

# **The Black Parade**

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*For my loved ones, those related by blood and spirit*

BOOK ONE: THE BLACK PARADE

I have no home on earth and none below, not with the living, not with the breathless dead. –  
*Antigone*, Sophocles

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## CHAPTER ONE

The alarm clock went off like a duck being strangled with a telephone cord. I always tried and failed to remember to buy a new one. Groaning, I lurched onto my side and slapped at the device until it went silent. Sunlight streamed in, golden and annoying, through a gap in the dingy grey curtains of the window across from the bed. I threw the comforter over my head and lay there with my face pressed into the mattress, breathing in the faint smell of fabric softener and fried chicken. I really did need to wash these sheets.

After about a minute, I reluctantly climbed out from underneath the blanket and stumbled towards the closet to find my white button up shirt and short black skirt. My shift at the restaurant would start in half an hour. Colton would kick my ass if I was late again.

After wriggling into my work clothes, I wandered into the kitchen and began the nearly involuntary process of making coffee. Once it was brewing, I retreated to the bathroom. As I brushed my teeth, I read the list of the names and addresses I'd taped to the vanity mirror: Linda, Ming-Na, and Ron. I only worked a five-hour shift today so I should have been able to take care of all three of them. After I finished brushing my teeth, I swept my hair up into something that vaguely resembled a bun and took a deep breath before staring into my reflection for a brief analysis.

To be frank, I looked like shit. The skin beneath my eyes was dark with circles since I hadn't gotten a decent amount of sleep in about two years, my complexion that had once been a rich brown was now a sickly brown-paper-bag color, and my weight had dropped significantly from lack of decent meals. Lord knows how I managed to keep my job looking like this. Cue the makeup—some foundation to cover up the spots and black eyeliner to further divert attention from my unhealthy pallor. A dash of lip gloss and *voilà*, I was once again presentable for public consumption.

My gaze fell across the list again. I sighed. "Ninety-six down, four to go."

I snatched the Post-It off the mirror and grabbed my flats on the way to the kitchen where my coffee was ready. When I got to the kitchen, I shrieked in surprise.

My favorite forest-green coffee mug was already out and filled with coffee.

I glanced to my right and my left, letting my eyes sweep across the small room carefully. Nothing. Not a soul.

It took a moment for me to calm down enough to tiptoe around the apartment and check the closet, the bathroom, and even underneath my bed, for any signs of an intruder. Nothing had been moved and there were no signs of entry. I took a deep breath and walked back into the kitchen, sniffing the coffee for any signs of irregularity but I could smell nothing except for the enticing aroma.

I put enough sugar and cream in to turn the dark brown a rich caramel color and sipped away my exhaustion. Maybe I'd poured the coffee without thinking and forgot. It was early and my brain hadn't kick-started yet. I grabbed a Nutra-Grain bar from the cabinet, my keys, and headed out the door, giving one last salute to the worn, leather-bound book sitting on top of my refrigerator. After all, I needed all the luck I could get today.

The first things I noticed about Linda were that she was small, blonde, and probably about seven years old. Her cheeks were still round and pink with baby fat that she hadn't grown out of yet and her dress was bright orange with yellow flowers dotted down the length of it. The look would have been complete with a pair of white or black Mary Janes but since she didn't have any feet, it was impossible. Linda was, after all, a ghost.

“What’s your name?”

I paused, having been lost in my thoughts after analyzing her appearance. “Jordan.”

She smiled, seeming interested. “Isn’t that a boy’s name?”

I resisted the urge to wince. She was just a kid, and a dead one at that, so she didn’t know any better. “Yeah, I get that a lot. Mind if I ask you a couple questions?”

“Sure.”

“What’s the last thing you remember before you ended up here?” I asked the little spirit in my sweetest voice. Linda glanced up from the dandelion she had been attempting to pick up, surprised that her small hand phased right through it.

“Um, I don’t know. Mom, she told me to sit next to my brother on the log by the lake. My brother kept poking me so I got up. The water was really pretty that day,” she added with another bright smile.

I nodded, scribbling her comments down on my ragged notepad. “What did you do after that?”

“I saw a frog and I wanted to catch it to bring it back to Mommy. My mean old brother told me to come back. I bet he thought I couldn’t catch it. So I tried my best to catch ‘im, but he was really fast. Then I woke up over there.” She pointed to the tall oak tree a few feet from where we stood by the lake, where police tape had been stretched across the bank.

“Is there anything you want to tell your mother or your brother?”

The little girl nodded. I suppressed a sigh. This meant I’d have to get the address of the family, and the police were pretty stingy with those sorts of details. Maybe I could find another way to get her to see them. The funeral, perhaps. Much easier to access and far less suspicious to look for.

“Can you remember your last name?”

Linda’s face scrunched in thought. “Nu-uh.”

Great. No last name. This case was going to take even longer than I thought and I was already short on time. Three days left to deadline.

I took a deep breath, dispelling the disturbing thought. “Okay, I’ll tell you what—why don’t you go play on the playground until I come back and then we can go see Mommy. Does that sound good?”

She beamed. “Mom’ll be so proud that I caught that frog. Bye, Jordan!”

The ghost scampered off for the abandoned playground, which was off-limits until the investigation was over. I stuffed my notepad in my grey duster and shoved my hands in my pockets, walking in the opposite direction. The park was only a block or two away from the nearest newsstand, where I might be able to find the child’s last name. What a loss, though. The kid was so cute she could put little orphan Annie to shame.

I paid a few dollars to a man at a newsstand and collected a handful of papers, searching through the obituaries one by one for her name. It wasn’t until the very last one that I found a matching picture: *Linda Margaret Hamilton, age 7, died August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2010. Loving daughter, wonderful sister, and family jewel that will never be forgotten. Funeral services held Sunday, August 8<sup>th</sup> at Wm. J. Rockefeller Funeral Home, Inc., 165 Columbia Turnpike, Rensselaer, N.Y at 6:00PM.*

Good news for me. I could get her there and be home before any of my shows came on. The wind picked up around me so I buttoned up my duster, heading back in the direction of the park where I had left her. Surely no one in Albany, New York would think it odd to see a black girl in shades talking to a jungle gym. Normal people couldn’t see ghosts. They were lucky that

way. Ghosts are terrible nuisances once you notice them because they are always on the look out for someone to help them. As far as I knew, there weren't others like me. To put it mildly, my situation was decidedly unique.

"Linda?"

When I turned, I discovered the new ghost had achieved a limited amount of solidity. She was hanging from the monkey bars. When I called her, she hopped off of them without hesitation. My hands shot out to catch her out of reflex, but she slipped right through them, sending a cold shock up my spine. I hated the tingly feeling of dead souls against my skin.

"Yep?"

"I'm going to come back on Sunday afternoon and take you to Mommy. Is that okay?"

She nodded. "Are ya gonna come visit before then?"

I winced. "Well, I am a little busy, but I'll come see you if I can. Be good, alright?"

"Okay!" She giggled and started back on her climbing, blissfully unaware of anything else. At least the dead had that going for them. She was just a ghost child so she retained her early behavior. Other ghosts I'd met weren't nearly this cheerful.

I waved and headed back in the direction of the city to catch the bus. I noticed a brown-haired guy smiling at me as I walked past the bench he sat on. He was my age at least with strikingly attractive features, so much so that I found it odd he was paying any attention to me. Did he know me or was he just friendly? Either way, I flashed him a brief smile and kept going. Shame, though. A couple years ago, I might have stopped for a chat, maybe asked him to grab a cup of coffee with me. If only I had a life that didn't involve taking care of dead people.

Night had folded in around the edges of the city by the time I trudged back to my crappy apartment after solving Ming-Na and Ron's cases. The rent was cheap because it was in a lousy neighborhood, wedged between a liquor store and a barbershop. Lucky for me, it was on the bus line so I didn't need a car. Work was only a fifteen-minute ride so it all balanced out pretty well. It would probably be more depressing if I weren't so used to it.

I opened the door to the apartment to find an obscenely tall blond man standing in front of my kitchen counter, stooped over the red leather book that had been on top of the fridge. A year ago, this would have been a strange sight. I didn't even bat an eyelash—just tossed my keys next to the book and shrugged out of my duster.

"Evening, Gabriel."

The archangel Gabriel smiled down at me with sky blue eyes. "Good evening, Jordan."

"Busy day?" I asked, opening the fridge to pull out ingredients to make dinner. Spaghetti tonight, and every day until payday. What a glamorous life I led.

He shrugged. "The usual. I see you have logged two more souls today."

"Yep. That puts me at ninety-eight. You wouldn't mind rounding it up to an even hundred, right?" I asked with a voice as sweet as honey. He laughed—a gentle, slightly echoing sound. That creeping sensation of joy rose inside my body and I did my best to ignore it. Gabriel had that effect on human beings. Even though I had known him for two years, it was still really unnerving.

"If only the Good Lord would allow me to. You have done remarkably well this year. You are nearly past the mark to your salvation," he replied.

I didn't even bother to shrug. "Ring-a-ding ding."



He watched me with a considerate look as I went about filling a deep pot with water to cook the noodles. “Something troubling you, my dear?”

“Not at all.” He closed the book and placed it back on the fridge, which was no feat for him since he was close to seven feet tall. Gabriel appeared in his human form because his angel form would have blinded me. He wore a navy Armani tux that easily cost more than my rent. An archangel with impeccable taste, oh my.

“Shouldn’t you be happier about your progress?”

I sat the pot on the stove and turned the dial, watching the coils for the red glow. “It’s hard to get worked up about the fact that even when my debt is paid, I still have to do this for the rest of my life because I’m the only one who can. I don’t like having that decision made for me already, Gabe.”

When I turned to face him, he had a curious expression on his delicate features. I shook my head.

“You don’t get it. It’s fine. You’re a seven-foot angel in charge of delivering God’s will. I wouldn’t expect you to understand the mind of a twenty-one year old American girl.”

I moved to take the spaghetti sauce out of the cupboard when I felt his large, warm hands resting on my shoulders. His face brushed my cheek, voice low and soft with kindness.

“Have faith, Jordan. That is all I ask of you and all you should ask of yourself.”

He kissed my forehead, in the same spot as always—above my right eyebrow. Over the years, it had become a familiar gesture between the two of us. I felt the gentle brush of air as he walked past me and out the door. A lone golden feather drifted to the floor in his wake. I stooped and picked it up, twirling the holy object between my fingers. His pep talk hadn’t worked, but I did love it when he left souvenirs. I tucked the feather in the top of my ponytail and went to gather the seasonings for the spaghetti. All three of them—seasoning salt, garlic powder, and onion powder—were sitting in a row on my counter. Had Gabriel done that while I wasn’t looking?

Once again, I raked my gaze through the apartment for any sort of presence before reminding myself to calm down. Gabriel must have done it, because ghosts can’t touch anything. Relax.

Still, maybe I should sleep with two guns underneath my pillow. A girl can never be too cautious.

## CHAPTER TWO

“Order up for Tables 6, 10, and 14!” The head chef’s voice beckoned me back to the counter where the steaming portions of fried chicken, grits, corn on the cob, and greens sat waiting for a hand to carry them to the customers. I finished refilling the sweet tea for a gentleman reading the paper on my left before heading back to where the chubby cook bellowed.

The Sweet Spot was a tiny but well-known Southern cuisine restaurant. Odd to have one in Albany, but it was pretty popular. The place was owned by Colton Banks—a South Carolina native who moved up North when he married a New York resident. I’d known him for going on three years and secretly felt a little proud of how the place had bloomed since we met. Not on my account, of course.

I scooped up the three plates and balanced them on my flat, round tray before gliding towards the tables. They were each labeled with little plastic outlines of the state of South Carolina. Corny but memorable, as Colton always said. Work hours were odd for me because I basically went through them with my brain turned off. The hand gestures of writing orders, carrying trays, and pouring drinks came unconsciously. No matter how fast the chef rang up orders, I could get them to tables, no sweat. Most people had a career or were in college in their twenties, but I was dancing the elegant dance of a waitress.

After the plates had been passed out, I set about clearing off the table of a couple who had just left. The pair was currently on the sidewalk giggling obscenities in each other’s ears. Something in my chest ached as I watched them from the corner of my eye. I couldn’t remember what it was like to have a life, let alone a boyfriend. Must’ve been nice.

“Jordan?”

I turned my head to the left to find my best friend and fellow waitress Lauren Yi waving her dishrag at me. She shook her head, biting back a smile.

“You were cleaning the same spot for like a minute. Something on your mind?”

I shrugged. “Not much.”

“There’s a surprise,” she teased, her brown eyes flashing with mischief. That might have offended some people, but Lauren had an abrasive personality. She seemed like a bitch when you first met her but beneath the attitude was a richer, more interesting Lauren. Besides, how many Korean girls worked at Southern cuisine kitchens? Maybe I’d Google the statistics later.

“I’m just saying that you’ve been moodier than usual. Don’t ask me how I know, I just do,” she continued, holding up the salt and peppershakers while I cleaned underneath them. Maybe I should have told her the truth—that not twenty-four hours earlier the archangel Gabriel was in my kitchen marking off souls in my own personal Penance Book. She’d probably just rent me a nice white padded room and a jacket to match.

“Just tired and ready to call it a week,” I said as earnestly as possible.

She wiped her brow, ruffling her pin-straight black hair. “Aren’t we all? When’s your shift over?”

“Soon. I’ve got a few stops to make and then I’m passing out for the weekend.”

Lauren arched an eyebrow at me. “For a girl with no life, you sure have a lot of ‘stops’ to make. You’re always late for work. What are you doing all the time?”

I met her eyes with a dead serious expression. “I’m Spider-Man.”

She burst into giggles, slugging me in the arm before moving on to the next table. “Get back to work, you moron.”

Her insult seemed to be just the pick-me-up I needed because I finished off my shift with a genuine smile. I waved good night to everyone and headed out of the door into the cool August evening. If I got lucky, I would spot another ghost to finish off my debt. Gabriel seemed to have confidence in me. I could only hope The Big Guy did as well.

Fifteen minutes later, with keys dangling in my hand, I walked up the short stairwell to my apartment only to stop halfway there. The cute guy from the park was leaning against the wall to the left of my door. Shock and fear rolled through me. How did he know where I live? How should I react? Could I get to the gun in time?

Finally, I decided to play it cool and continued up the steps as if nothing had bothered me. When I got closer, I could see him more clearly. He was even more handsome up close. His longish dark brown hair was parted down the middle, hanging low over his forehead and along the side of his neck. Intense sea-green eyes held my gaze.

He smiled at me with those full lips when I walked over. "Hi."

"Hi," I replied, not sure of what else to say. "Can I help you?"

"Actually, yes. Mind if we step inside for a chat?"

I glanced around in the narrow, empty hallway. No witnesses. Shit. "Uh, I'm not sure if that's a good idea."

The stranger raised his hands. "I'm not gonna hurt you, I swear. You can even pat me down if you want to."

I lifted an eyebrow. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

He grinned. "No comment. So how about it? I'll be quick, I just don't want an audience."

I took a deep breath. This was a terrible idea. I knew that. He probably knew that. Still, according to the law I couldn't shoot him outside of my property and claim self-defense so I might as well go inside. After all, I was a small relatively cute girl and he was a big strapping fellow. The cops would probably believe me over him if I claimed he assaulted me. Morally questionable but effective.

I stuck the keys in the door and nodded. "Yeah, come on."

When the door opened, he didn't try to rush me. He stepped inside and watched me close the door. I was careful not to lock it in case I needed to escape. I tossed my duster on the chair by the round kitchen table and headed for the fridge. The key was to act casual. The guy had no idea I owned a firearm, nor was he aware that I knew self-defense.

"So what's up? I saw you in the park the other day."

"Yes, you did. I was surprised." That made me look at him. He seemed serious.

"Why? Were you pretending to be invisible?"

The stranger chuckled, walking towards me. I froze, pulse thundering in my ears as adrenaline shot through me. He stopped a few inches short of actually touching me and murmured:

"You have no idea."

Still meeting my eyes, he reached up into the cabinet and brought down my favorite green coffee mug. "You were going to make coffee, right?"

The truth hit me like a lightning bolt. How could he have known where that was unless he had been in the apartment? I felt a paralyzing jolt of fear grow in my stomach and spread through my body like cold poison. Then, out of almost nowhere, I got angry.

"You—? You were in my *apartment*? How the fuck did you get in here? Why? Are you some kind of sick freak or something?" I searched for the nearest weapon I could reach. He didn't even try to defend himself as I discovered a dirty kitchen knife and brandished it at him.

“You and I have something in common, Jordan.”

“You have three seconds to get out of here before I call the cops or stab you, not necessarily in that order.” I held the knife inches away from his throat.

His smile widened into a smirk.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “I am *not* playing with you. Get. Out.”

“Y’see, there’s something you can do that other people can’t.”

“*Now.*”

“And that’s how and why I tracked you down.”

“Time’s up. Now get out!” I punctuated the last word by slashing at his arm. The blade met resistance but no blood came out. It just sort of...bounced off.

“I’m dead...and you can see me.”

My mouth dropped open. “You...you can’t be a ghost. You can touch things.”

“I’m a poltergeist. I can touch whatever I want, whenever I want.” He reached a hand out towards my cheek. I flinched, expecting to be hurt but instead it felt like touching some sort of metaphysical barrier. The skin on my cheek tingled, though not in the same way that a ghost passed by me. This sensation was more constant, as if energy were rushing from him to me.

“I need your help. I want to know what happened to me, and you’re the only person in this entire city who can help me.” His voice was gentler now. The teasing smile vanished, leaving his face vulnerable, serious, maybe even wounded.

I shook my head, taking another step back and kept a loose hold on the knife just to make myself feel better. “You were *stalking* me and now you’re asking for my help? You’re out of your damn mind.”

“I don’t *have* a mind to be out of. I can’t remember anything. All I know is that you’re the only person in Albany who can see and hear me. That’s all I’ve got to go on.”

“Give me one good reason to help you,” I shot back, crossing my arms underneath my chest.

The poltergeist paused, softening his tone. “What if the reason I’m dead is that I did something terrible? I can’t go wandering around for the rest of eternity not knowing. Wouldn’t you want to know?”

Something in my chest stung when he spoke those words. He couldn’t possibly have known about what happened to me, but the question wasn’t lost on me. I often wished I hadn’t killed an innocent man or that I could forget about it, but at least I was working to make up for it. If I denied him the same chance, what would that say about me?

“I...I can’t guarantee anything, but I can give it a try,” I said after a long, tense silence.

He sighed in relief. “Thank you.”

A few minutes later, I had rummaged through my duster to find my notepad and the mystery dead guy had perched himself on the counter by the sink. My hands still shook a bit as I smoothed down the paper enough to write. How embarrassing.

“What’s your name?”

“Michael. I can’t remember my last name, oddly enough,” he said, his brow wrinkling a bit with worry. I started the page.

*Michael*

*Caucasian, possible Mediterranean background*

*Brown hair*

*Green eyes*

*6’1”*

*Athletic build*

*No accent*

*Apparently a poltergeist*

“You’re Jordan Amador, right?”

I looked at him in surprise. He pointed to the counter behind me where there was a stack of bills. “It was on your mail.”

“Oh. Right. Yeah, that’s me.” I cleared my throat and started off with my official preliminary questions for a new spirit.

“When did you ‘wake up’?” There seemed to be a prominent process where troubled souls would recover after their death either at the site or nearby hours, or sometimes days, later. They never immediately remembered how or why they died. In my experience, it took between twenty-four hours to two weeks for a ghost to remember his or her death. Perhaps Michael would have that sort of luck.

“About two days ago. I was lying on a bench outside of some sort of club.”

“When did you realize you were dead?”

“At first, I thought the couple outside were just ignoring me, but then I started to notice they couldn’t hear me no matter how I shouted. Even when you’re ignoring someone, you flinch if they scream right in your ear. The weirdest part is that I could still touch them even though they couldn’t see me.”

He paused to chuckle. “Found that out the fun way, though. I flipped up this chick’s skirt in the middle of the street just to test out the theory.”

I rolled my eyes and wrote “horny dead asshole” below the last line. “Can you remember anything about your life yet?”

“Nothing more than my name so far.”

I snapped the notepad shut and took a good long look at him from head to toe. “Based on your face and body, I’d say you’re not out of your twenties. The clothes you died in are the clothes you’re wearing now, and that makes it a little harder to figure out what you did for a living.”

Michael wore a modest attire: a black button up shirt with the sleeves tucked back, dark blue jeans with a chain hanging off the back pocket, and black Timberland boots. The reason ghosts wore clothes was that their souls retained a self-image. Since human beings wore clothes at nearly all times, it was only natural that the way they saw themselves as spirits was represented that way as well. The fact that he had feet was what threw me off the most, which explained why I hadn’t recognized him as dead sooner. I made a note of his wristwatch and the silver chain with a small padlock around his neck before moving on.

“By the way, how did you know you were a poltergeist instead of just a ghost?”

Michael shrugged. “Well, think about it. The definition of ‘poltergeist’ is ‘noisy ghost.’ I figured that’s what made me different from a regular ghost since in most legends and stories, they can’t touch stuff.”

That actually sort of made sense. Hell, I’d only remembered what a poltergeist was because of the 1982 movie. Despite his somewhat immature behavior, the knowledge of the term suggested Michael may have been well-read when he was alive. It could come in handy later.

“Tomorrow, we’ll try to find the place where you woke up and see if anyone has discovered your body. With any luck, your memory will return and we can find out your soul’s final wish,” I said as I set the pad on the counter.

He nodded, raking a hand through his hair to push it out of his face. “How...how do you know all this stuff?”

I let a small, tired smile cross my lips. “That’s a long, complicated story. It’s late. I don’t want to get into it tonight so why don’t you go wander off and I’ll see you in the morning.”

I started to walk away but he jumped in front of me, seeming confused. “Wander off where? And what am I supposed to do all night?”

That made me pause. There was no reason why I should have trusted him enough to let him stay in my apartment overnight, but then again I couldn’t let him go around making trouble for other people. In the end, I just sighed and flourished a hand at the apartment.

“If you promise to behave yourself, you can just stay here. In the den. If you come in my room while I’m asleep, I’m going to start researching ways to get rid of you.” I ended this statement with a harsh glare.

He held his hands up in supplication. “I’ll be a good boy. Scout’s honor.”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

With that, I sidled past him with great care not to bump into him. I wasn’t ready to feel that odd sensation again. I shuffled off to the bedroom and shut the door with a sigh, feeling much more tired now that everything slowed down enough for me to process it. I kicked off my shoes, peeled away the skirt, and unbuttoned the shirt most of the way before searching for my nightclothes. Once I redressed, I flopped down on the bed face-first, allowing a frustrated groan to tear from my throat.

“I cannot believe I’m having a sleepover with a dead guy.”

## CHAPTER THREE

I smelled coffee. Coffee and bacon. What the hell?

My body reacted before my mind could catch up—poised at the door, gun in hand. Then, I remembered I had a houseguest and I let my arm drop. A *dead* houseguest.

After scraping myself off the bed, I threw on a robe, some ratty blue slippers, and stopped to check myself in the mirror. I was halfway through fixing my mussed black locks when I realized I had been preening for *a freaking dead guy*. I shook my head at myself and walked out of the room.

“I got bored waiting for you, so I decided to make breakfast,” Michael told me, shaking the pan a little to get the bacon a nice even brown. He was a picture of nonchalance, as if it wasn’t unusual that he was a dead guy cooking breakfast for a girl he hadn’t known a day yet. It made my head hurt just thinking about it.

“Though I can’t believe you don’t have any eggs. Even poor people have eggs. That’s just depressing.”

“You’re dead. What do you care?” I yawned, grabbing my mug and the fresh pitcher of coffee.

“I’m merely remarking upon the fact that you’re pathetic.”

I rolled my eyes. “Fine. Go rob a bank and get me some cash. Then you can have your damn eggs.”

He clucked his tongue at me, turning off the stove. “We’ve got to work on your people skills. Sleep well?”

“No, but that’s normal for me.” After adding cream and sugar, I sipped away at the delicious beverage while searching for a plate to put the bacon on.

Michael watched me with his arms crossed. “Well, the good news is that I apparently know how to cook. Maybe that will help us.”

“Yep, you’re a regular Emeril Lagasse. Bacon *a la* bacon, with bacon garnish.” I smirked when he scowled at me. We’d known each other for less than a day and we were already arguing. That had to be some kind of record for me.

“So I was thinking,” I continued, biting into the first strip. “If you’re a poltergeist, shouldn’t you be able to change between being solid and intangible?”

“I tried that out last night. I’m not very good at it. It sort of...comes and goes,” he admitted, staring at his outstretched hand as if it would change. Nothing happened. Poor sap. “So you’ve really never met something like me before?”

I shook my head. Michael scratched his head. “That’s just...weird. I wonder why I’m not a regular ghost...or why I didn’t just go to Heaven or Hell.”

“I don’t know either. I’ll ask Gabriel about it the next time I see him.” I moved to the kitchen table with the coffee and bacon, scooping up my notepad to review what I’d written last night.

Michael followed, sitting opposite of me. “Who’s Gabriel?”

“The archangel? God’s Messenger? Doesn’t anyone read the Bible any more?”

“I had to make sure. What’s he want with you? Do you two have a—wait for it—*heavenly* relationship?”

I rolled my eyes again. “He keeps track of all the souls I assist. I can’t exactly just call on him. He’s always in different parts of the world helping people.”

“Oh, I get it. You help ghosts find their final wishes so they can pass on to Heaven or Hell.”

“Exactly.”

“Why? Did you just fall into this job, or was it bestowed on you by a higher power?” His tone was teasing, but already I began to feel uncomfortable with where the conversation was heading.

I kept my eyes on the paper and my voice as mild as possible. “We really should get going. I’ve got a long day ahead of me if you’re gonna keep sticking around.”

I stood and drained my mug, tossing it in the sink before heading back to my room. I threw on normal street clothes: purple t-shirt, black jeans, tennis shoes, and my trusty grey duster. The key to my existence was lying low and hoping nobody noticed me whispering to no one they could see. It truly was a wretched sort of life, but I had a price to pay and this was part of it.

When I came back out, Michael was waiting. “You’re very trusting, you know. How do you know I’m not some sort of wandering murderous spirit?”

“Because they don’t live around here. I’ve only seen an evil spirit once.”

Michael’s eyes widened as he walked towards the door with me. “What was that like?”

I opened the door, not meeting his gaze. “Don’t ask. It’ll give you nightmares.”

“I don’t dream.”

“Be grateful for that.”

He shut the door for me, arching an eyebrow. “You’re just a ray of sunshine, huh?”

“I’m glad you finally noticed.” I locked the door and then we started down the hallway. A couple of my neighbors walked up, waving briefly to me and walking straight towards Michael. He had to dodge behind me to keep from bumping one of them.

He shook his head, stuffing both hands in his pockets. “Am I ever gonna get used to this?”

“With any luck, you won’t have to because we’ll find out how you died and you can cross over,” I replied, grabbing the Bluetooth I kept in my duster for this exact purpose and attaching it to my right ear. Otherwise, people saw me talking to myself and would think I was nuts. We made it to the sidewalk now where people were brushing past so Michael fell in line directly behind me to keep from hitting them. I couldn’t feel his presence behind me because he had no body heat. The notion raised the hairs on the nape of my neck. Better not let him know it creeped me out. He might use it against me.

“And then what’ll happen? Who determines whether I go to Heaven or Hell?” Michael asked. We reached my bus stop in a minute or so. Two people sat on the bench while Michael and I stood next to the sign.

I tilted my face towards him out of habit. “Gabriel told me that you go before the Father and Son. They weigh your life based on what you accomplished. It’s not quite as black and white as in the Good Book.”

“That’s a relief. I’m getting the feeling I wasn’t a very good little boy during my life.” His expression relaxed. I made a mental note about his more serious behavior. It could be that he was starting to regain more of his personality traits. That would become helpful later on. Still, I smiled to keep him from worrying about my silence.

“What? Did the skirt flipping tip you off?”

He smirked. “Why? Jealous?”

“You wish.”



“For all you know, I do. Maybe my final wish is to follow you around for all eternity.” He leaned down to my height with a smug look on his face.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “I’ll have you exorcised before I let that happen.”

“Ooh, would you? I wanna see if it actually works.” His voice was genuinely eager. What a weirdo. Luckily, the bus pulled up and I climbed aboard, sliding my bus pass through the slot. It was half past noon, so there were passengers everywhere, forcing me to choose a spot in the very rear. Michael walked on, flopping down next to me in the empty seat.

“I think the best thing about being dead is no longer paying for public transportation.”

“You’re just full of deep thoughts, aren’t you?”

“Yep.”

I sighed. “Focus, please. I need you to watch where the bus route goes and let me know when you recognize something so we can try to find your body.”

“What if we don’t?”

“I check the obituaries. If nothing turns up, I have to file a missing persons report and see if anything matches at the coroner’s.”

The bus lurched forward, its engine coughing to life and making it harder to hear his voice. “How many times have you had to do that before?”

“Not many. I have to be careful that the police don’t get wise to me being involved with so many dead people. They might peg me as a suspicious character.”

Michael peered into my face, making me lean back a bit. He had a strange lack of appreciation for personal space. “You *are* pretty shift-y looking. It’s the bags under your eyes and the fact that you’re about ten pounds underweight.”

I folded my arms underneath my chest, choosing to stare out of the window instead of facing him. “I don’t look *that* bad.”

“Maybe not. You’re pretty cute for a girl who sees dead people all the time.”

I resisted the urge to squirm in my seat from the compliment. I was wholly unused to them.

“Though I can’t vouch for your fashion sense. What’s with the man-coat?” He tugged at the edge of my sleeve.

I jerked it away reflexively. “Don’t!”

His eyes widened at my reaction. The people in seats in front of me turned to look.

I cleared my throat, reminding myself to calm down. “It’s...important to me.”

Michael studied my neutral expression before nodding. “Got it.”

No joke this time. Maybe he wasn’t as thick as he looked. Ye gods. I started to apologize, but his hand shot out past my face, pointing.

“There! I recognize that club. I woke up down the street from here.”

I tugged on the bus line and we came to a stop nearby. Michael followed me out as I hopped onto the sidewalk and fished for my notepad.

“Let your mind go blank and then just describe whatever comes in it as you look at this place,” I instructed with my pen poised.

Michael let his eyes wander over the building, now mostly empty because it was the middle of the day and most people were at home or at work. “I remember there was music, some kind of emo-kid rock music playing when I woke up. The first thing I noticed was that it looked sort of chilly out here, but I wasn’t cold. I just felt...faint. I felt like myself but somehow a little different.”

He ran his fingertips across the aforementioned park bench, eyes searching the tattered wood for answers. “I got up to ask a girl next to me where I was, but she didn’t answer me. When I touched her, she looked right at me but asked her friend if he was messing with her. That’s when I figured she couldn’t see or hear me. It should have bothered me more when I realized I had died somehow, but instead I just wandered down the street checking for proof. I flipped the girl’s skirt up over there.”

He pointed towards an ice cream shop two stores away with a faint smirk on his lips. “She freaked out. Thought it was the wind. I couldn’t figure out what to do so I just starting walking in that direction.”

Michael turned and walked, making me have to jog to catch up with his long strides. “I walked for most of the night, not knowing why but I knew I had somewhere to be.”

“What happened after that?”

He stopped and I collided with his back. I rubbed the tingling sensation away from my nose, frowning up at him. A few people around me whispered and stared at my strange behavior but I ignored them. Michael hesitated, turning his face until just one side was visible.

“I saw you.”

I stared. “What? When?”

“I think you were walking towards the bus stop that day. Something about you caught my attention. I don’t know why, but I felt like I had to be near you. Still, I didn’t want to freak you out so I made sure you didn’t see me when you got on the bus, stayed in the background during the ride, got off one stop after yours. I crept into your apartment through the window and hid in the closet. After you went to bed, I had a look around to see if there was any reason I felt drawn to you. Nothing really came of it but I had nowhere else to go so I stuck around. The next morning when I poured your coffee, you seemed to notice but like most people, you sort of brushed it off. When you left for work, I trailed you for a while but then I realized just how insane my stalking had gotten and went to the park. That’s when I figured out you could see me that time you walked past. I didn’t understand what was going on but I figured you might be able to help me. I followed you back to the apartment. This time, though, there was a blond guy in your kitchen so I stayed away. I figured I’d wait it out until you got back from work the next night. That’s why I was outside your apartment when we officially met.”

Michael turned around, looking sheepish. I mouthed uselessly for a moment, trying to figure just what to tell him. “That is the creepiest goddamn thing that has ever happened to me.”

He tilted his head, making an apologetic face. “Yeah, sorry about that. I had hoped you might find it romantic or something, but that was sort of a long-shot.”

“Who am I, Bella Swan? That makes me never want to sleep ever again! Thanks, you creeper.” I resisted the strong urge to shudder at the thought of him sneaking around my apartment while I slept. Good thing I didn’t have a rocking chair or that would just be the end of my ability to relax at home.

He winced a bit. “Alright, I deserve that. What’s your conclusion?”

I sighed, flipping through what I had written down. “Unfortunately, nothing you’ve told me suggests the nature of how you died. We’re gonna have to check the obits. Come on.”

Around the corner from the club, I discovered a newsstand and bought the available newspapers. Tossing the other parts of them aside, I found the proper section and began browsing through names and photos.

Michael hovered over my shoulder, bouncing on his heels with anxiety. “Anything?”

“I found one. I’ll write it down and Google it later.” I scribbled down a man named Michael who didn’t have an accompanying picture. As I folded up the paper, he tucked his hands into his pockets once more.

“So now what?”

“We’ll circle the block a couple of times to see if anything jogs your memory. Until I check this name, there’s nothing more I can do.” I hated the immovable truth in my words. This was the worst part of my “job”—waiting.

Two days left. Any more waiting and I was dead meat. Harrowing thought, really.

The poltergeist fell in step beside me, making sure to take in every detail he could about the block. This part of town was nicer than my side with its shiny boutiques, brightly colored neon signs, and clean, well-lit parking garages. The club Michael had woken up in front of, called *Devil’s Paradise*, was pretty exclusive—they only let the trendiest of the trendy in to observe whatever band would be playing. It had previously occurred to me to ask the people inside if they had seen Michael before, but the success rate without a picture would be pretty low. Better to dig up a photo before banging on doors. It saved time.

“What are the chances that people I know have reported me missing?” Michael asked.

I thought about it. “Depends. If it’s been two days, someone should have notified the authorities. Y’know, assuming you’re a person of good moral character.”

He touched his chest, feigning a wound. “Ouch. You think I’m a drug dealer or something?”

I snorted. “More likely a male prostitute.”

He threw his head back and laughed, nearly making me jump. “That’s rich. If that’s what my life was like, I’m sad I died. I’m sure my clients will miss me.”

“Or at least part of you.” I let my eyes drift downward.

Michael shook his head, smirking. “Careful. You’ll have me blushing soon.”

We turned the corner in a comfortable silence. Not sure how that came about. Could it be that I was getting used to him? I could only hope I wasn’t that desperate for companionship.

We passed a candy shop that made my stomach growl as I caught sight of fresh pralines and caramel apples. I rarely enjoyed sweets since I was on such a limited budget.

Michael noticed my longing gaze and offered a sympathetic look. “I think I’m going to miss getting a sugar rush.”

“It’s overrated. Still, I’d kill for a fresh caramel apple,” I admitted, rubbing my stomach. The bacon and coffee had only gone so far. Real food would be a necessity within the next hour.

“Is your wallet really that tight?”

I resisted the urge to wince. “I’m on my own. The money I get is from the restaurant. Most of that goes towards rent and utilities. I make what I can out of the rest.”

“You work for God. He can’t cut you some slack in the employment department?”

That made me smirk. “You would think so. Anything familiar yet?”

“Nope. Maybe I really was a street...walker...” He stopped and then whirled around.

I stopped dead in my tracks, confused. “What is it?”

His eyes darted through the crowd wildly as if he were searching for someone. “I thought I saw something.”

“Something or someone?”

“Someone. A man. He had dark hair. When I noticed him, something felt weird,” Michael muttered, looking back and forth down the sidewalk.

I threw up my hands. “Feel free to specify at any time.”

“I’m sorry, I just...” Michael shook his head a bit, still frowning. “Forget it. Maybe I’m seeing things.”

He kept walking, careful not to bump into anyone. I couldn’t help but feel worried. I cast my own gaze into the people on either side of me. It was clear to me that this street and whomever that mystery man was had something to do with Michael’s death. Sometimes I had to take a ghost to more than one site to help their memory return but for him, this seemed to be a hot spot. Still, there was an uneasy feeling in my gut that I had never felt before when working on a case.

When I caught up with Michael, he was peering at the sign for a store called Guitar Center with a glazed expression. He didn’t speak, but he stepped up to the glass and watched a brunette with purple bangs shelve different kinds of headphones. I had to step close to hear him whisper, “Chloe.”

“Chloe?”

He blinked a couple times, snapping out of whatever vision he’d just seen. “Yeah. It’s weird. Her face just sort of clicked in my mind. I think I knew her when I was alive.”

“Couldn’t hurt to ask.” The door jingled to indicate my entrance, and I made my way through the aisle to find the girl. She was a little shorter and thicker than me with wide pink lips and too much mascara. Still, she smiled prettily when I walked over and welcomed me to the store.

“Can I help you?”

“Yeah. Is your name Chloe?”

“Mm-hm. What’s up?”

I fought the urge to glance at the poltergeist to my right in confirmation. “I’m Jordan. Do you know someone named Michael? Six foot one, brown hair, green eyes?”

“Yeah, sure. He’s a friend of mine. Does he need something?”

Uh oh. She didn’t know he was dead. This little interview could get real bad real fast. I licked my lips and thought of the least harmful thing to do.

“Would you mind giving me his cell phone number? I have an important call for him.”

“Sure, no problem.” She glanced over her shoulder to make sure her boss wasn’t hovering around before taking out her iPhone and showing me his number. I copied it down on the notepad. It was indeed a local cell phone number, and maybe the first bit of good news for the day.

“Ask her how she knows me,” Michael prodded. Couldn’t blame the guy.

“By the way, how do you know him?”

“Oh, he comes in here all the time to try out the new guitars. He practically lives here. His band plays on weekends over at that club down the way. Sometimes I drop by to see the performance, but he disappeared after the first big concert a couple nights back. He’s always been like that, though. You interested in him?”

Naturally, my face went hot with a blush. Michael spared me a sly little smile.

I faked a laugh. “No way. He’s dead wrong for me.”

“Oh, real nice. Gimme a second to go make a rim shot on the drum set over there,” Michael grumbled, crossing his arms across his chest.

I bit back a snicker and addressed the girl again. “Thanks for your help. I really appreciate it. I may need some more help from you pinning him down—”

Cue another immature chuckle from the Peanut Gallery. “—would you mind telling me the store hours?”

She gave them to me, no questions asked. Nice girl. I waved and left the store, heading for the nearest quiet spot. There was a clearing across the street with a few tables underneath a group of trees, so we scurried over the crosswalk to take a seat. I dialed Michael's number, putting it on speakerphone so I could write any new information down. Instead of ringing, the phone belted out lyrics to Oasis' "Falling Down." At the very least, the guy had good taste in music.

"You've reached the voicemail of Michael O'Brien. If you leave your name and number, I'll be sure to get back to you if I actually give a shit. Konnichiwa, bitches." *BEEP*.

I arched an eyebrow. "So you really were a charmer while you were alive."

Michael grinned. "Make fun of me all you want, I don't care."

"Why?"

"I know my last name now." For an instant, I didn't have anything to say in response. The statement was so simple, but he said it with such...happiness. Who would have thought that one little word could make his face glow like that? I masked my surprise by scribbling down what I had heard on the notepad and closing the phone.

"Well, we've got a name, a number, and a reference. Maybe today isn't a total loss."

He made a scornful noise. "Please, what would you be doing if you weren't out solving my death?"

"Lying in bed with a cup of coffee and a good book," I replied with a wistful sigh. He muttered something about being a drama queen under his breath while I stood and stuffed my phone in my pocket.

"Where to next, fearless leader?"

"Home. We've done a lot today and your mind needs to reset itself. Come on." We passed back the way we came but I kept an eye out for any unusual dark-haired men. Y'know, other than the one walking right next to me. Maybe I was just being paranoid again but ever since he mentioned the man, I had felt like someone was watching us. I hoped for once it was just my imagination. If only I could be so lucky.