

—ELDORADO CEMETERY—



WE BURY
THE LIVING

TYLER MILLER



THE NEVERMORE SERIES

#1: WE BURY THE LIVING

#2: DEATH CAB

#3: THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR



CHAPTER 1

Two days after school let out, Mom and Dad ruined my summer vacation.

This wasn't the first time. Last year they crammed Jamie and me into a rented mobile home and carted us from Oregon to California and all the way over to Texas, stopping along the way to visit their old college friends. The summer before that we flew to North Carolina and wasted three weeks with Grandma Pearl. We were supposed to *bond*.

As if.

Grandma Pearl's idea of a good time was passing out while she watched *General Hospital* and farting while she snoozed. It's pretty hard to bond while you're holding your breath and trying not to gag.



“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” I said. “We’re going *where?*”

“Nevermore,” Dad said again. He smeared butter over a burnt slab of toast. Dad liked his toast black and sopping with Tilamook. “It’s in Washington.”

“DC?” Jamie asked from behind her mound of pancakes. She’d started with three but decided that wasn’t enough, tossed on two more and then lathered half a jar of peanut butter on top and finished it off with a heavy stream of Mrs. Butterworths. Jamie ate more food than anyone I’d ever seen, but she was skinny as a pole.

Mom shook her head. “Washington State. Right next door.”

“You two are going to love it.” Dad crunched down on his toast. A black blip of butter clung to the side of his mouth. “Uncle Silas and Aunt Ida are really looking forward to having you.”

“Wait. You’re not coming with us?” I dropped my fork.

“Sorry, sport.” Dad wiped the edge of his mouth. “Your mother and I are seeing some old friends in San Diego.”

Dad’s a radiologist, which means he reads X-rays. He’s got a thing for people’s bones. Since he works from home,



him and Mom can travel all they want. And they do. A lot.

“You’re *ditching* us?”

“I wouldn’t call it *ditching*,” Mom said. “That’s not a nice word at all.”

I scooted back from the table and crossed my arms. “What would you call it then?”

I knew she was going to say it before she opened her mouth.

“It’s a *bonding* experience.”

“Uncle Cyrus and Aunt who?” Jamie asked. She sawed at a wedge of pancake with her knife.

“Silas,” Dad corrected her. “And your Aunt Ida. Silas is my cousin. You remember you saw them at Grandma May’s wedding?”

No, I didn’t. Grandma May remarried when I was six. Jamie was four. Do you remember anything from when you were six? I didn’t think so. Your life hasn’t even *begun* when you’re six.

“They have a boy your age.” Mom glanced at me like I should care. “Chuck? Chris?”

“Charles,” Dad said.



Didn't ring any bells.

"You're driving us to Washington and ditching us. For *how long?*"

Dad bit off another hunk of toast. He'd started losing his hair last year, and in the spring he'd shaved his head bald, a move that revealed a rather misshapen skull. It looked like a shiny lopsided bowling ball.

"Not driving you," he said as he chewed. "Taking the bus."

"*What?!*" Jamie launched up from her chair. "No. No. No. No. No."

Jamie has a thing about buses. In second grade she rode to school every day on the bus. It didn't go well. Older kids teased her constantly about her clothes, her wild combinations of plaid and stripes and neon colors. She thought she was *stylish*. Everyone else thought she looked like a freak.

"I'm not going," Jamie said. "Huh uh. Not on a bus. No way."

"Tickets are bought and paid for," Dad said. "Done deal, I'm afraid."

That was the final word. When Dad paid for something, that was it. He never returned anything, never went back for



a refund, never traded it in. Once money changed hands, it was over. No amount of whining or pleading or begging ever changed his mind.

“You can’t make me go.” Jamie shot him a cold stare.

Which, as it turned out, wasn’t true.

Three days later Mom and Dad deposited us on a Greyhound and told us to listen to the driver and be good guests for Uncle Silas and Aunt Ida. What were we, five? Why do parents always seem to think that if they don’t tell you to behave you’ll suddenly turn into a mutant and start tearing the place apart?

“We’ll miss you guys.” Dad patted my shoulder.

Please. The only thing in his eyes was the sandy ocean beaches of Southern California. They weren’t going to miss us at all.

It’s nine hours between Portland, Oregon and Nevermore, Washington. You ever spend nine hours on a bus with your little sister? Mom and Dad are lucky they still have two children.

The only thing I saw besides empty desert and low rolling hills was a pair of vultures circling something dead in a field.



Wonderful.

Jamie pouted the whole way. Of course. She pouted about how stupid it was to spend three weeks with an aunt and uncle you'd never even met. She pouted about how much she hated buses. She pouted about how she'd eaten all of her food—three sandwiches, two bags of chips, half a container of Oreos, two bananas and three Twinkies—and how she was still hungry. She pouted about how she wasn't going to see any of her friends and how they'd all forget that she existed and how what Mom and Dad were doing just wasn't fair.

I sat on my hands so I wouldn't strangle her. Nine hours is a long time to sit on your hands.

Not that Jamie wasn't right. I thought about my own friends—Billy Teaguen and Jose Venegas—and all the things we'd normally be doing right now. Camping out in Billy's backyard. Barbecues with Jose and his family. Video game marathons at my house. The three of us had been friends since second grade. Summer was the best part of the year, and Mom and Dad had just blown a hole in the middle of it.

After what seemed like an eternity, the bus driver



wheeled down into a long and narrow valley with an inky dark lake resting between the mountains. The road veered away from the lake onto a path cutting deep into the hills. There was nothing along the road. No houses. No buildings. Not even any trees.

Ten minutes later, the bus stopped.

“Nevermore,” the driver called.

I stared out the window. An empty field stretched out all the way to the mountains. If there was a town out here, it was either invisible or made for faeries.

“This doesn’t look like a bus stop,” Jamie said.

“You two getting off or what?” the driver called.

“Let’s go,” I said. “I’m sure the driver knows what he’s doing.”

We snatched up our luggage and hauled it down the aisle. The driver threw us a suspicious look as we stepped off the bus, as if only crazy kids would want to get off here.

The door swung shut behind us. The bus rumbled to life, spat out a blob of smoke and rolled away.

Jamie was right. This wasn’t a bus stop. We stood along the side of the road next to a rusting pole that didn’t even

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have a sign on it. There was nothing but dirt and rocks in every direction. As we watched, the bus drifted farther and farther away and disappeared around a corner.

We were all alone.



CHAPTER 2

“I told you this wasn’t a bus stop,” Jamie said. “Where’s Uncle Cyrus?”

“Silas,” I corrected her. “I don’t know. Dad said he’d be here to pick us up. Maybe he’s just late.”

“Or he’s not coming,” Jamie whined. “How would he know to pick us up out here? We’re not *anywhere*. We’re just by the side of the road.”

Thank you, Captain Obvious.

She had a point though.. How *would* Uncle Silas know to come here to pick us up? It wasn’t like there was a sign anywhere that said *Greyhound Bus Stop*. I wasn’t even sure that the rusting pole had ever held such a sign. Maybe it had. Or maybe not. The more I looked at it, the more it seemed like a hunk of metal that had fallen from the sky and landed



standing up.

“So this is Nevermore.” I jammed my hands into my pockets. “Lovely place. What kind of name is Nevermore, anyway?”

“It’s from Poe.”

My sister is a real know-it-all. That’s her nickname: Ms. Prissy Pants Know It All.

“The *poem*,” Jamie said, as if she were speaking to an idiot. “About the raven. *Quoth the raven: nevermore.*”

Great. This was really turning into the most rocking summer vacation ever. So much better than barbecues and campouts and videogame marathons. I was standing in the middle of nowhere listening to my sister recite poetry. Glorious.

“Shut your hole,” I said.

Jamie stuck out her tongue. I was considering reaching out and yanking it from her mouth when I saw a car on the horizon. It shimmered briefly and then slowly came into focus. It was long and black.

“Maybe that’s Uncle Silas. I told you he was just a little late.”

Jamie rolled her eyes.



The car kicked up dust and fumes in its wake. As it drew closer, I saw that it was longer than a normal car. My first thought was it was a limo, but I realized suddenly I was wrong. It wasn't a limo.

"What the heck is that?" Jamie squinted into the afternoon glare.

The car slowed. Sunlight glinted off the shiny silver rear-view mirrors.

"It's a hearse," I said.

"You mean for dead people?"

Bingo. Give the girl a prize.

The hearse rolled to a stop ten feet away. The dust billowed behind it and then settled back to the ground. A man in a black suit sat behind the wheel. A cigar bobbed between his lips. Smoke filled the cab and drifted out the driver's side window.

Jamie reached for my hand. She's pretty brave (you know, for a girl) but even I was feeling creeped out. I squeezed her hand.

The hearse's door opened and the man in black stepped out. The cigar continued to bob. The man was chewing on its



end, sucking in smoke every few seconds and letting it back out. Its pungent scent assaulted us from ten yards away.

“Finn? Jamie?”

“Uncle Silas?”

A broad smile broke across the man’s bearded face. He opened his arms wide as if he expected we might run to him and give him a huge hug.

Wasn’t happening.

“You’re much bigger than I expected,” Uncle Silas said.

What was he expecting? Midgets?

“You’re driving a hearse,” Jamie said.

Told you: Captain Obvious.

“Of course I am!” Uncle Silas roared, letting out a hoarse laugh. “What else would I be driving?”

I don’t know. A Toyota?

“Let me grab your stuff,” Uncle Silas said. He strode forward and picked up our luggage in one hand. He was a large man, tall and broad, with shoulders that resembled something carved out of stone. Our luggage bags looked pint-sized under his arm. When he walked, he favored one leg, limping slightly, which caused him to sway like a large



ship on an ocean swell.

He carted the bags to the back of the hearse, pulled the rear door open, and set them inside.

“Well hop on in. Don’t be shy.”

We shuffled around to the passenger-side door. I opened it for Jamie, but she insisted I get in first. I scooted along the seat towards the middle. Uncle Silas settled behind the steering wheel, his leg two inches from mine. The whole car stank of smoke.

I glanced over my shoulder.

A coffin lay behind us. Long and black.

“What?” Uncle Silas said. “Never seen a coffin before?”

Actually, I hadn’t. Not up close. I’d only been to one funeral in my whole life, and I didn’t remember anything about it other than how much I hated wearing a tie.

“Why are you driving a hearse?” I asked, trying to sound polite.

“Didn’t your Mom and Dad tell you?” Behind his thick gray beard, the cigar poked from his teeth.

“Tell us what?”

“This is my job!” Uncle Silas roared. He struck me as



the kind of man who couldn't say anything quietly. He either roared or he didn't speak at all. "Eldorado Cemetery and Funeral Home. Ida and I have run it for nearly twenty years!"

"They must have forgotten to mention it," I grumbled under my breath.

Sinking back into my seat, I hoped that Dad got sunburnt and Mom got airsick. How dare they send us away for two weeks to a *funeral home*? Were they insane? I could see the looks on Jose and Billy's faces when I told them where I'd spent half my summer vacation.

Uncle Silas gave a hearty laugh that just about blew out my eardrums and then wrenched the hearse into first gear. It edged forward as Uncle Silas made a tight turn, bumping off the road and circling around the rusted pole.

"You really work with dead people?" Jamie asked. "Like *real* dead people?"

"No, he works with *fake* dead people, dummy."

Uncle Silas nodded. "They're real enough, alright."

The fear on Jamie's face drained away. Replacing it now was a bright intensity that lit up her eyes and tugged at the edges of her face. I knew that look. Jamie was loving it.



“That’s so *cool*,” she said.

Uncle Silas roared again. “Now that’s what I like! A little enthusiasm!”

Only Jamie would think working with dead people was cool.

A few years back Jamie had fallen in love with the band Black Sabbath. In the space of six months, she’d traded her brightly colored wardrobe for one that consisted almost entirely of shades of gray and black. She started watching horror movies and hanging pictures of Angus Young and Ozzie Osbourne on her walls.

Dead people were right up her alley.

Uncle Silas seemed content to smoke and drive. His window was cracked down, which let out about half the smoke. The other half curled in thick wisps throughout the hearse and made me want to hurl.

A few minutes later I noticed the noise. A rattling sound coming from behind me. I looked back over my shoulder again, but there was nothing in the rear of the hearse except our luggage and the coffin.

“Just a coffin, sonny,” Uncle Silas said. “Nothing to be



scared of.”

“Yeah,” Jamie said. “It’s just a coffin, Finny. Geez.”

“I’m not scared.”

I wasn’t.

Not much.

I turned back around, but a minute later I heard the rattling again. This time, when I looked back, I saw it: the coffin was moving. Not bouncing up and down, which you’d expect on this bumpy road.

It was shifting side to side.

As if something was trying to get out.

“Um...Uncle Silas?”

“What’s up, sonny?”

“Is there anything inside that coffin?”

Uncle Silas chewed his cigar and didn’t speak.

“You’re such a scaredy-cat.” Jamie punched me in the arm.

The coffin rattled again. The lid suddenly unlatched, lifting an inch. It was too dark to see anything inside.

Jamie turned in her seat and stared, disbelief covering her face.



“Nothing in there except the dead,” Uncle Silas said.

As we watched, the coffin lid swung up.

A pale white hand stretched out, reaching for my face.



CHAPTER 3

The breath caught in my throat, sticking there like a hunk of meat. I jerked back, putting up my hands to keep the undead zombie away.

Jamie gasped, her delight in teasing me suddenly turning to fear.

Then Uncle Silas's bellowing laughter filled the car, and a similar bellow, thinner and not as booming, came from inside the coffin.

The head of a young boy rose from the coffin. He grinned wickedly.

He clearly wasn't dead.

Here was Uncle Silas's son. He had his father's broad shoulders and square jaw, though he obviously lacked Uncle Silas's dark-flowing beard. Thick black eyebrows blended into



the shaggy tangle of hair on his head. He had the look of a feral animal.

“Sorry,” Uncle Silas said, slapping me on the back and nearly knocking the wind out of me. “Couldn’t resist. This is my son, Charles.”

“Call me Chaz.”

Still grinning, he worked his way out of the coffin and sat cross-legged behind us.

“Great joke,” Jamie said, trying to pretend she hadn’t been scared. “I knew you weren’t dead though.”

“Oh really.” Chaz folded his arms over his chest. Like Uncle Silas, he wore all black: a plain black T-shirt and black slacks.

“Sure. It’s not like the dead can come back to life or anything.”

Chaz shrugged and turned his gaze to me. “What do you think?”

“I think she was adopted, but my parents swear we’re related.”

Jamie gave me a nasty look.

“No, about the dead coming back to life. Do you agree?”



Which, let's face it, is a pretty odd question.

"Um, well...yeah. Obviously, right?"

What was I supposed to say?

"Can I sit in the coffin?" Jamie asked.

Like I said: dead people, coffins, Halloween, if it was creepy Jamie loved it. Her favorite writer was Mark Stevens, who everybody called America's Boogeyman. If Frankenstein were real, Jamie would marry him and have little green Franken-babies.

"Sure," Chaz said. "Come on back."

He looked at me again, inviting me too.

I held up my hands. "No thanks. I'm perfectly fine up here."

"Suit yourself."

The rest of the ride I stared out the front and listened to Chaz explain how coffins were built and the history of coffin making. Talk about morbid. The guy seemed to know a lot about it: the woods and metals used to construct the coffins, the types of cloth that lined the insides, how much each coffin weighed, why some cultures used them and others didn't.

Creepy, right?



Who knows that much about coffins? Or cares?

Uncle Silas drove deeper into the hills, which were as empty as the bus stop. It didn't seem as if anybody actually lived out here. Who would want to?

After half an hour, something finally came into view.

"Home sweet home," Uncle Silas said.

He steered the hearse onto a long driveway lined by a tall iron fence. Beyond the bars stretched row after row of crumbling tombstones. Some stood squarely upright. Others jutted at odd angles. More than one had slumped over and lay in a heap in the dying grass. I counted half a dozen large stone crypts the color of old bone.

At the end of the driveway squatted a shambling house with dull yellow paint and dark windows that looked like eyes sunken into sockets.

We rolled to a stop.

Uncle Silas stepped out and limped around to the rear of the hearse and started removing our luggage. Chaz and Jamie scooted out the back. I slid out of the car slowly, wondering if this was some kind of joke. People didn't live next to cemeteries. At least, *normal* people didn't.



“This is your *house*?” Jamie said. “This is so cool.”

“We like to think so,” Uncle Silas said, hoisting our bags in one hand.

The front door opened, and a short woman in a long dress waddled out. Her hair was silver and curled and she wore thick glasses with thin gold rims. Her dress was a blue paisley color faded from too many washings.

Aunt Ida.

“You must be famished,” she said. “Such a long bus ride.”

“I’m *starving*,” Jamie said.

Aunt Ida studied the two of us. “My how you two have grown. Dinner is already in the oven. Let’s get you settled and then we can eat.”

She waved us towards the house. Uncle Silas and Chaz shuffled up the porch steps with Jamie at their heels. I marched reluctantly towards the porch, my eyes on the ground. A dozen stone slabs formed an orderly path from the iron gate of the cemetery to the front porch.

I realized they weren’t normal paving stones.

They were grave markers.

Each slab had a name and dates chiseled into them.

**Roderick Wilhelm Donner:****1879 - 1907****Eufengenia Sinclair:****1845 - 1899**

Were there bodies under these markers?

I gulped.

“Chaz will show you your rooms.” Aunt Ida held the door as I trudged up the steps. “We made them up special just for you. I hope you find them comfortable enough.”

Chaz nodded and motioned at a stairwell just beyond the front door. “You’re gonna love your room.”

We followed him up. Uncle Silas trailed behind us with the luggage, tromping loudly upon every stair. The house was ancient. Every stair creaked and groaned. Picture frames hung aslant on the walls. There were no people in any of them. Instead, the frames held black and white photos of tombstones, coffins and gargoyles.

At the top of the stairs was a short hallway with three



doors. “Bathroom is at the end,” Chaz said.

He pushed open the first door. Its hinges squeaked loudly in protest.

The light was already on.

Jamie and I stuck our heads in.

“You’re gonna sleep great,” Chaz said.

In the middle of the room lay two long black coffins.



CHAPTER 4

“This is a joke, right?”

“What’s wrong?” Aunt Ida asked, shuffling in behind us. She smelled like hand cream and cigars.

“We can’t sleep in coffins!” I said.

Who in their right mind slept in a coffin?

“Why not?” Chaz said. “They’re a *lot* more comfortable than a bed. Trust me. I sleep in mine every night. We all do.”

“You’re kidding.”

Chaz held up his hand as if swearing on a Bible. “Honest.”

I tried to imagine sleeping in a coffin night after night, but I couldn’t do it.

This had to be a prank. Jumping out of the coffin in the hearse apparently hadn’t been enough. Clearly living next to a graveyard warped your sense of humor.



“Seems mighty strange at first,” Uncle Silas said, bringing up the rear. “But once you try it for a night, you’ll never want to go back to sleeping in a bed again. Just ain’t the same. Coffins is cozy. You just might want to spend all eternity in one.”

He broke into a barking laugh that filled the tiny room. Aunt Ida rolled her eyes, but Chaz chuckled and slapped his dad on the back. Uncle Silas’s hefty shoulders swelled up and down.

Definitely warped.

“Sorry,” Uncle Silas said, wiping a tear from his eye. “Little mortuary humor.”

I wasn’t about to sleep in a casket. This was ridiculous. I opened my mouth to say so, but Jamie beat me to the punch.

“I think it’s pretty cool,” she said. “Finn’s just a big scaredy-cat.”

She pushed past me and hustled to the coffin nearest the wall. It was dark mahogany, the color of dried blood. She stepped right up and plopped down into the casket, laying her head upon the white satin pillow. She folded her arms over her chest and closed her eyes.

“How do I look?”



“Like an idiot,” I said.

“You’re just scared. Finn’s scared of *everything*. He can’t even watch scary movies without having *nightmares*.”

“That’s not true,” I said, although it kinda was. I don’t really like scary movies. Not much for creepy books either. Give me a comedy. That’s more my style. I never understood why anyone wanted to watch movies about vampires and werewolves and ax murderers.

But that didn’t mean I was *scared*.

“Dad made these coffins himself,” Chaz said.

“Really?” Jamie sat up. “How sweet is that!”

Uncle Silas nodded. “We do everything ourselves here at Eldorado Cemetery and Funeral Home. Everything is hand-made right here.”

I stared at the coffin closest to the window and imagined the nightmares I would have sleeping inside it. What if the lid swung shut in the night? What if no one heard my screams for help?

“Don’t worry, kiddo,” Uncle Silas said, setting down our luggage and running a hand along the nearest coffin lid. “Nothing but sweet dreams in these lovelies.”



I doubted that.



Dinner wouldn't be ready yet for another hour, so Chaz offered to tour us around the Eldorado Cemetery.

"Great!" Jamie said, jumping up from her coffin.

I considered staying in the room, but there was nothing to do there. Not even a television.

"Eldorado is the oldest burial ground in Nevermore," Chaz explained as we left the house. He led us across the walkway of gravestones towards the tall iron gate that divided the front yard from the cemetery.

Had Uncle Silas buried people under this walkway himself? I wanted to ask but wasn't sure I wanted to know the answer.

We passed through the gate.

"Some of the tombstones here are two-hundred-years-old," Chaz said excitedly. He was a nervous tour guide, eager to show off his home but clearly desperate for us to like what we saw.

I tried to imagine lying in the ground for two-hundred



years.

The only other graveyard I'd been in was the one in Portland where our grandmother was buried. At her funeral, I'd thought the cemetery was quite large, but it was nothing compared to this. Eldorado Cemetery held thousands of graves. Tombstones extended far into the distance, vanishing over the downward sloping hills and stretching from the road all the way to the mountain.

"What's that?" I asked, pointing to a leaning structure at the edge of the cemetery.

"That's the old Blackwood Barn," Chaz said. "They used to own property on the other side of ours, but no one lives there anymore. It's abandoned. Mom and Dad won't let me go in it. Too dangerous. At least that's what Mom thinks. What's dangerous about a barn?"

Even at a distance the barn seemed massive. It loomed high over the few surrounding trees.

We wandered through the rows. Chaz explained how Eldorado was organized, pointing to the larger crypts of prominent Nevermore families. I glanced at the stones, noting names and dates. Collins. Manchen. Lovecraft. Matheson.



Jackson. 1898. 1794. 1921. 1857. 1934. Most of the stones were worn by wind and rain.

One grave caught my eye: **JENNINGS**.

That was *my* name.

I stopped to read the inscription:

DEATH IS BUT A DOORWAY

TIME IS BUT A WINDOW

Whatever that meant.

There were more Jennings family graves. At least half a dozen or more by my count. They stretched away down a long row. I wondered if any of them were related to me and Jamie.

I was still reading the stones when I heard the growling noise behind me.

I turned slowly.

Six dogs of various sizes and colors stood in a loose huddle a dozen yards away. The lead dog drew forward, baring its teeth and snarling.

“Nice doggie.”



It took another step forward. Its lips pulled back from its long teeth.

It let out a guttural bark.

“Hey there, Fido,” I said. “Good boy.”

The dog hunched, then leaped forward, aiming for my throat.

The other dogs barked and followed.



CHAPTER 5

“Ahhh!”

I held up my arms to ward off the coming attack and stumbled backwards. My feet tripped over a gravestone, and suddenly I was sprawling in the grass. I landed with a hard *whoomphh* and the air shot from my lungs.

I couldn't even scream as the dogs attacked.

The lead dog's paws hit my chest just as I heard Chaz calling:

“Basker! Down boy! Down! Hey! Get off him!”

The monstrous dog pinned me to the ground. His ears twitched at Chaz's yells, but his eyes stared directly at my throat. A long tendril of drool hung from its yellow teeth. It dipped its head toward my throat.

Chaz shouted again, but his voice was muffled by the



killer dog's growls. His words sounded different though, as if he were commanding the dog in another language.

The dog's jaws wrapped around my throat and then stopped.

Chaz issued another command. Was he speaking German? Russian?

The dog let me go. Its snout pulled back, no longer snarling.

Reluctantly, it stepped off my chest.

I could breathe again.

I hacked and coughed and pulled myself up. The dogs stood in a half-circle around me. They stared intently, waiting to see if I made any sudden movements.

"Barker! Enough! Stupid dog."

Chaz and Jamie appeared behind me. Chaz waved the dogs back. They shooed away slowly, clearly unhappy Chaz had come between them and their prey.

"Whoa," Jamie said. "You were almost dog meat. Not that you'd make much of a meal."

Mom says Jamie loves me in her own way. I'm not so sure.



“Sorry about that,” Chaz said. “Technically these dogs are ours, but really they’re just strays that roam about the cemetery. The big dog is Basker.”

“Like the *Hound of the Baskervilles*,” Jamie said.

Three cheers for Ms. Know It All.

I wiped dog slobber from my neck and flicked it from my fingers into the grass. Gross.

Chaz smiled. “Exactly. Great stuff, Sherlock Holmes. That one’s my fav.”

Standing up, I brushed dirt from my pants. I tried to look nonchalant, like a pack of wild graveyard dogs attacking me was something that happened every other week. No big deal.

Basker wasn’t believing my act. He leaned forward and uttered a low growl.

I took a step back.

Chaz whacked the dog on the head. “Knock it off, will you?”

He shoed them some more, and finally the whole pack turned and trotted off deeper into the cemetery. They rounded a large oak tree and vanished behind a row of crypts.

“Wish I could say they were more friendly,” Chaz said.



“But they really don’t seem to like people. Living people anyway.”

He broke into a sharp laugh. I tried to laugh with him but barely managed a smile.

What was funny about almost getting eaten by wild dogs? Jamie, of course, laughed the hardest.

“What did you say to it?” I asked Chaz.

“What do you mean?”

“It sounded like you were speaking German or something.”

Chaz shrugged. “Dad trained them in old Slavic. He thinks they listen better that way.”

“Do you need to go back to the house and change your underwear?” Jamie said, snickering.

“I hope fleas infest your armpits,” I told her.

“Come on.” Chaz marched away from the site of my near-death experience. “This way.”

We took a winding path deeper into the graveyard, swinging out along the road and then curving towards the heart of the cemetery. Oak trees stood here and there like solitary mourners who had come to pay respects to the dead and



never left. Chaz rattled on about famous people who were buried here. Famous for Nevermore, anyway. I'd never heard of any of them.

All I really wanted was to get back on the bus and go home. The next two weeks were going to suck. Jamie might enjoy them because she's weird like that. There's something messed up in her head. But I was going to hate it.

We were walking along a row of crypts when I spotted the upturned grave. Chaz was explaining who owned the various crypts and how much each crypt cost when I pointed to the disturbed earth.

"What happened?"

"What's that?" Chaz asked me.

"This grave. It looks like it's not fully dug."

Chaz stopped. His face darkened. He swept past Jamie and came back to where I stood.

A narrow marker lay on the ground at the head of the grave. It read:

OSCAR HUDSPETH: 2006 - 2019

GONE TOO SOON



The earth was dark and damp, as if someone had dug it up recently. Dirt had been flung here and there, dirtying the surrounding grass. Instead of neat level ground, there was now a two-foot-deep hole.

The dirt was not the usual brown, but rather a deep red color, almost like clay.

“Is it supposed to be like that?” Jamie asked. “Is your father not finished with the grave or something?”

“He was buried last year,” I said, pointing to the marker. “This is more like vandalism. Someone’s digging it up.”

Chaz’s face had turned an unhealthy sickly color. His eyes flashed angrily, but there was fear there too. Fear of what, I wasn’t sure. Aside from crazy wild dogs, what was there to be afraid of in a graveyard?

I stared at the dug-out grave and wondered about poor Oscar who had died when he was just my age. I wondered if it was cold underground.

“You can’t tell my parents about this,” Chaz said.

“Why not?” Jamie asked. “What’s wrong?”

“You just *can’t*, okay? Promise me you won’t say anything, either of you.”



I was about to tell him to stop being ridiculous, but the fear had grown wilder behind his eyes. Whatever was going on here, he was really worried. And afraid.

“Fine,” Jamie said. “Promise.”

I nodded.

Chaz turned and lead us back towards the house. I glanced at the upturned grave one last time. The longer I stared at it the less it seemed like someone had been *digging up* the grave and the more it looked as if someone had been trying to *escape from below*.

But that was crazy.

Wasn't it?



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