

THE
GLOAMING

BLOOD OF THE REVENANTS

Michael (Book 0.5)

The Gloaming (Book 1)

Vânător (Book 2) – Coming 2026

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The Gloaming Chapter One

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CONTENT WARNING

This novel contains themes and scenes that may be distressing for some readers, including:

Descriptions of violence and gore

References to suicide

Death and murder

Blood drinking

References to historical atrocities (Holocaust)

Intimate sexual content

Strong language

War trauma

Emotional manipulation

Psychological warfare

Descriptions of injuries and torture

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

Welcome to Erin's world of vampire hunting, questionable life choices and copious amounts of coffee.

If you find yourself wondering how Erin became a hunter or about the true nature of certain enigmatic characters you'll meet along the way... well, me too.

No – in all seriousness, I have the answers. But since this isn't an origin story, I'm not about to tell you everything all at once, am I?

Some mysteries are meant to unfold gradually, and some questions are designed to linger even after the final page.

So pour yourself a strong cup of whatever keeps you sane, and enjoy the hunt. All will be revealed... in due time.

Happy reading,

J

I

THE QUICK AND THE DEAD

ATTWENTY-NINE, I HAD a higher body count than most serial killers. I'd killed for the first time at seventeen years old. The difference was, my targets were already dead.

There's a weird fatigue that comes with hunting vampires – one that sinks into your bones and twists your sense of time. It's not the kind of job you can really switch off from, when an average night has you rolling into bed at 2 A.M., up to your elbows in blood and running on fumes. Your body learns to stay awake whether you want it to or not. Which is how I found myself sprawled on the living room floor at three in the morning, surrounded by half-dried acrylics and an unfinished mural.

It's also why, when a shadow shifted at the edge of my vision, instinct took over. A faint scuffling from behind the fireplace, and I was crouched and alert, every muscle ready for action.

Across the room, Tom appeared in the kitchen doorway, coffee mug halfway to his lips. “What?”

I held up a hand for silence. The shadow moved again, and I whipped my gaze toward it, tracking its trajectory with measured breaths.

Tom’s eyes were wide when I glanced his way.

Raising a finger to my lips, I shook my head and inched forward. My Wonder Woman socks were silent on the bare floorboards as I crept toward the sound, ready to attack. A silhouette in the doorframe, Tom shifted his weight, and the board beneath him let out a long creak. He winced, but it was too late.

A tiny, furry head peeked out from behind the stone fireplace, skittering across the room to hide under the sofa. I dived, hands outstretched, my fingers scrabbling after it. It dashed under the base of the seat, and I wriggled my hand against the velvet, scrambling to get at it.

Behind me, Tom released his breath as he realised what I was doing. “You’ve got to be kidding me? Erin, it’s a bloody mouse. It’s the middle of the night. It’s what mice do.” I heard his exasperation, but it did nothing to stop me from grappling with the sofa.

“Grab a box or something, will you?” I kept my voice low. The scraping sound had stopped.

“What for?”

The cambric was grazing my arm, but I hadn’t seen it come out. “To trap it!”

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Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him shake his head – but he disappeared into the kitchen. I held my breath, waiting for the mouse to make its move. Tom came back through, not troubling to tiptoe, and handed me a stained plastic box.

A faint scratching sound came from the other side of the sofa. As gently as I could manage, I removed my arm from the tight space underneath and straightened, careful to keep my movements small and silent. Tom watched me with a smirk, and I gestured at him to help me lift it. He shrugged and made his way toward the other end of the substantial three-seater.

I counted to three, mouthing the numbers, and we lifted. The floorboards were dusty in the dim light of my table lamp, but the mouse was nowhere to be seen.

Tom let out a bark of laughter and dropped the sofa with a thud.

“It’s like a bad documentary,” he chuckled, sitting down by the ancient bureau I used as a desk and picking up a deck of cards. “The hunter’s instincts are sharp and well-honed, allowing her to sense her prey from several miles away.”

I gave him the finger and returned to my usual chair, though his Attenborough impression wasn’t half bad. “It’s a sodding mouse, not a vampire.”

Tom continued shuffling the cards. “Though the hunter may have been defeated, she must try again, in order to survive in the harsh reality of the jungle.”

I settled back into the cushions, resting my feet on the displaced coffee table – pushed aside earlier to make space for my latest mural. “That’s basically what Jon’s been saying.” I ran a hand through my hair, still gazing around for any sign of the mouse. “Then again, it’s been quiet lately.”

My eyes pricked with tiredness as I surveyed the room, clamping down a yawn. I didn’t spend much time at home, so my floorboards were bare, the walls still the same bland ivory they’d been when I moved in almost six years ago. The only hint of personality was the colourful patchwork blanket thrown over the moth-eaten arm of a once-black sofa, and the bureau pushed against the far wall. Acrylic paints in every hue were scattered on the surface and across the floor, but the canvas was still half-finished. I released the yawn and reached for my mug.

“Surely you’re not going to drink that. It’ll be clock cold by now.”

I raised it in Tom’s direction, firmly meeting his expression of horror. “Coffee’s coffee,” I said, downing the cold, sludgy dregs in one delicious mouthful.

“Uh-huh. Is that what you tell the customers?” He plucked the mug from my hand and took it through to the kitchen, and the sound of running water reached my ears a second later.

I rolled my eyes, knowing he couldn’t see me. “Course not. But I hate to waste the caffeine.”

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The water stopped, and Tom came back through, picking up the cards again. “Have you heard from him, then?” he asked, shuffling them like a pro.

It took me a moment to catch up. “Jon? No. It’s been busy at the café. I was planning on calling yesterday, but I’ve not had time.” I paused, glancing at the clock on my phone. “It’s probably too late now. But I thought you said he’d messaged?”

“Not a bloody word since he got on the train. Been trying to track his phone but it’s either dead or...” He shrugged.

I smirked. “It’s only been a couple of weeks. He’s probably shacked up with some Scottish girl he met in a bar.”

Tom laughed. “Maybe. Or dragging her up a mountain or something.”

“Oh, I know all about the ‘guy’ stuff you get up to when I’m not around, Chowdhury.” I wagged a finger at him. “On that much, my instincts are pretty sharp.”

He spread the cards across the desk in a fan. “What are we supposed to do while you’re off being badass and killing things, eh?”

“I dunno,” I mocked. “Tear your hair out with worry? Knit?”

“Come off it,” he chuckled along with me. “You’re fine on your own.”

I shrugged. “Doesn’t hurt to know someone cares.”

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Tom shook his head and gestured me over. “Play me?” I glanced at the time again. 3.14 A.M. “Sure. Ready to lose?”

Before he could reply, a beam of blue light fell in through the open curtains of the bay window, flashing around and around in a familiar swirl that caused my stomach to drop. Tom shot me a look of alarm as I stood slowly.

“What did you do?”

“Nothing!” I was already edging into the kitchen, towards the back door.

“Shit. Okay, go. Hide. I’ll deal with them.”

I hesitated, wracking my brain as I shoved my feet into unlaced Dr Martens. I had no idea what this was about.

“Just hide!”

I RAN. THE ICY WIND BIT INTO my skin, burning my lungs as I pushed my limbs faster than I’d ever run before. Slowing down wasn’t an option.

The skies were clear and starry as I sped toward the city, away from the house. Even now, part of me registered it was a perfect night for hunting. And if killing something would help release the tight, dull ache in my chest, that’s what I would do.

My heavy boots battered the ground beneath my feet, never faltering on the icy pavement. It was only November,

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but the night was deathly cold, and my cheeks grew numb as I forced my body onward. Away. It didn't matter where to. I cast my senses ahead, throwing them before me like a net, seeking the empty patches in my mind that signalled something unnatural. It was after four in the morning, but somewhere, someone might need me. Something would oblige my need for violence.

Pockets of late-night stragglers lingered on the street, huddled close to the light and warmth of the few pubs and bars still open. I sped past, ignoring the bursts of sound from within.

It only took a few minutes of searching before I felt it. An uncomfortable alertness settled over my body like a veil of ice, and I slowed to a walk to catch my breath. Goosebumps crept over my skin, and I shuddered, though my pulse was pounding in my ears and my blood hot. I hadn't seen the cause of the sensation yet, but my instincts were sharp from years of practice. In this, I trusted them absolutely.

I let the feeling take over my mind and body, flooding through me to almost sweep away the unthinkable thoughts the last hour had brought – since I'd first seen those blue lights. There. In the thin white glow from the streetlights, two women turned the corner ahead of me, blending into the shadows of the alley as though they'd never been there at all. My skin prickled, and the hairs raised on the back of my neck. I picked up my pace, keeping close to the wall.

The rich scent of tobacco filled the air as I edged toward the alley where they'd disappeared, and sneaked a glance into the passage. The dark-haired woman had lit a cigarette and handed the lighter to her blonde friend as she leaned against the wall. She inhaled and tilted her head back, closing her eyes as she blew smoke artfully into the frigid night. Both women were attractive, so similar at first sight that you'd assume they were related: high cheekbones, symmetrical features, and large, dark eyes. The blonde was a few inches taller in glossy black heels.

I observed them for a moment, my pulse pounding in my ears. From the sheer, form-fitting dresses and heavy make-up they both wore, they were probably passing as students from one of the local unis. They looked to be about the right age, not that appearances meant much. But the ruse was simple enough to be believable – unless, of course, you happened across someone like me. Keeping an eye on them, I assessed the short, narrow alley. From my position, I should have a slight advantage. Emphasis on slight.

I took a deep, silent breath, reigning in the simmering heat in my blood that begged to be released. My body trembled as I held it back, waiting, the taste of fire a metallic tang that filled my mouth.

The blonde was distracted, rifling around in her bag. Now was the moment. I stepped forward, the streetlamp behind throwing my face deeply into shadow. Everything about the alley was dim and filthy, from the sweet stench of

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refuse to the grotty, spray-painted graffiti across the brickwork. On a normal night, I might have worked harder to draw them out – if only to get away from the smell. But tonight was not a normal night.

“You know, they reckon cigarettes are bad for you. I guess that’s not a worry when you’re dead?” I frowned. “But second-hand smoke in a public place... that’s just rude.”

The smoker barely reacted, throwing a lazy glance my way. But her blonde friend’s head snapped up at the sound of my voice.

“Excellent,” she murmured, scarlet-painted lips curling. “A late-night snack.”

I resisted rolling my eyes. Vampires had no imagination.

The brunette straightened as her friend spoke, her head tilting to one side as she looked me over.

“It’s you.” She tapped the ash from the end of her cigarette with a long, enamelled nail, apparently unconcerned. “I’ve heard about you.”

“I’d bow or curtsy or something, but...” I pushed my hair back from my face. “Manners won’t matter much in a few minutes.”

The blonde gave a low chuckle as I took a step toward her. I could smell them now – perfume intermingled with something darker.

“Witty.” She reached out to push me with both hands, the movement faster than should have been possible.

I stepped back, and her fingertips missed the wool of my coat. “I like to think so.” Any minute now...

Anger flooded her pale face, turning her skin an unpleasant mottled pink. But the brunette came between us before I had time to react. I twitched.

“Look,” she said, raising her hands. “We get it. But it’s late. We haven’t done anything.”

Something flickered behind her eyes, and I couldn’t help but raise an eyebrow.

“So, no one took the bait tonight. What about next time?” My voice hardened. “There’s a reason this isn’t a negotiation.”

“Idiot,” the blonde one spat, leaning around her friend. “You’ll lose.”

They were strong. And fast – I could see as much. Plus, it was two against one. But I’d fought with worse odds, and I was still here.

“Ignore her. We’re not looking for a fight,” the brunette pressed, edging forward. “Walk away.”

I almost laughed. “How considerate of you both. Maybe manners do matter after all.” Despite their words, bit by bit, they were forcing me against the wall. My mind flashed to the dagger tucked into my boot. “Unfortunately for you,” I planted my feet. “This is what I do.”

“Don’t worry—” Blondie took off one of her heels. “You won’t be doing it—” and the other, “much longer.” Dropping them behind her by the straps, she grew still for a

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second, a predator's gleam in her eye. I blinked, and with a casual, unnatural swiftness, she attacked.

I dodged the first blow – a punch aimed squarely at my face – and a hunk of brick in the wall behind me shattered under her bare knuckles. Before she had time to step back, I swung my fist up into her abdomen. Molten adrenaline shot through my body as I made contact, and I grinned wildly, revelling in it. This was exactly what I needed.

She stumbled away, feet slapping on the damp concrete. I used the pause to wiggle my way out of the corner and shook out my shoulders, the heat spreading through my limbs and finally burning through the haze of grief that had brought me here. The brunette vamp shot a glance between us before starting forward, stubbing out her cigarette on my arm as she tried to grab me. The wool smoked, but I felt nothing.

“That’s my favourite bloody coat you’ve ruined!” I seized the strap of her dress to stop her from getting away. Grabbing her shoulder with my other hand, I dug my fingers into her cold skin and shook her hard before dashing her against the wall. Her skull made an unpleasant crunching sound as it hit the stone, stunning her momentarily.

Taking advantage of the confusion, I spun back to Blondie, who’d recovered her balance.

“You actually are an idiot,” she hissed as she advanced, aiming her knee at my gut in a move I almost didn’t spot. I backed up, but not fast enough, and flew backwards as her

kneecap met flesh, landing on my back with a thud. I groaned inwardly – that was going to leave a hell of a bruise. But I didn't have time to complain.

Twisting up and straightening, I ignored the urge to vomit rocketing up my throat and blocked a couple more punches with my forearms.

“Seriously?” I caught her wrist and wrenched it behind her, grabbing her hair with my other hand. “You're the one calling me names?” I smashed her face into the concrete, dropping to a crouch. “You were gonna eat me—”

“Oh, fuck off!” she half-yelled, writhing, her mouth full of dirt.

“I don't think I will.” I eased my grip for a moment, sure I had her trapped, but she rolled over, ready to bolt. Before she could get far, I shoved the heel of my hand into her shoulder and pinned her other arm to the ground. “If this had gone your way—”

I took a long, ragged breath and shook my head, no longer smelling the rancid stink of the alley. Now was my moment. My favourite dagger was inches from my hand, but I didn't unsheathe it. I felt sick.

I bent nearer, so close I could count her eyelashes. “We both know you're far from innocent,” I murmured, mostly to myself. She strained against me, but I tightened my grip, glaring at her. “I'm not the bad guy here.”

She hissed, her lips pulling back to expose sharp white canines – but she didn't fight. With a sigh, I let go and she

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scrambled into a sitting position. Before she could get any further, I drew back my fist and struck out, hitting the sweet spot at the side of her jaw. Her eyes rolled back, and she fell limp. I kicked her away, a quick shiver running through me as I brushed myself off and stood up.

Fuck, I wanted to keep hitting her. For a moment there, she'd helped push away the raw, hollow ache that had settled over my heart earlier tonight. But this wasn't the solution, and some part of me knew it.

Before I could get beyond that thought, something yanked me back by the hood of my coat, and I was thrust against the wall. Shit. I'd almost forgotten about the other one, but apparently, she'd found her bearings while I had my tiny breakdown. My cheek scraped the filthy brick and I began to choke as she lifted me by the throat with one hand. My feet dangled uselessly.

"I tried to play nice, hunter. But that little stunt actually hurt. And you're right. I suppose..." Her breath reeked of copper. "I'm the predator. You're the prey."

I kicked out, struggling for oxygen as she tightened her grip. Her lashes lowered as she shifted me higher and bit her lip almost seductively, eyes lingering on my pulse.

I thought fast. My dagger was still in my boot. Bracing one foot against the wall behind me, I jammed my knee into her middle, raising my leg enough to grab the hilt. Before she could work out what I'd done, I forced it between her ribs, straining my wrist to twist the pale steel. Blood spilt

over my hand and arm, sticky and almost black in the half-light. As I slid the blade from her chest, she released me, staggering back into the other side of the alley.

The sight of her bleeding left a sour taste in my mouth, and I gulped down oxygen, trying to clear my head. My dagger clattered to the ground, and I stared as blood bubbled and spilled from her lips. She almost seemed surprised as she slid down the wall and went still.

The prickling sensation beneath my skin lessened as her life – or whatever it was – ran out. I pulled my clean hand through my hair, still panting and trying to recover my breath as I took a peek out of the entrance to the alley. There was no one in sight.

Behind me, the blonde stirred. I imagined her waking up – with me, still standing over her. She'd probably run for it when she saw what I'd done to her friend. I wasn't sure how comfortable I was with that.

I should finish her and leave. I knew it – hell, she probably knew it – but I hesitated. The fire in my veins still ran hot, but the blood on my hands felt dirty.

Get your shit together, Erin, for crying out loud.

I swallowed. It felt wrong to kill her while she was semi-conscious. Not even a vamp deserved that. The brunette was thoroughly dead, yeah – I'd got the kill I was craving, in the end – but it hadn't made a blind bit of difference. The knot in my throat was as unbreakable as it had been when it showed up alongside the police.

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I sighed. The gold inlay on my blade glinted on the floor, and I scooped it up, shoving it back into my boot without cleaning it. My sleeve and hand were bloody and stained, and I wiped them as best I could on the lining of my coat. It would have to do for now.

Cheery voices floated through the air from the bar four doors down, interrupting my musings. No raised voices, though. No alarm. No one had noticed a thing.

Pulling my hood up over my face, I headed onto the street at a fast walk, leaving the blonde with her hair splayed across the damp ground, the brunette sprawled beside her.

I reined my senses in as I hurried along, shutting down each sensation, desperate for the numbness it would bring. I didn't want to feel any more.

Here and there, stragglers loitered in the doorways, smoking and chatting, most of them still drinking. A few called out as I passed, but I ignored them, though the aroma of stale beer followed me.

Violence hadn't helped. I'd been an idiot to think it would – so I guess the vamp had been right about that, at least. The fire in my blood could burn through just about anything, but not this. The truth was, my best friend was dead. Nothing was going to bring Jon back.

My breath condensed into soft white clouds as I picked up the pace. I was so bloody tired. Tired of tonight. Tired of this life. Tired of thinking about death. Twenty-five years of obsessing – I'd been four when I realised I couldn't escape it

— and I still hated that it followed me everywhere I went. Sure, I'd done what most people would and pretended it wasn't happening for a while — but when you can sense vampires, they can usually sense you, too.

I crossed the road, leaving the hum of the city behind as the shops and restaurants petered out and turned into houses. Most people were heading home, or already tucked in, but every now and then voices reached my ever-sensitive ears from streets away, squeezing every moment of life from the night.

A shadow across the street caught my attention, almost human as it darted behind a fence. My skin tingled for a second and I froze, before the shape transformed into a small tabby that trotted out and into the road at a run. One by one, I released my taut muscles. Jumpy much?

It wasn't like I thought it was a ghost or anything. I'd never seen or talked to spirits. As far as I knew, it wasn't even possible. Vamps were the only thing that went bump in the night, and my talent for spotting them was fairly specific. I sensed them stalking their victims: the quick and the dead. And I took it as a sign that it was my job to stop it.

Obviously it hadn't been enough this time.

Jon was my oldest friend. And let me tell you, when you weird the other schoolkids out for talking about undead people that follow you home, friends are hard to come by. So, for years, he'd been my only friend — the one person who could convince me of the truth when I wanted to pretend I

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wasn't a hunter. Then we'd met Tom, started the coffee shop... and things had been good. I'd dropped my guard.

The inferno in my veins was receding now, and the cold crept in through the heavy wool of my coat. I shoved my hands more deeply into my pockets, speeding up.

It hadn't even occurred to me to worry when Tom had dropped Jon off at the train station a few weeks ago. He'd announced he was taking a trip to Edinburgh – something about visiting an estranged uncle, he'd said. I don't think I'd even said goodbye.

Then earlier tonight, the police had knocked on the door. Tom answered it, while I panicked and hid. I'd assumed they wanted to speak to me – it wouldn't have been the first time. It was still a blur, trying to get it straight in my head. One minute we were playing cards, the next...

Dragging my mind back to the now, I turned onto my street, a long row of Victorian terraced houses. I lived alone, but Tom would probably still be there, ready to guilt trip me since I'd run off without a word. My fingers were stiff with cold as I tried to fit the key into the lock.

The hallway was dim, the earliest light of dawn behind me. Tom was asleep on the sofa, his long legs and arms dangling under my blanket. The air was tinged with the clean scent of soap and pencil shavings that always seemed to follow him – familiar and quietly grounding. His usually tawny skin looked ashen in the shadow, short black hair

sticking up in all directions. He looked at peace, though I knew that wasn't the case.

When he'd opened the door to the police, I'd listened in through the open kitchen window. The officer's tone set my teeth on edge; way too solemn to be anything good. They said they'd found Jon in his hotel room. That his uncle had identified the body. When they called it a suicide, I'd almost burst through and kicked off – it was total bullshit. But as I watched Tom catch hold of the hall table to steady himself, I knew it didn't matter what they called it. The result was the same – Jon was gone. Moments later, I'd run.

I shook off the memory, though it was only an hour or so ago. The air was warm in the living room, perfumed with the comforting scent of coffee and vanilla. Careful not to make too much noise, I laid my coat on the armchair and stretched, my joints popping in protest. Stray strands of my tangled auburn hair caught the dawn light as it filtered softly into the room, and I pushed them aside with my left hand. Crusted brown blood still stained my other hand, so I kicked off my DMs and padded into the kitchen. Tom stirred through the French doors that separated the rooms.

“When did you get back?” He blinked at me as he appeared in the frame, not quite awake.

I shrugged. “A couple of minutes ago. The sun’s barely up.”

Tom yawned and rubbed his eyes before turning to tidy his blanket away. I turned on the cold tap and washed the

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blood from my hand, wincing as the water stung my raw knuckles. Without another word, I prepped the coffee machine, grinding beans and pressing them into the portafilter without seeing what I was doing. Behind me, Tom switched on the old radio by the oven. Slow, melodic piano music floated through the room, and my hands stilled. It was one of Jon's favourites. Tom nudged me aside and took over.

That done, we sat together at my tiny kitchen table, and I picked at the scrubbed, paint-flecked wood. My coffee was too hot to drink, but the bitter aroma and the warmth of the heavy ceramic mug beneath my fingers was soothing.

“Are you going to say something?” He didn’t ask where I’d gone, but I was sure he knew.

I shrugged. I should apologise for running out, but I didn’t.

Tom raised both eyebrows, waiting.

“Do you...” I swallowed the lump in my throat. “What if he’s not really dead?”

I’d been turning it over in the back of my mind since I’d left. If the only explanation was the worst thing I could think of, so be it. It was better than losing him.

Tom’s eyes searched my face as he pulled his mug across the table, understanding in an instant. “I don’t think so. He wouldn’t want that.”

The sun blazed in through the leaded glass of the kitchen window, illuminating his face, and I turned away.

Of course he'd say that. And it was true. I knew it. But I'd still hoped.

"This whole thing doesn't ring right, though. He wasn't..." He swallowed. "He's not a suicide."

I nodded. The empty chair between us where Jonathan usually sat seemed bigger than usual, and it was a struggle not to stare at it.

"I mean, the body, the way he—" Tom's hands shook, and he dropped his mug to the table with such force that the liquid sloshed over the edges. I stared at the spillage.

"He must have been released fast," I murmured.

"I guess they didn't think there was anything to investigate." He shook his head. "He wasn't suicidal, and we both know it. But it doesn't seem like anyone else is going to look into it. It has to be us."

I nodded. It sounded morbid, which wasn't exactly out of the ordinary for us – but at least we were on the same page. With Jonathan gone, everything was different. Even if we were wrong – and I didn't believe that was true – we needed to know. Whoever had done this would be held accountable, I'd make bloody well sure of it.

I spent the rest of Sunday in my armchair, turning the pages of a paperback novel without seeing the words. All I could think about was Jon, and how his death had to be my fault, somehow. I hadn't protected him enough, hadn't checked in like I should have... Because the fact of the matter was, anyone connected to me would always be in

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danger. Of course, I'd thought about it before – but this was the first time the threat had seemed truly real.

While I pondered all this, Tom made what seemed like a hundred phone calls, arranging the things I couldn't bring myself to help with. At barely thirty, Jon already had a will in place and a funeral plan: we just had to set it in motion. I supposed he'd understood the threat, at least.

As the afternoon drew on, Tom called a few of our friends. It wasn't a long list these days – people had grown tired of the secrets and excuses, so our circle had grown small. Honestly, I preferred it that way.

“I’m so sorry to—” The person on the other end interrupted Tom. “No. The police told us it was a suicide.” He paused, and I admired his tact as he let the other person speak. “No, neither would I. As soon as we know, of course.”

I knew I should be doing more than just listening in, but I couldn't talk about Jon in the past tense without my throat closing up. For Tom's sake, I refused to cry – or so I told myself.

Next on his list was the police department; then the hospital that had carried out the post-mortem. I didn't know how he'd found the contact info, but it was Tom, so I wasn't surprised.

“No, Tomal. No, I'm not. He didn't have any—” His tone was polite, but he was getting nowhere. “I understand. Could you let us know if there are any updates?”

JAMIE DALTON

My mind wandered, and I wandered. I watched the patch of grass I called a garden through the kitchen window for a while, following the patterns the light made and the shadows that crept up behind. I wanted it to rain or snow or, even better, storm. The mild, sunny day seemed wrong, somehow. If my eyes must remain dry, then the heavens should at least open.

Eventually, the house grew silent. Tom dozed off with his notebook still open beside him, the pages full of his tiny, cramped handwriting. The sun slipped below the horizon, the air grew cooler, and our first day without Jonathan was over. I knew he'd been gone for weeks, been dead for days... that I was being silly. But it was different. It was the first day.

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