

# The Pale: Diary of the Dead

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## Chapter 1

I awoke to a dense fog. I could make out some graffiti on the brick wall across from me, lit by a dim sconce above a thick metal door, but everything was dull and misty. I slowly stood and turned to get my bearings. My eyes were having trouble adjusting and when I looked down, I was shocked to find a blurry blood-soaked copy of myself slumped against the wall, a knife buried deep in my stomach. With a shaking hand, I reached out to touch the shoulder of my motionless body, but my fingers passed right through it. The only sensation I felt was a slight, cool dampness — like when you let your hand drift outside a car window on an early spring morning. Unnerved, I ran my fingers through my hair and was relieved to discover that at least I — the me that wasn't passed out — was solid.

As a sense of panic at the precariousness of my situation began to set in, I looked around for other people but the alley was dark and the fog was making it next to impossible to see. A realization slowly began to dawn on me — this was obviously a hallucination of some sort. I'd been in a pretty rough spot before I passed out, but the fact that I was capable of wondering what was happening meant that my neurons were still firing. I might be unconscious — but I *must* be alive.

I tried to calm down a bit and focus. *Ok*, I thought, *so if I'm unconscious but bleeding out in a dark alleyway, then what can I do about it?* Calling for help wouldn't do me any good. This was a hallucination, and stopping the bleeding here wasn't going to fix my problem in reality. No, what I needed was to wake up. If I woke up, then I would be back in the real world and I could try to figure out a plan from there. My mind began to race through a list of things that typically wake you from a dream: the phone, inconsiderate neighbours, irritating alarms. For me, it was usually that something terrifying was happening and I scared myself awake. But how was I going to scare myself in a place where there didn't seem to be anything except fog?

I moved out of the alley; the mist seemed to have engulfed the entire city. I hurried through the streets looking for some way to wake up. The air around me was filled with the repulsive scent of urine and filth that permeates the worst parts of any city. Shrouded in the darkness and vapours were people with nowhere else to go — huddled up in doorways as litter blew about them in the slight breeze that had picked up. A sudden inexplicable aversion made me wary of reaching out to them for help.

I decided to venture out further to see if I could find a break in the haze, but the fog didn't let up. After several frantic minutes of searching, the dull glow of neon lights in the distance drew me towards potential signs of life. A rowdy group stumbled out of a bar — four against one might be a good way to get the adrenaline pumping to wake me up. I moved towards where they were gathered and said some choice words to get their attention but they didn't seem to hear me. It was weird — even though I was closer to them, they still looked cloudy and indistinct — but I didn't have time to think about that. They were singing loudly, totally blitzed out. *Maybe I just wasn't loud enough.* I got closer and reached out to tug on one guy's disgusting ponytail but my hand passed right through it — as if he was made of air. Each time I tried to touch any of the drunks, my hands slipped through them with that same damp sensation that I'd felt when I'd tried to touch 'my' shoulder.

This wasn't going to work. I had to come up with another plan ... but what? Since this dream world seemed to be loosely based on the real one, I began running down the street in search of a landmark I would recognize. Maybe if I could figure out where I had wandered to, I could come up with some other way to wake myself. While I ran, I was struck by the fact that my steps lacked the wet slapping sound they should have been making on the pavement. It was so quiet, too quiet. There wasn't even any sound coming out of me. By now I should have been panting like crazy — but instead my breath came easily, regularly. This weirded me out so I slowed to a more natural pace.

The streetlamps around me seemed barely able to penetrate the dense mist, but after a few blocks I saw an old café I'd been to a few times. If I continued along this street a bit longer, I would eventually come to Banting Memorial Hospital. I hated hospitals. If the goal was scaring myself, then

maybe there would be something useful there. It took me another five minutes to make my way to the emergency room entrance. It already felt like I'd been in this dream world too long so I began to pick up the pace again. I didn't know how much time I had before the blood loss would be too much.

When I passed through the open doors I was hit by the sterile, antiseptic smell of hand sanitizer and chemical cleaners. Strangely, the thick fog continued inside the hospital despite the harsh fluorescent lighting. The ER was fairly quiet. I decided to start by seeing if I could get anyone to notice me. I walked up to the admissions desk to grab the nurse's attention. Like the people outside the bar, he looked as foggy and distorted as everything else. As the nurse continued to flip through charts, seemingly oblivious to my presence, I leaned forward over the counter and — in the process — stumbled right through it. Standing there, in the centre of a piece of furniture, I had to wonder what the rules of this surreal dream-world were.

*So far, I seem to be the only solid object, no one can see or hear me, and everything is shrouded in an all-consuming haze. If I can move through things that are normally solid, I wonder what else I can do.* But there wasn't enough time for more than that. I needed to stay focused on waking up. I looked around and saw a sign for the stairwell. Maybe if I could get to the roof and jump — dreams about falling always woke me with a jolt.

I hurried down the first hallway on my left, following the signs for the stairs. I raced to the end of the hall but hesitated slightly when I reached the door. Slowly, I stretched out my hand to see if it could pass through the metal. The cool, gentle mist let my fingers slide easily into the handle and out the other side. Trying not to think about how weird this was, I quickly pushed the rest of my body through and took the first flight of stairs in several large strides. The building was seven stories high, but I never got tired or out of breath as I rushed upward. When I reached the top, I burst through the door and onto the roof.

Never being a fan of heights, it took a minute for the vertigo to pass before I could move closer to the edge. The air seemed a bit clearer up here but the light pollution washed out the sky with the dull orange glow of the reflected streetlights. It was eerily quiet. There was the faint hum of some traffic below, but my feet made no sound as I walked across the gravel towards a low brick ledge at the corner of the roof. Cautiously, I looked down and immediately regretted it. My stomach began doing backflips and my vision grew dark. I stumbled backwards and tried to clear my head.

'This is insane. What the hell am I thinking?' I asked no one in particular. My voice was shaky and my breath started to catch in my chest. 'Even if this is a dream world, how am I going to get the nerve to jump? What if it doesn't work and, instead of waking myself, I end up brain dead?'

I didn't have time to waste being afraid. The panic began to spread through my body and my chest got tight.

STOP IT!

Suddenly I was six years old, standing in my parents' kitchen.

'STOP IT!' my mother whisper-screamed at me — her hand leaving a stinging burn as she slapped me across the cheek. 'Cut that out right now or you'll wake your father.'

That's right, there are worse things than heights. I took a deep breath and stepped towards the edge. Without looking down, I tried to place my foot on the low wall. It seemed to be solid. After another deep breath, I put my weight on my foot and brought myself all the way onto the ledge, staring straight ahead the whole time. The door had been vapour but the ground was firm. *If I'm wrong, if this fall can't scare me awake, then I don't know what will happen to me — both here and in the real world. But what other options are there? How long has it been already? How much longer do I have?*

With one final breath, I closed my eyes and tilted my weight forward. Instant remorse. My eyes snapped open and my arms flailed wildly, reaching for anything that might save me. I was too terrified to scream and this seemed to be doing nothing to wake me up. At least the thick fog made it hard to see the ground that was racing towards me. I closed my eyes again and decided to just wait for it to be over. It wouldn't be long now. I felt pressure underneath me as I fell.

*Am I falling in slow motion? This feels like it's taking forever.* I couldn't help a quick glimpse to see how much further I had to go. To my surprise, I was already lying face down on the sidewalk, a discarded piece of gum right in front of my nose. *Damn it! I survived it but I'm still not awake. What the hell do I have to do? Jump again? Jump from higher up?* This was bullshit. I rolled over and looked back up towards the roof. The darkness and fog only allowed me to see about a storey up. What was I going to do? If this wasn't enough to wake me, then what?

Defeated, I decided to make my way back to the alley. If nothing else, I would be near my body for whatever was going to happen next. The sun had begun to rise, but like the lights in the hospital, it did nothing to dispel the mist that saturated everything. A similar veil had begun to descend upon my hopes. As I shuffled along the sidewalk, pondering what my next move would be, I mindlessly kicked at a can laying in my path. My foot passed through the vapour and I was reminded of how powerless I seemed to be in this world. The one bonus so far was that I hadn't grown tired or hungry. At least I didn't need to worry about my more basic needs. That would let me focus on finding a way out.

Loneliness from this sudden isolation began to set in — but I'd been alone before. If there was one thing my parents had done, it was ensure that I never relied on anyone for anything. I'd learned very quickly that the only person you can count on is you. I supposed that was part of how I'd ended up in this mess to begin with. When you only look out for yourself, there's never anyone to watch your back.

By the time I got back to the alley the sun had risen enough that some of the bums had begun to stir. Their misty forms moved slowly as they started to gather up their few belongings to face another day. One man mumbled, wondering where he had left his watch, worried that he was late for an appointment. Another grinned, a huge cat-like smile spread across his face as if he was up to no good.

Since no one could see me, I wasn't too worried about going back down the alleyway by myself. *Is my body still there, or will it have vanished while I was gone?* I had to walk all the way to the end before I could be sure. I knelt down and tried once again to touch it — *if only I could shake myself awake.* Like the can, I was met with no resistance and my hand passed through the dimly-lit air that resembled me.

'I'm sorry for your loss.'

I nearly jumped out of my skin at those words. I turned around quickly and a small girl, probably about twelve years old, was looking down on me with a face full of compassion. Not only did she seem to see me, but she was also the first thing I'd seen that didn't look all misty. I must have looked confused because she repeated herself.

'I'm sorry for your loss.'

'You can see me?' I asked, still in shock, not really taking in what she was saying.

'Yes. I followed you here from the hospital. You looked lost and now I see why.'

'What do you mean? What are you talking about? Why do you look normal?'

Her eyes were soft and her thin lips formed a patient smile. She knelt down beside me and gently placed her hand on my shoulder. I could feel its warmth through my sweater.

'My name is Ava. Why don't we find somewhere a little nicer to talk?'

Her eyes darted to the blood-soaked areas of my shadow self. She was calm, but I could tell that she didn't want to be here.

'Why don't we just move to the bench across the street?' she suggested, gesturing behind her.

I stood up and followed her as she led the way out of the alley. Ava had taken my hand like I was a child who needed help crossing the street. I didn't resist: it was the first thing I had really felt in hours. The gentle firmness of her grasp was comforting and felt like a life raft in this sea of anesthetic fog. She was small with dark brown hair braided into pigtails that went to her shoulders. She wore a denim jacket with flowers on it and acid-washed jeans. Her sneakers were fire engine red and her striped t-shirt looked like a rainbow. The bright colours of her clothing contrasted nicely with the darkness of her skin. She moved towards a wooden bench in front of a boarded-up old deli. It faced the alley and I could just make out the entrance where the sun had begun to illuminate it.

Ava sat down and patted the spot next to her, indicating that I should do the same. I didn't — partially because I didn't want to, and partially because I didn't know how. Everything else I had encountered was as solid as a cloud. I didn't feel like falling on my ass and looking like an idiot.

'What's going on here? What is this place?' I snapped. My rudeness didn't seem to faze her.

In the same calm and gentle tone she'd used before, she said, 'This is the Pale.'

'And what the hell is that?'

She paused for a moment and tried to take my hand again. I jerked it away and stared her down. I was done being patient.

The kindness didn't leave her face — if anything, it deepened. She returned my stare with a gaze full of pity. Then she spoke very quietly, as you might when trying to reassure a frightened animal, 'The Pale is where some people go when they die.'

Ice ran through my veins. I wanted to laugh in her face and storm off, but everything I'd experienced last night told me she was telling the truth. *But she has to be wrong. I'm just unconscious, I've lost a lot of blood, but I'll pull through this. If I can keep her talking then maybe she'll give me an idea of how to get out of here.*

'What do you mean some people?'

'Not everyone who passes away comes to the Pale. I'm not entirely sure what the rules are, but I know that those who choose to end their lives don't end up here.'

'Why?'

'I don't know. I've only been here a little while. There are others who've been here longer, but no one seems to know much about why or how we get here.'

Without thinking about it, I sat down. My body wasn't tired, but I was having trouble processing what was going on, and suddenly felt like gravity had been magnified. *If Ava is right, then there might be no going back. I could be trapped here. But I'm not giving up that easily, there has to be a way out.*

'Does anyone ever show up who isn't dead, maybe just unconscious?'

'Not that I've seen. I'm sorry.' Her eyes dropped to the ground as she said this.

We sat there in silence for a long time. Not once did she try to cheer me up or make me talk. Ava was patient and seemed content to just keep me company while I contemplated this possible reality.

'My name's Alex,' I said with an attempt at a less aggressive tone.

'It's nice to meet you, Alex. I'm sorry that it looks like your trip here was rough.'

A harsh laugh escaped my lips. Yeah, that was one way to put it. I'd bled out in an alley. Completely alone. Never to be missed.

A dark figure suddenly blocked my vision and the pain of the stab wound shot through my stomach all over again. I grabbed at his arms, struggling to keep myself upright. His free hand wrapped across my mouth. I still tried to call out for help but it was growing difficult to stay awake.

'Is there anything I can do?' she asked.

Ava's question made the memory disappear as quickly as it had descended. 'I want to wait for someone to find my body. I'm sure it will be a while ... you don't need to hang around.' This would buy me some time to think. *There still has to be a way out of this mess I've gotten myself into. As much as I appreciate having someone who knows I still exist, it won't be long before she ditches me like everyone else.*

'I'll wait with you,' she said.

'Have it your way.' *I guess I'm not going to get rid of her as easily as I'd thought.*

We continued to sit there for the next few hours. It was hard for me to concentrate. There had to be another explanation for what was happening. Ava's silent vigil by my side actually turned out to be nice. She didn't seem to want anything from me, and she never tried to move me along.

The street had gotten busy but my body had continued to go unnoticed. By about noon the sun lit the passageway all the way to the back. I too had slowly drifted closer, not able to look away from the pathetic mess I had become. Now fully visible, I realized why no one had seen my body. Everyone kept their eyes forward, not wanting to see or think about the kinds of people who would take refuge in an alley, not wanting to notice those less fortunate than themselves because they wanted to pretend ignorance. A pair of beat cops doing their rounds eventually spotted me. Neither of them looked fazed. They had probably seen their fair share of violence in this area. I followed them to the back and the woman bent to check my pulse. She shook her head to her partner and he called it in. They searched my pockets for ID, but anything of value would be gone by now. It looked like I'd already been picked clean: even my shoes were gone. It seemed I was destined to be another nameless victim of the city's growing crime problem. I continued to watch them as they sorted through the refuse looking for evidence but they weren't turning up much.

It looked like I might have to admit that it was too late. *At least my body isn't going to just sit here — hunched over and rotting.* But that wasn't good enough. *No one will come to identify me, no one will mourn me. No one will avenge me.*

Ava had continued to wait back by the bench but she was standing now. I stood frozen in place as my grim reality descended upon me — but a pity party wouldn't get me anywhere. I needed a plan. To form a plan, I needed information. Luckily Ava seemed like the type who was eager to help. As I circled the alley to have another look around for clues as to who might have killed me, she came over and hovered near the opening.

'You said only some people end up here — you must have a theory as to why we've gotten trapped in this nothing land.'

'Well, it could be because we've left something unfinished, some mission we haven't achieved.'

'Then why are you here? It doesn't seem like you'd have been alive long enough to even start anything, let alone leave something incomplete.'

She smiled a little, 'Maybe that means I have many things to accomplish before my time here is done.'

I guess she had me there, but this all seemed a little flimsy. I didn't see much point in continuing to discuss theory. What I needed were hard facts.

'So how do things work around here anyway? Can we pop out of paintings or make sensual pottery with the living?'

She laughed again. It was kinda nice making her smile.

'No,' she said. 'As far as I know, we can watch everything the living do, but they can't see or hear us. We don't need to eat, drink, or sleep, but there are limitations too.'

'Like what?'

'Well, for starters, we can't touch anything from the living world. For example, if you want to pass your time reading a book, you can't flip the pages. You have to look over someone's shoulder while they read.'

'I see. So no more fixing up motorcycles or working on my needlepoint.'

'Sadly, no. Which is too bad, because I'm sure you make some pretty interesting embroidery.'

I gave her a sly look and she stuck her tongue out at me.

'Why is it so foggy?' I had begun to feel a little claustrophobic, never able to see more than a few dozen meters ahead, never knowing what might be hiding just out of sight. I was also quickly growing frustrated with the misty vapours of this new world that were making it difficult for me to search for clues.

'I've heard a few ideas. No one seems to know for sure. Everything we know about the Pale is through trial and error or word of mouth. We don't have any way of recording what we learn. One possibility is that since we're no longer trapped in a physical form, we see things more like they are on an atomic level — mostly air and space.'

Just then, one of the cops spilled the rank contents of someone's improvised toilet — cutting short their cursory search for evidence. Covering their faces, they both rushed for the cleaner air of the street. It didn't look like the police would be much help. Letting out a sigh, I shook my head. *I shouldn't be surprised that, yet again, I'm the only one I can rely on.*

Ava carried on — almost as if she was trying to distract me from the pitiful circumstances of my untimely end: 'But as harmless as it all seems, you still need to be careful.'

'What do you mean?' *What around here could possibly be dangerous?*

'If my theory is right, then we're trapped here until we wrap things up and that will be pretty hard to do since we can't interact with anything from the real world. A lot of people drift about aimlessly and their minds deteriorate pretty quickly. You either accomplish what you've left unfinished and move on ... or you get trapped here forever and eventually ... lose it.'

*Great! So, unless I can figure out how to get outta here — and soon — I'll end up losing my mind. This isn't exactly reassuring. As far as I'm concerned, my time was cut short way sooner than was fair. Then I arrive in some kind of crappy afterlife, and I find out that the clock is already ticking. Sure, the clock was technically ticking the entire time I was alive — but no one ever bothers to think about it. In fact, we spend a good deal of time and money trying to deny the fact that we won't be around forever.* Regardless, there clearly wasn't any time to waste. The longer I stood here, the colder my killer's trail would get. He was obviously my unfinished business and I was going to do everything in my power to make sure something finished him.

## Chapter 2

The changing seasons made me painfully aware of the months that had slipped by without a single clue. The cops had no leads, and without anyone crying out for the capture of my murderer, the case was quickly relegated to the stack of other unsolved murders in the city. I too was losing the will to hunt him down — it just seemed impossible. I had begun to spend more and more of my time randomly wandering and I could feel myself growing numb. What did it really matter if I went crazy? Maybe I would like it. Anything had to be better than this tediously endless existence of nothingness. *No. I can't think like that. If I give up, then the piece of garbage gets away with what he did.*

Clunky work boots stomp slowly down the stairs. Beady eyes catch a glimpse of me and begin to fill with a look of hate.

'Come here, Alex.'

Instead of moving forward, I back up a step. My backwards movement triggers anger, causing a wave of red to wash across the face that's quickly hardening into a scowl.

'When I tell you to do something, you better damn well do it!'

I turn and try to make my way to the back door as quickly as possible. I pass through it and in the memory our yard shifts into a dimly lit street. Mouth covered, gasping for air through my nose, I try to scream out. This new tormentor digs the knife deeper and pulls me further into the alley. It hurts so much I want to vomit.

*Screw that guy. He's not getting off that easily. He's going to pay for what he did. I'm so sick of bullies and dirtbags who think it's okay to hurt people.*

I was fired up again but I was out of ideas. Back in the beginning I had asked Ava to keep an ear out for anything she might hear about my murder. She tended to spend a lot of time at the hospital and between the cops, paramedics, and newly dead, I was hopeful she would learn something about my killer. Since that night, I had spread my time between chasing false leads and regular check-ins with Ava. *Perhaps it's time I visit her again.*

I found Ava at her parents' place. They were all sitting in the backyard enjoying the sunset — the rest of her family completely oblivious to the fact that Ava was enjoying it with them. I didn't like coming here much. They all genuinely seemed to care about each other. It always felt like I was intruding on something private, intimate.

As a general rule, I don't go into people's homes. I wouldn't have wanted anyone poking their nose into my business when I was alive, and the fact that I was dead didn't give me the right to intrude into theirs. Besides, you never know what you may walk in on behind closed doors — and I didn't need to watch someone dressing their cat, binge-watching TV, or whatever else they might be up to.

Looking over at her, I was reminded of just how young and innocent Ava was. I sometimes wondered if it hadn't been for the best that she died so young. She'd gotten out before anything bad could spoil her naïve trust in the world. *No, that's not true. She died a slow and painful death caused by an incurable disease. Still, I think I would have preferred her life to the one I had.*

Ava noticed me hovering by the gate to the yard and waved for me to come over. She was sitting under a large maple tree whose leaves had just started to turn with the season. I walked over to stand by her feet, keeping my back to the happy family gathered together on the porch. Ava's gaze was focused on her folks. Her eyes reminded me of the cross-section of a tree with rings that gradually shifted from gold to brown as they moved inward towards her pupil.

'Hey, stranger', she said with a smile, 'what brings you here?'

Aggravated by the shittiness of the world and existence in general, my tone was surly, 'Just passing through. I thought I'd stop by to see if you'd heard anything lately.'

'No, sorry.'

Pity filled her face and this made me even more irritable — I didn't need pity, I needed results.

'I haven't had anything concrete to follow in forever and I can't just wait around for someone else to catch this guy.' I swung my fist at the tree but, of course, this did nothing except remind me of how paralyzed this world made me feel. Ava seemed a little startled and I had to keep in mind that even though the tree wasn't solid, she was. I could hurt her, and for the first time, she seemed aware of that.

I immediately bent down to place my hand on her shoulder. I wanted to reassure her but she flinched away a little. *I am not like them. I can never be like them. I need to make this right.*

'I'm sorry, Ava, I just lost my cool for a minute. I hope you know that I wasn't aiming for you.'

'It's ok,' she said relaxing a little, 'you just surprised me, that's all.' Her gaze returned to her family, perhaps avoiding making eye-contact with me. 'My mom always said, "When all else fails, start again." Why don't you try going back to where it all started?' Tentatively, she looked back at me to see how her suggestion was received.

Embarrassed by my behaviour and eager to show her I could behave, I agreed. 'I suppose it can't hurt, it's not like I've got anything to lose.' *Except my mind.* I stood up and began to leave the yard.

'Going so soon? Why don't you hang out for a bit? I think my family is going to play charades and they're terrible at it. Maybe it'll be a nice change for you.'

'No thanks.' *I'd rather wait in line at Service Ontario than sit here awkwardly sharing in 'game night'.* 'There's no time like the present and the darker it gets the harder it will be for me to see anything at the alley. Maybe another time.' Before she could say anything else, I slipped through the fence and hurried down the street.

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By the time I made my way downtown, the sun had set and a cool autumn breeze was picking up. Most of the Vitae, my nickname for the living, had turned in for the evening. The night was dark and cloud-covered, the only lights guiding the way were the small islands created by the street lamps that lined the sidewalks. Appearing ahead of me in one of those islands was a girl with warm-ivory skin, chin-length black hair, and an overstuffed messenger bag wearing jeans and a plaid shirt. She was as misty and shrouded as everything else that still existed in the real world. It looked like she was alone and this made me a little nervous. As I knew from experience, this was a bad part of town and no good would come from being on your own in a neighbourhood like this.

She quickly passed out of the light back into the darkness and I found myself picking up my pace to close the distance between us. It was stupid really — I wouldn't be able to help her if something happened — but it would drive me crazy not knowing whether she made it home safely. My imagination could be very colourful and it always tended towards the macabre. Suddenly, my fears didn't seem so absurd. A dark figure entered the same patch of light the girl had just left. It was decided, then, for my own peace of mind, I would follow her to make sure she didn't end up sharing my fate — or worse.

I had made my way closer to both of them now. My pace had quickened to a light jog. I didn't have to worry about being spotted or scaring either of them since they would be completely unaware of my presence. The gap between the man and the girl was now only about three meters with me coming up in between them. He wore a black jacket with the hood pulled down over his face and his hands were in his pockets. He seemed focused on the girl, who I couldn't help but picture as his inevitable victim.

She wasn't oblivious to the possible danger behind her, though. Her steps had quickened from their already brisk pace. Now that I had caught up with her I could see that she was trying to watch her back out of the corners of her large almond-shaped eyes using the reflections in the windows of the abandoned storefronts. That was good. If she was prepared for what was likely going to happen, then maybe she would stand a fighting chance at getting out of this.

I glanced around to see if there was any sign of help or safety on the horizon. But as far as I could tell, the street was deserted. There were no other people, no open businesses, nothing she could use as a refuge. I looked back and the man had continued to gain ground despite her increased pace. She sensed that things were coming to a head. I saw her hands tighten on the strap that crossed her body. It made me wonder if she thought her only danger was being mugged.

I had never felt the helplessness of my situation more strongly than I did right now. My inability to do *anything*, to prevent this stranger from meeting the same tragic end that I had, was almost painful. I couldn't tear myself away from the scene that I knew was about to play out. One way or another, it would all be over soon.

The man had now completely closed the distance and reached out to grab her — black leather gloves covered his hands even though the weather wasn't even cool yet. At that moment, the three of us were passing in front of the opening to an alley. With one quick movement, he dragged her into its mouth.

Only the faintest light from the street lamps penetrated this dark hole, but I could still make out the general shapes. This girl — who I had somehow mixed myself up with — seemed to have been more ready for what was coming than her attacker anticipated. With movements that were almost as quick as his had been, she spun around, thrust the heel of her hand up into his nose and kned him in the groin. I heard surprise and pain escape his mouth. He staggered backwards and made a failed attempt to keep hold of her as he crumpled to the ground.

She didn't waste any time looking behind her to assess the damage she'd done. As soon as his grasp on her was broken she took off running down the street. The man had fallen back onto the sidewalk, into the light of the streetlamp, and I could see the blood streaming down his peach-coloured face, obscuring his features. In his hand was a red lanyard that must have been around the girl's neck. He seemed to be in too much pain to get up and chase his 'victim' after what she'd done.

In the shock of it all, it took me a moment to realize what had happened and chase after her. The heavy load of her bag seemed to keep her from going as quickly as she wanted to, and it didn't take me long to catch up. After about a block of running, I began to hear voices. She seemed to hear them too and steered her course toward them.

Around the corner was a group of people who had just stepped out of a bar and I was once again flashing back to my first night in the Pale. This time was different though. She hadn't died and these people would hear her calls for help. They turned towards the sound of her black combat boots pounding against the pavement. Her breath was ragged as she tried to ask them to call the cops.

The group of people began to close around her. One woman was already dialling 911 on her phone while some of the guys looked like they wanted to check out the street she'd come from. Another woman asked what the girl's name was while she continued struggling for air.

'Billie,' was all she was able to get out between gasps. She flung her bag onto the ground and paced a little with her hands on her hips, still trying to get control of her breathing. Billie seemed to be focused on her surroundings as she continued to glance in the direction she'd fled every now and then, not ready to let her guard down. She quickly explained to the others what had happened without any hysterics or over-exaggeration.

The police arrived pretty quickly, and although it seemed like tonight was a victory over the barbarians of the world, it wasn't until Billie gave her statement that I discovered my devastating mistake.

'Can you describe your attacker?'

'I didn't get a good look at him, but he was about a foot taller than me, maybe two-hundred pounds, Caucasian, and he had a scar that ran along the bottom right side of his jaw. The rest of his face was covered by a hood.'

It's late at night and I'm in a rush to grab some food from any place that I can find that's still open. Suddenly someone grabs at my ankle, stopping me in my tracks.

'Can you spare some change?' asks a man covered in rags, squatting against the wall.

'Take your hand off me!' I shake my leg but his grip only tightens. He looks up at me, his face covered in filth with a long scar that cuts across his jaw.

'Take pity on me, you must have something you can give.'

'I've got my own problems, now let go of me before I make you regret it.'

Like a flash, he's on his feet and pushing me into a dimly-lit alley.

'I CAN'T BELIEVE IT! I had my chance and I blew it!' I yelled every bad word I could think of at the top of my lungs. *I had been right there and all I had to do was follow him instead of that stupid girl!*

I tried to calm down a little. He hadn't been dressed anything like the last time I'd seen him. This time he'd been in clean dark jeans and an expensive-looking jacket. His hood had been pulled forward to hide his features. After the attack, the blood had so completely covered his face that he'd been impossible to recognize. *That's it! Blood! Hopefully, they'll find some traces of it and I'll have some way of tracking this guy down. The police might already have a record on him.*

After they'd finished talking to Billie, one officer stayed with her while me and the other officer went to investigate the scene of the attack. I was sure that monster would be long gone, but a part of me held out hope that he'd still be there nursing his wounds. It was too dark and hazy for me to see much but the cop radioed back to his partner that it was worth getting a team down to collect some evidence.

All was not lost, I now had two new leads! The cops would surely be investigating this incident and, knowing that this guy had no problem taking a life, I had my doubts that he'd leave a witness walking around. As awful as it was, I found myself hoping that he'd come looking for Billie. Between her and the police, I might actually catch him yet. Of course, I still didn't know what to do once I found him — but I could worry about that later.

Once all of the reports were completed and the formalities wrapped up, the officers gave Billie a ride home. I rode along with them, now unwilling to leave her until I figured out where I would be able to find her in the future. After they dropped her off, I rode along back to the station to see if I could learn anything about the evidence they had found.

## Chapter 3

The cops hadn't found much. There were a few drops of blood but it would be a couple of days before any results would be back from the lab. Other than the typical trash, there hadn't been anything else left in the alley.

I figured I couldn't just sit around the police station waiting to hear something. In the meantime, I decided that Billie would be my best lead. I made sure to get back to her place early the next morning so that I could catch her before she left. She was probably safe during the day but I needed to learn her routines so that she'd be easier to find in the future.

A little while after the sun rose, Billie emerged from one of several doors at the front of a little brick quadruplex. The bottom two units were businesses — a small engine repair shop and a used book store called 'Between the Sheets'. The top two units looked like they were both apartments. Billie was dressed in the same type of clothes as she'd been wearing the night before but with the addition of a light-grey canvas jacket. Her messenger bag was slung over her shoulder. She chewed on her lip and seemed somewhat unaware of the world around her.

I'd been hanging out across the street from her building and since she was headed in my direction, I waited for her to join me. We slowly zigzagged through the streets and made our way downtown. The entire time, Billie fidgeted with something in her pocket.

It wasn't long until she'd led us back to the same street as last night. With a determined pace, Billie marched up to the mouth of the alley. She looked around for a minute, then pulled a large, professional-looking camera from her bag. Billie snapped a few pictures then moved in closer to take a look at the ground. *What is she doing?* I moved closer too, trying to see what she was looking at. Billie took a few more shots and I caught a quick glimpse on the screen — some dark-brown spots that had been splattered on the pavement.

After a few more minutes of looking around, she let out a sigh. 'There's not much here to go on, is there?' she said to herself.

'It might not be much — but it's more than I had,' I answered, even though I knew she couldn't hear me.

Billie put her camera back in her bag and took a quick look at her phone. 'Shit, I'm going to be late.' She took off again at a brisk pace. After a few more blocks she hurried into a little café. I followed her in, unsure whether this was where she worked or not. As she placed an order, I took a look around. The air was filled with the scent of fresh-baked brownies and hot coffee. Based on the menu and the number of things it was 'free' off, I figured it was a vegan joint.

After Billie had her order, half-a-dozen drinks, she left the café and immediately turned to enter the door beside the one she'd just left. Like Billie's apartment, this building had units stacked on top of each other. She rushed up the stairs and entered the only door at the top — it read 'Spectrum Publishing'.

When I stepped through the door it took me a minute to locate Billie. She was moving through a row of cubicles, handing out the drinks she'd bought downstairs. When she reached the end of the row, she tossed her bag on the floor, handed a drink to the guy who sat behind her and placed the last cup on her desk.

'You're a lifesaver!' the guy said while gripping the cup tightly and inhaling its scent. He had short curly brown hair, the palest skin I'd ever seen, and he wore thick black-rimmed glasses.

'And you're over-dramatic,' Billie laughed as she flopped down into her seat.

Billie's and her co-worker's desks were in the same cubicle but were facing opposite directions so they'd have their backs to each other while they worked. On Billie's right, there was a large window that looked out onto the street we had just left. Her side of the window was filled with plants, while her co-worker's side had a bunch of used coffee cups. Their workspaces were just as different as their

window space. Billie's desk was neat and organized with a few bobbleheads for decoration. Her partner's was covered in papers, food wrappers, and a single framed picture of him and a blonde woman.

'How was your night, Jesse?' Billie asked.

Still holding his coffee close to his nose with his eyes closed, Jesse answered, 'Uneventful. I had dinner and then mindlessly scrolled through my phone until I went to sleep. How was the awards show?'

Billie frowned a little. 'It was fine but I hate covering that stuff. I'd rather be working on something that actually matters.'

Once again, Billie fidgeted with the thing in her jacket pocket. Absentmindedly, she pulled it out and placed it on her desk. It was a travel-size spray deodorant canister. *That's a weird thing to carry in your pocket.* Jesse seemed to be thinking the same thing.

'Are you planning on working up a sweat today?' he asked.

'Hardy har har. Pepper spray may be illegal, but it's not a crime to want to stay 'daisy fresh' all day long.'

'What are you talking about?'

'When you spray them in someone's eyes, they both accomplish the same thing. One's just against the law and the other isn't.'

'Getting a little paranoid, are we?' Jesse's face was skeptical.

'No, just taking precautions. My night was a little more eventful than yours.' She began digging through her bag. 'By the way, thanks for loaning me your pass.' Her eyebrows scrunched up as she continued to look for something.

'What's the matter?'

'I know I had it when I left ... what happened to it?' She let out a little grunt of frustration. 'Crap. I must have lost it when that guy tried to mug me.'

'Wait! What? You got mugged last night? Are you ok?'

'Yeah, I'm fine. I knew it was risky cutting across Utopia Avenue at that time of night but I was in a hurry. He didn't get anything, except maybe your pass.'

'Don't worry about it, it was from before the company rebranded with the new name, I'm just glad you're alright. Why didn't you say anything?'

'It's not exactly the first time something like this has happened to me. My parents dragged me all over the world. The places that needed their help most, usually weren't the kinds of places you'd find on a sitcom.'

Her tone was still matter-of-fact but her face had fallen into a more sombre look. Her eyes stared off into the distance. They were a captivating mix of grey and gold — like a solar eclipse or the dying light at the event horizon of a black hole.

*That explains why she was able to handle herself so well last night. I guess I'm not the only one who's been through some rough times.*

Billie shook her head a little and seemed to rejoin the present moment.

'That's the stuff I should be writing about, not some stupid awards show where a bunch of wealthy bureaucrats get to pat each other on the back. I want my stories to mean something, to make a difference in the world.'

'Not me. All I aspire to do is pay my bills and afford the latest phone.'

Billie was not impressed by Jesse's attempt to lighten the mood. She rolled her eyes, then spun around in her chair and booted up her computer.

'Take a look at this,' she said opening a spreadsheet and turning back to Jesse.

'What am I looking at?'

'I was doing some research for a side project on the use of outreach centres. One of the volunteers was telling me about how they're seeing fewer and fewer people show up, even though

poverty has been on the rise. So, I did some digging. This is a list of some of the people who've either gone missing or turned up dead in the area over the past year.'

Now she had *my* attention. I combed through the list of names, dates, locations, and causes of death.

'So what?' Jesse asked.

'So...I think they're connected. All of these people went to the same centre. Some used the counselling services, some used the employment services, and some used the hot food counter, but at one point or another, they all visited this same location.'

I looked at her list again. At the top of the spreadsheet was the title 'New Page Centre Victims'. I knew that name. I'd been there to look at the job postings a few times.

I'm standing in a bland, depressing foyer, staring at a bulletin board. As usual, the only jobs available are mindless, minimum wage torments for the soul. A man walks up on my right and looks at the board too.

'Lots of chances to start fresh, eh?'

I say nothing, I'm not here for small talk. He doesn't seem to take the hint.

'Beverage artist sounds like it could be good.'

He obviously isn't going to leave me alone. As I turn to walk away, I quickly glance at the man. He's smiling at me, but the smile doesn't reach his eyes. He looks like someone playing a part, performing a role.

'I'm missing from your list!' I shouted. *I need to tell her somehow.*

Oblivious to my outburst, Jesse continued their conversation. 'If it's so obvious, then why haven't the police picked up on it?'

'Because all of the victims are from vulnerable groups: street kids, homeless people, sex workers. No one cares enough about these people to see the connection. The killer is careful too. No two people have the same cause of death.'

'I don't know, Billie. The ages, genders and races of these people are all different too.'

'Exactly! What better way to hide your pattern than to seemingly have no pattern at all?'

'This seems pretty thin. Are you sure you're not letting your personal feelings cloud your judgement?'

'This has nothing to do with me. People are being murdered and no one is doing anything about it!' Billie's face became indignant. 'Just forget it.'

She turned her back on Jesse and stared straight ahead but her eyes didn't seem to be focused on the screen in front of her. Jesse said nothing and swivelled back to his desk.

My mind was racing. *I have to find a way to talk to her. Not only does she need to know that she's missing a victim, but she also has no clue who her 'random' mugger is.* Frantic, I tried tapping my fingers on her keyboard. Of course, nothing happened. Next, I walked through her desk and stood with my hands inside her computer. *Maybe I can bypass the keyboard and just make a message appear on her screen.* Nothing.

Desperate to get through to her, I yelled as loud as I could, directly into her ear, 'YOU'RE IN DANGER! HE'S GOING TO KILL YOU!'

Deaf to my warning, Billie put some headphones on and began blasting heavy metal music.

*Nothing is working and this is so much worse than I thought.* I wasn't the casualty of some crazy person's bad temper. I was another nameless victim in a long string of people who'd been tossed aside and forgotten by society. But Billie hadn't forgotten us. I needed to warn her and do everything I could to help her catch this guy — for both our sakes.

*But why her?* Billie didn't seem to fit the pattern. She wasn't homeless or spending most of her time on the streets — which was probably why she hadn't made the connection between what

happened last night and the people on her spreadsheet. *Why would he break from his routine to go after her?*

I needed more information and I needed a way to communicate with Billie. But I didn't have many resources. Ava was the only person I'd spent any time with. She wasn't much, but she was all I had. Ava said we couldn't interact with the Vitae, but there *had* to be a way. *Maybe if I'd spent more time talking to people in the Pale, I'd have more guidance than a twelve-year-old kid.* Once again, doing everything on my own wasn't helping my situation.

I figured I'd be safe to leave Billie at work for the next few hours so I took off to the hospital — hoping I wouldn't have to waste time running all over the city looking for Ava.

For once, luck was on my side. She was predictably hanging around the intensive care unit. I had a sudden dark image of Ava in a hooded black robe, standing silently with a scythe — a cold emotionless expression on her face as she waited to take the lives of those she watched over. The wail of sirens outside the hospital brought me back to reality. That vision couldn't have been further from the truth. Standing there in the same bright outfit she'd worn since the day I met her, Ava's face lit up when she saw me coming down the hall.

'Hey, Alex. I didn't expect to see you again so soon. Have you finally come to help me with the new transfers?'

'No, I have a problem and I was hoping you could help.'

'What's up?'

'I finally have some information on the guy who killed me. The problem is, it looks like I'm not the only one he's killed. I need to warn someone before he can hurt anybody else.'

Surprise and worry wrinkled Ava's brow. 'I'm so sorry, Alex — but I don't know what you can do about it.'

'There has to be something. Think!'

Ava was quiet for a few minutes. The person clinging to life on the gurney beside her was restless and mumbling in his sleep. Suddenly, her eyes widened.

'Well,' she said, 'there is this one thing that might work.'

'Let's hear it.'

'It's a long shot.'

*Come on, I haven't got all day.* 'What have I got to lose?'

'My brother gets these really bad nightmares sometimes. A little while ago I was watching him sleep, and even though I knew he wouldn't feel it, I bent down to kiss his forehead — you know, just to let him know he was safe, that he wasn't alone.'

'And ...'

'And as I bent down, I thought I heard him say something, so I turned my ear closer to listen. As I turned, my head passed through his. I saw these images and flashes of light. At first, I was startled and jumped back — but after a minute I tried lowering my head again.'

*Come on, come on, come on. Get to it already.*

'This time I laid my head fully inside his and I was shocked by what I saw. I was in his nightmare. And it wasn't like here in the Pale where everything is so dull and hard to see. It was like being back in the living world — it was bright and real.'

'But I don't see how eavesdropping on people's dreams is going to help me, Ava.'

'I'm getting to that. I was so upset by what I saw that I wished I could take him away, take him to the treehouse in our backyard, and then suddenly that's where we were in the dream.'

'Interesting.'

'It won't be easy ... but maybe you can figure out a way to show someone who this guy is.'

'Why would I have to show them? Couldn't I just tell them?'

'No. I've tried talking to my brother. He doesn't seem to be able to see or hear me. All I can do is change the setting of his dreams, make them a little more pleasant.'

*It isn't what I'd hoped for — but it's better than nothing.*

'Thanks, Ava. I'll have to give that a try.' I turned to leave, but Ava stopped me.

'Aren't you going to stay for a little while?'

She looked so innocent and hopeful. I began to feel bad about constantly ditching her the second I had what I needed.

'No, I've gotta run. I'll see you around though.' I ran out before this newfound guilt could distract me from everything I needed to figure out. The trip from Billie's work to the hospital had taken longer than I'd thought and I still needed to make it back before she left. I was already starting to feel anxious about being away from her. I had begun to imagine Billie leaving early or going out on an assignment and disappearing forever. Without knowing her routines I stood a greater chance of losing track of her and I didn't want that murderer catching up with Billie before I could.

Running along the streets, I tried to force the noisy symphony of the city to fade so that I could concentrate. A lot had happened in the last day or so and I needed to start thinking about the long game.

*Problem #1: My killer is on the loose and I don't know where to find him.*

*Problem #2: Billie needs to be warned but I can't talk to her.*

*Problem #3: I need to figure out what I can do about this monster when I eventually find him.*

*Problem #4: I don't know how long I have before the Pale makes me lose my grip on reality.*

Unfortunately, I didn't have any clear solutions. *Concentrate on what you can do.* It seemed my only option, for now, was to stick with Billie and try out this dream walking thing. *How the hell am I going to make a setting that says 'You're being targeted by a serial killer!'*? Key scenes from a few movies popped into my head. *I wonder if she's a film buff.*

It wasn't much, but at least it was a plan. Tonight, I would break my rule and follow Billie into her apartment. Once she fell asleep, I would try my best to warn her.

## Chapter 4

Billie's walk home was uneventful. She had continued to fidget with the deodorant canister and she'd chosen a route that bypassed the alley. When we arrived at her place I expected her to head in but, instead, she went through the door beside the one she'd used last night. It led to the used book store. The bell on the door clattered to announce her entrance as she came in. I followed closely behind her.

'Hey, Al, it's me,' she shouted towards the back of the store.

Just then, a balding man with skin the colour of desert sand, and tiny glasses perched on the edge of his large nose, poked his head out of an office in the back.

'Great! You're just in time,' he responded with a warm smile.

'Oh really? For what?'

'We ordered dinner and we're not taking no for an answer. You spend too much time alone up there.'

Billie looked embarrassed and quickly changed the subject. 'I've actually got plans. Sorry, I'll have to take a rain check. I just wanted to return the novel I borrowed.' She pulled an old cloth-bound volume out of her bag and placed it on the counter next to an ancient-looking cash register.

The smell of musty books was taking me back to my childhood again. Whenever the weather wasn't nice enough to be outside, I'd spent the bulk of my time in the public library.

'What have you got there little one?'

'It's called *Brave New World*,' I replied, eyeing the old woman suspiciously.

'I think you're a bit young for that. Why don't you try something from the children's section? They have some very fine picture books.'

'Why don't *you* mind your own beeswax?'

'Well, I never!'

She turned with a huff and left me to my tale. Some kids in the stacks next to me snickered but were quickly shushed by their mother, who gave me a dirty look. *Who cares? They're no one to me and she sure ain't my mother — not that she seems like a bad one.*

When I was older and had somewhat exhausted the local library's resources, I'd moved on to the library at the University. I quickly discovered that if you played your cards right, it wasn't just the libraries that were open to the public. Just about anyone could sit in on a lecture if the hall was large enough. The professors had no idea who belonged there and, frankly, didn't seem to care. I may not have gotten an expensive piece of paper, but I certainly got an education.

The title of the book Billie had placed on the counter was hard to make out since the writing was faded — and the haze of the Pale didn't exactly sharpen my vision.

'How about next week then? We may need to take you up on your offer to help. The website's coming along slowly. It's taking forever to catalogue everything we've got in here.'

'Sure thing. It's the least I can do considering the unrestricted access you give me.'

*That's interesting. I wonder what kind of stuff she likes to read. Maybe I know some of it — not that it matters. She's just a lead.*

Billie turned, aiming for the door. 'Just let me know when you want help and I'll pop down.'

With that, she was back on the sidewalk, digging for something in her bag. She pulled out her keys and opened the entrance next door very carefully. Billie tiptoed up the stairs like she was trying not to make any noise.

*That's a weird way to enter your home.* Since I was now breaking my rule, I followed her up the stairs. Billie's ascent was slow. She seemed to pick her footing carefully. When she made it to the top, I

noticed there were more stairs on the other side of the landing that immediately began to descend to a back entrance. Billie turned to her right and quietly opened the door of her apartment. She crept through the opening, then gently eased the door shut and clicked the lock. *She's certainly going out of her way just to avoid a dinner invitation. I guess she didn't think the free food would be worth listening to more advice about how she should be living her life.*

Billie removed her boots, dropped her bag, then went into the room on the right. She flopped onto a couch in the middle of the room without turning any lights on. Billie lay there with her eyes closed for a minute or two. The sun hadn't quite started to set, so I had enough light to see around the room. Across from the couch were a TV, gaming console, and two overflowing bookshelves. I examined the titles but I couldn't figure out what her organization system was. The subjects were random and included anthropology, biographies, classic literature, graphic novels, and a bunch of books that weren't even in English.

Tucked into the left-hand corner was a closet with bi-fold doors that stood open. Inside the closet was a pile of stuff that varied from tools, to climbing harnesses, to a large black case about the size of a small child. Behind the couch that Billie was laying on, was an electric drum kit and a wall of even more bookshelves.

While I stood there surveying things, a large fluffy calico cat came into the room and hopped up onto the couch at Billie's feet. The cat slowly made its way along the back of the couch, then down the arm on the opposite side, until it was beside Billie's head. It began treading its paws in her hair.

'Hey, Taco,' Billie said without opening her eyes, 'How was your day?'

Taco continued to matt-up Billie's hair until she finally sat up and moved the cat to her lap. They sat there in silence for a little while — seeming to just enjoy each other's company. After a minute I saw Billie repeatedly wipe her hand under her eyes. *Is she crying? I wonder what's got her down?* As if she'd heard my wondering thoughts, she spoke to Taco again.

'Yeah, you know how it is, don't you? Alone up here all by yourself day after day. I really should get you some company, shouldn't I?'

*If she's lonely, it must be her choice. Everyone I saw her with today seemed to like her. If anyone can understand keeping people away, it's me — but look where that got me.*

Billie's phone chimed, startling Taco off her lap and snapping me out of my train of thought. I hadn't realized how still and quiet the apartment had felt until that harsh electronic bell sounded. Billie pulled out her phone and unlocked the screen.

The message read, 'Don't forget about Sunday. I know things have been hard but you can't let what happened to your parents rule your life. He needs you.'

Billie turned her screen off and tossed the phone to the other end of the couch. *I wonder what happened to her parents. This girl becomes more of a mystery the more time I spend with her.*

With a huff, Billie got off the couch and moved back into the hallway. She finally flicked on some lights, illuminating an outdated kitchen across from the front door. The linoleum was a pattern of white and pale mint-green diamonds. The cupboards were a similar mint green, with black wrought iron handles, and the counter had a bland marble veneer. Everything was old but clean.

Billie began gathering some tortillas, vegetables, and glass containers from the fridge. Everything in there was either fresh fruits and veggies or had 'organic' or 'plant-based' plastered across the label.

While Billie cooked, I took the opportunity to look around a little more. The apartment was very quiet except for the low hum of her fridge and the sounds of cooking. Plants filled the kitchen window. Based on the aroma hanging in the room, I guessed they were herbs like basil and dill.

There weren't any decorations on the walls but the fridge held a few pictures of people I didn't recognize. The photos were older — a little beat up around the edges. Only one had someone in it that I thought might be a younger version of Billie. She was holding a baby and there was a man on her left

and a woman on her right. The baby's skin was light brown, whereas Billie's and the man's were golden beige and the woman's was pale pink. All of their eyes focused on the baby instead of the camera. The man and woman were smiling but Billie's expression was harder to read. I couldn't tell what she thought of the little bundle she was holding.

The cat, inexplicably named Taco, came in and began winding itself around Billie's ankles.

'You hungry too?'

Taco answered in the affirmative and Billie peeled open a can of food. She took both their plates back out to the living room. The smell of Taco's cat food mixed unpleasantly with the fragrant odour of Billie's falafel wrap. Billie seemed to spot her phone where she'd left it. Her mouth puckered and her eyebrows scrunched in towards each other.

'What do you think?', Billie asked Taco, who had already practically inhaled the cat food. 'Mom and Dad are dead. Shouldn't I be entitled to become a grumpy old hermit and hide out in my apartment?'

The only response that Taco could offer was to scamper over to Billie and immediately plop down on her lap. Absentmindedly, she began to stroke the cat.

'Yeah, I guess you're right. It's selfish and I'm not being fair to Sam.'

That seemed to be the end of the lopsided conversation. Yet again, I'd learned something new that only resulted in more questions. *How did her parents die? Who is Sam and what does he want? Who was the baby in the picture? Why do I care?*

Billie turned on some old black and white film and began picking at her dinner. She seemed more lost in thought than focused on the movie or her food. As time passed, her features relaxed and her eyes started looking a little droopy. It wasn't long before she was passed out on the couch — fast asleep, with Taco curled up on her lap.

*Ok, this is what I've been waiting for.* Given the limited means of communication I had available, the best I could come up with was to hope that Billie was familiar with movies about serial killers. Maybe if I filled her dreams with human-monsters, she'd realize the danger she was in.

I moved towards her. Standing behind Billie, I hesitated. *This feels wrong. It's bad enough that I'm walking around in her apartment, let alone literally nosing around in her head. But what other choice do I have?*

Just then, Billie's face scrunched itself up again. She let out a whimper and her head twitched to the side.

*As if she hasn't had enough stress, she can't even catch a break when she's asleep?*

I tried to remember what Ava had told me she'd done. *All she said was that she'd laid her head in her brother's. But it can't be that easy, can it?*

Billie's head flopped back against the couch. Her mouth was open just the slightest bit. A low sob escaped from her lips and suddenly all I wanted to do was make things a little better for her. I bent down — hovering a few centimetres above her petite nose — then plunged my face into the misty space where her head was.

Disoriented, it took me a minute to get my bearings and grasp what I was seeing. For the first time, in I don't know how long, I looked around at a world that seemed relatively normal. It was night and tall lights illuminated an empty damp street. There didn't seem to be much of a world outside of the spaces lit by the lamps — but it all looked deep, rich, and solid. I heard a startled scream. It had come from behind me and I ran towards the sound.

Not far away was a flickering light that flooded the entrance to an alley in the brief pulses when it flashed on. Another scream, this one more terrified than the last, burst from the mouth of the alley.

When I got there I could clearly see what was happening. This time Billie hadn't won her match with the 'mugger'. She was shoved against the wall. His one hand was now over her mouth and the other held a gun pressed into her stomach. His face was hidden in the depths of his hood and he didn't

seem to be demanding anything. He just stood there jamming the gun deeper and deeper into her stomach. *The attack must be bothering her more than she's been letting on.*

I ran at him at full speed but I was as powerless here as I was in the Pale. Everything may have looked solid, but I wasn't technically apart of this dream. *Ava told me that she couldn't do anything except change the scenery.* Muffled sounds of agony escaped the hold the mugger had over Billie's mouth and I knew I needed to do something to stop her suffering. *I have to get her out of here — but where am I going to take her? It doesn't matter. Anywhere is better than here. How the hell am I supposed to do this?*

I tried to focus, to bring somewhere pleasant into my mind, but it was hard to escape the memories that were fighting for my attention. Before I could choose something, the dream started to shift. The light got brighter and walls began to form around us. Everything was decorated in muted tans and beiges. The mugger evaporated and was replaced by a table covered in white linen. On the table were two vases, each with a photograph beside it. No, not vases — urns. The people in the photos resembled the people in the picture on Billie's fridge, but they were older. *This must be her parents.*

The horror on Billie's face slowly shifted to intense sadness. Silently, tears streamed down her cheeks as she struggled to hold back sobs. Somehow, the pain on her face seemed so much worse than the fear that had held it a moment ago. *I need to think. Where can I take her to make this stop?*

Closing my eyes so that I could concentrate, I began to picture a rainforest I'd seen in a documentary. I opened my eyes, but we were still in the funeral home. Billie had fallen to her knees and was hunched over — holding her sides like they might explode if she didn't grip with all her strength.

*What did I do wrong? Ava made it sound so easy.* Closing my eyes again, I worked harder. This time I tried to picture specific details. I imagined the fresh scent of the leaves in the hot dense air, the gentle patter of the rain as it slowly trickled down from the canopy above, the astonishing number of shades of green that nature was capable of producing. For a minute, I swore that I could hear the hushed croaking of frogs in the distance.

My eyes shot open when I heard a loud gasp. Still crouched on the ground, Billie was now surrounded by a thick bed of ferns. Her hand reached out to touch one of the leaves and the pooled water in it came spilling out. A smile began to pull at the corner of her mouth. *I did it! I can't believe that worked.*

After a few minutes of enjoying the hushed tranquillity of the forest, I remembered what had brought me here in the first place. I couldn't just leave her here to enjoy a peaceful sleep. I had a job to do and putting it off wouldn't make things any easier. *She needs to be warned.*

Once again, I tried to concentrate on an image. This time I pictured stone walls, a cot, an aluminum bench, and a wall made of plexiglass with holes for air and sound to pass through. I tried to imagine the smell that would accompany being in a row of subterranean cages.

When I opened my eyes it was all there, just as I had pictured it, but there was no one in the prison cell. I tried with all my might to conjure a man — his arms restrained, a large scar jagged across his jaw — but nothing appeared. *Ava had said she could only change the setting. Does that mean I'm restricted to just creating inanimate objects?*

Billie was looking around, her brows pinched together in confusion. She stepped closer to the plexiglass and I tried to remember what else belonged in the cell, but it'd been years since I'd seen the movie.

Losing interest, she proceeded down the hallway and reached the gate at the end. *Maybe a prison cell was too generic. What else might she recognize?* On the other side of the gate, I quickly created a musty old basement. I filled the space with sewing mannequins and cages of butterflies. Billie didn't take much notice of these things and continued towards an open doorway. Through the door, I made a deep pit lined with stone. Billie glanced down into the pit, but it was too dark to see anything.

*This isn't working. She must not know this one. She was watching a black and white movie when she fell asleep. Maybe I need to try something older.*

Trying to recall specific details, I began to create a new environment. A black and white scene, with a gravel road that ran alongside an old motel. One of the room doors stood open with a light on inside. Billie moved towards the light and entered the room.

Following behind her I struggled to remember how this movie went. I needed to draw her towards the bathroom. I tried turning on the shower, and to my surprise, it actually worked. The steam from the shower began to roll out into the bedroom. Billie drifted further in. Once she'd reached the bathroom, I played the iconic slasher music and splattered everything inside the tub with bright red blood. This startled Billie. With a shaking hand, she reached forward to pull back the shower curtain. I held my breath. I didn't know what she'd find behind it since I didn't seem to be able to create people.

But before I knew it, the scene had disappeared and I was staring down at a couch made of mist. Billie had woken up and was hunched forward with her head in her hands.

'I've gotta stop falling asleep with the TV on. The dreams are too weird.'

*That's it? After all that, she just writes it off as weird dreams? I don't know why I'd expected anything different. Why would Billie assume it had been anything more than a dream? But I wasn't giving up that quickly. When has anything ever been easy for me? It was just a first attempt. I'll have to come up with a new strategy and try again.*