terry and I. Even on all fours, she's almost as tall as I am. Her snarl sends a red mist into the air.

I thought this was supposed to help us talk to her. Maybe it's an etiquette thing. She can't talk with her mouth full.

The wolf swallows hard, curls its fingers into fists and pushes itself into a standing position.

"Terry?"

"Just wait."

Taking slow, heavy steps, the creature stomps toward the coffin, growling and spitting out half-chewed Niles bits as she approaches. With each stride, the wolf hunches a little, weighed down by the massive

amount of zombie meat making its way through her system.

The monster looks into my eyes and shows me its teeth. If it were anyone else, I would probably run away. Honestly, I'd probably jump in the coffin, close the lid and hope for the best. But, as the wolf gets closer she stares into my eyes and, for the first time since I died, I see Erin. I see her soft brown irises, yellow-ringed like sunflowers staring into me, and I know that it's her.

The wolf's body begins to stutter. Both knees sink into the grass as its claws grip the earth. Howling and buckling, the creature collapses into itself like a Transformer made of flesh and bone. As her face contorts, she doesn't scream, or cry, but it feels like she should. Erin's body breaks slowly and loudly, as if there are fistfuls of dynamite exploding beneath her skin. Each joint cracks and breaks until she finally falls loose like a string-cut marionette.

I try to look at my feet, the grass, my hand on the coffin, but I keep returning to Erin. It's a reverse train wreck happening in slow motion right in front of me. There's nothing I can do. The hair covering her body begins to recede like a shrinking bathing suit made of dog shavings.

"Shit," I yell. "The clothes."

"Got it." Terry drops his side of the coffin and I fall to the grass.

Erin's eyes are glazed and red. The sporadic tufts of hair on her face are still fading. Her breathing slowly wanes, normalizing from a wet, labored, panting to a steady, rhythmic, inhale. When everything has finally snapped back into place, there's little evidence that the wolf was ever even there. I see a little blood around her mouth, and an X-shaped scar across her nose where the snout stretched her skin beyond repair but, otherwise, she's perfect.

"Here," Terry says, setting a light blue dress into the casket beside me.

"She's not going to prom. Get some pants or something!"

"In my day, we said please when we were yelling demands at our friends." He reaches into the garbage bag and pulls out a yellow shirt and a pair of jeans. "How's this?"

The voice behind me is hoarse but soft, "Perfect, thanks."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." Terry lowers his head, averts his eyes, and tosses the clothes past me. "I didn't see everything. I'm not going to lie, I saw a lot, but

not everything."

"Cole?" She coughs.

Even through her beaten, fractured lips, hearing Erin say my name makes me feel a full body goosebump, butterfly parade in my stomach, sort of feeling.

"Can I turn around?"

"Um, yeah?" she says. "I just woke up naked, in a graveyard, to see my dead ex boyfriend standing next to a coffin. I'm pretty sure I can handle you seeing my boobs."

"Okay, but don't be scared. I mean, don't freak out when you see my face."

"Don't freak out?" She chuckles. "If this isn't a dream, I'm going to be freaking out for pretty much the rest of my life."

When I turn, Erin is already fully clothed. She pushes her dark hair from her face and her eyes well up.

"It looks worse than it feels."

"Oh my god." She brings her hand to her mouth.

"I'm sorry. I'm kind of a--"

Erin throws her arms around my neck and squeezes. Her watery eyes stamp warmth into my chin as her racing heart beats against my chest like a defibrillator, trying to shake me back to life.

"You don't have a lot of time," Terry whispers.

"Make it count."

"Who're you?" Erin's arms loosen their grip and she takes a step back. "Who is he?"

"Here." He hands her a pamphlet. "I'm Terry. Sorry that I saw you naked."

"Uh, thanks?"

Terry closes the casket and sits on the lid.

"This is—" Erin's eyes scan the piece of paper and she nods. "Wow."

"I know, right?" I laugh. "It sounds ridiculous but you won't even believe the sort of things—"

"No," she says. "This actually makes a lot of sense."

"See," Terry says, "she gets it."

"I tried to tell everyone what happened," she says, "but it was impossible. What happened was impossible. There were no words for it. All I could do was cry, you know? Everyone kept asking me all these questions but I didn't know what to say."

"A werewolf ate my boyfriend?" Terry shrugs.

"Terry."

"Sorry," he says, "ex boyfriend."

Erin takes a deep breath. "It was so fast. And huge. Everyone assumed it was a bear or a coyote or

something. But, I knew. I couldn't say it out loud but I knew. This—" She waves the paper. "I mean, yeah, it's totally insane, but better it than me, right?"

"Do you remember anything?" I ask. "The funeral, the hospital, any of it?"

"Yeah. I think so." Her eyes lift skyward as if she's navigating the depths of her brain in search of memories. "It was awful. Seeing you like that, after what happened, it just wasn't real. And, your mom, oh my god, you know how she gets."

"Yeah, she brushed my hair. It wasn't great."

"How do you... You were awake?"

Terry laughs. "One of the perks of being—"

"Shut up, Terry."

He grumbles.

"It was awful," she says. "I almost didn't go. I was afraid that your parents..." She looks skyward with a whispered growl.

"What?"

"I didn't know what they'd do. It was, they were just, it was weird. They refused to talk to me after that night. You know how they can be. After everything, screaming for help in the woods, dragging you to the car, even the fucking monster, it was still seeing your parents that scared me the most."

"My mom is pretty terrifying."

"I couldn't face her. I didn't want to be the one to tell her. But, I did. I had to." She sniffs subtly then brushes the corner of her eyes with an index finger. "They'd never say it, but they think it was my fault." She breathes in slowly through her nose and out through pursed lips. "I can't believe you're alive. How is this even possible? You were, I mean, it definitely, you know- There was so much blood."

"It's a whole thing." I turn my face, hoping to hide the fact that my teeth are visible through my cheek. "What happened after the funeral?"

"It took a long time to do much of anything," she says. "I was hurting, you know? My neck and chest were throbbing like crazy. I was so hungry but I couldn't eat. I figured it was depression or something, I don't know. I just couldn't hold anything down. Then, my chest started to hurt. I had these long achy waves all over and I couldn't breathe. Everything felt tight and shallow, like the air was empty somehow," she says. "I went to the ER, but, you know, there are bigger problems than a girl having a panic attack, I guess. They finally put me in a room and tried to give me diazepam or whatever. They were just trying to get rid of me."

"What did you do?"

"I started coughing up blood. A lot of blood."

"On purpose?" Terry asks.

"No? Are you serious?" She slides a finger across her forehead to tuck a few loose curls behind her ear.

"Is he serious?"

I groan.

"But, that's it," she says. "That's all I remember. I was sitting in the room waiting for the doctor, and then I just woke up in the dark."

"Sorry about that," Terry says, drumming on the coffin. "Kind of an occupational necessity."

"Wait," Erin's voice softens. "Was I in an actual coffin?" She runs her nails across her denim jeans as if she was squeezing an invisible stress ball. "I was, wasn't I? Holy crap. That whole time, I was in there and you just..." She crinkles her nose and squints, sighing through her nostrils. "Why didn't you let me out? You were there. I know you were there."

"I couldn't."

"I thought I was kidnapped or something," she says. "You should have helped me."

"We did," Terry says. "If you haven't noticed, you're fine."

"You put me in a coffin!"

"We had to!" I say.

"How did I even get in there?"

"By running really fast in one direction," Terry laughs. "You basically jumped in."

"No. What? No."

"I'm sorry," I say. "I wanted to let you out. We just. We had to wait because--"

Groaning and rolling his eyes, Terry stands and walks over to the pile of Niles bones. "Tell her," he says.

"You don't remember?"

"Remember what?"

Terry places his foot on the zombie's shoulder. He bends down, sticks two fingers into Joe's eye sockets and pulls upward. Thin strands of skin stretch until they rip and the zombie's skull is dangling from Terry's hand like a fleshy bowling ball. He sniffs the head and walks toward us. "He's alive."

"Oh my god," Erin says. "Why would he... What is that? Is that..."

"It needs a little garlic salt," he says, chewing a piece of Niles, "but, otherwise, it's definitely edible."

Erin covers her mouth, turns her head, and gags. "Are you really eating that, right now?"

"Why? Were you saving the rest for later?"

"What do you mean?" She looks at me, confused.

"What does that mean?"

"Nothing."

"We don't have time for this," Terry says. He spins the zombie head in his palm like a basketball.

"Just tell her."

"Not now," I say. "It's..."

"Tell me what?"

"We just--" It's hard to look at her. "I thought you'd remember."

"This is my fault," Terry says. "I should have known that the transformation would affect your memory. I'll add it to the book so this doesn't happen again."

"Wait." Erin shakes the pamphlet in the air between us as she speaks. "Me? I'm? No. It can't. I can't. I'm not. Come on!"

"Yeah," Terry steps between Erin and I, "welcome to the Monster Squad."

"But, do you mean, I mean, the bones are-- Did I?" She runs her hand across her lips. When she pulls them away, her fingertips are red. "No."

"You had to," I say. "It was the only way we could talk to you."

"It's all in the pamphlet," Terry says. "You guys have to stop staring at the covers and actually read these things once in a while."

"So, I'm..." Erin looks at her hand. "I'm a werewolf? I don't feel like a werewolf." She notices the soft glow of the moon hanging overhead. "That's not even full, is it? If I'm a werewolf-- Jesus." She closes her eyes and takes a breath. "Shouldn't it be, like, a full moon or something?"

"You're thinking of Werewolf Werewolves," Terry says.

"Come on," I yell. "Seriously?"

"Look," he says. "It's pretty complicated and I don't really think this is the best time to get into it, but, yeah, you're a werewolf, that's the moon. Your relationship is about to get real complicated."

"Does that mean you're a werewolf too?" Erin asks. "You were definitely bit."

"He's a ghoul," Terry says. "We're ghouls."

I quickly tell her about the morgue, about my funeral, about Terry. She laughs at most of it. I guess, in retrospect, having a vampire rip your heart out is actually kind of funny, if you survive. It's like anything else, I guess. Tragedy, plus time, plus spidery vampire-monster equals comedy.

I show her the pamphlets, my wrist, and my staples. She knocks on my duct tape chest like I'm the Tin Man and, for a second, I forget that we are in a cemetery.

"We have to get out of here," Terry says. "And you need to eat." He shoves a handful of brainburger toward my face.

"Not now." I snatch the head from his hands and toss it in the back of Tony Robbins. "Not yet. We need more time."

"First of all, rude. Second, we don't have any more time. It won't take long for them to find us."

"Who?" Erin asks.

"It's just- There are- How do I say this?" I don't know where to look when she's staring into my face like this. Her eyes are moving too quickly to know which one to look at. I don't know if I should look at her forehead, or between her eyes, or just watch her mouth and pretend to be comfortable. How long have I been staring at her? This is why I'm an ex. Focus.

"There are people after us. After you."

"That's kind of an understatement," Terry says, walking toward the car.

"Why me?" she asks. "Are they, like, werewolf hunters or something?"

"There's this guy named Roman." I'm kind of stuck with this one. It's hard to find the words to describe our situation without making it sound absolutely freaking crazy. Mostly because it is absolutely freaking crazy. "He's the one who... He thinks that you're... He's the kind of guy who might be so inclined to believe--"

"He was the wolf that bit you," Terry says. He turns to face us with the severed head in his hand. "Now, he thinks you're his wife."

"His what?"

"He's the one who did this to us," I say. "That night--"

"Yeah," she says. "I got that part. He thinks I'm his wife?"

"It's just a theory." Terry sits on the bumper of Tony Robbins swinging his legs. "The important thing is, he's a psychopathic monster with basically limitless resources and he wants us dead. So, that's pretty much where we are with that."

Erin walks toward the car whispering to herself and shaking her head in disbelief. "Okay then," she says, raising her voice, "now what? We just run from this guy forever?"

"I've always wanted an excuse to move to Canada."

"It's not that simple," Terry says. "We're all a liability now. Roman might forget about me, maybe even stop looking for staple-face after a while, but not you. You're supposed to be a part of the pack. If you don't show up for dinner, you show up as dinner. That's just the way it works. He'll never stop coming for you."

"Uh huh," Erin says, leaning against the car. "So, no running. Got it."

"What's left?" I ask. "What are we supposed to do?"

"How do we kill him?" Erin asks. "That's obviously the plan, right? I mean, if hiding is off of the table, if the choices are being eaten or hunting a big wolf, I'm going to go with option 2 all day."

"But--" I can't stop thinking about what Pavel said. If Roman dies, I die. "Maybe we should--"

"Is it like the movies?" she asks, looking at Terry. "Should we make silver bullets out of my grandma's old spoon collection or something? Has anyone ever made a silver rocket launcher? Is that a thing?"

"I think I just met my new best friend," Terry says. "I know now why he loves you."

"I'm serious." She coughs. "What are we doing

here? If this guy is after us, if he's as dangerous as you say he is, why aren't we doing something about it? Why bring me here of all places?"

"You needed to eat," I say. "We had to feed you so we could tell you what was happening."

"And, this seemed more sensible than letting you loose in a strip mall," Terry says.

"Fine. So, what happens if we kill him?" Erin asks. "Is that in your pamphlet?"

"You'd be human again," I say. "You could-- You know, you'd be able to go back to your life."

"What about you?" she asks.

"I'd be pretty much the same." I feel my heart in my stomach. "You're right. We have to kill him."

"Is this one of those situations where we put our hands in and say go team?" Terry asks. "Because I respectfully decline."

"But, you're in, right?" Erin asks.

"We need a plan, some rest, and a lot more bullets," he says. "But, yeah, I'm in."

Erin coughs again, burying her face into her arm, when she looks up there's a Rorschach blot of red on her shoulder.

"You're bleeding."

Terry jumps from the tail of Tony Robbins and

points his ax at Erin. "She's going to change."

"No," I say. "Not yet."

"Open the coffin," she says.

"Erin--"

"Please." Her face sours into a nauseated grimace.

"Do it!" She collapses beside the box as her chest labors through heavy, rapid, breaths. Her fists dig into the earth as meaty veins force her skin into peaks and valleys. She lifts her head, looks into my eyes, and screams.

"Get her feet," Terry says. "Now!"

I grab Erin's ankles and feel her skin boil between my fingers as her body tries to shake itself free. Her feet tighten and extend, cracking at the heel to form a new joint as she kicks. Her stomach seems to implode, shifting its weight to her chest and stretching her torso until her waist falls to the grass below. She's getting heavier and as her body breaks and reassembles itself, the shifting and thrashing of her limbs becomes more intentional. More consciously directed. More violent. The wolf is taking over, and it's pissed.

"Lift," Terry yells. "Lift!"

Holding the creature's swinging legs, with its razor claws chopping at my head, I've been too

distracted to see what Terry has had to deal with. Erin's face is gone, split open like a blood-colored flower, and all that remains is a broad snout jutting its enlarged, steak-knife teeth into Terry's arm. We're almost there. We're almost there.

"Drop her!" he yells.

The silver lining of the coffin weakens the wolf's attack enough for us to close the lid. The coffin bobs beneath our weight as Terry searches through his fanny pack for the lock.

"Are you alright?" I ask, pushing all of my weight against the casket.

"Yeah, why?" He pulls out the lock and as he slides it into place, he notices his half-devoured arm. "Oh look, we're twins."

"You're amazing."

We watch the box bounce around for a minute. She could have torn us apart, but she didn't. We made it. If it were a full moon, we wouldn't have been so lucky. She would have just picked us apart like chicken wings and in the morning she'd wake up in a puddle of wet bones and Terry beard.

"Why didn't you tell her?" Terry's eyes soften. "If she kills Roman--"

"She might have changed her mind," I say. "I can't

let that happen."

"I get it," he says. "But, if Roman dies, you die. That's it."

"I know."

"I hope you know what--" His mouth hangs open, stuck mid-sentence.

We should have seen this coming. We were at the pet shop long enough to know that this could happen. We're sitting ducks. Fish in a barrel. Dead bodies in a cemetery. Then again, I guess there are worse places to be stuck in corpse mode.

We collapse beside the coffin. I can't see Terry, or Tony Robbins, or really much of anything. I'm on my back, with one arm draped over the box, guarding Erin like a mom-made seat belt. This is all I can do. I watch the clouds turn from gray to white as the sun slowly fills the sky with new shades of blue and orange. The wolf's growl fades into a delicate whisper and I hear Erin say my name through her tears. She tells me that it will be alright. She calls to me, but I can't answer.

At least this time, she knows why.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It doesn't take long for someone to find us. After only a few hours of cooking under the sun, staring at the clouds, and watching hungry birds nibble at my duct tape, I hear the popping rumble of a small engine and know that we're screwed. In my peripheral, I see a car approaching, it's a small maintenance mobile, a repurposed convertible golf-cart being driven around by an elderly, jumpsuit wearing, impressively mustachioed grounds keeper. This adorable old man, well above retirement age, whistles to himself through his dentures as he drives toward us in his little dingy, blue golf cart. He pulls right beside us and just stares.

I'm waiting, imagining something like a wide-eyed, slack-jawed panic, screams and shock, maybe a little outrage, the sort of reaction people tend to have when they stumble upon a menage a trois of monsters in the middle of a cemetery. This little old man steps out of his cart, looks us over and just shakes his head as if someone egged his house on Halloween.

He wipes the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand, then lifts a black walkie talkie from his hips. "Julie," he says with a deep southern drawl. "Dave here. We got us another one. West Lot. There are two of 'em this time. Should I just bring 'em in or what?"

The walkie belches a white noise as grounds keeper Dave walks toward us. After a second of silence, a woman's voice responds. "Dave, what was that? Did you say you got another one? Fucking kids, these days. Little monsters. Who's supposed to be on morgue this morning?"

"It's Angie, I think," the old man says, squeezing the walkie. "She's not gonna like this. There are two of 'em. And a box. Someone just dropped 'em right in the middle of the lawn. Dug up a whole mess. I guess I'm getting old, 'cause I just don't see what's funny about doing this sort of thing to these poor folk."

"No use in trying to solve it, you can't make sense of crazy," the woman says. "Bring them over to the garage, maybe Angie'll give you a treat for your hard work."

The old man laughs. "She'll give me shit, is what she'll do. Like I have time to be reprimanded. I might just hold onto 'em for a little while. I have East Lot

to get through. They'll still be just as dead in an hour."

"Are you sure it's okay to move them?" she asks.

"It's what Angie wants," he says. "Last time, she said if it happens again, just bring 'em her way before doing anything else. If you ask me, there oughta be cops and lawyers and all kinds of real official stuff going on. Red tape, or yellow tape, or whatever kind of tape they got, all over this place. But, like I said, it's what Angie wants."

"Alright then," Julie says. "Keep out of trouble. You don't need to get wrapped up in any kind of mess."

"Don't I know it," he says. "Alright, I better get at it. Over and out." With his hands on his hips, Dave leans forward, dipping his head much lower than I would have thought possible. He turns his shoulders back and forth, twisting himself at the waist until his spine pops loudly. "This here is some serious bullshit."

I wonder what Terry is thinking, right now. He should be in his morgue, laying comfortably on his favorite slab, listening to music, and waiting for sunset. Instead, he's being ushered toward the backseat of a golf cart, bouncing helplessly on the shoulders of the strongest grandpa I've ever seen. Of

course, on the outside, he looks completely unfazed by all of this, but I know better.

I know the rigor mortis is keeping his bushy eyebrows from forming an angry V-shape of hatred across his face as he nosedives into the torn leather seats of the golf cart. I'm sure he wants to slap me upside the head, wag an angry finger in my direction, or chop me in half with his pickax, but he can't. His mouth is stuck in that neutral doll position, straight lined and emotionless, but inside, I know he's saying unforgivable things about me.

Old man Dave reaches under my arm pit with one hand, grabs one of my legs with the other, and hoists me over his bony shoulder without so much as a grunt. He tosses me, effortlessly, on top of Terry, and I immediately wish that my eyes were closed. My focus shifts back and forth between Terry's dead eyes and the reflection of my own while the car begins to rock in heavy, rhythmic thuds as if a T-rex is about to round the corner.

Erin doesn't make a sound as Dave heave-hos the casket onto the flatbed of the golf cart. She is incredible. If anyone hears her, everything will get unbelievably complicated. The amount of crazy that she would have to explain would definitely get her locked

away for an extended psych eval. At least the coffin is locked. Terry has the key, and Grandpa Dave doesn't really strike me as the grave robbing type.

After loading us onto his cart, Dave doesn't go directly to the morgue, or call the police, or really do any of the things that you're supposed to do when you find a dead body. I spend the next three hours encased in the not so comforting tendrils of Terry's beard, listening to the old man water flowers, rake leaves, and cough through a series of Frank Sinatra songs between drags of cigarettes. After a while, the dense red bush of Terry's beard begins to lose its usual ginger luster, and slowly shifts into that black and white, gray scale haze of Ghoulvision. He was right. I should have just eaten that groovy zombie pimp guy. This is what I get for being a picky eater.

Once the old man finishes his rounds, he drives us into the morgue's loading dock. We haven't even parked and I can already smell Angie. It isn't something she is eating, or her hairspray, or even perfume. It's her brain. I can actually smell her brain, and I like it. A lot.

I can't see anything, but the scent is getting stronger. She must be close. It smells like a mountain of delicious, minty Girl Scout Cookies, and I just

want to tear through sleeve after sleeve until a sticky black, chocolaty crumb smile is permanently painted across my face.

"Sorry for taking my sweet ass time, Angie," a woman's voice says in an exaggerated, and obviously fake, southern accent. "You see, I'm old, and senile. I forget that there are other people in the world who have shit to do, while I'm busy sleeping on the job and pissing myself."

This must be Angie.

"That's a pretty good impression," Dave says, shutting down the engine. "You been practicing?" The golf cart rocks as the old man's weight lifts from his seat.

"It's really easy," she says, dropping the accent. "It's one part hillbilly, three parts incontinent old bastard."

"Yeah," he says. "Seems you added a lot of sarcastic asshole into the mix, but I guess that was just for flavor." They chuckle.

"Why are you still here?" she asks. "Are you waiting for a tip?"

"Yeah, you got something for me?"

"Change your diaper more often," she says. "You smell worse than these guys."

"You know," he says. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you were coming on to me. But, we all know you got a thing for the stiff's."

"Don't sell yourself short, David," she says. "You're dead where it counts. In the head and in the pants."

"What was that?" the old man grumbles.

"Oh, I should speak up. I forget that dinosaurs don't hear so well."

"No." Dave smirks. "I just don't speak bitch is all."

"Alright, alright, let's get these guys into the morgue before you laugh yourself into another heart attack."

Dave walks around the passenger side, pushing a gurney. He stops at our feet and pulls at my ankles until I'm laying across the white, leathery padding of the stretcher. It isn't exactly comfortable, but it's pretty much a 5 star resort compared to the rat's nest on Terry's face.

He positions Terry on the cot beside me so we're laying back to back, then pushes us through the mortuary doors. Even with half of my face smooshed into the stretcher, it's clear that this place is much nicer than our morgue. The entrance hall is wide and

sterile, full of fake flowers and framed art. This must be where normal people go when they die. The people who don't need pamphlets or duct tape. The one's who are done fighting monsters.

The foot end of the gurney pushes through a glass door with the words, "ANGIE LEARNER: MEDICAL EXAMINER" printed neatly across its center.

Once Dave finishes unloading Terry and I onto separate examination beds, he asks Angie to follow him into the hall. From my slab, I can see the two of them, laughing and bickering as they lift the coffin onto a stretcher. Dave slaps the top of the casket, gives Angie the middle finger, smiles, and leaves. Erin should be safe in the hallway as long as she stays quiet. I didn't see anyone else in the building, and it looks as if Dave is on his way out. We might actually be okay.

As Angie pushes her way through the door, the lights flicker in a blinding strobe of white as if lightening is filling the room. When the explosion fades, the world is all black, white, and gray, and I feel as if I'm drowning in a bathtub of sugary snacks.

Long, twisted, red licorice fingers dance across the edge of my slab. She's brightly colored and glowing as if her scent has a visible aura. A Fourth

of July sparkler sizzling and popping in an otherwise sterile room. As she rounds the foot of my slab, she's hardly recognizable. Hardly human.

Her body reminds me a lot of those old snack commercials that used to play before movies, only instead of a dancing bucket of popcorn or a singing fountain drink, Angie is a five foot tall, labcoat wearing cookie monster. The scent of her shimmering, chocolaty body as it waddles between the slabs is killing me. Every muscle in my body is rattling like crazy, trying to break through the rigor mortis long enough to get a taste of her overpriced, minty flesh.

"So," she says, "you guys really suck at this."

What in the actual fuck.

"Believe it or not, I was kind of rooting for you." She pats my leg. "It's okay. I'm not mad, just disappointed."

This lady is insane. At least she smells delicious.

"I didn't actually expect you to get away," she says. "But, I was really hoping for a little more. Roman is all worked up about this whole situation. It's hilarious. Honestly, if I'm hearing about it, you know it's a big deal. It's getting around. Usually, noone tells me anything. Not that I mind. Why else

would I be here. Anyway. Here you are, in my morgue. Yikes, right?" She smiles with enormous marshmallow teeth. "I hope you don't take it personally. If it were up to me, I'd just let you do. I don't really have any skin in this game, anymore."

Skin. Smooth, creamy, chocolate coating on the outside, crispy, mouth watering peppermint flakes on the inside.

"Don't look at me like that," she says. "I know what you're thinking."

Where can I find a giant glass of milk at this hour?

"If I'm such a big fan, why don't I just let you go, right?" she asks. "I could, and like I said, I would love to but, the truth is, I'm not a total fucking idiot." She takes her phone from her pocket and thumbs across its screen. "Hey, it's me. Angie. Angie. Yeah. Right. They're here. Yes. Yes. Uh huh. Both of them. Can I--" The cookie begins to pace the room, walking in a wide figure-eight pattern. "No. Come on. What if I-- What about the big one? Okay. Fine. Who? Fine. I mean, yes. That's fine. I'll be here. They'll be here. Okay. Okay. Okay bye."

Angie turns toward us, stares at me with her enormous gumdrop eyes and shakes her head. "Sorry,

he's a talker," she says with a shrug. She walks slowly toward her desk, grabs a camera from one of the drawers, and starts snapping pictures of Terry and I. "I hope you don't mind if I take a few pictures," she says. "Of course you don't. These will look so good in my scrapbook, you have no idea."

She takes enough photos to make a monthly corpse calendar. One from every angle. I half expect her to take out a box of props and set us up in adorable, dogs playing poker like, poses. "You guys are great," she says. "If I wasn't so allergic to dying, I might reconsider this whole turning you in thing."

Once her camera is filled with a shot for every holiday, Angie pulls a cart of sharp objects between my slab and Terry's. "This is where it's going to get a little weird," she says. Lifting one of the more pointy, nightmare inducing instruments from her tray, Dr. Cookie turns to Terry and waddles toward his slab. "I know that you're going to judge me for this," she says. "It's fine. I understand. Most of my patients aren't really in the business of listening to what I have to say, or actually caring about much of anything, being dead and all. Usually, I just go in and kind of do what I have to do, but here you are. Not exactly dead. Staring at me. Listening. I know

that you're listening. I know what you are. Truly, in any other other circumstance, I wouldn't even dream of taking advantage of your situation. I'm just not that kind of girl. That being said, Roman is that kind of guy, if you know what I mean, and since you're as good as dead anyway, I figure I might as well enjoy this while I can."

This would be a good time for the rigor mortis to take a break. Cut me some slack. Release it's grip so I can devour the doctor and savor her sweet, minty goodness. Of course, it doesn't.

"No, no, don't worry. I'm not going to kill you. I wouldn't do that. Roman has something planned, you know how he enjoys his theatrics. But, like I said, you're here for now, so I'm just going to poke around a bit and you'll have to try to forgive me when we're finished. Deal? Perfect."

In my peripheral, the giant cookie is a blur. Her scrumptious, chocolaty aroma wafts across my slab as she rocks back and forth, humming to herself. I can't see exactly what she's doing but whatever it is, it sounds like dogs slurping spaghetti or Rocky practicing his left hook on a raw slab of beef. "Wow," the cookie grunts. "How old are you? Your cobwebs have cobwebs. Yikes."

After what seems like several hours of witty insults and playful comments, Angie's sardonic tone turns into a sweet angelic whisper. The cookie is still wrist-deep into Terry's chest, but instead of laughing as she counts the rings of his torso, or asking where he keeps his sarcophagus, she begins to whisper the same two words over and over. "Eat me," she says. "Eat me."

I can feel my mouth trying as hard as it can to give her what she wants but, thankfully, my body is still an ice pop. As much as I love a good, crunchy mint cookie, I don't actually want to take a bite out of Angie. Sure, a few days ago I'd literally be chomping at the bit, but this time is different. I can feel it.

I know that this woman isn't actually a giant snack creature from planet Wonka. I know that if my teeth get their way, despite how much I'll enjoy the peppermint flavor or licking the chocolate crumble mustache from my top lip, in reality, I'll be tearing the flesh from a woman's body. Intellectually, in theory, I get it, and I'm totally against it. The rest of my body, on the other hand, is standing on a soapbox, holding a megaphone, and chanting "COOKIE COOKIE COOKIE COOKIE."

Still begging to be eaten, the cookie turns to face me, covered in Terry's blood and smiling. Suddenly, I'm in the best, or worst, horror movie of all time. This is how I die. If my life were a game of Clue, the winning answer would be: Mrs. Cookie Lady, in the morgue, with a scalpel.

She stands over me, tilting her head and gesticulating, as she speaks. Her lips continue to move, obviously forming entirely different, probably more interesting sentences, but all I can hear is, "Eat me. Eat me. Eat me." She smiles and points the scalpel in my direction. Here we go. The mouth watering, angel-scented cookie of my dreams is about to cut me into little pieces.

My muscles twitch, pulsing upward as Angie lowers the knife toward my chest. I can't really move, but that chained to the floor, useless and corpsified, feeling is fading. It must be close to sundown and all I can think about is the fact that I get to have cookies for breakfast.

"Holy fucking shit," a deep voice yells from the hall. It sounds like old man Dave. "Angie! Where you at?"

Startled by the screaming, Angie bumps against my slab, jostling my head to the left. From here, I can

see the door. I can see Erin's coffin, still closed and locked, but rocking wildly as if something inside is in the middle of exploding.

"Looks like your ride is here." The cookie pats my shoulder. Her scalpel tings against the metal tray and she sighs as she rounds the slab. "At least we got to have a little fun, right?"

As Angie waddles toward the door, my eyes follow, trying to force the rest of my body out of bed. She only makes it about half way to the door when a severely wrinkled, jumpsuit wearing, mustachioed hot dog bursts into the room. This is, without a doubt, the weirdest thing I've ever seen in my life. It's old man Dave. At least, I think it's old man Dave. It's hard to tell because the last time that I saw him, he wasn't exactly a man-sized hot dog person.

My fingers curl and stretch, waking from the rigor as the cookie and the dried up sausage yell at one another. I'm glad that Terry is still in corpse mode otherwise I'm sure I'd have to hear some lame food fight joke.

I know that what I'm seeing isn't real. I know that the old man probably ran in here because he was worried. He's probably wondering why the coffin in the hallway is suddenly growling at him or why Dr. Cookie

doesn't seem all too concerned about the fact that there's a werewolf in her mortuary, but I'm not hearing any of that. Instead of asking questions, or coming up with a plan of escape, Dave keeps shaking his frankfurter fists and yelling at the top of his smoke weary lungs, "Eat me, dammit. Eat me." Eventually, after a few minutes of arguing, the hot dog lowers its head and leaves the room. Angie stands at the window, watching as he makes his way toward the exit.

Without the pungent, summer barbecue stench of the elderly hot dog, the rest of my senses seem to die out. I can't see, or hear, or feel anything, at all. For a second, the only things that exist in the world are my nose and the cookie's exquisite aroma. She smells like it's my birthday. When my eyes come back into focus, I'm already standing behind Angie, rocking slowly with my nose to her hair.

"Eat," she whispers. "Eat." She's still looking through the window, watching the coffin.

Somehow, she didn't hear me coming. She doesn't know that I'm here, staring into her, savoring her mouthwatering scent, and drooling all over myself. Apparently, the most important weapon in a ninja's arsenal isn't a throwing star, or a smoke bomb, it's

the trusty old werewolf distraction box. Works every time.

Angie turns as I lean toward her neck, and her gumdrop eyes are the size of dinner plates. There's a quick, sharp yelp, and then we're on the floor. My shoulders are pressed firm against the hard tile with Angie on top of me swinging her fists over and again. My teeth chase after her, diving in every direction, trying their best to taste the fruity, gummy goodness of Angie's arms, but thankfully, she's too fast.

I have no control. This is terrible. If my face didn't already look like a deflated beach ball, I'd be happy that she is throttling me, right now. Her blurred hands just keep swinging until the hole in my cheek is wide enough to fit a golf ball, and I deserve it.

My fingers move like calloused, hungry snakes, crawling up Angie's arms, toward her throat. They're out for blood and she's too busy punching and shrieking to see them coming. I try to pull my wrists into the air, but my hands continue to climb up the cookie's body. I try to shout for my fingers to stop but we don't seem to speak the same language.

With the cookie straddling my stomach, my hips buck and twist, trying desperately to knock her to the

floor. She's fighting as hard as she can, but my entire body is trying to devour her. My teeth are still leading the charge, thrashing fiercely, and attempting to grab ahold of anything even remotely edible.

Despite the ridiculousness of her cookie face, I know that what I'm doing is awful. Angie is strong, but she's getting tired. I don't get tired. Eventually, my teeth will catch her, my hand will wrap around her neck, and my fingers will peel the flesh from her bones. All I can do is watch this black and white horror movie play out in front of me like a deranged episode of Looney Tunes written by Stephen King and directed by George Romero.

As she swings her fist, blood seeps from my gums and I swoosh the copper flavored liquid between my teeth. It seems to awaken something in me, and the monster controlling my limbs can feel it. He writhes madly, begging Angie for more like a shark unappeased by chum. She responds with a series of wild punches, forcing me to swallow a mouthful of blood.

Swirling, fuzzy patterns move across my eyes, shaking the world into and out of color with every unsettling vibration. The metallic flavor coating my tongue melts away, leaving something else, entirely.

Something eerily pleasant. It's peanut butter. I taste like peanut butter.

When the color finally settles, my hands are clenched, wrapped almost finger to finger around Angie's neck. She isn't begging for me to eat her. She doesn't have a chocolate body or licorice arms. She's not even cookie shaped. She is a woman. A human. For the first time I can see her as she is. A person who isn't asking me to do anything except let her go.

As the warmth of the blood floods my body, it washes over whatever was in control, leaving me to pull the strings. I yank my hands away from the woman's neck, lower my head to the floor, and do my best to protect my face. Punching rapidly and screaming like a Spartan warrior, Angie knocks my own fists into my temple until she's exhausted. She rests her hands on her legs and closes her eyes. Her quick, heavy breaths aren't coming easily.

This is my chance. I want to tell her that I'm not a zombie and, despite the fact that she was going to go all middle-school biology on my helpless corpse, I don't actually want to eat her, but when I try, it just comes out as a deep, meaningless groan. Instead of apologizing for the misunderstanding, my teeth, tongue, and lips rally against me and pull the rest of

my body upward, knocking Angie to the floor as I stand.

The cookie crawls backwards slowly as I approach, and with each of my steps, she whispers, "Eat me."

This is going to suck. My arms raise in the usual zombie fashion, and I'm embarrassed to be connected to them. As my tongue wags between my teeth, searching for some unearned dessert, I try to tell Angie that I'm sorry, but it's impossible. The hunger has my tongue. It has my lips. It has me. The color begins to fade, but I can't let it go. I watch Angie collapse into tears, and I want to be anywhere else. I want to be anyone else.

I tense my muscles, hoping to hold on to whatever control I might still have. With a lot of focus, and an almost painful amount of effort, I can move my jaw up and down, but that's about it. I struggle to mouth the words, "run", and "I'm sorry", but with my salivating lips hanging loose and uncooperative I'm as helpful as a ventriloquist dummy made of deli meats.

My legs prepare to pounce as my fingers wiggle with anticipation. I'm out of options. There's only one thing I can think to do and, again, this is going to suck. I open my mouth as wide as possible and, with as much strength as I can find, I full-on nutcracker chomp into and through the side of my tongue.

Blood seeps from the wound as I grind my teeth. I chew and chomp until a small chunk breaks loose and, as soon as I swallow, color fills the room. This will absolutely make the list of the top five things I hope to never do again, just behind the troll jelly shower, and having my heart torn out.

Angie is still on the ground crying with her back against the wall. As I wipe the drool from my lips, she looks up and screams loud enough to knock herself unconscious. But, she wasn't looking at me. She was looking past me. There's something here. I hear its heavy steps and the slow trickle of drool falling from its lips. There's something in the room with me, something worse than an undead monster eating his own tongue, and Angie had enough common sense to play dead.

As soon as my head begins to turn, there's a flash of silver and a hard, metal smack against my face. I fall to the floor beside Angie and when I look up, I see Terry standing over me holding a bedpan and scowling. His chest is spread wide open like the mouth of some enormous rib-toothed monster. Angie spent the better part of the day picking at his insides, and the result isn't exactly pretty.

"Say something," he whispers.

"You look like an extra from Aliens."

He sighs in relief. "You're telling me. She owes me four rolls of duct tape and a shirt." He lifts his lab coat from the foot of one of the slabs, throws his arms into the sleeves, and buttons it to the side. Looking at Angie's unconscious body, Terry wags a finger like an admonishing teacher, "I expect a carefully worded apology, the next time I see you."

"Can you believe that--"

"Can I believe that you were a step away from biting her?" he says. "Yes. Yes, I can. I told you that you had to eat, but, no, noone ever listens to Terry. Now, look at you."

"She's stronger than she looks," I say. "You have no idea."

"I hope it was worth it," he says. "What was it this time, tacos? French Fries?"

"Peppermint cookie." I lower my head.

"So, what you're saying is, she was one tough--"

"Don't."

"What did you do, anyway? Rip a piece of your stomach? Eat one of your toes?"

"My tongue," I say. "The back of my tongue."

"That's not enough."

"Do you have any of Niles leftover?"

"Who?"

"The groovy zombie pimp guy."

"You're going to have to be more specific."

"The guy we fed to Erin?"

"Oh." He reaches into his coat, sighs and checks the other pocket. "Here," he says, forcing a jellyfish like mound of something toward my mouth.

I can't tell what he's holding, but it's delicious. Whatever it is, this dried up, raisin textured, fist-sized piece of mystery meat tastes like a smoothie made of baby smiles and rainbow wishes.

"This is exactly why when I tell you to eat the head of the groovy zombie pimp guy, you eat the head of the groovy zombie pimp guy."

After savoring a few bites of the emergency meal, I watch as Terry reaches into his labcoat. As his hand returns, he's holding a familiar looking ball of meat, but it's plain to see that it didn't come from his fanny pack, or from one of the coat pockets. He pulled the potato sized hunk of grizzled flesh from his own chest cavity.

"No," I say, scraping my tongue. "Please, no. This isn't happening."

"Don't be such a baby." He lifts the meat toward his mouth and takes a bite.

"Why do you hate me?" I scream as I stick a finger

down my throat. If I can somehow vomit up the last few minutes of my life, and erase the fact that I just ate part of my friend, I'll die happily as a blood hungry, brain dead monster.

"You were going to turn zombie on me." He pushes the rest of his intestines back into the coat. "I had no choice. I had to do something."

"And you landed on that? You could have literally done anything else and I would have been fine. Cut off my head, set me on fire, rip off my own face just so you could have something else to--"

A door slams in the other room.

"They're here."

"Who?"

"Whoever Roman sent to kill us." He peeks through the window, looking toward the entrance. "Crap." He slowly backs away from the door. "Crap, crap, crap."

"What is it?"

"It's bad. Like, really bad."

"Fine," I say, leaning toward the window, "I'll just look my-- What the hell are those things?"

"Gremlins," he says. "Why did it have to be gremlins?"

Through the small window, I can see most of the hallway. To the right, the walls are wet with a fresh

coat of grounds keeper blood. Scraps of dead bodies hang from the ceiling like forgotten birthday streamers. It's a mess of food fight proportions, only instead of tater tots and sloppy joes, it's all old man organs and human skin. To the left, I can see Erin's coffin rocking and growling as usual. It's perfectly fine except for the fact that it's completely surrounded by, well, gremlins.

Terry was right, I've never seen anything like this. If a giant polar bear killed a t-rex, and then wore its skin around like a suit of armor, it would look sort of like one of these things. There are four ceiling high, bear shaped reptile monsters, stumbling over one another, punching and shaking the casket like excited toddlers on Christmas morning. If I make it out of this alive, I'm going to write a very long letter to Joe Dante and Steven Spielberg.

"We can't just let them take her," I whisper.

"What do we do? How do you kill a gremlin?"

"I don't know," he whispers.

"I thought you knew all about this stuff. What about the pamphlets? The book. What does it say?"

"I only finished the cover," he says. "I've never actually seen a gremlin in person."

"What about silver?" I ask. "Doesn't silver kill

like everything?"

"Yeah," he says, "that would be really useful information if we actually had some silver."

"I do," I say. "We do."

"What is it?" he asks. "A stake? A knife? A belt buckle? Please tell me you took the grenade again."

"A spoon," I say, reaching into my pocket. "I still have your spoon, it's silver, right?"

As I hold raise the spoon like Excalibur, Terry drops his head and sighs. "Are you seriously suggesting that we go out there, stand in front of four Andre the Giant sized monsters, and wave a spoon at their belly buttons?"

"I didn't say it was a good plan," I slowly shove the spoon back into my pocket. "What about the key to the coffin?"

"Do you even know what the word 'plan' means?" Terry raises an eyebrow. "The key isn't silver, and it's smaller than the spoon. I suppose we could throw it really hard, but I doubt it would be very effective."

"No," I say. "I mean, do you have the key on you?"

"Of course," he says, lifting the key from his fanny pack. "Why?"

"I'm going to distract them."

"How?"

"I'm going to dazzle them with my spoon playing ability and charm," I say. "I'll think of something."

"You can't," he says, standing in front of the door. "They're after you too. If they see you they'll either kill you, or take you to Roman, so he can kill you. Either way--" He runs his thumb across his throat.

"I'll be fine as long as you do your part."

"I'm not going out there," he says. "They don't even know that we're here. We could hide in one of the lockers and--"

"No," I say. "We can't. We have to do this, right now. You have to go out there, because she would do it for you. I would do it for you."

"Why did it have to be gremlins?" He sighs and grabs the bridge of his nose. "Alright. What can I do?"

As I explain the plan, Terry nods a handful of times. His eyes are rolling in his head, and I can tell that he's trying to think of a better idea, because we both know that this is the worst plan anyone has ever had in the history of plans. We both know that there is no way we can actually fight these things. There's no chance of me out running something with legs as big as theirs, but if they get Erin, all of this will have been for nothing.

I nod to Terry, and peek through the window. The gremlins are shoving one another, hissing and growling. They seem to be fighting over who gets to carry the coffin, as if Roman will give a special treat to whichever pet retrieves his prize. The largest of the brutes belches a violent roar, and the other three seem to drop their heads in shame. As the alpha gremlin tosses the coffin over his shoulder, I give Terry one last nod, and push my way into the hall.

It was one thing to see these creatures through a window, from behind the safety of the door, they seemed large, sure, but not much more terrifying or grotesque than Pavel. Now, standing in the hallway, alone, looking them in their dragon-snake-panda faces as they realize who I am, I know that I'm gonna need a bigger spoon.

"You," the alpha gremlin barks. This thing sounds like Tom Waits gargling acid. Deep tones complimented by high pitched, pubescent spikes of pain. "You are the ghoul. Roman wants to talk with you."

"Of course," I say, slowly stepping forward, "but I thought that you could talk to me first. You seem like... reasonable gentlemen." I stare into the big one's eyes and slowly reach into my back pocket. "I think we can make a deal."

One of the other gremlins lets out a grunt and leans forward enough for me to smell its pungent, wet dog breath. If I had to guess what this thing ate for breakfast, the list would start with something like pickled rat corpses, stuffed with tuna fish. Its fat, scaly lips pucker as it scowls, making it look like one of those giant goldfish that you see swimming in Chinese restaurants. "No deals," it breathes into my face with a deep British accent. "You come with us in peace or in pieces."

"Wow," I say, taking a step back, "did you just come up with that or do you say that to all the ghouls? He's clever. You're clever." None of the gremlins seem amused.

"Roman wants him alive," the big one says, shouldering his fish mouthed friend out of the way. "You're coming with us, ghouL."

"So, you're definitely sure that we can't come to some sort of agreement?" I try to keep eye contact as I pull the spoon from my back pocket.

"You agree to come with us," Koi face grunts, "and we'll agree to leave your bones where they is."

"Man, he's really good at those," I say. "Why isn't he the leader?"

"I am the leader," he barks.

Alpha and the others burst into laughter. Stepping backwards, I turn the spoon in my palm and grip the handle tightly.

"What?" Fishface says. "What's so funny?" His mouth opens wide, revealing an abyss of endless teeth as he hisses. The two goons in the back fall silent immediately, clearing their throats and returning to their stoic, on guard, expressions.

"So, you're in charge?" Alpha says with a chuckle, dropping the coffin.

"It's not like we a team," Fishface says. "We don't have meetings or anything like that."

I take a step backwards.

"But, you're the boss?" Alpha snorts. "Of me? Have you seen me?"

"Well," Fishface says, "it's not like the ability to look like a pregnant whale is in direct proportion to the ability to manage a team."

"Are you inferring that I look like a pregnant fish?"

"Not at all," Fishface laughs. "I was implying that you look like a pregnant mammal. And now, I'm outright saying it to your overstuffed face." He raises his head to hiss at the larger gremlin.

Looking through the morgue window, Terry mouths

the word, "Go" and points toward the door.

I nod in response and turn to face the monsters. "Guys, guys," I say, slowly stepping backwards. "Don't fight. You're better than that. Why don't we take a vote like civilized people?"

Alpha shoves Fishface aside and closes the five foot gap between us with a single step. "There's only one vote that matters, and it isn't yours."

"Okay, okay," I say, continuing slowly toward the door. "I get it. You're in charge."

"I know what you're doing," Alpha says. "I'm not an idiot."

"Can we put that to a vote?" Fishface says, rubbing his shoulder.

"Quiet," Alpha grunts. "This little ghoul thinks he can turn us against each other and get away while we bicker. What do you all make of that?" Without a word, the three Gremlins fall in line behind Alpha. He laughs, pleased with himself.

"You're right," I say. "You totally figured me out, but there's one thing that you haven't thought of."

"Yeah," he barks, bending to lower himself to my eye level. "What's that?"

"Now, Terry," I say. There's a few seconds of

silence, then the gremlin's head cocks to the side, confused.

"What's that supposed to mean?" He asks. "Notary? Seems like a peculiar thing to say, for a person in your situation."

"I don't think he said notary," Fishface whispers. "I think--"

"I'll do the thinking around here," Alpha says, smacking Fishface with the back of his bulbous hand.

"Now, Terry. Now!"

"Not hairy now?" Alpha says. "Are you having a stroke, boy?" He bends closer to my face, looking into my eyes.

I guess Terry couldn't bring himself to do it. Now that I've been face to face with one of these things, I get it. I don't exactly blame him for not wanting to leave the morgue. Sure, I'm going to curse his name with my dying breath, but that's just standard practice for someone who's been betrayed by their only friend. Oh well. Here we go. "Well, uh, it looks like we--"

"We what?" Alpha asks. "Spit it out."

"We, um..."

"Yeah?" He grunts.

This humongous reptilian thug is staring at my

face, waiting for me to think of something clever to say, and all I manage to come up with is, "Eat this!"

I jam the spoon into Alpha's mouth, punching as hard as I possibly can until the silver shiv sticks into the back of his throat. Pulling my hand out of the snaggle-toothed death trap, I cover my face and leave the spoon to do its job like a mini shovel shaped time bomb. I wince, expecting a fireworks display of lizard-man brain matter to explode all over me.

When I open my eyes, I see Alpha, with his head fully intact, chewing what's left of the spoon as if it were a piece of popcorn stuck between his teeth. I've seen what silver can do to these sort of creatures, it should be raining gremlin brains all over the place by now. He swallows, burps softly, then wipes his lips with the back of his hand.

Apparently, gremlins eat metal. I'll have to tell Terry to add that to The Book, after this thing is finished digesting me.

"Thank you," Alpha says, wiping the drool from his lip, "for a second there, I thought you were going to try something stupid."

I swing my leg back and kick high and hard toward the gremlin equivalent of a crotch. Alpha howls as my

foot buries itself between his legs with a squishy thud. When my shoe comes down, it's followed by an oozing, soapy, black, tar-like sludge. Bearing his teeth, the gremlin lets out a high pitch squeal that sounds like a chorus of angry cats. I launch my fist toward his bulging, frog eyes and the punch lands with a wet slap.

Alpha grabs his face, pushing away my hand as he hisses, more annoyed than actually hurt. As I turn to run, I hear the gremlin's fists smack the floor like a linebacker preparing to charge. "Get him!"

At least they've lost interest in the coffin. Mission, accomplished?

The hallway is lined with a thin, peach colored carpet that happens to be matted with leftover Dave juice. I have to high step over body parts while listening to the beasts behind me as they yell in feral tongues, ready to tear me apart. These things are groaning and screeching as if it pains them to have my flesh so far from their teeth. Hearing this sort of furious, animalistic rage only a few feet away is absolutely terrifying. It's the kind of soundtrack you could sell to motivate lethargic joggers. I've never moved so quickly in my life.

Pushing through the glass double doorway, I run

for another few feet before collapsing. I'm not tired. I don't get tired. But, I can't keep running. I can't just leave. Erin is still in there. Terry is still in there. Despite ruining our plan, he's the only friend I have, and he doesn't exactly deserve to become fish food.

I take a deep, useless, breath and turn to face the mortuary, expecting a spectacular wrecking ball crash through the entrance. I imagine these nine foot tall, lizard-bears, now covered in shards of sharp armor, stampeding toward me like some nightmarish art installment come to life. Instead, I hear screaming.

"No. Please no."

My head falls on its own, too afraid to face the horror show ahead, and I don't know whether to run into the fray or just lie down and wait to be eaten. After a couple of seconds, the screaming turns into a deep chorus of off key howls. There's more than one voice, all of them are in agony, but, none of them sound human. I don't hear Terry, or Erin, or even Angie. Stepping toward the door, I look up and see the glass entry way, dripping from floor to ceiling with streaks of black, tar-like ooze.

Through the smeared gremlin blood, I see Alpha, Fishface, and the rest of the gang, doing a sort of

interpretive dance. It's like a game of charades where the answer is, "being torn apart by a werewolf".

Terry did it. He actually did it. Erin is free. The wolf is loose and circling the gremlins like a playful Great White toying with its food. It's a force of nature, much larger than anything I've ever seen. I don't know if it has something to do with being closer to the full moon, or what, but she is at least two feet taller than she was last night and swollen with the sort of muscle usually reserved for comic book villains.

There's nothing left of Erin. I know that she's still in there, somewhere, but those gorgeous sunflower eyes have wilted beneath larger pupils, like black holes eating whatever light might have existed inside. She's still wearing most of the shirt that Terry gave her except now it's stretched and torn to accommodate her massive, elongated torso. Her pants are ripped at the thigh with tufts of thick, dark brown fur bursting through each hole. Her face has contorted and stretched in such a way that what remains looks more like a rabid, razor toothed cave man than an actual wolf.

This animal that stole Erin's body is standing on two legs, hunched over the largest gremlin and

drooling. With a bellowing roar, the wolf throws its teeth toward Alpha as if to find out how many licks it takes to get to the center of a gremlin. Apparently, the answer, is one, but that doesn't stop her from enjoying her meal. As Alpha's lower-torso falls to the carpet, the other gremlins take notice.

Fishface runs from across the room and tackles the wolf to the carpet. The two of them roll through the carnage, ripping and clawing at one another until Erin pins the gremlin against a wall. I can only see the back of the wolf as it tosses gremlin limbs around the room like a child tearing the wrapping from a birthday present. It's as disgusting as it is relieving.

I get closer to the glass and watch as she devours them, one by one, until the hallway looks like it was hit by the entire back catalog of biblical plagues. By the time the flesh flakes of gremlin debris fall, all that's left is Terry and a blood spattered werewolf.

With her mouth still dripping from gorging herself on gremlin hearts, Erin lifts her snout and bears her teeth. Her top lip turns upward with a snarl as she takes a step in my direction. The wolf's claws slam against the frame of the door, cracking the glass between us. There's nowhere to go. If it so much as breathes in my direction, the glass will shatter and

there will be nothing separating my neck from its teeth. Slowly walking backwards, the beast keeps its eyes on mine. It stops for a moment, lowers its head and then begins to charge. There's no time to move out of the way, or duck, or even cry.

Before I can say "Holy crap, a flying werewolf", the beast leaps into the air, claws extended and teeth dripping with anticipation. It smashes through the glass, tossing shards into my skin as it knocks me off of my feet. My back collides with the cement several yards away from the wolf but, as I peel myself from the sidewalk, it's already closing the gap.

Walking slowly, on two legs, the wolf sniffs the air between us. Its head begins to jerk back and forth, snorting as if frustrated. I lift myself to a sitting position. It's only four steps away. I can hear the crickets in the freshly cut grass beside me. Three steps away. I can see the moon, nearly full, and taunting me, as if it shot this fur-faced bullet into my life like a slow-motion assassination, out to kill everything that I love. Two steps away, and I want to close my eyes, but I don't.

The wolf spreads its jaws, growling furiously as it dives toward the sidewalk. Falling just short of my feet, with its teeth still fighting to reach me, the

beast begins to shrink. It's collapsing through awkward convulsions, and bellowing madly. The harsh voice of the beast seems to echo as its pitch shifts into a higher register. The deep, feral tones begin to fade and I hear Erin scream as if trying to escape from the center of the wolf.

Her voice rattles as bones snap out of and into place, breaking through patches of fur, and growing new skin over the wounds. Within a minute, the wolf is gone, and the only thing left is Erin. Still wet with the beast's hunger, she stares up at me through tearful eyes, and, somehow, she's smiling.

"You're welcome," she whispers. She falls into my lap and her eyes close.

I hear the crunch of broken glass and when I look up, Terry is pulling the coffin through the doorway.

"Did you see that?" He asks. "I was amazing."

"Your timing needs a little work."

"I believe you mean, 'thank you'." He pulls the coffin beside Erin and I.

"Thank you."

"Okay, okay, stop gushing," he says. "We need to get out of here before those things wake up."

"What!?" I say. "There's nothing left in there, can they actually do that?"

"Do you really want to wait around to find out?"
he asks.

"Fair point well made," I say. "But, Erin's not
going back in the coffin."

"She's going to--"

"No," I say. "She ate enough. We'll be fine. Help
me get her in the car."

"Where are we going?" he asks.

"We're going to bring her home."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Erin's temple digs into my shoulder as she sleeps. She has spent the better half of the week either in a coffin or dressed as a furry, rage tornado. After everything she's been through, and all that she's done for us, she's earned every second of peace that we can possibly find to give her.

Whispering to himself, Terry alternates between nodding in agreement and shaking his head in defiance. "The key was stuck," he says. "I couldn't... I just couldn't."

I tell him that it's okay.

"No," he says. "It's not."

"It's fine," I say. "You were scared. We all get scared and do stupid, dangerous, selfish things. Who hasn't left their friends alone in a room with a bunch of gremlins, am I right?" I chuckle.

"No," he says. "You don't understand." He squeezes the steering wheel and narrows his eyes. "I--"

"I told you, it's fine. This is it. We're here."

Turning right through the entry way, we pass a large wooden sign with the the words, "Welcome to the Commons" painted in a fading white, cursive font. Navigating the concentric circles of Erin's apartment complex is second nature to me. It's so ingrained in my muscle memory that I don't even have to watch the road as I direct Terry with a series of "Left"s and "Right"s. As Tony Robbins comes to a stop, Erin rubs her eyes and begins to stretch. She peels her chin from my chest, looking up to see my face, and instinctively makes that noise people make when they see a dead dog on the side of the road.

"Sorry," she says. "You just-- I didn't--"

"We're here," I tell her.

"Where?" She pushes the hair from her eyes.

"Your place," Terry says. "You better have some duct tape."

"Wait." She pulls on the handle of the car door.

"It's a mess. Don't judge me."

Following Erin through the door to her apartment sends a tingle through my body. It's the sort of cold chill that crawls up your spine when you're about to ruin a deja vu by telling everyone that you're having deja vu. As we walk through the entrance hallway, toward her living room, there's a strange maple scent

in the air that shakes memories into and out of my brain like an etch-a-sketch. The walls of the hall are lined with familiar photos of smiling people, pictures of a happy young couple doing the sort of things that happy young couples do. I can't believe she hasn't taken them down. It's as if we never broke up.

I pass a frame, and see a guy and a girl on a swing together, she's sitting on his lap and they're both smiling. In the next picture they're near a fountain, his face is wet, and she's laughing her head off. In the next, they're kissing in front of a wax museum. I remember that day. Touching things we weren't supposed to touch, and taking pictures we weren't supposed to take.

There's a framed photo of the two of us kissing in front of a two story tall replica of Elvis. It was a perfect day. I take a step closer to get a better look, and my focus shifts between the kissing couple and my reflection in the glass. I'm glistening in a color wheel of blood, all stapled and stitched and dead. I might as well be a ghost. This is not the same face as the one smiling, and kissing, and laughing in the pictures. Right now, I have the kind of face that even a mother would smack with a shovel until it stopped moving.

"Come on," Terry says, nudging me through the hall.

"I'm sorry this place is such a disaster," Erin says, leading us past her kitchen, toward the living room. "I haven't been home much. You know, being locked in a coffin for a few days, I didn't really have a chance to clean up or anything."

"This is how it always looks," I say.

"Yeah," she says. "But, I don't usually have an excuse."

She gestures toward the denim colored sofa in the living room. It's the same couch we would sit on when we would play Mario together. Where we watched every episode of Parks and Rec in less than a week. It's where I kissed her for the first time. It's also where we had our first fight. Terry and I sit.

"Do you guys want something to drink?" she asks, stepping into the kitchen. "I have water, beer, half a bottle of wine."

I try to ask for some water, but when my mouth attempts to form the words, it lets out a few extra syllables that sound something along the lines of, "I miss you."

"I... um, you--" Erin stutters.

"Duct tape," Terry says, jumping to a standing

position. "Do you have it, and if so, is it far enough away that I won't hear any more of this conversation?"

Erin stares off for a second, biting her top lip. She shuffles through one of the drawers in the kitchen, tossing aside scraps of paper, batteries, and whatever else. "Yep," she says, looking up with a smile. "Here." She throws the tape.

Terry catches the roll with two fingers then looks back and forth between Erin and I. With a subtle nod, he shuffles toward the nearest bedroom. "Oh look, I seem to have dropped the tape in this direction," he says, gesticulating with the roll. "Please excuse me while I fetch it. When I come back, I'll be in need of a shirt."

"Cole's clothes are in one of the boxes in the room. There might be something that'll fit."

As Terry wanders off to patch up his chest, mumbling to himself and shaking his head, Erin comes into the living room, carrying two drinks. She hands me one of the glass bottles, it's some sort of craft beer with a picture of a very sophisticated looking bear on the label. "Do you still drink? I mean, can you?" she asks. "I know you have to eat..." She gulps. "Living... things, but is it like a vampire? I mean, what happens if you eat something that isn't alive?"

"I honestly, have no idea." I stare at the beer in my hand, slowly pulling it toward my nose.

"Wait," she says. "Cheers."

"Here's to not being swallowed by weird, lizard, fish bears."

She laughs. "To being anywhere other than a coffin."

The glass bottle feels cold to the touch, but the beer itself smells warm like a fresh baked, salted pretzel. I put the bottle to my lips and let the cool liquid fill my mouth. It tastes delicious. So delicious that I completely forget about the hole in my cheek until my face becomes a fountain, leaking all over Erin's couch. "Crap," I say, sticking a thumb in my cheek to plug the spillage. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Erin laughs, walking quickly toward the bathroom. She rifles through her medicine cabinet, and returns with a hand towel, and a palm-sized first-aid kit. "Are you sure that you're allowed to drink that?"

"I don't even know." I wiggle my fingers in front of my face. Everything seems to be in order. "I feel fine." I shrug.

She sits on the couch, with her back to the armrest and tosses the towel onto my lap. "Maybe you

should ask him?" She nods toward the bedroom. "He's like you, right?" She lifts a large, square bandage from the kit then sets the box on the table.

"Yeah, we're practically twins." I take my thumb out of my cheek, and suck the beer from my fingertip. "Terry," I yell, "am I allowed to drink beer?"

"Of course," he says. "If you want to poop blood for a few days, go right ahead."

"What!" Beer gushes from my cheek hole. "Are you serious?"

"No," he says. "I have no idea. I've been sober since '69."

Tearing the paper wrapping from the bandage, Erin brings her hand close to my face. "Here," she says, "this should help a little." As the back of her hand grazes my skin, she pulls away. "You're so cold."

"Sorry."

With a determined breath, she presses the strip against my cheek, and I feel the warmth of her fingers through the thin plastic.

"Thanks." I rub my face, tracing the outline of the bandage. "Sorry about, you know, making it awkward, I just--"

"I miss you too." She takes a long, slow sip of her beer.

"This has to be weird for you," I say. "I mean, it's weird for me."

"Yeah, well," she shrugs, "noone likes seeing their ex."

We both chuckle, and sip our drinks. My muscles loosen as my back sinks into the couch. Turning my shoulders and shifting in my seat, I try to find a sweet spot in the cushion, but I can't. It's as if there's some kind of memory foam beneath me, perfectly sculpted to fit someone else's body. She's watching. Sit still. "It wasn't always bad, right?"

She stares into the bottle. Her lips teeter between a smile and a pout. "No," she says. "Not always. But, enough."

"I never cheated on you." I look into her eyes. "I never lied to you, or yelled at you or anything. I just-- I don't get it."

"I know," she says. "I know."

"Why?" I ask. "Why can't you just explain whatever it was. I know we can't do anything about it. I mean, I know it's obviously too late now, but I still want to know."

"There's nothing to explain," she whispers, looking toward the bedroom. "We can't do this now."

"Please?"

Her eyes widen and she nods toward the door.

"Sorry," I lower my voice to a library-worthy whisper. "There might not be a later, you know?"

"You don't have to whisper," Terry says. "I have excellent hearing, and I think you're both adorable. Don't mind me."

Erin and I look at each other, both trying not to smile.

"Also, where do you keep the clothes for actual people-sized individuals?"

"Everything we have is in there," Erin says. "Sorry."

"I'll make do."

Erin's smile reaches her eyes, and she covers her mouth. "I just can't believe this," she says. "This must be what it's like for the people who see Bigfoot, you know? Is there a Bigfoot? If there are werewolves, and vampires, and whatever you are, there's probably a Bigfoot."

"Maybe."

"It's amazing," she says. "It changes everything."

More like you're changing the subject. "I guess," I say, looking into my beer.

"It's like, you've seen these crazy things, right?" she says. "You've been a part of something

that you didn't even know existed. Like, no matter what you do, you can't take back the fact that you saw freaking vampires. Noone can take that from you. It's just kind of who you are now."

"Uh huh."

"What is it?"

"Nothing."

"This is what I'm talking about," she says. "You don't experience things."

"I've had more experiences this week than literally everyone," I say, "in the world. The whole world."

"Things have happened," she says. "But, I'm talking about actually experiencing things. Living things."

"It's hard to live in the moment when you're kind of, mostly, dead."

"But, you're not," she says. "I mean, you are, but, you know what I mean."

"Sure," I say, "but, why don't we pretend that I don't and you can explain it anyway?"

She laughs softly. "You always do this. You're great at watching everything happen. Talking about everything, making jokes. You're funny. But, you're not there. Not really."

"I was always there."

"I'm not saying that you were a bad boyfriend, or even a bad person," she says. "It's just... It's you. It's who you are. The way you are."

"Ouch," Terry says. "Sorry, I stubbed my... Sorry."

"What about me?" I ask. "Specifically. Can you give me an example?"

"Like that," she says. "It's not always that simple. You can't--" Her palm sweeps over her face as she sighs. "It's not like I write it down when it happens. But, it's there, Cole. You're just different with me than you are with other people."

"What does that even mean?"

"I don't know. I don't know," she says. "That should be enough. The fact that it's there, the fact that I feel it should be enough. But, it's not. You pick apart every single sentence that I say. We can't just talk. I can't talk to you, like, as a person."

"How is that my fault?"

"I'm not saying that it's your fault. It's noone's fault. It's just the way it is. That's how you are. You joke around with everyone else, you make people laugh. You have fun."

"We had fun."

"At first, yeah" she says. "We were like eighteen when we started dating. That's young. We were young. Young people have fun. They're stupid and impulsive."

"Isn't that a good thing?" I ask. "Aren't we supposed to go through things like this? This stuff happens. I mean, not this stuff," I gesture across my face and chest, "but our stuff. People stuff. Couples grow and change and--"

"But, you didn't," she says. "I mean, you did. You changed, but not-- I don't know. I don't know what it is. I don't know how to say it. We both grew, but, Jesus, there's no non-corny way to say these things."

"My entire life is made of corn."

"We grew, just not together, you know?"

"We've already done this part," I say, setting my beer on the table. "We've said all of these things. You tell me that you've known for a while, and I ask why you didn't just talk to me, and then we just start all over again. Can we try something different this time? Start fresh and actually try to understand each other?"

"See what I mean?" she says, almost laughing.

"It's always been like this. I'm not allowed to not know. I can't just be confused or make mistakes with you. That's insane."

"So, you think leaving me was a mistake?" I ask.

"Then why? Why do it?"

"No. I don't know. In the end, yeah, maybe I'll wonder if things could have been different. But no. People do things without knowing exactly what'll happen. That's all," she turns in her seat and tugs at a strand of fabric hanging from her jeans. "I don't know if I want kids, or a house, or a dog, or whatever. I don't know where I'm going to be in a week or a month, or if I'll even be alive after tomorrow."

"You will."

"It's just. I need to have experiences. Good and bad and whatever. I need to be allowed to make mistakes and be a person. I just want to be a person, and I think that should be enough."

I nod.

"I didn't want to hurt you," she says. "I never want to hurt you. I love you. It's just, we aren't, I can't, you're not--"

"It's okay," I say. "I get it. I get it."

Terry walks out of the bedroom wearing a plaid button up shirt that's about two sizes too small on him. "I think your shirt is broken," he says.

"It's all we have." Erin wipes her cheek with the palm of her hand. "Sorry. Do you want a drink?"

Terry shrugs and walks into the kitchen. "Has the beer killed you yet?" He furrows his brow as if waiting for my head to explode.

"Um... no?"

"Then I'll have a beer." He opens the fridge, grabs a bottle from the top shelf, and walks to the living room. "Are you guys kosher?"

"Yeah," I say. "But, Erin was just asking about Bigfoot. Do you know anything about that?"

"Mhm," he says, lifting a bottle opener from his fanny pack. "He owes me twenty bucks. That guy has a serious gambling problem."

We laugh. "So, there's no Bigfoot?" I ask.

"I have no idea," he says. "Honestly, I don't really care. There are more important questions to ask."

Erin shifts toward Terry. "You mean, like, is there a god or devil, or afterlife or whatever?"

"I don't carry those sort of pamphlets," Terry says. He stands in front of the TV and sips his beer. "I mean things like, what now? What are we going to do? What's the plan?"

"I need to change," I say, grabbing the empty bottles from the table as I stand. "These pants still have some Pavel in the pockets."

"I knew this was a bad idea," Terry mumbles.

"Calm down," I say, tossing the bottles in the recycling. "I'll be right back."

"Take your time," he says. "It's not like we have anything important going on in our lives."

The entire room smells like a Cinnabon. With the exception of a few cardboard boxes neatly stacked beside the closet, it's exactly as I remember. The walls are lined with unfinished craft projects, underwear, and glitter. Things like dream catchers, birdhouses, and half-painted portraits fill every inch of the room, spilling from the purple bookshelves beside the bed. Her books, neatly stacked in a row of wooden crates, are organized by color instead of by author or title. Having to remember that the spine of Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy is blue with white lettering always frustrated me. She thought it was adorable. Her drawing desk is littered with everything from birthday cards to empty whiskey bottles. It's a mess. It's her mess, and I miss it.

Two of the three boxes in the corner are filled with drawings, notes, framed pictures, and various poems. They're all anniversary gifts, or random souvenirs from road trips and weekend vacations. It's like a time-capsule of our relationship, waiting to be

buried and forgotten. I grab a pair of jeans, and a gray shirt from the box on the bottom. After wearing the hand-me-downs of strangers for the better part of a week, it feels good to have something that actually fits and isn't covered in some sort of otherworldly goo.

When I leave the room, Erin is standing in front of Terry and her nostrils are flaring. "Are you fucking serious?" she says.

"Whoa!" I put my hands in the air. "What did I miss?"

"He's having a change of heart." Her eyes widen as she points at Terry. "After all of the shit he's put us through, he's trying to convince me that going after Roman is a bad idea."

"That's not what I said." Terry twirls beard hairs between his thumb and index finger. "I just think we should take time to consider other options."

"Other options?" Erin's voice softens and her breath slows. She looks to me, then to Terry and shakes her head in disbelief. "Did you take the time to consider other options before you threw me in a coffin? Did you consider other fucking options when you used me like a dog to protect you from those things at the morgue?"

"That wasn't my idea."

"And it wasn't my idea to get bitten by a fucking werewolf," she says. "I don't want this. Do I look like I want to be doing any of this? I just want my fucking life back."

"I'm sorry," he says. "I just meant, even if we kill him, even if it all works out, we don't know exactly what will happen." He looks at me with stern eyes.

Erin groans. "I don't see how that changes anything."

"It doesn't," I say, looking at Terry.

"But--"

"Terry. Trust me." I think he's looking for a sign. Some sort of hidden signal or gesture that will tell him that I want to call this whole thing off. We both know what will happen if we succeed. Roman will die. Erin will be human. And, I will spend the rest of my days as a corpsicle. "We have to do this. It's the only way."

He sighs. "The full moon is tomorrow night."

"So?" Erin says. "What does that mean?"

"If you haven't noticed, it gets worse." Terry sits on the couch. "Your wolf. You. What you're capable of. It just gets worse."

"I've been going all Teen Wolf since you met me," she says. "We've been managing it so far. If I have to eat something gross, I'll take one for the team. I don't see how that has anything to do with--"

"No," Terry shakes his head as he speaks. "No. No. No. It won't work. Not tomorrow. Not with the full moon. It comes in phases. It changes. The early ones are easy. Snacking on little bits here and there will do. But, not tomorrow."

"What about the book?" She asks. "Is there anything in there about controlling the transformation? Maybe there's a way to use it."

"You're new to this. Even older wolves have trouble handling the change."

"She can learn."

"This isn't some Rocky movie," he says. "We don't have time for a werewolf training montage." He shakes his head and scratches through his beard.

"What about all of those pamphlets?" she says. "There's nothing helpful in any of them?"

"Terry makes the pamphlets, himself."

"What is this Madlibs for monsters?" She asks. "Are you just making this all up as you go?"

"There are things we just can't know," he says. "But, some things are absolutes. Tomorrow is the full

moon. We can't change that. You'll be stronger.

Bigger. Faster. Worse. And, so will Roman."

"So," I say, "she'll stay here."

"Screw a lot of that," she says. "This asshole ruined our lives."

"We can't do this," Terry says. "There's nothing we can do."

"What are you saying?" I ask.

"It's simple math," he says. "The full moon, plus Roman equals all of us freaking dead. We can't do this."

"Maybe not alone," I say. "But, what about the others? There are others, right? Like Pavel or the vampires. Monsters. People who are trapped or forced to work for him. We can't be the only ones who want to kill this guy."

"Do you have some kind of creep signal to shine in the sky?" he asks. "Are you going to yell 'Monsters Assemble' and wait for a ragtag group of vampires and zombies to knock on your door? It's not going to happen. There's nothing we can do. He's a werewolf. A werewolf."

"Yeah," Erin says, with an unimpressed shrug. "So am I."

"No," Terry says, "you don't understand. Compared

to him, you're as much of a werewolf as a shih tzu is a rottweiler."

"I'm pretty sure that I took out a bunch of big ugly somethings only a few hours ago," she says, "or have you forgotten the way you stood there doing nothing while I saved the day?"

"None of this is helping," I say. "We can't just sit here and argue. We need to find help, make weapons, prepare. We need to do something."

"We are doing something," Terry says, "we're waiting." He sets his beer on the table.

"Waiting for what?"

"Nothing." He stands and begins to pace from the living room to the kitchen. "Just waiting."

"He's afraid," Erin says. "I can't believe you're afraid of one little werewolf. What happened to Mr. Gungho pickax guy? I thought you wanted to do this."

"I did," he says. "I do. I just--"

"You just what?" she asks. "You're just going to turn into a monster tomorrow night, and kill innocent people? Oh no, that's right, I forgot, that would be me."

Terry stops pacing, and stares directly at me. "Do you trust me?"

"What is this, Aladdin?" Erin says, half laughing.

Terry's cheeks are red balloons of frustration. He's sweating and tugging at his beard. "Do you trust me?"

"Yeah," I say. "Why? What is it?"

"I called him."

As the words leave his lips, my brain spirals into some sort of hyper terrified, alternate-reality head space. Everything seems to freeze for a moment as I desperately try to imagine a possible world in which he might be talking about anyone other than the person he is actually talking about. It could be anyone, right? The pope. A Ghostbuster. Tony Robbins, himself. But, it's not.

Terry lets out a heavy breath of silence after dropping the big old betrayal bomb all over us, snapping me out of my daydream, and leaving me with nothing but a stupefied look of disappointment, and the words, "You've got to be fucking kidding me."

Erin says something similar, but I can't really hear her over the sound of my entire body wanting to murder Terry.

"When?" I ask. "How? Why? What the hell?"

"When I was in the room," he says. "You guys were talking, and I just couldn't stop thinking about it. I had to. I thought if we explained the situation, if we

told him that you guys know each other, I thought he might understand."

"You're the one who told us how terrible he is," Erin says. "You said he was a monster."

"We're all monsters," he says, "that doesn't mean we can't be reasoned with every once in a while. I know what'll happen if we try to fight him. I don't want that. None of us want that. I had to try to make a deal with him."

"What kind of deal?" Erin takes a step toward Terry. "The kind of deal that sells me into a life of slavery? That kind of deal?"

"No, no, no," he says. "He just wants to talk. He..."

"Did you tell him where we are?" I ask.

"I had to." Terry tugs at his beard, sighing. "I... He just... He wasn't going to stop," he says. "I had to think of something. He promised he wouldn't hurt anyone. He just wants to talk. There was no other--"

Erin throws her fist into Terry's cheek hard enough to knock the rest of the sentence out of his mouth.

"Holy shit," I shout as Terry's feet leave the floor.

Her punch is like a sledgehammer slap to the face that sends Terry flying across the room and through the wall. As debris falls around us, Erin stares at her shaking fist in awe. "Terry," she screams. She waves her hands to clear the cloud of dust as she peeks through the enormous, Terry shaped hole in the wall. "Oh my god, oh my god."

As Erin and I run toward the doorway, I can hear Terry coughing. It's a syrupy, boil of a cough. Wet and pained. "Terry," I yell. "Terry!"

"I'm sorry," Erin says. "I didn't mean to-- Oh my god."

Lying in the center of the bed, surrounded by red-stained rubble, Terry's body looks like a failed attempt at a tinfoil swan. The lower half of his left leg is on the floor beside the books. His eyes are swollen, and his face is torn across the right cheek, leaving a grayish, pink sponge where his skin should be. His fingers are shaking, moving slowly like a focused surgeon, carefully picking the drywall from his beard. The problem is, his beard is no longer attached to the rest of his head. He sits up slowly, holding his own bottom jaw like a furry bowl of cereal and tries to say something.

With his tongue hanging loose between his mustache

and shirt collar, Terry is as difficult to understand as he is to look at. He sounds like Scooby Doo, drowning in a pool of acid.

"I don't know what you mean," I say.

"Rom RoRRy," he gargles. "Ru Reed Ro Ro."

"We have to go," Erin says.

"We can't just leave him like this." I put my hand on Terry's shoulder. "Look at him."

"No, I mean, that's what he said. He said we need to go."

"Here." Terry lifts a set of keys from his fanny pack and drops them on the bed beside his leg. He does what he can to reposition his jaw and begins to speak slowly and deliberately. "Go see Pavel. Tell him that we need him. His brother needs him. I am so sorry." His eyes fill with tears as his back falls against the bed.

"Come on," Erin says. "We have to go."

I look into Terry's swollen, busted eyes and mouth the words, "Thank you", before following Erin through the door.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

When Erin asked where we were going, I didn't know how to tell her that the only person I've met who knows anything about werewolves is a puss spitting, head exploding, snail eating monster, so I just asked her to trust me. As we pull into the strip mall, her intrigued, confident expression begins to sour.

"So, this is your big plan?" she asks as we park in front of the pet store. "What are we going to do, train ferrets to fight this guy?"

"We are now," I say. "That's much better than what I was thinking."

"Seriously," she says. "What are we doing here?"

"Is there a poncho in the glove box?"

"No, why?"

"This could get really gross really fast." I step out of the car and Erin follows. "Have you ever seen that movie *Weird Science*?"

"Yeah, we watched it last Halloween," she says.

"Why?"

"Right." I walk in front of Erin, leading her

toward the door. "Do you remember the scene with the brother? The one who gets turned into a monster."

"Yeah, the giant turd," she says. "Bill Paxton was amazing."

Grabbing the metal handle of the door, I pause and turn to Erin. "The guy who runs this place is pretty much that thing times a gorilla. He's a troll. Like, a real troll. With jelly."

"What are you--" Erin's eyes widen and she lets out a surprised yelp.

Staring at us through the glass door is a revolting 6 foot tall creature of pubescent proportions. With his greasy skin, unreasonably elongated limbs, and new warts covering his upper lip like a mustache made of puss, Pavel looks like the personification of an internet comment section. "Go away, ghoull," he grunts. "I just finished mopping up, I'm tired."

"We need your help," I say.

The troll turns and starts to walk away.

"Please, Pavel," I yell into the glass. The troll shakes his head and continues into the darkness of the reptile section. "Terry needs you. Your brother needs you. For Kazool."

Pavel pauses.

"What's Kazool?" Erin asks.

"It's a long story."

With four troll-sized steps, Pavel makes his way from the fish tanks to the front door. "For Kazool," he nods. Unlocking the door, Pavel smirks as his perfectly round, red and black pimple-like eyes bounce between Erin and I. "This is the wolfgirl, huh?"

"Yeah," I say. "This is Erin. Erin, this is Pavel."

"She's cute," he says. "You're cute."

"Ew. I mean, thanks?" If Erin were a comic book character, this entire page would be filled with an onomatopoeia that read "CRINGE".

Standing in the doorway, Pavel lowers himself to our level and groans. "So, what happened? Where's Terry? Did Roman finally catch up with you guys?"

"Not yet," Erin says. "I think that's why we're here."

"We need your help."

"With what, feeding a fish?" He laughs. "I don't know why Terry would send you here."

"He trusts you," I say. "I think we can trust you."

"Did you forget that I wanted to kill you, like, yesterday?" he laughs. "Honestly, after all of this,"

he gestures from his head to his stomach, "I'm still taking it into consideration."

"You were scared."

"I wasn't scared, I was smart." He nods for us to follow and walks into the pet store. "What you guys want to do is inconceivably dumb. But, it's also pretty awesome. Come on."

Grumbling with every step, Pavel ushers us toward the back of the store and into the "Employees only" section. It's a cramped, white room with a single plastic table, four chairs, and a mostly-empty snack machine. Against the far wall, there's an old, twelve inch tv set connected to every game system I've ever seen. This is the room that my thirteen year self would want to die in. A few books, loose sheets of paper, and a bunch of oddly shaped dice are spread around the Cheeto-dusted table. Pavel sits and lifts a twenty-sided die from the pile. "So, where is he?" he asks. "Where's Terry?"

"My apartment," Erin says. She avoids looking at Pavel, but can't seem to stop dry heaving.

"Have a seat." He kicks one of the plastic chairs.

I shake my head. "We don't have time for this."

"Sit."

"We're going after Roman," I say, taking a seat.

The chairs are sticky, cold, and uncomfortable enough to meet the legal definition of torture. "We need to know how to kill a werewolf."

"Easy," he says. "Silver or bust. Is that it? Can I go?"

"Does it have to be through the heart or anything?" I ask. "You know, like a vampire? Is there something special you have to do?"

"Yeah," he whispers, "listen carefully."

We lean in close. I wish I had a composition book so I could take notes.

"You have to get as much silver as you can, right? Like, a bunch of silver. You take that silver and go to a pawn shop and sell it. Then, use the money to buy some plane tickets and spend the rest of your lives in Fiji. That's what you have to do." Pavel taps the die on the table. "Otherwise, you're wolf chow."

"We need to know," Erin says. "This is serious. Does it have to be silver bullets? Can it be, like, a knife?"

"It can be whatever you want," he says. "As long as it's silver. A spoon, a fork, some earrings, anything will do. But, the more, the better. It's not gonna be easy, or pretty."

"Anything silver?" Erin asks. "That doesn't sound

too hard."

Pavel snickers and taps the die on the table. "I can tell by your tone, and the fact that you're alive enough to bother me, that you've never actually seen a real werewolf in person."

"Were we not formally introduced?" She laughs. "Hi, I'm Erin. I enjoy good beer, listening to Abba, watching Kubrick movies, and I happen turn into a flesh eating fur monster when the moon is full. Nice to make your acquaintance."

Pavel laughs. "Listen, just get whatever you can. If you can somehow drop a silver house on him, I suggest doing that and then bombing the house with a silver coated nuke."

"Where does he live?" she asks. "How do we get there?"

"Are you guys really going to do this? You're actually gonna try to kill Roman?" Pavel leans forward, twirling the die between two fingers. "I mean, really? You guys?"

"Someone has to do it," I say. "I figure, we can try to get some help. There are plenty of people out there who've been screwed over by this guy. We just have to find others like us. We'll arm ourselves with whatever silver we can find, and then storm the gates

when he's mostly human, you know? Wait it out until after the full moon, when he's not as strong, and then go in there, all, guns blazing."

He drops the die, and watches it bounce on the table in front of him. "And how many people have you converted to your cause so far?"

"Well," Erin says. "There's us, that's two. And, well, uh, what about you?"

"What makes you think I would do something that stupid?"

"Do you actually like being Roman's professional wolf sniffer?" I ask.

"No," he says, "but it's better than being his midnight snack. It doesn't really make a difference, anyway. Did you see the name on the van outside? Did it say, 'Roman's Reptiles'? No. This is my store. When this is all said and done, I'll be here either way. You don't have it so lucky."

"What do you mean?" Erin asks.

"Nothing," I say. "So, where does he live?"

Slapping his giant hand on the table, Pavel stops the die from bouncing. "She doesn't know? You don't know? What kind of a boyfriend are you?"

"The ex kind," I say.

"Oh, that makes sense."

"What?" Erin asks, finally looking at Pavel. "What is it?"

"We need to know where Roman lives," I say. "We don't have time for this."

The troll lifts a pencil from the table and scribbles onto a piece of paper. "Here," he says. "This is the address. It's a big place, statues outside, and a whole stain glass wall thing. You can't miss it. Now, where's Terry?"

"Don't change the subject," Erin says, kicking her chair backwards as she stands. "Tell me."

"I'm not interested in getting in the middle of your soap opera," Pavel says. "I just want to know where Terry is."

"Please don't do this," I say, turning to Erin. "Just let it go. Please."

"Tell me," she says, grabbing the edge of the table.

Roman's address is in my pocket. I could just take the car and run away. It won't be easy to do it on my own, but I'd rather fight a tsunami of angry werewolves than have to see Erin's face when she finds out the truth.

"Do you know The Commons?" Erin asks. "The apartment complex across the bridge?" Pavel nods.

"That's it. The Commons, apartment 142. That's where Terry is. Now, tell me."

"Please," I say. "Just trust me."

"Your boyfriend is a ghoul," Pavel says.

Her nostrils flair as she lowers herself closer to Pavel's face. "I know about ghouls," she says slowly.

"So, you already know that if the wolf dies, the ghoul dies too?" he asks. "Phew. That makes this all way less awkward for me."

Erin's head sinks between her shoulders. With her eyes closed, she takes two heavy breathes and then looks directly into my eyes. It's a look that I've seen before. The look that she was giving me the night we broke up. The "there's no way out of this, prepare for immediate annihilation" look.

Don't panic. It's okay. She'll understand. "I'm sorry," I say, "I knew you'd try to stop me if--"

Without a word, Erin walks past me, pushes the door open, and storms down the hall toward the entrance.

"You're an idiot," Pavel says, rolling his die.

"That's the popular opinion."

I follow Erin through the door as she continues to walk past the reptile section, toward the exit. Her fists are balled and she's whispering to herself.

"Erin. Erin, wait. Please. Come on. What was I supposed to do? I just didn't want--"

"What?" She says, stopping between two large fish tanks. "You just didn't want me to stop you from killing yourself? Jesus, Cole. This is crazy. This is all fucking crazy. You don't know what it was like. You don't know what it was like to lose you. To watch that happen. To be at your fucking funeral, saying goodbye to you and your mom and feeling like--" She rests her face in the palm of her hand and massages her temples. "I can't do that again. I can't be responsible for that."

"You're not responsible for any of it," I say. "This is just what has to happen."

"So, these are the options?" she asks, pacing the fish food aisle. "Either we run and eventually this asshole tracks us down and kills us, or we kill him and you die anyway? Wonderful. This is really wonderful."

"I agree that it isn't ideal," I say. "But of the two choices, I'm going to have to go with choice B all day long."

"We don't even know if it'll work," she says. "We could go through all of this, you could die, and I might not even be human again. I can't ask you to do

that. I'm not asking you to do this for me."

"I'm not doing it for you."

She rolls her eyes hard enough to turn her entire body toward the exit.

"Okay, yeah," I say. "Some of it is for you, fine. But, how could it not be? The only reason we're here, at all, is because I'm a colossal fuck up. This is my fault. All of this is because of me. It is. I know you want to make me feel better about it, you want to take some of the blame, but... but..." Erin stands in silence with an eyebrow raised and her arms crossed, not taking any of the blame. "Okay, maybe you don't. But still, this is what I have to do. I don't know what's going to happen. I don't know if you'll be human again, or if I'll die, or if Roman will just kill us both of us."

"Great speech," she says. "Really motivational."

"My point is, we have to try. Even if it kills me, we have to fucking try. Not because I need to, or because you're asking me to, but ecause, for once, I want to do the right thing when there's a right thing to do. After all that we've seen and all that this asshole has done to us, if there's a right thing to do, this is fucking it. I know you're sick of hearing me talk."

"Does being undead make you psychic?"

"But, this is who I am. Sometimes, I'm a mess. Sometimes, I'll talk too much, or not enough. I'll say the wrong things and I'll get myself in trouble. But, I'm trying. This is me trying. And, I know. I know that it's too late to save us, but it isn't too late to save, you know, us."

"That was sloppy." She smiles. "But, I hate you a little less."

"Sloppy but effective is pretty much all I can do."

"So, now what?"

I wave the car key between us. "We're going to get in the car, drive as far away as we can, find something sharp and silver, and shove it up Roman's ass."

"Okay." She snickers, nodding her head with a slight smile. "I would have gone with down his throat, but, yeah. We can do this. If you're sure."

"I'm sure."

The chorus of Pat Benetar's *Invincible* rocks Tony Robbins from his sleep, and as we reverse, I almost feel alive. The world looks different, somehow. Full of color and purpose. The strip mall is still a barren wasteland of bad ideas and broken windows, but there's

a new tint to everything. It's all vibrant and alive in a way that I haven't seen or felt in a long time. Erin is smiling, playing the air drums and singing along to the song, and I know that she feels it too. This is a new beginning. A new sense of direction. I can see it in her eyes. It's as if she's surrounded by a beautiful white light, perfect and all encompassing.

"Cole," she says. "Cole? Cole, stop. Stop. Stop!"
Shit.

With my head frozen in place, I'm forced to watch as Erin screams and lifts her arms to brace for impact. There's nothing I can do. My hands are glued to the wheel and my foot is stuck in the down position as if my body is doing its best impression of a doomed crash test dummy. As the tires spring over the curb, light pours in through every window, filling the car, and for a second, I feel weightless.

For most people, watching the sun rise is a romantic event. There's usually a certain majesty to the light washing away the events of the night that can make you feel renewed. There's an innocence to it. A forgiveness. But, as Erin's head buckles, the light silhouetting her whiplash is more like a flashlight in the face of a high diver. My head hits the steering wheel and bounces into a forward facing position as we

bellyflop through the bright blue letters painted across the storefront window. Without the ability to flinch, or move, or blink, I stare forward helplessly as Tony Robbins headbutts a new doorway into the center of the word "Laundromat".

There's a sudden explosion of glass and dust and brick that sounds like a waterfall of hail pouring over the car. The impact is enough to loosen my grip on the wheel. I have no control. My arms hit the dash, smack the window, slap my face, then finally fall, exhausted and abused, beside my lap as we nosedive directly into a row of washing machines.

The hood of the car folds in on itself as it pushes the heavy tin boxes further into the store. We make it ten feet before finally hitting a wall of heavy-duty double-stacked dryers. The tires squeal and kick dust as my foot continues to press on the gas, trying its best to force itself through the blockade of dented metal. We're not going anywhere. Streams of light punch through the storefront, dancing along the smoky debris like bullets staining the air, and laughing as they shoot us in the face. I really need to invest in a watch.

In my peripheral, the passenger side is a dark, unmoving blur. With the seatbelt holding my face a few

inches from the steering wheel, my head is at the mercy of gravity, and I can't see much of anything. I listen for Erin, hoping to hear any sign of movement, a word, a sigh, a breath, but it's too loud. Everything in the building is echoing the car crash like an audible recording of my failure stuck on repeat. The engine continues to rattle and cough as if Tony Robbins is begging to be put down. Bits of shattered glass cackle and taunt me. Pat Benetar is still singing her heart out, telling us how invincible we are, but now I can hear the sarcasm in her voice, as if the entire song is one big musical eyeroll.

All I can do is wait, and listen, and hope. Please breathe. Erin, please. Just, say something. Move. Breathe. Anything.

"Well, that fucking sucked," Erin groans.

Every muscle in my body tries to smile.

"Are you okay? Can you move?" She pokes my arm. "I forgot about the rigor mortis thing. You know, you really need to buy a watch."

Thanks.

"Crap," she says, grabbing my leg. "Cole, can you see this? Holy shit. Holy shit. I think they're here. Is that them?" With her palm spread across my chest, she pushes my back against the seat, so I'm sitting

upright.

In the rear-view mirror, I see Roman's spit-polished monstercar pulling into the lot behind us. Perfect.

"What do I do?" she asks. "What am I supposed to do?"

Drive. Push me out of the car and drive. Run away. Kick me through the door and run over my corpse as you reverse. Go. Do it. Do it, now. Please.

"What the hell is that?" she asks, shaking my chest. "Is that a person? Is that Roman?"

In the rear-view, I watch a well dressed, white-eyed, gray-skinned man step out of driver's side of the car. It's Roman's chauffeur. This guy looks like something that should only exist at night. Like the kind of toothy shadow that might walk around your room while you're asleep, daring you to open your eyes. He's a living statue of the boogeyman, carved out of nightmares, and he's here for us.

"This is happening. This is actually happening," she says. "What the fuck!" I can feel her heartbeat in her fingertips. Her foot taps the floor, scattering pudding cups as her hand grips and shakes my chest.

"Okay. Okay. We uh-- We just have to--"

The chauffeur is getting closer. Erin starts

cursing under her breath. It's one long whispered word, made up of a thousand syllables you aren't supposed to say in church. This is her version of Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious as performed by George Carlin. "Okay," she says, taking a long, deep breath. "Sorry about this."

Wait, sorry about wha--

In one jarring leap, Erin tosses her legs over the center console and onto my lap. She kicks my foot away from the pedal, throws Tony Robbins into reverse, and tells me to hold on.

Through Erin's hair, I can see the chauffeur standing just outside the entrance of the laundromat. The engine growls as the pedal hits the floor, and we bound up and over the shattered glass and brick, toward the light and directly into the chauffeur's chest.

As we smash into the rock man, there's a thunderous clap, like two mountains high-fiving one another. The car buckles and squeals, pushing against the chauffeur's immense strength. There's a lot of tire spinning and screeching, but we hardly move. Erin lifts her foot for a second, then stomps the pedal into the floor again and again. Rockman doesn't even break a sweat.

His perfectly round eyes are staring directly into the mirror just watching us. He's looking right at us. Watching as Erin panics. Watching as I sit here, helpless, knowing that there's no way out. He's just staring at us, expressionless, knowing that he's the reason that we're going to die and he doesn't even seem happy about it. He looks bored, like this is just standard rock guy procedure. Another Tuesday on the job.

Erin's fists pound the steering wheel as she yells, "Shit. Shit. Shit." When she moves her hands, the wheel looks like a black, metal pretzel, all twisted and collapsed in on itself. She spreads her fingers, and turns her hands, looking over her palms and knuckles. There's not a bruise or scratch in sight. "What the fuck." She finds my eyes in the rear-view mirror and begins to nod her head softly. "Okay, okay. I can do this," she whispers.

I see where this is going.

After easily tossing Terry through the wall like he was a cannon-shot jellyfish, Erin probably feels invincible. She probably thinks that she can shatter the bones of this poor, fancy suit wearing gentleman with a single kick. But, considering what happened with Pavel, and what Erin did to the gremlins, I doubt

that Roman would just send another incompetent goon after us. I don't want her to go out there. She's strong, but there's something about this guy that makes my nerves feel alive enough to send goosebumps up and down my arms. It might have something to do with the fact that his entire body is made of stone, or that he's holding a running car in place using only his hands.

Lifting herself from my lap, Erin slides toward the door. She grabs my knee, positions my right foot over the gas pedal, and presses on my leg until it's locked in place and the engine is screaming. I have a bad feeling about this. "Stay here," she says.

As if I have a choice.

"I'll be right back."

The chauffeur almost looks confused as Erin hops out of the car. His wide-eyed, doll-like expression doesn't actually change, he just sort of tilts his head slightly to the left like a concerned lizard. I've only seen this guy twice in my life, but something tells me that this is the closest he's ever come to showing genuine emotion. It's subtle, but it should count for something.

The chauffeur straightens his back, keeping both hands firmly on the car as Erin reaches the trunk. In

the rear-view mirror, they're perfectly framed with her on the left and him on the right as if they're working together to push this broken down car away from danger. Unfortunately, for all of us, this isn't a Lifetime movie. They don't exchange pleasantries, or phone numbers, or even an awkward smile. Rockman's lips part as if to say something, and Erin immediately throws her fist directly into the space between his eyes and mouth. There's a loud pop, like a baseball bat hitting a lightbulb. It's the sound of rock turning into rubble.

Her punch doesn't have the same effect on butler Ben Grimm as it did on Terry. He doesn't fly through air, and his jaw is mostly intact, but the blow is damaging enough to make him loosen his grip. Chunky pebbles splash against the rear window, staining the glass with a thick, dark green liquid, and small fragments of the chauffeur's face. His nose is gone and all that's left is a jagged canyon above his mouth, pooling with an inky green slime.

Erin jumps backwards as the car begins to roll. She's a genius. Tony Robbins slams into the distracted chauffeur, cutting him at the knees and taking him to the ground. The rear tires jump up and over the man's body, turning his fancy suit into a really expensive

speedbump. As the front tires pass over Rockman, the world seems to move up and down rapidly, and I feel like an undead bobble-head.

"Cole!" Erin reaches for the driver side door as I pass, but she misses.

Tony Robbins and I continue to roll, leaving her stranded in the road beside Rockman. Looking forward, I watch Erin swing her fist as the chauffeur tries to stand. Her knuckles dig into the man's face, sending a handful of rubble flying through the parking lot. He shakes the dust from his skin as the thick, dark green liquid drips from his new cheek hole. He tilts his head at Erin and then looks directly at me.

Wait. He isn't looking at me. He's looking at the car. This can't be good. I check the rear-view and, well, shit.

The seatbelt digs into my neck and locks me into place as Tony Robbins rams into the side of Roman's car. The crash isn't exactly devastating to the pristine monstercar, but as the engine in Tony Robbins sputters to a halt, I'm glad that he had the chance to go out swinging. The radio cuts out, the dashboard lights dim, and the engine exhales its last breath. So long, Tony Robbins. Terry is going to be pissed.

Despite the disgusting ooze, and the fact that he's now a card carrying member of the cheek-hole club for the undead, Rockman seems completely unfazed by Erin's attack. He cocks his head from side to side as if to crack his neck and just watches as Erin throws the sort of punch that would decapitate the Terminator. The chauffeur lifts one of his hands and redirects her fist, throwing it off course, and her off balance. He kicks the back of her leg, forcing her knees to the ground then drives his stone fist into the back of Erin's head. Her body falls to the pavement, limp and motionless.

No. I can't watch this. I don't want to watch this. Come on, Erin. Wake up. Wake up. I hate my fucking eyes, right now.

With his hand wrapped around her wrist, Rockman drags Erin through the street. He stares into the car, watching me, taunting me with his stoic indifference, knowing that I'm a fish in a barrel. That I'm a sitting duck. Easy pickings. Helpless. Useless. Dead.

I want to find a man-sized rock tumbler and use it to make a festive trophy out of this guy's skeleton. There isn't a word for the sort of messed up, violent, hate-fueled torture revenge that I want to enact on this ugly, stone hearted, gargoyle looking bastard.

Unfortunately, I can't. Fortunately, Erin is waking up.

Her head turns from side to side, as if trying to figure out what's going on. Grabbing at Rockman's hand, she twists her body and kicks her feet wildly. Yelling a slew of curse words, Erin promises unspeakable tortures as she swings her free hand like her fist is a rabid dog on a chain. The chauffeur continues to walk, unfazed. Nothing seems to help. He just continues to walk, ignoring her completely like a Neanderthal dragging away his nightly wife. I want to throw the car into drive and roll over this guy until his head is a pile of sand.

Erin stops flailing and digs her nails into the concrete. Her grip slows Rockman enough to carve that disturbed reptile expression into his stone face. He pauses about ten feet from the hearse, turns around, and balls his fist. Erin brings her knees to her chest as the chauffeur prepares to punch. She straightens her legs, throwing her feet over her head and sends her heels directly into Rockman's chest.

It all happens incredibly fast, and looks like something you could only do after watching hours upon hours of yoga videos on Youtube. It's pretty incredible. The kick catapults the living statue

through the air, toward the hood of Tony Robbins, in a high, wide, rainbow arch as Erin rises to her feet. The chauffeur crashes like a meteor, hot and heavy and cataclysmic. His back hits the hood with a hard, metallic splash creating a crater large enough to be named after him.

His right arm smashes through the cracked windshield, showering my chest and lap in glass. As his head high-fives the hood, I see that the hole in his cheek is gone. The green ooze has somehow scabbed over, filling the gap with a shiny new layer of rock. There's a clarity to the regrowth, like a dimly glowing sheen of crystal, and it looks as if he could kill Superman with a head-butt. Rockman's tux rises as he takes a breath and as it falls, I see Erin standing in front of Tony Robbins looking like she's on fire with anger. With her tussled hair, balled fists, and scowl painted across her face, she looks like she's about to go full Super Saiyan.

The chauffeur's fingers begin to fidget, curling and opening as he wakes. He takes another breath and his eyes open just in time to see Erin leaping into the air with both arms raised overhead.

Her feet sink into the hood as she lands, straddling Rockman. Before he can blink, her fists are

pummeling his chest like a jackhammer of devastation, stamping her name across his life. She's strong and impossibly fast, and she's throwing the sort of punches that would eviscerate a normal man. Green tar splashes with every hit, covering Erin's forearms. Nothing about this is normal.

Despite the thunder punch sound of fist against rock, and the skin boulders flying through the air, the chauffeur sits straight up and shoves Erin with both hands. She flips over the front of the car, falling backwards onto the pavement. Rockman pushes himself forward until his legs dangle over the bumper. He drops to the ground, and tilts his head from side to side, cracking his neck. I can't see Erin, but I know that she's there. She's laying on the cement with this asshole standing over her, balling his fists and bending to reach her.

I beg my hand to move, but it just sits there. I do my best to form words with my lips, but they're stuck in that half-open, high school desk nap position, drooling and useless. She's on her own. She doesn't need me. She never did.

With the sort of sound that can only be described as earth shattering, a large, Kryptonite-covered hand erupts from the center of Rockman's back, lifting him

toward the sky. The creature's blood has crystallized over Erin's fists and forearms, turning them into sharp green, Incredible Hulk-level gauntlets. Impaling the chauffeur as she stands, Erin raises her arm, holding Rockman in the air with one hand like a wrestler about to throw an opponent from the top rope. As the creature's body slides down her wrist, she pushes her free hand through his chest. There's a puff of dust and a fountain of green ooze as her fist exits through the other side.

Her nostrils flair as she grits her teeth, dripping with blood, and sweat, and rock. She looks like a distressed mother lifting a helicopter off of a child. She's exhausted. Hurt but not broken. Not beaten.

She spreads her arms into the shape of a "Y", splitting the chauffeur's body at the waist in a hail storm of wet, green and gray pebbles. Throwing the pieces to the ground, she pounds her fists into the pavement like an aggressive gorilla displaying its dominance. I can't see what she's hitting, but there's a flurry of fabric, sand, and crystallized rock flying through the air as she swings her fists. When Erin's exhausted arms finally fall to her sides, her hands look perfectly fine. After all of the punching,

smashing, and crushing, the crystal gauntlets are so pulverized that there's little evidence of their existence. There's even less evidence of the chauffeur.

Erin stumbles forward as the rubble falls. She collapses over the hood of the car with her face buried in her arms. Loose hairs bounce against her ear, falling into and out of her eyes. She's still breathing. She's alive. She did it. Erin is my fucking hero.

Using the side of the car as a crutch, she hobbles toward my door. She's dalmatianed from head to toe with the chauffeur's violent fingerprints and I can tell that it feels worse than it looks. With every labored breath, she seems to shake the residue of Rockman's fists. Dark blue inkblots beneath her eyes swirl and fade into her pores like water disappearing down a drain. Her bruises are fading right in front of me, but the pain isn't. Tears flush the sand from her cheeks like thin rivers breaking through the filth and blood and earth. She rests her head against the window, fogging the glass with her breath.

"Hi," she says.

Hi.

She opens the door and falls into my lap. With her

forehead nestling into my neck, I can feel her heart racing. It beats against the hollow of my chest and feels as if it's my own.

"I need a nap," she whispers. "Wake me up when I'm human again." As her muscles retire, her body sinks into me. Her heart is still drumming against the duct tape, only now, it's slow, rhythmic, and evenly paced.

There's a noise from outside. The muffled pop of a car door opening and closing. I hear footsteps. Definitely more than one person. In the rear-view, I can only see shadows passing over the dented fender of Roman's car. A darkness moves behind Erin, filling the door frame and blocking the light.

Over the horizon of Erin's hair, I watch two hands reach into the car and pull her from my lap. Her face presses against mine, turning my head toward the open door as she passes, and I see three men grabbing Erin by her legs and arms. With their ridiculous, romantic-era suits the men look like background players from a musical rendition of Frankenstein.

As she is dragged into the light, her eyes open slowly, one at a time. She blinks into the sun, looking up at the strange men and as they lift her feet from the ground, she screams my name. Her shoulders move in wide circles, but her arms remain

still, locked in place by so many hands. She continues to yell until her voice fades into a whisper. The shadows move across the rear window, and then she's gone.

When they return, the men peel me from my seat, throw me into a coffin, and close the lid. I can't see anything. I can't hear anything. I can't move. If my life were a movie, this is probably where the credits would roll and there would be some sad piano song playing against a black screen.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

When the casket opens, I'm in a brightly lit room with mirrors from floor to ceiling on every wall. It's the kind of vomit inducing, funhouse for sociopaths that Patrick Bateman would kill for, or imagine killing for, whatever.

In the reflection of the ceiling, overhead, I see Erin. She's unconscious and handcuffed to a chair, facing a prison-barred window, and made up to look like a prom queen from the 1800s. She's been washed and redressed. In other words, fucking violated.

Instead of her blood soaked bluejeans and t-shirt, Erin is wearing a light blue dress with white trim. It's the sort of gown that fails to meet human proportions in such a way that I can't help but wonder if it was designed for, and or by, a bird. With the ancient clothes, dark red lipstick, and heavy black eyeliner over her pale skin, Erin looks like the kind of portrait that would stare into your soul as you walk by. The kind with holes where the eyes should be.

Circling slowly around the room, like a well

dressed shark who found a way to speak the universal language of asshole, is Roman. He looks like he's quietly practicing his next villain monologue, or waiting for me to notice how menacing he is. Either way, I can't stop trying to shake the roof with my mind. There was nothing about telepathy in my pamphlet, but I'm hoping that I can shatter the glass with some, previously unknown, ghoul-tastic brain magic. I want a rainstorm of mirrored daggers to fall through the top of his head, and make a disco ball out of his brain.

"Honestly, I am completely fascinated by you," Roman says. "You could have left days ago. You could have run away, and to be perfectly honest, I might not have ever found you." His steps are slow and calculated. "But, you chose to stay. You chose to be here tonight, the two of you together, with me." He leans over the coffin and looks into my eyes. "You chose this," he says, "I need you to understand that much."

Yeah, you're right, I definitely wanted to be murdered by a werewolf and thrown into a coffin. It's just how I like to spend my Tuesdays.

"Of course, you didn't want to be killed, Cole," he says.

What the fuck.

"Who wants to die? All of that wondering about what comes next, what dreams may come, and all of that nonsense, right? Who needs it?" He smiles. "But now, you know exactly what is going to happen next, don't you? No need to concern yourself over planning, or dreading, or toiling."

Roman reaches a hand into the casket, grabs me by the shoulder, and lifts my entire body into the air. Without so much as a grunt, he carries me toward the chair beside Erin and drops me into a sitting position.

"You know," Roman says, pushing my cheeks into my teeth with his thumb and pointer finger, "you might not believe this, but I genuinely pity you. All of you." He releases my jaw and stands in front of the window, brushing his hand against his jacket. "You're forced to walk the earth as meaningless accidents, knowing that your entire existence can be attributed to little more than poor table etiquette. Walking happy meal leftovers, given life because I was too careless to use a napkin." He walks toward the coffin. "I try to make it work, I really do. Everyone and everything has a place, a job, a purpose." Roman raises his chin slightly and cocks his head as he speaks, "Coffin, please."

Two men enter the room, through a camouflaged mirrored doorway. The same men who put me in the box. They lift the coffin without a word and leave the room.

"See what I mean?" Roman says, circling back in our direction. "A perfect society, running like an immaculate, self contained organism. A living machine, unseen and unencumbered."

Perfect. Right. I don't think that word means what you think it means.

"But," Roman says, standing behind me, "like any machine, it cannot run efficiently with spare parts fucking everything up and killing my people."

At least he's good at analogies.

"I know, I know," Roman says. "If it is such a good system, why are you here? Why would I allow for such a seemingly incongruous piece to be thrown into my meticulously crafted puzzle?"

Why would you have an entire room filled with mirrors, you self obsessed talking dog.

"The truth is," he says, lowering his head, "this is where you belong. If you were buried with the rest, you might be foolish enough to retain some semblance of hope, but here I have spared you the indignity of such ignorance." Roman tilts his head and squints. "Do you understand what is about to happen to you? To

her?" He squeezes my shoulder. "Are you even listening?"

I'm listening to you enough to know that if words had a scent, this room would smell like bullshit. I probably should pay attention, but I really don't need another reason to want to kill you. The list is long enough. I'm already staring out the window, ignoring the sunset, and wishing I could spartan kick you through the glass right now.

"No matter. None of this is for you." His hot breath lingers on my ear as he turns away. "You, on the other hand. You deserve everything that is coming to you. I know you can hear me, Erin, so listen carefully. You are better off without him. Had he not interfered, you would be smiling, right now, thanking me for giving you such a wonderful gift. We would be celebrating your new life. Your evolution." He takes a step away from the chairs and straightens his tie. "I understand that it might be difficult to believe, especially now, after all of this but, I know that you will be happy here."

"You're insane," Erin whispers. "I'm not going to be your fucking slave."

"Of course you aren't," he says. "What would make you think that?" He walks around the chair and kneels

in front of her. The chain rattles beneath her wrist as he places his hand over hers. "There is nothing that I wouldn't give you," he says. "Nothing that I wouldn't do for you."

"You tried to kill me," she says. "You ruined my fucking life."

Roman sighs. He stretches his fingers, cracking his knuckles as he turns toward the window. "Normally, I have a speech prepared for this moment. It's never failed, in the past, to spark a sort of revelation in young wolves." He gestures as he speaks, pacing in front of us. "It's a simple, little something about releasing your true self by tearing your old self apart. Reassembling the pieces to form the true you. The better you. That sort of thing. It's quite good, if I may be so immodest, and it's taken me decades to perfect. But, you see, there's this whole section about setting you free from the shackles of your human form, and, given our circumstance, I just don't think it would be quite as effective."

Erin extends her middle finger as high as she can, pulling at the metal chain until the handcuff digs into her wrist with a quiet sizzle. The cuffs must be made of silver.

The smell of cooked flesh hits my nose and I'm

embarrassed by the fact that I want an Erin scented candle for my nightstand. I want a scratch and sniff book with pictures of her face and captions that read things like, "Caramel Mocha Macchiato," and "Creme Brulee". I want to live in that delicious pool of-- What am I doing? Shit. I'm starving.

Roman laughs. "You see? This is what I need, what we all need. It's why you're here."

"To tell you to go fuck yourself?"

"To remind us of what it means to be alive," he says. "Look at you. You're young, beautiful, of course you could stand to smile more, but otherwise you're practically flawless."

This guy is made of assholes.

"We don't die. Do you understand that? Can you imagine what that's like?" He places both hands over Erin's wrists as if to strap her to the chair. There's a stream of smoke as his palms cook against the handcuffs. "Everything there is to do, or say, or think has already been done, and said, and thought time and time again."

"You're really selling the whole werewolf experience."

Roman smiles. "It's true. When you live as long as I have, the simple interactions, the banal platitudes

that you take for granted in your every day life become forgotten relics. Feelings like surprise, joy, hope, excitement, they all become extinct. When all is said and done, what we are left with is true appreciation."

"Have you ever considered, you know, a greeting card or something?

"To be perfectly frank, your particular brand of novelty is something of an endangered species. Something to be cherished, embraced, admired."

"So, what does that make me, your fucking panda?"

"Oh, no, you don't understand," he laughs. "I'm not looking to build a zoo, humans find a way to do that all on their own. If anything, I'm looking for company outside of the cage."

"I've met your friends," Erin says. "I don't think we'd get along."

"I've become exhausted with them, myself." He lifts his hands from hers and paces in front of us as he speaks. "They're all so impossibly boring. They've been given the gift of eternity and use it to do little more than sleep and feed. They stare with their mouths wide, dead behind the eyes, waiting to be told what to do or say or feel. Not technically dead, but never truly alive, you know the type."

He's talking about me.

"But, you're not like that," he says. "You're here. You see what others can't." He snaps his fingers an inch from her face. "You're here because I know that you deserve to be here. Because you and I have a lot in common. This is where you belong. Somewhere you can be respected, admired, and loved."

Erin chuckles. "Seriously? Come on. Does anyone ever believe this crap?"

"Excuse me?"

"This isn't a part of some grand, brilliant scheme," she chuckles, "you're just a sloppy, entitled douche who can't clean up after himself."

"Oh, no," Roman says. "No, no, no. I have been alive long enough to know how to recognize my shortcomings. I know that I have my blind spots, just like anybody else. And yes, I admit, I have made some mistakes."

He's talking about me again.

"But, you, you were no mistake. He squeezes her hand. "You're strong. If you weren't, you wouldn't be here. Do you feel it? The strength. It has a life of its own. A scent. We're drawn to it. It brought me to you. Brought us together to--"

Erin leans forward and springs to her feet, taking

the chair with her as she sends the top of her head into Roman's nose. Blood drizzles from his nostril and I smell popcorn. Fresh, hot, movie theater-style popcorn, wet and sticky with butter.

My stomach starts to punch me from the inside. It beats at the walls of my chest, pushing its way past my lungs, shimmying all the way up my throat until it reaches my eyes, and the bright pinks and greens of the sunset explode into a deep sepia tone. In a flash, everything looks like a glowing gray-scale soap opera, except for Roman and Erin.

I don't know if it's because they're werewolves or if I've just reached some uncharted, supernatural level of bloodlustiness, but while everything else in the room is dim and colorless, they're shining like human-shaped lightsabers.

Roman grabs Erin by the shoulder with one hand and forces the chair to the floor, cracking the stone beneath her feet. "You are going to be here a while," he says. "I suggest you try to be more pleasant." He takes a handkerchief from his coat pocket and cleans the blood from his nose. "I am confident that, with a little time, you will come around. Eventually, you'll learn to appreciate your new life and all that being one of us has to offer."

An eternity of slavery, excessive body hair, the weird, wet dog smell, and that really cool way of speaking that makes you sound like a high school drama teacher. Sounds great.

"Until then, we'll have to take certain precautionary measures. Treat you with kid gloves, as it were." Roman pulls a key from his jacket, and stands between us. "That being said, we can't very well begin anew until we've addressed the obvious skeleton in the room."

That one wasn't even subtle.

"This could have been a much easier transition for everyone involved, but, since this particular skeleton seems intent on tap dancing between our respective closets, I have no choice but to improvise."

I hear the metal click and clank of the key unlocking one of the handcuffs.

"Still, despite the interference, I personally find it very fitting, if not poetic, for the two of you to experience this last moment together." He pulls Erin's hand closer to mine, then wraps the open cuff around my wrist. The tip of his finger begins to smoke as he tugs at the center of the ten inch silver chain, shaking our arms between the chairs like dancing puppets. "It really couldn't be more perfect."

Roman drops the chain causing our hands to fall between the chairs and my pinky finger to rest against hers.

"Here you are, two love birds, waiting for the moon to rise and crush you like the proverbial stone. It's so adorable. You're just so cute, I almost want to let you go."

Something tells me you won't.

"But, I won't."

Dammit.

He leans toward Erin, kisses her forehead, then walks toward the door. "Don't worry about the mess, I will have my people take care of everything in the morning," he says. "Kick off your shoes, slip into something more comfortable, and try to enjoy yourself. You are home, after all."

Stopping in the doorway, Roman turns and smiles. "You see how this works, ghouls? Everything happens for a reason. Everything and everyone has its place. And now, you know yours." He closes the door, leaving Erin and I alone in the room.

As the sun fades into thin strips of light over the horizon, each part of my body prepares to race toward Erin's flesh. There's a warmth that begins in my hands, a sort of pulsating sensation from the

center of my palms, vibrating outwardly in waves. It runs up my arm, spills into my chest, and fills my entire body until the hunger is dripping from my pores. My teeth, lips, fingers, eyes, and nose are all outstretched in the ready-set position, waiting for the moon to rise as if it were a gunshot, inviting them toward the finish line.

"Cole," Erin whispers, "can you hear me? Can you move?"

It's as if my eyes are tethered by rubber bands. I stretch and pull and fight against the tension, but my pupils seem to snap back into place.

"This isn't your fault," she says. "I mean, it's a little bit your fault, but still. Sorry we couldn't make it work. Not just this whole thing, but, you know, with everything. I'm sorry about us." She coughs softly. "And, um, I'm sorry if I accidentally eat you." The corner of her mouth lifts into a half smile.

The handcuff rattles between us as my fingers begin to wake.

"Cole?" she says, working her fingers between mine. "I can feel it. I think it's happening." She squeezes my hand as she coughs blood into her shoulder. "I'm scared. It hurts. My chest. It fucking hurts. I can't--" She begins to gasp as if she's

choking on her own breath. Tears fill her eyes and she coughs heavily, leaning forward and heaving until she falls to the floor, pulling me from my chair. As she collapses into a fetal position, I nosedive into the dark stone beside her. Take that, teeth.

Erin's nails begin to grow until the chipped and faded blue polish is little more than a tattooed freckle across the tips of her sharpened, yellow claws, and her skin is hanging loose like an old banana peel around each finger. Her joints crack as her limbs expand, breaking the skin, and sending the scent of freshly baked bread into the air. I should be running away. I should be sweeping Erin off of her feet and carrying her to safety, but the smell of soft pretzel hits me like a bullet through my nasal cavity, and I know that I'm no longer in control. The race is on.

My hand takes the lead out of the gate, spider-crawling toward Erin's elongated neck with a twitchy ferocity. Charging forward and dripping with hunger, my teeth do what they can to close the gap as the scent of salty pretzel meat hits my nose like an adrenaline shot to my heart. With my fingers and mouth racing neck and neck, I stare toward the finish line, watching Erin's body shudder uncontrollably as the

wolf huffs and puffs and blows her body apart.

One by one, her shoulder blades tear through her dress as her muscles sharpen and enlarge. Boils cover her limbs like deep red geysers, bubbling over her thin skin as it stretches to conform to a violently shifting bone structure. Tufts of fur burst and bloom from each of her open wounds, thick with blood, and new muscle, upgrading my meal to Super-size for no additional cost. Erin continues to scream, clawing at her exposed flesh, trying to turn herself inside out like some kind of half wolf, half human, turducken.

Teeth spill from Erin's mouth, and tap across the stone like dice as over-grown canine replacements erupt from her receding gum line. There's a deep echo in her scream, a bass note of pain that bounces from wall to wall as her voice transitions into a full-blown beast howl. My brain has been too distracted by the promise of baked goods to really participate in the race, but as I get closer, the sight of Erin's newly formed, jagged monster mouth awakens something in my thought box and suddenly, I'm able to wiggle my toes.

Kicking against the stone floor, and pushing upward, I do my best to redirect my mouth. Instead of sprinting past my fingers and burying themselves deep

into the finish line of Erin's clavicle, my teeth fall hard onto my wrist and immediately begin to chomp and chew. The rough, spongy zombie meat has a familiar, and unfortunately delicious flavor. It isn't exactly hot, sticky pretzel bread, but my teeth don't seem to mind as the peanut buttery flesh warms my taste buds.

As I swallow, the color comes flooding back into the room, but as I look around, I wish that it hadn't. There is a subtlety to the gray-scale ghoul haze. Everything is rich in texture, but washed out in a way that makes the entire world look like an artsy student film. In color, without the Photoshopped, Citizen Kane filter, this room looks like it just took a shotgun blast to the face. Pieces of Erin are everywhere, splattered and dripping down the mirrored walls, pooling across the floor, and seeping through the cracks in the stone. All but a faint trace of her eye color has been absorbed or destroyed by the creature in front of me.

The wolf, itself, is the stuff of nightmares. It's a beast unlike anything I've ever seen. It has all of the usual, big bad wolf features, with the sort of eyes, ears, and teeth made for eating grannies and little girls with red cloaks, but this isn't something that belongs in a children's bedtime story. It's not

just a big dog, or a scary, feral forest animal, this is a fucking werewolf. As the creature thrashes and snarls through the final stage of the transformation, the endless reflection in the wall looks like a gateway to hell. I need to get out of here, now.

The wolf is already watching me, drooling and licking its lips while it waits for its skin to settle. At this point, I'm like a very doomed mouse trapped in a cage with a shedding snake.

With my feet firmly planted, I wrap my fingers around my wrist, and pull as hard as I can. The chain rattles between us and the pressure against the tightening silver cuff makes the creature roar. It's the sort of sounds that I've only ever heard in movies about rampaging dinosaurs.

"Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit." This is going to suck.

As far as I'm aware, there are exactly three ways to break out of handcuffs. First of all, the best, easiest, and obviously preferred method would be to use a key. The second, less convenient but still entirely acceptable way is, of course, picking the lock. Being that I'm short on time and have literally none of the skills or tools required for the first two methods, I'm forced to settle for the third option.

Keeping my eyes on the wolf, I press my hand flat against the floor and stomp the heel of my shoe into my thumb until it looks like chewed bubble gum.

Before I have the chance to slip the cuff off of my wrist, the wolf pounds its fists into the stone floor in front of me. It bears its teeth and as the muscles in the creature's arms continue to enlarge, the handcuff around its wrist pops open and falls to the floor at my feet.

"Come on!" I yell.

Walking backwards toward the door, I wrap the metal chain around my good hand and hold the cuffs together in my fist like make-shift brass knuckles. "Good werewolf," I say, stepping softly. "Nice werewolf. Just stay there and--"

Lifting itself onto its hind legs, the wolf spreads its arms and roars.

"Shit!" I throw my back against the door.

The wolf snarls and then stares into me. Its eyes are black, wet orbs, swallowing all of the light in the world. There's nothing left of Erin.

"I'm sorry," I say, searching for the doorknob behind my back. "I'll come back for you."

The wolf bears its teeth, lowering its front claws to the floor as I twist the metal knob. I don't know

what's waiting for me on the other side of this door. For all I know, Roman will be standing there with a fork and knife, ready to finish his leftovers, but it doesn't matter. This is what I need to do. I have to finish this.

Long, black talons screech across the stone, spreading its muscular, mangled limbs into a sprinting formation. I open the door, and jump backwards into the darkness.

She roars.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

There's an immediate crash as I pull the door closed. It's the sound of Erin's wolf doing its best impression of a battering ram. Some incomprehensible half-yelped curse word springs from my lips as I leap backwards into something large and unmovable. My eyes close instinctively, and I swing my hand in front of my face like I'm swatting at a bee. I'm a veritable killing machine, as long as the thing threatening me is imaginary and/or fly-sized.

When I open my eyes, I'm standing in an empty hallway with my hand still hovering in the "Wax On" position. An unblemished statue of an armor clad knight is standing beside a door, judging me for the unprovoked attack.

"Sorry," I whisper.

As the wolf continues to beat against the door, its roar and the clang of broken glass echo through the corridor, melting into a din of similar chaotic sounds coming from various doors along the wall. I don't see speakers anywhere, but all of the screaming,

howling, and splashing seems to be in time with the pulsating rhythm of some obnoxious music bleeding in from the ceiling. If Mozart and Rob Zombie ran a haunted house together, this would be its soundtrack. It isn't exactly my kind of music, but, thankfully, it's loud enough to hide my haphazard karate moves.

Everything about this place makes me feel like I'm about to be stabbed by a glove full of finger knives. Behind me, the hallway seems to go on forever. Doors, statues, and darkness, but nothing else. In the other direction, light from a distant room is leaking into the corridor, illuminating the red carpet in front of me like a giant tongue. These are my choices. Utter darkness or the mouth of certain doom. Perfect.

I can't help but to crouch as I walk through the hallway toward the light. I must be upstairs. The carpeting helps to mute the noise, but even tip-toed steps fall heavy against the hollow floor. I probably look like an idiot, right now. I know that it doesn't actually make me invisible or anything, but there's something about crouching that makes me feel like a ninja, or like I'm prepared to lion-pounce if anything comes out of one of these doors.

There are eight doors along the wall, four rooms on either side. The sounds from within are a playlist

of various torture scenes as I pass. One is filled with a screaming human voice, the next with sobbing, another with a howling, unsettling cackle. It's like following the time-line of a toddler's lunch, except instead of drumming in a messy pool of uh-oh-Spaghettios, these things are splashing in human remains. This is sick. Roman isn't trying to usher in some new era of youthful immortals, he's housebreaking werewolves.

At the end of the corridor, the floor opens into a stretch of balcony with staircases bookending either side. Compared to the hallway of horrors, this is a whole new world. From here, the music is faded enough to create a sort of ambiance that reminds me of every art museum I've ever visited. There's a white, marble banister tracing the perimeter of the floor and steps, overlooking a large, colorful room. The entire front wall of the house is made of glass. It looks the way the Sistine Chapel might have looked if Michelangelo read one too many Anne Rice novels. Large windows stained and shaped to look like saints and sinners. Angels and demons. Men and monsters dancing around the full moon. It's the life cycle of a werewolf, from bite to rebirth and back again.

Keeping low to the ground, I inch toward the

banister until a faint sound of conversation can be heard over the music. Through the marble pillars, I see seven people sitting around a dining room table. It's a long, red-clothed rectangle with immaculately white plates spread along either side like well brushed teeth waiting to devour whatever is set before them.

At the head of the table, Roman sits with his hands folded, watching his guests as they laugh and sip their drinks. There are three men to his left, the same well dressed men who pulled Erin and I from the car earlier, and three women to his right, all clinging their wine glasses and smiling. Between them, shackled to the center of the table is a naked, living, human being. Gagged, with his arms and legs chained in place, the man can hardly even move his head while the guests continue to talk casually as if he were a roasted pig or a Thanksgiving turkey.

Toasting across the shackled man with their frilly, absurdly shaped dresses, and sparkling white gloves, the women look like psychopathic princesses. A brunette woman in a yellow dress, who looks a lot like Belle from Beauty and the Beast, pats the naked man on the stomach and laughs. Across from her, a bald man in a dark blue, velvet suit leans into the table and

grunts in her direction until she pulls her hand away.

"Collect yourself, Mr. Reynard," Roman says. "We have a long night ahead of us."

The bald man scowls and sits back in his chair as the guests laugh and return to their conversation. They smile and wave their wine glasses as they speak, toasting one another and joking politely, but the table seems to be shaking beneath their elbows. Despite the group's expensive clothes, posh demeanor, and utter disregard for the naked man on the table, something is bothering them. Something is wrong. The polished, white china plates move subtly over the red cloth, glasses tip and spill, but the guests don't seem to acknowledge any of it. It's as if their collective knees are trembling beneath the table. They're all dancing in their chairs, moving from side to side, crossing and uncrossing their legs as if they have to pee.

A woman in an off-white gown runs a finger along the leg of their centerpiece, smiling at the bald man across from her. Mr. Reynard squeezes the arms of his chair. His eyes close as he shakes his head through rapid sharp twitches and he begins to groan in short bursts.

"Mr. Reynard," Roman says. "You're better than

this. You're setting a rather poor example for some of our younger guests."

The woman chuckles and slides her fingers away from the naked man. Her dark, curly hair shakes as she raises a gloved hand to her lips and bursts into laughter. In a singular explosion of energy, the bald man growls and launches his chair behind him as he pushes himself into a standing position.

Roman wipes a hand across his face like a flustered parent. "Miss Dacosta," he says, "please try not to provoke the other guests." She coughs away her laughter, but continues to smile as Roman turns his attention to the angry bald man. "Have a seat, Mr. Reynard."

Baldy seems to stiffen his body. Even from this distance, I can see the veins protruding along his neck.

"Come on, lighten up," the man beside Reynard raises his glass. "She didn't mean anything by it. Just having a little fun. Sit, drink. This is a celebration. There's no need for--"

"Mr. Davis, I appreciate your intention," Roman says, "but, I assure you, Mr. Reynard is more than capable of making his own decisions. Isn't that right, Mr. Reynard?"

The bald man slowly lowers his shoulders as if to crouch into a sitting position. Across from him, Miss Dacosta begins to walk her fingers along the table toward the naked man once again. She's definitely taunting Baldy on purpose. Her fingers kick along the man's hip until she reaches his abdomen. Never taking her eyes off of Reynard, she uses her index finger to draw invisible circles around the man's bellybutton.

With a room shaking scream, Reynard throws himself forward and it looks as if his skeleton is trying to escape from his skin. There's a chunk laden trail of shed human flakes as the bald man jumps, transforms mid-air, and lands on the table, straddling the living centerpiece. I can't help but cover my eyes when the wolf takes its first bite. There's a muffled scream, and then the sound of a dog lapping up wet kibble.

"I am seriously disappointed," Roman says.

I lean toward the banister to get a better look. The burly wolf's muscles flex and bubble as it digs its snout into the ribcage of the centerpiece. Roman has his hands steepled near his chin as if he's about to pray. He taps his pointer fingers against his lips as he speaks. "I thought for sure that you would be one of the last to succumb."

The wolf turns its bald head enough to watch Roman

as it eats.

"But, I am not above admitting when I am wrong. And wow. I. Was. Wrong." He drums on the table cloth in front of him, then claps his hands together. "You know that I can be a forgiving man," he says, "but, come on. This? This degree of weakness, this utter lack of will power, wow. Astonishing. It's a testament not only to your ineptitude, but to your inexhaustible selfishness. I never really enjoyed your company, Mr. Reynard, and to be perfectly honest, I'm glad that you decided to make this easy for us all, but still. I am flabbergasted."

The wolf growls.

Roman looks to the well groomed man on his left. "Mr. Dancing, would you mind?" He waves his hand in a sweeping gesture as if to say, "wrap it up" or "take out the trash".

Mr. Dancing's long, slicked back, white hair hardly moves as he nods and stands from his chair. He reaches into his suit and pulls a gun from somewhere in his jacket.

A red mist showers the white dinner plates as the wolf turns, arches its back and snarls. The creature pulls its front claws from the dead man's shoulders as if it were unsheathing knives. The white haired man

doesn't seem concerned. He very slowly and steadily aims the gun with an expression that seems more annoyed than anything else.

Bearing its teeth, the wolf stretches its arms toward Mr. Dancing and lunges. Two explosions sound off from the gun, causing the top of Mr. Reynard's head to pop like a red balloon, painting the rest of the white plates across the table. The guests jump in their seats, but it only takes a second for their startled awe to turn into an amused round of applause as the wolf falls to the table and shrivels into another naked human centerpiece.

Miss Dacosta swipes a bead of blood from Reynard's face and brings it to her lips.

"Your sense of humor is growing on me, Miss Dacosta," Roman says.

Behind me, a young man's voice yells from the corridor. With the rest of the rooms settling into a muted grumble of well fed beasts, the confused human voice becomes more noticeable as he calls for help. "Hello? Hello? Is anyone-- Oh my god. Help me! Help me!"

"Mr. Dancing," Roman says, lifting his wine glass, "you are an absolute treasure, and I hate to continue to be a nuisance, but would you mind?"

The white haired man nods and begins to walk toward the staircase.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Keeping low, I hurry toward the hall, and as I round the corner, light from one of the rooms pours into the corridor. Bloody fingers grip the door frame as a blond haired, twenty-something year old naked man steps into the hall. "No, no, no, no, no," I whisper. "Get in there. Go. Hurry." He doesn't have time to argue. I push him through the doorway and close the door behind us. The room is identical to Erin's, mirrored walls, window, abandoned human tissue, and all.

"What the hell?" he says, covering himself as best he can with tattered shirt scraps.

"Keep yelling for help," I say. "Just yell, scream, whatever."

"What? Where am I? Who are you? What happened to your face?"

"We don't have time, just yell." I position myself beside the door, unwrapping the metal chain from my fist.

"Why am I naked? What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything, I'm here to help."

"What the hell is going on? Whose blood is that?"

Is that my blood? What is this? What's happening?"

"Hey, hey. Stay focused." I rattle the handcuffs to get his attention.

"What is that?" he asks, gesturing at the floor.

"You were a werewolf, now you're not, now shut up and start screaming."

The man looks at the bloodied walls, the pile of flesh on the floor, his torn clothes, then back at me. "You're insane. There's no such thing as werewolves."

"Seriously? Fine." I hold a handcuff in each of my fists and let a foot of the silver chain dangle freely between my hands. "Oh no, oh no," I yell. "I was a werewolf and now I'm not. Oh boy, this sure is a nightmare."

"What are you doing?" The man asks. I wave toward the wall and he takes a few steps backwards.

"The agony," I yell into the door. "The horror. The horror. Help help help."

The door swings open and Mr. Dancing raises his gun as he enters. With his eyes singularly focused on the man in the corner, he doesn't even notice that I'm in the room until I take a step forward. With the silver chain taught between my fists, I throw my arms over Dancing's head. His skin whistles with a searing pop as my knees push into his back and I pull the

chain tight against his Adam's apple. He kicks backwards, crushing me between his suit and the wall.

"Holy shit!" the naked man yells.

I can feel Mr. Dancing's bones rearranging beneath my fists. He begins to transform, bucking and gnashing, tossing bits of skin and cloth around the room as he tries to shake me from his shoulders like a pissed off bull. His head and chest become engorged, inflating on either side of his neck with supernatural moon muscle, but the silver chain continues to burn into his throat, keeping it thin, and charred, and frail. Fighting to release a hoarse growl, the wolf turns toward the man in the corner.

"No, no, no, no, no," the man cries. "Oh my god."

With slow, laborious steps the creature lurches toward the naked man. Its claws raise high enough to scrape the mirrored ceiling as it roars, still trying to throw me from its back. I flatten my feet between the wolf's shoulder blades, hold my hands together for a better grip, and stand straight up.

The silver chain rips through the wolf's neck, sending red chunks toward the ceiling like dental floss flicking dislodged food onto a bathroom mirror. I jump to the stone floor as the beast's body collapses and its head rolls toward the corner of the

room.

"What the hell was that?" the man yells, staring at the white-haired human head resting at his feet.

"Proof that you owe me an apology." I lift the silver gun from the pile of cloth on the floor. I have no idea how to check the bullets in this thing. For all I know, a little flag with the word "Bang" could pop out the next time it's fired.

"I'm getting out of here," the man says, stepping around the head.

"Not yet." I block his path. "There are more of them."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"I don't know. Make a toga out of this guy's suit scraps and stay here." I pull the door open. "Just trust me, you want to stay in here."

With the silver cuffs in my left hand and the gun in my right, I head toward the stairs. I'm crouching, of course, and I can feel the statue of the knight judging me as I pass. I can already hear Roman. He's lecturing his guests. Pontificating sternly while his audience applauds between sentences. It's as if he's speaking a made up language that's equal parts self-help guru, cult leader, and football coach.

Through the banister, I watch as he circles the

table, touching their shoulders and patting their heads. He's talking about impulses and willpower. Promising the starved monsters that their patience will be rewarded. He's lecturing about the hierarchy of civilization, and how it is their job to strike a balance. "To establish and maintain a perfect system." It's a lot like a grenade trying to teach world peace to a group of shotguns.

"After tonight," he says, "you will have earned your place at my side."

The gun feels heavy in my hand as I extend my arm through the banister.

"This isn't a family, or a tribe," he says, stopping behind the red haired woman at the end of the table. She looks like the moody high school version of Jessica Rabbit. He pats her head as he speaks. "We aren't a pack of animals. We are a living testament of the strength of will. Of choice. Of evolution." Roman stands at the edge of the table, staring over his guests. "You are here because you are strong. Each of you has been selected to be--"

The explosion in my hand seems to crack the air around my fist like a bolt of lightening, shaking my entire body. One of the dinner plates bursts into tiny white shards, and the entire dinner party looks

directly at me. Shit. I missed.

Roman begins to clap. "I'm almost imp--"

I stand to get a better view and squeeze the trigger, aiming the gun directly between his teeth. The bullet flies wide, decapitating a statue beside the dinner table. I fire again, and the force is enough to tear the flesh from my wrist. The gun flips over the banister and falls beside the table below, taking my entire hand with it. Roman grabs his thigh and growls as smoke rises from between his fingers. I got him.

"Yes!" I yell.

"Bring me his heart," he says. "You can have the rest."

"Crap."

The four remaining guests push their chairs from the table, stand in unison, and look in my direction. With their soulless eyes and elegant attire, they kind of look the way characters from a Jane Austen novel might look, if they were moonbeasts from hell instead of sophisticated ladies or arrogant noblemen.

"Great," I say, stepping away from the banister.

"Just great."

Splitting into groups of two, Roman's guests climb the stairs on either side of me. Belle and Mr. Davis

are on my right, Miss Dacosta and Jessica Rabbit are on my left. All of them are bearing their teeth and transforming slowly as if by will alone. Step by step, the jewelry and clothing falls from their bodies as their limbs begin to shift and stretch.

 Holding one of the silver cuffs in my fist, I let the chain dangle by my side as I step backwards toward the hall. I don't know what to do. I could jump over the banister, and try to land on Roman. If I actually pulled it off, it would be an epic Swan Dive of Doom, and this would all be over. Then again, I don't weight much, and I'm pretty sure he would just open his mouth and swallow me whole. At best, I'd bruise his ego. I could swing the cuffs in front of me like a propeller, and maybe mow down one or two of these things before being eaten. It's not a perfect plan, but my options are limited.

 The woman in red kneels into a crawling position, snarling and tossing her long hair from side to side. As she nears the top of the stairs, Jessica Rabbit's lips curl into a bright white grin. A bloody snout bursts from beneath her skin, tearing through her smile as wolf teeth blossom from her face like a terrifying, man-eating flower. To my left, Mr. Davis falls to the floor as he reaches the balcony. He

crawls along the red carpet leaving a snail-trail of flesh in his wake as hair-laden muscles break through his skin.

I back into the hall slowly, hoping to put some distance between myself and the Jane Austen Wolf Club. I should just run, but there's something about Jessica Rabbit's teeth that make it impossible to turn around. It's like staring into a bright white bug zapper made of deathblades. If I turn my back to her, I'm helpless. Mincemeat. Not that my front is doing a whole lot to protect me, at the moment. But, still.

As I reach the statue of the knight, all four wolves are standing in the mouth of the corridor, shaking the remnants of human from their fur. This is too much. The knight's gauntlet clad fist pokes me in the kidney as I pass, and I notice that its hands are clasped around a sword. It's a loose, silver blade, sharp and reflective, about as long as my leg. Where have you been all my life?

The knight's judgmental eyes seem to say, "I tried to tell you earlier, stupid."

Stepping on the base of the statue, I try to pry the sword from the knight's grip, but it's no use. It's sculpted in place. The armored man's stone fists are tightly cemented around the handle of the blade,

and I feel like every idiot who tried to take the sword from the stone before Arthur showed up. It's just not going to happen. A chorus of broken snarls catches my ear. I shouldn't have taken my eyes off of the wolves.

My hand is still wrapped around the handle of the sword when the red blur hits me from the side like a rocket made of teeth and claws. Jessica Rabbit tackles me to the floor but, as my back hits the carpet, the stone knight collapses over us. The surprise of the impact is enough to knock the creature to the floor beside me. She whimpers as an avalanche of dust and stone crumbles over us, releasing the sword into my hand.

I roll to my right, and stand with the blade in my fist as the wolf collects itself. In the mouth of the hall, the rest of the wolves are foaming at the teeth, drooling and snarling. They begin to inch forward, impatiently, but Jessica turns and roars in their direction as if to say, "wait your turn" or "he's mine". She turns back to me, twists her neck to shake the rubble from her fur, and growls quietly. With that, all four of the creatures begin to move forward in unison.

Apparently, I don't speak werewolf.

Screaming and thrusting with all of the force I can manage with one hand, I plunge the sword into the beast's chest. She howls wildly, throwing her body in every direction like a deflating balloon sputtering through the air. Falling to one knee, she pulls on the handle of the sword, desperately trying to escape. I've seen what a simple silver chain can do to these things. A sword like that, stuck directly into her heart, must be like a time bomb of silver waiting to pulverize her from within. This should be pretty gross.

I turn to run, hoping to hear an earthshaking, werewolf obliterating explosion behind me, but there's only a soft groan. As I reach the end of the hall, I look back and see Jessica Rabbit standing on her hind legs, heavy with sweat and matted with blood, but otherwise completely fine. With a flick of her wrist, the wolf drops the sword to the carpet. She groans through a heavy snort and looks directly at me.

Crap. It wasn't silver. The freaking sword wasn't silver.

Jessica's deep roar rattles through the hall as she charges forward, leading the pack of wolves. That bastard knight betrayed me. If I live through this, I'm going to glue him back together just so I can smash him with a hammer.

As I sprint through the hall, I pass several doors and statues. I hear a new hodgepodge of terrified human voices and howling wolves. One of the doors ahead of me begins to open, and I see the bright green eyes of a twenty-something year old woman peek timidly through the crack.

"Close the door! Close the door!" I yell as I pass. Thankfully, she listens.

The wolves crash into the corner behind me. They leap frog over one another, clawing their way across the walls and ceiling, knocking over statues and destroying everything in their path. "If you can hear me," I yell, "stay where you are. Do not leave your room." As I reach the end of the hall, a door opens behind me. "No," I yell over my shoulder.

It's too late. Jessica pushes her way through the door, and there's a desperate plea for mercy followed by a loud crunch.

There's only one way to go. This place is just a series of right turns. It's a big box. A cage. A kennel. Ahead, I see the other side of the balcony. Roman is at the top of the staircase, staring forward, and waiting patiently for his pets to set my heart at his feet. He hasn't transformed. He isn't even sweating. He's just watching me with narrowed eyes,

like an archer, focused on his target, completely unperturbed by the world around him.

The thunderous crash of stampeding wolves shakes the floor behind me. They're getting closer. I'm running as fast as I can, but they have me trapped between a rock and a hard place. As usual, my choices are simple: certain death, or certain death.

I push the handcuffs open with my thumb and hold them in my fist so that the silver teeth are protruding on either side of my hand. When I was a kid, I would do the same thing with plastic cuffs, and pretend that I was Wolverine. I've had a lot of practice in my backyard Danger Room, preparing for just such an occasion. Then again, the imaginary bad guys were always easily defeated by the time the streetlights came on and dinner was ready.

Raising my clawed fist, I scream in a berserker rage as I reach Roman. This is it. I jump into the air and throw every bit of hatred I have toward his smug face and it's as if the cuffs are on fire. They're heat-seeking, anti-werewolf missiles, ready to burn their way through his nasal cavity. As my silver claws approach his lips, he takes a step to the right, and before I can redirect my arm, something crashes against my spine hard enough to knock me off of my

feet.

I've fallen down the stairs a few times in my life. The sort of shoes I tend to wear, the perpetually on clearance because nobody else wants to look like a toddler, slip-ons, create about as much friction as a loose bar of soap or a cartoon banana peel. It's embarrassing, but never really a big deal. I've never broken a bone or anything. This, on the other hand. This is my Swan Dive of Doom, except, instead of landing on Roman and saving the day, I land on step after step, smacking my face, then my back, then my stomach, then my back. When I finally stop flipping, my feet are still on the stairs with my shoulders pinned to the floor, and I'm staring up at the stained-glass wall.

I see the carefully cut and painted renditions of the lunar cycle. The bite, the full moon, the transformation. What I don't see are caskets. I don't see the funerals. The crying parents. The destroyed lives. It's like a crayon scribbled portrait of the first Thanksgiving, leaving out all of the genocide. Lying on my back, beneath this ridiculous mural of condescending bullshit, I've never wanted anything as much as I want to watch the moon explode.

Walking slowly down the stairs, draped in loose,

tattered pieces of her off-white dress is the wolf who launched me into the air, Miss Dacosta. Her steps are delicate and purposeful. She's watching me, knowing that I'm helpless. Knowing that I failed. When she reaches my feet, there's a rumbling hiss from her throat. Saliva drips from her teeth and its warmth soaks through my pant leg. As her steaming breath moistens the air around my face, she sees me on my back and knows that it means this is the end. She knows that this is ghoulspeak for, "I give up".

The wolf and I lock eyes and as our bodies move together it's as if we're doing some sort of synchronized interpretive dance. The message of her movement isn't exactly subtle, she wants to devour my body and pick her teeth with my rib cage. My movements aren't exactly balletic or full of subtext but they get the point across.

With the kind of yell you learn watching movies about warriors, or professional tennis matches, I jam my make-shift claws into both of the wolf's eyes. Her face immediately boils above her nose, gushing a hot stream of yellows, whites, and reds. She flings her body backwards, falling against the stairs, and I push myself to my feet. Apparently, she doesn't speak ghoulspeak.

"You've got to be kidding me," Roman says, looking

down from the balcony. "Well, go on." He flutters his hand as if he's shoeing a fly, and the remaining three wolves bound over one another, taking the stairs with ease.

"Shit!" I run toward the dinner table.

Up close, the bodies in the center of the table are revolting. Before being shot, the bald wolf tore through the better part of this guy's face and chest. What's left is like a human bread bowl, but instead of melted delicious cheeses, the hole in the man's torso is filled with shredded, coppery, fecal-scented flesh. Beyond the table, lying on the floor among the abandoned skin and clothes of Baldy, I see my hand. It's still intact and, more importantly, it's still holding the gun.

At the foot of the staircase, the wolves pass by Miss Dacosta. Still huffing and grunting, the blind wolf raises her snout to the air and falls in line with the others. They spread themselves out as if to avoid another single-file Scooby Doo chase. They want to get this over with. One of the creatures, wearing a fragmented yellow ball gown, leaps to my right side, blocking my path around the table. It's Belle, except now she looks more like the Beast in a pretty dress. Jessica Rabbit snarls from my left, while the others

approach slowly from the center, forcing my back against the table.

Grabbing the edge of the red cloth, I kick my legs up and over the decaying bodies and land on the other side with a splash. The floor is still slick with Baldy's body juices, and the gun is only a few feet away, so I dive. As I slide across the floor, I hear a snarl follow me over the table. Sharp claws land on the blood soaked stone with a moist ting.

Lifting the gun, I shake my severed hand from the grip, grab the trigger, turn, and shoot.

Mr. Davis is less than a foot away from the smoking barrel. His mouth is wide, and his teeth are trembling as the bullet lodges itself into his shoulder like a black hole of acid, melting through muscle and bone. Crashing backwards, the wolf's wheezing, panicked whimper is enough to make the others take a step back. He flops like a beached fish across the table and lands beside the other wolves. His arm continues to bubble and blister, stretching at the shoulder joint until it eventually falls to the floor and shrivels into a thin, lifeless human arm.

I lift the gun and wave it back and forth, trying to keep my hand from shaking. With the table dividing us, the wolves move across one another while keeping

their eyes on me and slowly inching forward. They thrust their bodies, one by one, as if testing the invisible barrier created by the threat of a silver bullet breakfast. As much as they want my heart, as much as they want to appease their pompous wolf god by collecting his trophy, they still don't want to be shot in the face.

I point the gun at Bellewolf, and the others get really brave, really fast. The blinded wolf slams its claws against the table and roars wildly, waving her teeth in every direction.

"Holy shit!"

I pull the trigger as I stumble backwards. There's an echoed boom, and half of Miss Dacosta's face falls to the table. I don't know how many bullets I have left, but I need to save one for Roman.

I wave the revolver around the room, swinging my hand in a semicircle as if I'm holding a torch. The wolves retreat inch by inch as the barrel points in their direction, but it's only temporary. When I aim to the left, the wolves on the right move forward, when I point right, the wolves on the left begin to charge. There are too many of them.

Mr. Davis stiffens his body. He lowers his head and watches me as I side step around the table. He's

still huffing and puffing. His right shoulder is still smoking from being shot, and the smoldering hole is only getting worse. The wolf's claws shake as his breathing becomes more erratic. He's about to lunge. As soon as I aim the gun toward Mr. Davis, Jessica Rabbit leaps into the air, and I have no choice but to squeeze the trigger.

The bullet hits her in the jaw, and most of her teeth fly apart like bowling pins, but it doesn't slow her down. She jumps again, and I fire again. This time the bullet dances through her eye socket and comes out the other side. Her body falls to the floor in front of the three wolves and seems to wilt into a human shape.

As I fix my aim back on Mr. Davis, Belle and Miss Dacosta begin to move like serpents. They're criss crossing one another, stepping back and forth and side to side as if they're trying to confuse me, and it's working. I don't know what to do. My back is already against the stairwell, and the wolves seem to know something that I don't. They're not afraid anymore. They're all moving forward slowly as if they can smell the amount of silver left in the chamber. Which, apparently, isn't enough.

I squeeze the trigger, aiming for Belle's snout,

but I miss. The three wolves seem to smile as they lower their bodies enough to be on all fours. I pull the trigger again, but there's only a click. Click. Click. Shit.

"So," I say, feeling my back against the staircase, "awkward..."

The three beasts growl into the air, confidently shaking their heads back and forth. They snarl and grunt at one another like siblings arguing over who gets to bring dad his beer. Or, in this case, my heart.

As they discuss, there's suddenly an odd glow around them. They're brighter and more clear than they have been. For a second, I can see everything so perfectly. In this new light, I can see the tiny blood particulates sliding down their furry faces, the pulsating veins in the naked parts of their arms and legs pumping steadily. I can even see something almost human in their eyes. But, beyond all of that, beyond the feral, supernatural ferocity, and the starved, blood fiending wolf faces, I see that the stained-glass full moon is shining over us like a pale faced god. The wolves stop their growling and begin to approach in unison.

"Wait, guys, ladies, gentleman, everyone just wait one second," I hold the gun between us as I talk. They

stop for a second. "I might be out of bullets but, uh--"

The light surrounding the wolves spreads throughout the room as two bright orbs form in the center of the glass moon above. Lifting onto their hind legs, the wolves spread their arms and belt out a series of victorious roars.

"I know something you don't know."

A large, white work van crashes through the center of the moon, showering the entire room in fragments of painted glass. The words "Pavel's Pets" fly by in a blur as the van belly flops onto the wolves, smashing all three into the floor. The distorted, beastly bodies flip and grind between wheel and stone until the van crashes into the dinner table.

I can hear mumbling coming from the driver seat as the engine stops. Bellewolf and the gang are on the floor, crawling out from between the tires, snapping their bones back into place, and deciding which leg belongs to whom. They're hurt, but not enough to stop them.

The driver side door opens, but I can't see what's going on from here. I'm at the base of the stairs, admiring the blue "Pavel's Pets" logo and watching as the wolves dust off their fur. Belle pulls herself out

from beneath the bumper, looks up from her army crawl, and snarls as a deep, soulful voice fills the room.

Shaking the speakers enough to rock the van, that song from Dirty Dancing blasts its way through this blood washed house of death, and for a second, everything is completely still. The beasts look more confused than angry as a large, red-bearded man walks from around the van, singing about having the time of his life. Even with his jaw completely wrapped in duct tape, Terry still manages to perfectly lip sync every word into his yellow pickax.

As the opening verse of the song comes to an end, a very 80s rhythm kicks in and Terry drops the sharp end of his ax into Belle's chest. The wolf howls as he rests his elbow on the handle, shifting all of his weight over the blade. Smoke rises from her searing torso as he speaks. "Hey."

"Hey."

"I guess my invitation got lost in the mail." He digs through his fanny pack pocket, lifts a silver stake from the pouch, and tosses it to me with a half-smile.

I try to catch it but with the gun in my hand, I fumble the stake between my stump and my chest until it eventually falls to the floor.

"I like what you've done with your hand," he says. "Have you thought about getting a hook, or like a chainsaw, or a--"

"Is that supposed to be a joke?" The wolves are nearly done licking their wounds, we don't have time for this. I drop the gun and lift the stake from the floor. "You have no idea what I've been through."

"Alright," he says. "I know you're probably still a little upset. Things didn't really work out the way I thought."

"You don't say." I lift my nonexistent middle finger as high as I can.

"I'm sorry." His smirk collapses into a sincere expression. "I shouldn't have called him. You guys were right to do what you did, and I'm sorry. But still," his eyes nearly disappear behind the widest smile I've ever seen, "you have to admit, it was pretty incredible."

"Losing my hand and being chased by a pack of monsters?"

"No," he says, lifting his pickaxe from the wolf sludge. "That entrance. How awesome was that?"

I want to slap him in the face with the stake but he has a point, and he did just kind of save my life. "It was alright," I tell him, "you could have topped

it off with a one-liner or something, but your timing was impeccable."

"Yeah," he says, shaking the goo from his axe, "We've been out there for twenty minutes, waiting for the right moment."

"You're an asshole." I laugh. "Wait, we?"

"Hey," Terry says, knocking on the van with his pick axe. "Don't be rude." The back of the van begins to rock, and I hear groans from within. Dirty, blood-soaked hands smack against the rear window, followed by angry, decayed faces. He sets his axe against the van's bumper. "Let me see that a second," he says, reaching for the silver stake.

"Why?" I ask. "What do you--"

He grabs my wrist and shoves the handle of the stake deep into the front of my stump, twisting the silver into place where my hand should be. He takes a step back and covers his mouth, but I can see the smile between his fingers. He's loving this.

"That's disgusting."

"But, it's effective." He lifts a roll of bright green duct tape from his fanny pack then wraps my wrist until the stake is secure and I look like a junk yard T1000.

"Oh, Terry," a voice says from the balcony, "I was

genuinely hoping that you would be more sensible."

Roman is in the center of the balcony. His body is swollen and stretched to the point of breaking through his suit, but he still looks mostly human. The skin on his face is a little tighter than usual, but it hasn't ripped open and made way for that big friendly wolf grin that the others have had.

"And I was genuinely hoping that you would be under the van when I got out," Terry says. "Life's full of disappointments."

"You were always so loyal," Roman says. "So willing to do what was asked of you. Never once did you question my word, and now you're here, destroying my beautiful home. For what?"

"Honestly," he says, "I just wanted to hear another one of your riveting monologues."

"It's a pity that you choose to be more humorous than clever," Roman says. "Oh well, so it goes."

He lifts a phone from his jacket pocket and swipes across its screen. The doors lining the second floor fly open like something out of a game show nightmare, revealing our prizes. Behind doors one through thirteen, there's a brand new batch of pissed off werewolves. At least we won't go home empty handed. Mostly because we won't make it home, at all.

"What the shit," I say. "How are we supposed to--"

"We're not. Don't worry about them," Terry says, "Go after Erin. I'll keep 'em busy."

"There's no way. You'll--"

"I'll be fine," he says, digging through his fanny pack. "Take this." He drops a grenade in my palm like he's passing the potatoes on Thanksgiving. No big deal, here's an explosive device that I happen to be carrying around with me for just such an emergency. "Don't blow yourself up."

Wolves are filing down both sets of stairs like a stampede of living meat threshers headed in our direction.

"I'll never make it past them." I grip the grenade, trying to keep my fingers as far from the pin as possible.

"The roof," Terry says, pointing to the top of the van. "Jump across and drop that right in Roman's lap. Death from above."

"That's like a six foot jump!"

"And that's what makes it awesome," he says. "It's either that, or you take the stairs."

"Crap." I step onto the bumper, and shimmy into a sitting position on top of the van.

From the roof, I have a bird's eye view of the

apocalypse. Terry's goofy smile falls into a sincere, focused look as he opens the van's backdoors and jumps backwards. Gesturing with his pick axe, he whistles and taunts the wolves as if he's calling a pack of disobedient dogs. As the beasts approach, dozens of the undead file out of the back of the van, nearly shaking me from my feet. This was his plan. This was how he decided to help, by collecting a graveyard full of abandoned ghouls into a zombie death squad of doom.

Roman sneers from the balcony. "What exactly do you think will happen now? Do you really believe that I'll let you leave here alive?" The skin on his face bubbles around his cheek bones as he grips the banister.

"I don't know if you've noticed," I say, turning the grenade in my hand, "but you already killed me once. I'm just here to return the favor."

"And you plan to do what, exactly?" The skin on either side of his lips begins to crack as he speaks. "How do you suppose this will all work out for you?" A thin broken line forms over his nose as if a snout is slowly pushing its way through. "You really think that you can stop me by poking me with a stick?"

"Nah," I say, lifting the grenade, "I was going to use this."

Despite the zombie water fall shaking the van beneath me, I stretch and hop into a run. There are four big steps and about five feet of air between me and the banister. As my toes reach the edge of the van, I bend my knees, raise my hand, and leap into the air. From here, I can see everything. Terry is below, swinging his axe and singing in short grunts while the wolves push through the field of corpses like raptors in tall grass, mowing down the bodies and looking for their next meal. Suddenly, all of the chaos under my feet blurs together into a whirlwind of dead space, and for a second, I float.

With his skin split from cheek to cheek, Roman's smile makes him look like an arrogant muppet. He opens his mouth to roar and I throw the grenade as hard as I can. It's a lot like a carnival game, except instead of trying to win a useless, over-sized ball of fur, I'm trying to blow one up. As the grenade leaves my hand, his snide expression contorts into a panicked grimace.

My arm falls over the top of the banister and my fingers grip whatever they can to keep me from slipping. The slick stone isn't easy to hold onto, and I can hear the excited zombies below, drooling over the promise of fresh meat about to be lowered into

their pit. I wrap my fingers around the marble hard enough to break the skin around my knuckles, then kick my feet against the wall. As my chest reaches the banister, I flip over the stone railing, and when my back hits the floor I can't help but smile. I made it. I did it.

Roman hardly moves as I scrape myself from the carpet. He should be a dust cloud of confetti by now, but there he is, completely fine, just watching me, turning his head from side to side like a confused puppy. There should be grand finale firework display to celebrate my victory, but there isn't. The grenade was a dud. Well, at least I upgraded from possible zombie chow, to future dog food. Small victories.

"You didn't pull the pin." His elongated wolf foot kicks the grenade as he takes a step forward.

"Shit," I say as the grenade rolls past me.

"You should have stayed in the ground," he snarls. "This, all of this, could have been so easily avoided, had you just stayed in your fucking grave."

The grenade hits the wall near the top of the stairs. I can't reach it from here, and if I try to run, things could get really toothy, really fast. Keep him talking. I just have to keep him talking. "What do even you want?" I ask, stepping backwards.

"What do I want?" he drops his head and laughs. "You come in here, ruin my dinner party, kill my guests, treat me like I am somehow the bad guy, and you want to know what I want?" He snorts and looks into my eyes.

"Cole," Terry yells from below, "how's it going? I'm not hearing a whole lot of explody sounds up there."

I'm afraid to take my eyes off of Roman, but it sounds like he's in trouble. Glancing over the banister, I see that most of the zombies are still alive. There are only a few wolves left, wearing the corpses like capes as they furiously chase Terry through the zombie moat.

"Don't forget to pull the pin," he yells with impeccable timing.

"Enough," Roman grunts. "Traditionally, I prefer these moments to be more intimate. I've never been much of a voyeur."

"Uh huh." I feel the grenade against my heel. "Totally."

"But, seeing as how you are so intent on making yourself the thorn in my side, I am going to enjoy this."

He turns to look over his shoulder and grunts. A

large, brunette wolf emerges from the shadowy corridor wearing a belt made of light blue dress scraps. It's Erin. She slowly walks toward Roman, keeping her teeth pointed as if her snout is the needle of a compass and his throat is her true north. She doesn't want to do this, but she has no choice. With each step her lips quiver and shake, revealing tooth after tooth. Roman growls and nods in my direction.

Erin's response is a low, reluctant snarl. Looking into her blood tinted, sunflower eyes, I can tell that there's no chance of getting out of this. She is a wolf, and as long as Roman is alive, she will do whatever he says.

"So, for the last time," he says, gesturing with an open, furry hand, "what I want is very simple." He locks eyes with Erin. "Bring me his fucking heart. Please."

Erin shakes her head into a roar as her front claws grip the floor, ready to pounce. She is going to do exactly as he says. She has no choice. He's larger than she is, older, more experienced. He's the alpha. He says jump, she says, "On whom". He says, "Get his heart" she breaks my body open like a fortune cookie. I'm in trouble.

I can reach the grenade but it's no use. If I

throw it, I'll definitely hit her and all of this will have been for nothing. Roman is walking slowly by her side, watching her every step like she's some kind of show dog jumping through his hoops. I have to get her as far away from him as possible. Think. Come on. Think. Think. Dammit. Fine.

"You want my heart?" I reach under my shirt, tear the duct tape from my chest, and pull out a fist sized chunk of meat.

Roman growls.

"You want my heart?" I ask. "Go fetch." I look to my left, wind back, and chuck the ball of flesh into the dark end of the corridor.

Before Roman can make so much as a sound, Erin charges down the hall past me.

"No," he grunts, "you're not--"

I lift the grenade into the air, poke my stake fist through the circular pin, and pull. The small, key-ring shaped piece of metal flies over my head, and the only thing keeping me from exploding into little ghouls is the trigger. Roman dives forward, shredding through his suit as he completes his transformation mid-air.

As the humongous creature descends upon me it's as if the ceiling is caving in. With its arms

outstretched like massive, furry wings, the wolf casts a shadow over my entire body, and I know that there's no escape. I lift my dagger fist into the air and thrust forward.

Despite his size and all of his rage, the sight of the silver still causes Roman to recoil as he lands. I punch the stake into his neck and I can feel the beast's muscle sizzle around my wrist. With one hand, Roman lifts me into the air and roars as he tosses me ten feet across the room. My fingers feel loose against the grenade's trigger as my back slams the wall, but I manage to keep myself from exploding.

"That was fun," I groan, pushing onto my feet. "You should open a theme park or something. You could be the next Walt Disney. People would come from all around for Mr. Wolf's wild--"

Roman leaps into the air and lands over me with a chomping head-butt, swallowing most of my shoulder in one swift bite. For a second, I'm in shock. I'm staring this ten foot tall mythological monster in the chest and I know that if he decides to come back for seconds, he'll chop me in half. I'd be better off just eating the grenade.

The wolf lets out a loud and proud, ready to finish the job sort of growl then pushes my back into

the wall. He smiles like a schoolyard bully, clawing at me with an obnoxious "stop hitting yourself" sort of expression, as I try to stay on my feet.

In my peripheral, I see the blue-belted, brunette wolf come around the corner with my heart between her teeth. The fatty hunk of tissue is soft and sagging, it dangles from her lips like a broken tennis ball as she shambles toward us. I can't let her get too close. This has to happen now.

The small puncture wound in Roman's neck is still glowing orange and flickering like a neon sign. Getting stabbed in the throat wasn't enough to stop him, but it definitely hurt more than just his pride. As the wolf's steamy breath bathes my face, I jam the stake into the same wound again, and again, and again until the tape rips enough to leave my fancy silver hand stuck in his clavicle.

Erin gets closer as the wolf roars. Vibrating his voice into a two-part harmony of man and monster, Roman shakes violently as he tries to force the stake out of his body. He pulls his head back, stretches his jaw and prepares to engulf what's left of me, but as his snout lowers, I punch my fist between his teeth, grenade first.

Beastly jaws snap over my forearm like a bear-trap

as the wolf's claws dig deep into my chest and back. He keeps his teeth from sinking too deeply as he stares into my eyes. He could easily clench his teeth and sever my arm, but instead, he turns his body toward Erin as she approaches. He knows what he's doing. Roman is an asshole, but he's a smart asshole.

I drag my feet. I punch whatever I can reach, but it makes no difference. There's no stopping it. He knows that we're already too close for me to risk it. He knows that he has me. If I let go of the trigger, we'll all die.

The wolf grunts to get Erin's attention. With its head turned in her direction, I can see that the stake is still protruding from the beast's neck like one of Frankenstein's bolts waiting to shock his body into action. I launch my stumpy wrist into the silver and push forward with all of my strength. Growling through his teeth, Roman hurls himself backwards putting some distance between us and Erin. We're still too close.

Securing its claws deeply into my shoulder, the wolf lifts me from my feet and huffs in pain. I can see in his eyes that if it weren't for the grenade, he'd already be flossing the little bits of me from between his teeth. He's ready to end this. He's done toying with me. He growls and squeezes until my

shoulder nearly pops.

With the wolf's sharp nails piercing through my joints, I can hardly lift my arm. As I watch the enormous claw tear through my skin, I can only think of one thing to do. And, I freaking hate it.

"Dammit," I sigh.

I raise my head, open my mouth, and send my teeth flying into the top of the wolf's hand. Grinding through the coarse, fur-coated flesh is absolutely disgusting. I feel like the first person who tried to eat a coconut, except instead of a delicious, tropical juicy center I get, well, werewolf flesh. Closing my teeth and ripping upward, I pull a chunk of wet, filthy dog meat from Roman's fist and it's enough to make him retract his claws.

As the wolf shakes the pain from its hand, I beat my wrist stump against the stake until the silver disappears into the creature's body like a whirlpool of lava, burning a hole around its neck. With my arm stuck between its teeth, the colossal wolf throws itself backwards into and over the marble banister, taking me with it.

As we flip through the air, I release the trigger. I push my stump into the monster's chest and try to move my face as far from its mouth as possible. I

don't know if Erin knows how I feel, but she'll know what I've done. Hopefully, it's enough.

The explosion ripples through us faster than my eyes can understand. There's a flash and a boom, and then I finally get the fireworks display that I've been waiting for. A geyser of celebratory Kool-Aid gushes between Roman and I as our bodies are torn apart and spread throughout the room. The disgusting eruption of flesh confetti and white, fatty tissue streamers envelopes me completely. It's absolutely grotesque, but really, I'd take being covered in wolf intestines over being digested by them, any day.

With my eyes closed, the fall is actually kind of nice. It's just me, and the darkness, floating through the air feeling weightless. This is the kind of death I can live with. Just an eternity of moving through the empty void. Blackness and nothing else. But, to be honest, I'm kind of disappointed. Are there really no third chances? No chicken nugget assembly lines? I don't get to see what it's like to be a lion or a witch or a wardrobe?

I open my eyes and the world goes white as I slam face first into the the van with a wet crunch. Everything is spinning. I see the ceiling, then the hood, and then the ceiling, then the hood. I roll

until the windshield catches me between the wipers. All I can do is stare upward and watch as the tiny wolf and ghoul fragments dance through the air like embers from a campfire.

The zombies are throwing themselves to the floor, tearing at the larger pieces of our bodies. They're ripping everything apart, shoving fistfuls of wolf slop into their mouths. It's disgusting to watch, but it's kind of poetic in a weird, macabre sort of way.

A few feet ahead of the van I see Terry. He's alive and limping. Half of his body looks like swiss cheese, but he's still on his feet, walking around the feasting corpses, holding an armful of something, but I can't make out exactly what. Every few steps, he swings his pickax at a different zombie, or lifts a chunk of something from the ground.

"Are you collecting souvenirs?" I ask.

"Cole!?" Terry jumps. "Whoa! Whoa! Whoa! Don't ever do that again," he says, collecting himself. "I almost dropped your kneecap."

"What do you--" Lifting my head isn't easy, it feels a lot like balancing a boulder on a pyramid made of Jello, but when I finally look down, I can't help but laugh. There's nothing left. My arms and the lower half of my body are scattered throughout the room like

pieces of a scavenger hunt that Terry is trying desperately to win. I'm really nothing more than a head on half of a shoulder, and it isn't even my good shoulder.

"I think I got most of you," he says, opening the door to the van. "I tried to get two of everything, just in case. I'm like Noah, but, you know, gross." He tosses the pieces onto the passenger seat and closes the door.

"Why am I still alive?" I ask. "If Roman dies, I'm supposed to die too, right?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

A silhouette appears on the balcony. It's a blur in my peripheral. A living smudge. A brunette shadow. The large figure traces the marble banister, moving slowly down the stairs until it's completely out view.

"Terry," I say. "Is that--"

"Yeah," he steps in front of the van. "It's her."

"Is she still--"

"Yeah." He twirls the pick ax slowly. "She is."

Behind Terry, the feasting corpses begin to topple over one another. One by one, they fall to the ground, motionless, as if some unseen force is knocking them down like poorly arranged dominoes. I try to turn to see Erin, but my head feels like it's glued to the

van. A tingling sensation crawls from the base of my neck toward my face like a wave of goosebumps. It's a coolness. Like a calm hypothermia, or a carbonite bath, stiffening my muscles as it passes over my skin. There's no sunlight pouring through the stained glass wall. Terry hasn't prepared his bed, and I haven't heard his alarm go off. This isn't just another rigor mortis morning. I'm actually going to die.

Terry takes a step back. His knuckles turn white, and his jaw hangs wide as he squeezes the pick ax. The massive brunette blur comes into focus as it steps in front of the van. The wolf no longer has my heart between its teeth. It roars at Terry, shaking the saliva from its lips. His eyes widen and he looks at me as he raises the ax.

"Don't," I say. "Please." He nods and lowers his head.

Slamming both hands into the hood, the wolf bends toward the windshield and growls. Her claws pierce the metal as her animalistic howl turns into a recognizable scream. The hair covering her long, muscular limbs begins to shed, and as her body shrivels into its usual proportions, Erin pulls at the blue fabric around her waist until it covers most of her skin. The darkness of her eyes begins to crack and

fade as her gorgeous sunflower irises blossom from the center outward. Shaking the wolf from her skin, Erin smiles as she looks at her wiggling, human fingers.

"You did it," she coughs. "You fucking did it."

Trying to move my chin is like doing jumping jacks in quicksand. I can feel the muscles in my face tighten and solidify. It takes everything I have to even open my mouth. "Dying."

"What can I do?" She asks. "Terry, what can I do?"

He doesn't say a word.

"I'm sorry." She runs her thumb across my cheek as the tears fill her eyes. "I'm so sorry, Cole."

"No," I say. "My fault. You have nothing to--" My jaw feels like it's turning to stone. I have to choose my words carefully. "Erin."

"I'm here." She runs her fingers through my hair.

"I'm right here."

"Erin. I'm sorry. Thank you. I don't know, I love you."

She smiles as my eyes close. My skin no longer feels tight. There's nothing left to fight against. Nothing to break through or shake off. There is no ice to melt. It's just dark, and peaceful, and quiet.

And then it isn't.

CHAPTER TWENTY

When my eyes open, I'm in the morgue lying on a slab. The fluorescent flicker overhead stings my eyes, but through my squinting I can see Terry standing over me. Despite the catchy doo-wop music playing through his phone, he isn't singing or humming, or even swaying back and forth. He's focusing intently as he punches a needle into and out of my skin. He's literally stitching me back together, and there isn't even duct tape in sight. More impressively, he's actually managing to keep most of the pudding in his beard while he does it.

There's a tingling, pins and needles sensation, as I peel my shoulders from the slab. "What the hell, Terry?"

He screams and lifts a bedpan over his head. "Holy Jesus!"

"I have shoulders!"

"Yeah, I know," he says, setting the bedpan on a tray. "You're welcome."

"What happened?" I ask. "Where's Erin?"

"Okay, I hate to be the I have good news and I have bad news guy, but--"

"What happened?"

"You've been asleep for eighty-eight years," he says. "Everyone you know and love is dead."

"No," I can't stop shaking my head. "No. No. No. What? Why? What? Eighty years? That can't be. I mean, I-- What's the good news?"

"That was the good news," he says.

"What?!" I say. "Holy shit. What's the bad news?"

"I gave you a horrible lower back tattoo."

"What are you--"

"It's in a fancy, all caps font, and it says, 'Gullible'." He snickers.

"You're a jerk." I raise my hands to gesture as I speak, and can't help but notice that they're two different colors. Neither of them are mine. "What happened to Erin?"

"She's fine," he says. "They all are. The whole killing the werewolf thing helped a lot of people. They were all confused and thankful. You weren't there to take any of the credit, so, naturally--"

"But, she's okay?"

"As okay as someone can be after eating their boyfriend's heart, I guess," he says. "It was a long

week. She kissed your forehead and said she loved you, then I drove her home."

"She said--"

"Don't make me repeat myself," he says. "She said her goodbyes. I guess you were passed out by then.

It's a shame that you didn't get to hear it. It was nice. Beautiful even. But, I guess noone gets to hear that stuff."

"Do you remember--"

"She said goodbye, Cole. Oh! And, she wanted you to have this." He pulls a silver ring from his fanny pack. "I thought it looked kind of cheap to be honest, but I'm not a jewelry expert or anything. Maybe we can pawn it, I think Pavel knows a guy."

"Thanks," I say. "What about, uh." I wiggle my fingers in front of him. My right hand is an inch or two longer than my left, and about four shades lighter. "What happened to me?"

"I collected as many pieces as I could," he says. "I tried to make sense of everything, but, to be honest, I've never really had the patience for puzzles."

"So, what did you do?"

"I improvised."

"What is that supposed to mean?" I ask, examining

my new body.

"Precision guided missiles, laser eyes, gravity boots for feet," he snickers. "You're like the Six Million Dollar Man or Robocop, but, you know, dead."

"Holy crap, Terry! Really?"

"No," he says, "but I'm pretty sure you're at least a quarter Jewish now. I'm not positive, but it took five or six bodies to put that thing together so, you know, your chances are pretty good."

"You know that I hate you, right?"

"I know," he says. "I hate you too."

"Are you at least going to give me a pamphlet or something?" I ask. "I mean. Is this it? What am I supposed to do now?"

Terry digs through his basket of pamphlets until he finds what he's looking for. He lifts a marker from his fanny pack and scribbles something across the front of the page, then hands it to me.

"Cole," I say, reading his chicken scratch aloud. I open the pamphlet, and the inside is completely blank. "Thanks a lot."

"Seriously, though," he says. "You're basically being held together by blood, spit, and good intentions, right now."

"Thank you, Terry."

"You're welcome," he says. "Now, lay down and let me stitch this metal plate to your face."

I don't know if I would call this reincarnation. I guess I died and came back. Twice. So, it's close enough. This is all new. This time, there's no book to give me a list of rules to follow. There's no monster to slay, or person to save. I'm on my own. I might not know what I am, but at least I'm not a chicken nugget. I'm not dog chow, or leftover dinner scraps. I'm not a lion, or a wolf, or a brain dead zombie. Whatever I might have been yesterday is gone, and what I am today may be a huge mess of Frankensteinian proportions, but I'm here.