

My Boyfriend is a Zombie

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Book One of “The Delicates”

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Dedicated to Dany my number one zombie fan and good friend.

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The boundaries which divide Life from Death are at best shadowy and vague. Who shall say where the one ends, and where the other begins?

~Edgar Allan Poe



One



He wasn't normal, she could tell with the first glance. From her bedroom window, Victoria saw a man shuffle along the sidewalk past the old cemetery. He wore a heavy coat that enveloped him up to the chin and in his hands he clutched something possessively. The cemetery's fence was iron, seven feet tall, with spikes on top. He went in through the front gates.

Carried by impulse Victoria ran downstairs outside and followed him. The cemetery was old and large. The man had not gone far when he stopped and looked behind him. Suspicious of being followed he went on quickly with a slightest limp. Victoria lost sight of him for a moment. She stepped carefully through a cluster of trees, pushing aside a branch. She could see him kneeling by a grave, digging with a small spade to make a shallow hole, then buried whatever he had been carrying.

Victoria grimaced as she crunched a twig. He stopped and looked up. He arose quickly and walked away, looking back with wide, unfathomable eyes.

"Wait!" Her cry didn't arrest him, no doubt he avoided her on purpose. Victoria stumbled after him but even with his limp he was difficult to catch. He wanted to hide, to cover himself from the openness. Victoria stopped, and decided to return to the grave. The headstone was covered in green moss, so worn and faded as to almost be unreadable, but the rubbing was clear. "Travis Godspeed, beloved son and brother, 1799 - 1824, sleeping till we meet again," Victoria read aloud.

She touched the freshly dug soil, her curiosity to know what he had

buried was gnawing her. Perhaps it was just a dead pet, she didn't know. A brush of wind tugged at her hand, as if she shouldn't be touching. She felt a presence and looked up, the man had come back. He said nothing at all, he just stared at her.

Again something brushed past her, she wasn't welcomed. "Why did you follow me?" he asked in a soft voice, half frightened.

"I didn't," she said. What horrible thing had possessed her to follow a stranger? She was filled with overpowering fear of herself. "You know there is a pet cemetery?" she said, watching him. "What did you bury, a cat?"

"I buried nothing."

"I saw you. Right there—there's something buried."

He gave her the feeling that he wanted to run away. "Do you live here?" she asked.

"In the cemetery? No."

"I meant in Hall."

"Oh," he said.

He looked a bit too old to go to school, but she was nervous and went on with anything.

"I don't see you at school," she said. "Do you go to school?"

"No."

"So, what do you—"

"You have to leave." He suddenly stooped and gripped her arm. She gave a scream, getting out a bottle of perfume from her jeans and sprayed him in the eyes. She ran but her steps were arrested by his cries: "Ah, what have you done? My eyes!" He fell to his knees, practically sobbing. "Oh, my God! My eyes!"

He was such a piteous, horrified thing, she went back.

"It burns!" he cried.

"I know, I'm sorry." She tried to wipe his face with a handkerchief. It did no good. There was a fountain with running water. She led him there and he sat down with his face bent over the basin while she splashed his eyes. He seemed so harmless now. "Better?" she asked.

He wiped his face on his coat sleeve. She sat next to him on the bench. He looked at her from under knitted brows. "You're dangerous!"

"I thought you were trying to hurt me."

"I wanted you to leave."

Victoria studied his face. He was ghastly white, with thin, smooth skin, too smooth, like wax. He had the tiniest stitches on his bottom lip; they were so finely stitched she hardly saw them. He turned away from her look. A sort of quiver passed over his face. Behind him was the abandoned funeral chapel, iron doors padlocked, covered in a tangle of ivy. Someone walked the path that led through a clutch of half-broken tombstones towards the front gates, but it was only mist and shadow.

"Did you see that?" she asked.

He frowned. "No."

"I've lived in Hall my whole life. Never seen you before. Did you just move?"

"No, I live nearby."

A heavy jingling of keys. The caretaker held a lamp in his brittle hand. The sun had almost completely gone down.

"Get along with you," he said. "I'm about to lock up. Not the best place for a rendezvous. Follow me."

Victoria followed the crooked old caretaker. She looked back at the man on the bench. "Isn't he suppose to leave also?"

"He's to help me lock up." The caretaker closed the gates behind her and said, "Take it you live not too far? Travis could walk you home."

"Just over there."

"Get home to your mother, then," he said.

At dinner Victoria didn't mention her encounter. Her brother, John, was twenty-one and he had a say about everything. While brushing her hair that night, Victoria looked out the bedroom window across to the cemetery. It had never seemed so alluring. She wondered if he was still in there, amongst the mist and tombstones. She wondered what he was doing.



Two



Victoria and her family lived in a big white house opposite the cemetery. Everyday, when school was finished, she cut through the park to get home. Today she went to the cemetery instead. She couldn't stop thinking about him. He was so strange. The place was empty yet strangely inhabited, an unsettling contradiction. A thousand dead things watching her.

"Hello!" she called, afraid of her own voice. She walked the paths hoping to meet him. Then she waited by Travis Godspeed's grave, biting her little fingernail. She was tempted to dig up the soil. What was he hiding? He was such an unusual person, so painfully shy, she couldn't imagine what she would find beneath the ground. She had all sorts of insanely bad thoughts—a dead pet, a murder weapon, someone's head? But no, there was something too sensitive, too sweetly attentive, for him to be dangerous. She wished he would come again so she could speak with him, hear his soft, deep voice. She hated being in the cemetery, but his presence, for some reason, made her feel alive and safe. She knew it was madness waiting for him. Well, she was a little mad. Her curiosity and persistence were inspirations of insanity.

The library clock was the only sound to break the silence, tick, tick, tick. Victoria was bent over her homework. She felt a sensation and turned to look over her shoulder. She saw a figure slip away from the partly-closed door, as if it had been caught in its act of watching. A tiny smile came to her lips. Was he following her now?

Her school bag slung over her shoulder, Victoria walked along the path outside the cemetery. She stopped at the front gates. They were always locked at five in winter, in summer eight. Inside her a terrible knot of curiosity persisted like an obsession. There was something in his look that was hypnotic, supernatural.

Over the course of a few evenings she stood by the bedroom window, wondering. Something was going on, she was certain of it. Something in the wind, in the stars, in the darkness. It was there, it was there, if she could only meet it. But these meditations only increased her confusion and blew the itching fires that consumed her. Sometimes, in the excitement of curiosity, she threw herself on the bed and lay as if expecting him, till finding her illusion, she opened her eyes and sighed, burning.

It was still dark when Victoria got up in the morning for school. She dressed briskly. Her school uniform was a white blouse, and a dark skirt. She had long, burnt-brown hair with auburn undertones, which made most people think she had red hair. Instead of going straight to school she wanted to see Travis first.

The cold trees stood still and dark in the cemetery. Victoria scanned the place with her torch. She could see only the nothingness of the fog. The air was chill and frosty.

Then Victoria saw a glare in the fog, the caretaker made his rounds, holding the lamp high over his face. Victoria quickly switched off her torch and waited in the dark. She avoided him and kept looking for Travis. A number of times she thought she glimpsed him, but he would always vanish into the secret company of shadows.

"Travis," she whispered, "is that you?"

Beside her the mist swirled together but in the figure of a man, only to

fade again like an impression in the fog. She turned away and didn't see the yawning face. Her torch lighted a tall figure standing with his back to her. It was Travis. He was speaking in a low voice, yet to no one. Victoria approached nearer and nearer, till she stood rather close behind him. He turned his head and looked, just as if someone had informed him of her presence, a crease on his fine brow.

"I don't know why I'm here!" she said, looking at him. "Do you mind?"

"Why should I mind?" he said delicately, still in that unnerving, subdued tone.

Victoria, pushing her scarf up to her ears, stood waiting in silence, her warm boots protecting her from the wet grass. She glanced around.

"I've never visited the cemetery in the dark. It's spooky. Must be strange working in a place like this. What do you do?"

"Help Mr. Morrison, the caretaker, see that things are locked and secure."

"Is that all you have to do?"

"Mostly. I'm usually only here in the night."

"Why are you here now?"

"I wanted to take care that everything was in order, nothing broken or desecrated. Some people have such little respect for the dead."

"I didn't think you would be allowed to bury things here," she said.

Travis looked at her darkly with nervousness.

"There's little to entertain you here," he said. "I'll see you to the gates."

"I'm not ready to leave just yet," she pleaded.

"Please yourself."

He was tall and ungainly but of very striking appearance. He had dark, stiff, short hair, a long nose, and a brow that was both high and clear. His pale hands didn't seem to fit him properly, and his head was set uncomfortably on his shoulders. Yet there was something very beautiful about him, in his deep eyes, a kindness. But about him also was the strange, guarded look.

"Can I string along?" she asked.

He glanced at her over his shoulder, with one of his odd grimaces. They walked together in silence.

"You don't have a torch," she said.

"I'm accustomed to it," he said, suffocated.

She shined the torch to light their way. They were on a grassy rise. Many capstones lined it making a retaining wall. He jumped softly down from the wall, his knees a bit stiff.

"Careful, careful," he said, overly cautious, reaching up to help her. She took his hand.

"I'm okay," she said, jumping down. It was only a little drop. "It's fascinating to read the inscriptions," she said, shining the light. "They're so old."

Victoria went along reading all the epitaphs. Sometimes she kneeled to pull away ivy. She enjoyed touching the stone. He watched everything with wide, black eyes.

"Here Lies Eleanor Pennyworth, Spinster of this Parish, 1790-1871," Victoria read aloud.

"Not the friendliest of ladies," said Travis.

"Why do you say that?"

He faltered. "Look at the inscription. Nobody thought to write anything heartwarming."

"That doesn't necessarily mean it's her fault."

"No. Very true." His fine, nervous hands were clasped in front of him. His dark eyebrows raised with a twitch. He was courteous in the extreme and tried always to have the right word to say in the right place. Yet he was impatient to be rid of her.

"You don't have to stay with me," she said. "You can go do your things. I can see you don't want to be here with me."

"No, not at all." He was caught of guard. "Only, this isn't the place a young lady should spend her morning."

She sat down on a rock, she knew she was missing her classes, but she didn't care. As if a wind tossed him, he hobbled over to her, sat down. His

expression was pleasant, with an inkling of wistfulness. He said, "Your hair reminds me of autumn."

"Thanks." She unconsciously touched her hair. "Yours reminds me of brambles. I just mean because it sticks out a little. Boys would pay to get it styled that way."

"I think a bird moved in sometime ago. I haven't the heart to kick him out of his home."

She laughed at his joke.

A large raindrop splashed down on her face. Victoria looked up at the grey sky. It was beginning to get light. Another handful of raindrops, and Victoria and Travis ran together into the tiny brick porch of the church, where the rain could not touch them. The wind gusted coldly, the rain beat down. They were together, rigid, shy, silent. He smelled sweetly, too sweetly for a man—of roses and of something like varnish. It made her heart beat violently for no reason. His eyes were brown, darker than the deepest forgotten well. For a heartbeat she thought he was going to kiss her. She half wanted him to. Again the confusion came over him, as if he were lost and becoming all vague, uncertain.

"I think the rain is easing off," he said.

"Yes," she said, feeling all confused and a bit shaky inside. "You're different from everyone else. There's things you're not telling me."

"Of course there are things I'm not telling you," he said. "I hardly know you. I'm not sure why you would expect me to divulge anything of myself. I don't even know your name."

"Victoria Evans."

"I know a Victoria, another Victoria."

"I think I know your name—Travis."

"How do you know my name?"

He sounded so suspicious, she laughed. "The caretaker mentioned you the other night, when we first met."

"Oh," he said. In his gentle, respectful way he got her seated on the bench. "Not cold are you?"

She shook her head. She was shivering, but that was because of him.

“Are you going to sit down too?” she asked.

He promptly sat down. Victoria stared at his face. She noticed there were also dark little stitches on his cheek beneath his left eye. She wanted to ask him what had happened to him.

“This was a church before it was a funeral chapel,” he said. “It dates back to the 1600s. Some parts have been rebuilt and extended, but they kept many of the original features. The stained glass windows at the back are original. Do you find that fascinating too?”

“Sort of,” she said to be polite, not very interested.

They chatted for some time before Victoria realized she didn’t need the torch any more. It was quite light. The rain had stopped and the fog began to lift a bit. There was a peculiar feeling of silence and secrecy in that lonely, old cemetery. Travis said, “I hope you’re not bored! Wouldn’t tea be nice!”

“That would be nice,” she said. “. . . I should go.”

“Must you?”

“I’ve already missed the first few classes,” she said. When she stood up and walked he saw her legs move softly within her short skirt. She had on thick black stockings, and sensible black shoes. She had a girl’s slender, lovely legs. She stopped on a sudden and turned back. He stood up on impulse. She gave him an awkward little kiss on his cheek. He turned only his eyes to look at her. He was set in stone.

“I wasn’t bored at all,” she said.

Oddly and blankly he looked at her, with the vagueness of a child, but with the quiet intensity of a man.

She caught her lower lip between her teeth. “Would you like to see me again?”

“I—I don’t think that would be a good idea,” he said, becoming sober. He had a secret within, something he would not divulge.

She looked down, disappointed, embarrassed. “Why not? You can’t stop me, I mean this a public place. I can come back any time I want.”

His lips twitched with a smile. “You can’t want to spend time with me?”

"I do," she said. She was conscious of a sharp little breeze darting back and forth and around her. "What is that?"

"What is what?" he asked, alarmed.

"That! Never mind."

"A stray breeze likely," he said.

"Well, I'll see you around, I guess. I hope. What times can I find you here?"

"I usually start work late in the evening but sometimes I come here in the day, just because I like it. That's a strange thing to say, I know."

"No, it's peaceful here," she half lied. It was peaceful but it was also a bit strange. "So, you'll be back again tonight?"

"Yes, I suppose I will."

"Maybe I'll stop by after I've done my homework. Do you think you could open the gates for me—do you have a key?"

"I do, but—"

"Or, we could meet up somewhere this afternoon, you could bring some friends and I'll bring mine."

"I won't be in until very late. The gate will be unlocked if you decide to come around. I'll be in the East side."

"Okay, that'll be great. I'll see you tonight—it's a date!"

Victoria left the cemetery in a detached, dreamy haze. She felt as if she had a burning secret and wanted to tell someone. Yet she was possessive of it. She didn't want to share it with anyone. The rest of the day was spent in a dream. Her only thought was that so sweet a creature as this boy seemed to her could only make her happy. One kiss from him would last all her life.



Three



A date in the cemetery when it was not Halloween wasn't something Victoria would usually look forward to, but tonight was different. She could hardly concentrate on her homework and eventually dropped her pen and got off the bed and went to the cupboard. She decided she'd wear something pretty but not too over the top. She wanted to seem casual even though the knots in her stomach were anything but casual. She glanced at the clock. It was only 8:30pm. She decided to wait another hour before sneaking out. He probably wouldn't be there yet.

The time ticked over agonizingly slow. When it was finally half past nine, Victoria grabbed her coat and snuck out. Her parents would have a fit if they knew she was going on a date with a stranger in a graveyard. The gates were unlocked just as Travis said they would, and she slipped in without any trouble. The whole situation was queer and exciting. Her mind went to all sorts of magical places and kept her from freaking out at being in such creepy place after dark. She imagined he might have set up a makeshift pavilion decorated with lights and entwined with flower garlands. There would be a blanket and candles and other essentials. He'd be sitting there, waiting, looking as solemn and remote as a forbidden Prince, in the shelter of the pavilion. The location wasn't exactly romantic, but one thought of those innocent, mysterious eyes, gazing into hers, kept those butterflies in her belly fluttering.

Then she found him.

He was crouching cleaning lichen off a gravestone with what ap-

peared to be plain water and a soft-bristled brush.

"I'll be finished in a minute," he said.

"No rush," she said, disillusioned. She felt kind of stupid now, and stood with her arms by her sides. How silly was it to expect he'd go through all that trouble to set up something special, when they barely knew more than each other's names. Still, it was nice to just be with him out in the night. He was a hard worker, he scrubbed away at the lichen, constantly pouring water over it. She watched him for a moment then said, "Hey, I've got some bleach at home, would that help?"

He didn't stop for a second. "Bleach will damage the stone, it'll dissolved the binding minerals and cause the quartz crystals to start to exfoliate. It'll give it a nice brightness but will ruin it in the long run, the lettering will be the first to disappear."

"So . . . no on the bleach?"

"Don't worry, it'll look good once I'm finished. It'll keep its charm. Something that is over 100 years old shouldn't look bright and new."

He stopped and looked at the gravestone, contemplating it. Everything about him was so peculiar. He seemed almost eternal, crouching there, stiffly, fixedly, as if to stand and walk would not be natural to him.

"I feel kind of special being allowed in here at night when no one else is," she said. "I don't suppose you get a lot of visitors. I, uh, brought you these."

She pulled a box of hard candy from her purse and handed it to him. He stared at her as if he mistrusted why she was being so nice to him.

"Thank you," he said, with a genuine smile.

She became a little bolder, then. "So, Travis, if this is a date shouldn't we be doing something date-like?"

"Watching me clean lichen off gravestones isn't entertaining?"

She gave a small awkward laugh, not sure if he was serious or not. "Maybe if I was into dating a mortician." He looked at her oddly, and she cleared her throat. "Do you want me to help? I don't mind getting dirty."

Travis handed her the extra scrub brush. "Don't scrub too hard and be sure to keep it wet at all times."

“Okay.” She squatted near him and began to gently work away at the lichen. There was a variety of textures and colours, from yellowish-green to deep green, to orange or white. She found it quite fascinating.

“The lichen is just amazing,” she said. “The white ones almost look like tiny barnacles. Awesome pattern and colours.”

“Lichens are some of the best abstract paintings in the world.”

“You never know what you’ll find growing on a tombstone.”

“You never can tell.”

Her gaze lingered on him for a second, who would have thought cleaning headstones could be this much fun?

“This isn’t going to get you into trouble or anything is it? I don’t want you to lose your job because of me.”

“No, it’s fine—you’re helping. Besides, we’re the only ones here.”

For some reason him saying that sent shivers up her spine. It was true, they were all alone. She was all by herself with a young man she barely knew. Yet, not one hint of suspicion or alarm came with those spine-tingles. She was completely calm. He looked and felt utterly harmless, more than that, he felt . . . good.

“I didn’t think you would come tonight,” he admitted.

“Why?”

He paused to think. “Just a feeling.”

“Well, you were wrong.” She sat on the ground and took out the wet wipes from her purse to clean her hands. She offered one to him. “Do you want to break open the hard candies?”

He stayed crouching, handing her the box. “You have one. I don’t eat sweets.”

“Oh, well, that’s okay.”

“But you have one.”

“No, I won’t. Thanks. Save them for your mother or sister, if you have a sister, or sisters. Do you?”

He suddenly became very tense and uncomfortable. “I do.”

“They live here?”

“Yes; they don’t eat sweets either.”

He was so frank and so distant, she began to feel uncertain of him again.

“Give them to your girlfriend, then. Do you have a girlfriend?”

“Certainly not.”

“Good! I mean—good for me. I’ll keep the candies.”

She took the box and held it as the only thing keeping her from slinking off in embarrassment. It took everything she had not to ask him if this was a real date. That would just be shooting herself in the foot and scare him away. But then quite unexpectedly he answered the question for her.

“Would I have accepted your invitation to spend the evening together if I had girlfriend?”

A glowing involuntary smile came to her face. “So, this is an official date?”

“It’s not an official anything.” He fumbled with the brush dropping it in the bucket of water. She watched him, wondering what his problem was. It wasn’t as though she was asking him to put a ring on her finger. “It doesn’t feel right that you’re here. I think you should go.”

“What did I say wrong?”

“Nothing, you said nothing wrong. I just want you to understand this isn’t a date or anything of the sort. It can’t be—”

“Why can’t it be?”

“I—I don’t date—at least not from around here.”

“That’s kind of a snobby thing to say. None of the girls are good enough for you?”

“The other way around,” he said with a relaxed but somehow sad expression on his face.

“Maybe I wouldn’t seem so intimidating if you could just look me in the eye. You’ll see I’m not that sort of person.”

He glanced at her but she couldn’t hold his gaze. She had a thousand questions to ask him; why he looked so strange and acted so paranoid, and why his clothes seemed to belong from another era, but she zipped her lips. She simply asked, “What do you do when you’re not working?”

He began scrubbing again. "This and that."

"Me too. I spend most of my free time at the studio—I dance—Latin American. How about you, do you like dancing?"

"Depends on the company."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. My partner is always arguing with me. So, what else are you interested in, what's your favourite book?"

"Is it possible to have a favourite book?"

"To be honest I'm not much of a reader. I write poems, more like verses. I form them in my mind without really thinking, it's just a habit I've had since I was a kid."

He seemed so determined to be uncommunicative, Victoria could barely keep the the conversation afloat.

He obviously didn't want to tell her much about himself or his family, so she refrained from divulging a whole lot about herself, too. In fact, she worried that she was being a nuisance.

"Maybe I should go."

She waited a second to give him a chance to make her stay. He said nothing. Just as she started to stand he reached forward, but caught himself before touching her. She stopped and looked at him; they were both crouching. When their eyes met, he seemed somehow fragile. There was something heart-breaking about him. It made her feel crazy. Then there was that unsettling, confusing scent of his. She didn't know whether she wanted to cry or kiss him.

"Victoria, I would really like you to stay."

She stared at him, deciding whether to leave or not, then she reached for the second brush and he handed it to her. Without a word they continued to clean the gravestone. He glanced at her every so often, gently watching her with a regard that missed nothing.

"I have something for you," he said reaching into his coat pocket. He handed her a single purple flower on a stem. Not a lot of flowers were blooming at this time of year, this one looked as if he had stepped into Spring and brought it back just for her. It was very pretty, and the colour very charming.

"I love this flower! where did you pick it?"

"I planted a bush a long time ago, to brighten the place a little."

"Will you show me?"

Travis took her to a hidden little spot in the cemetery. The flowering plant was a semi-creeper and derived its support from climbing, twining, or creeping along surfaces. It had half covered someone's headstone.

In Loving Memory Of

Abigail Bligh, Beloved Wife and Mother

1802-1880

Thy Will Be Done

"Lucky girl." Victoria pointed to the dead woman's headstone. "What made you choose this spot?"

"It's nice and shady, too much sun will damage the flowers."

"I've never seen any like this before. They're unreal."

"They're my favourites."

"Finally, I learn one of your favourite things." She smiled, and he couldn't help but return it.

The purple flowers were otherworldly, as though he had stolen the plant from a mystic forest. The flowers were impossibly fresh as if only just opened, untouched by decay. Wind and rain and sunlight could never stain, never tinge, their divine purity. Victoria was quiet, admiring the marvellous beauty of their form, which seemed to greatly exceed that of all other flowers. They had thick petals, and, in spite of their opacity seemed to shimmer with a crystalline lustre.

"The rest of the cemetery has got to be jealous of this section. It's gorgeous! Why don't you plant more flowers around the place?"

"Mr. Morrison didn't approve. He said I'd turn the place into a damn nursery. He threatened to set this part on fire."

"He's a bitter sad old man."

"No more so than the rest of us."

She didn't know what he meant, but felt that he was well meaning, protecting the old man.

"Well, I guess I should be going. This was an awesome—whatever it was. Will I see you tomorrow?"

"I'm not sure if I'll be here."

"I'll take my chances."

"I have a feeling you do that a lot."

She smiled, walking backwards. "I'll let myself out. Goodnight, Travis."

"Goodnight, Victoria."

To hear him say her name was like stepping onto a merry-go-round, which didn't stop spinning until her head hit her pillow. She twirled the flower stem between her fingers, musing over him. What a simple, yet perfectly extraordinary man!

As soon as possible Victoria went back to the cemetery. She knew that she was supposed to make him wait, make him chase her, but he was irresistible. Her disappointment was crushing when she discovered that even after the fourth day of visiting, he was not there any more. Her only thoughts had been of him, but then the little likelihood there was of compassing a friendship with him, or perhaps of ever seeing him again, crushed her hopes, and turned them into torments.

When she was most unhappy, she pondered over his appearance, his clothes. The coat he wore was old-fashioned and finely tailored. Everything about him was gentlemanly, while the soft glimmer of his lucid eyes suggested a poet, a dreamer, a lonely man.

It was a fortnight before she saw him again. She went straight after school. He was closing up the storage shed.

"Where have you been?" she asked. "I've been here every day for the past two weeks."

"I told you I work nights," he said, barely glancing at her.

"I thought you would want to see me?" She didn't mean to make her voice sound so pathetic. He lifted his head, and a frown knitted his gloomy forehead.

"I—when you were here—when it was only the two of us—I thought that—I mean to say—I thought it might lay us open to unpleasant con-

jectures, but I have no other reason to regret spending time with you. It just seems a dangerous game, and I thought it would be best if I stayed away.”

He got tangled up in his own speech, but she managed to find some meaning in his struggling words.

“I don’t care what people think,” she said. “If we want to spend time together, it’s nobody’s business. To hell with anyone who has a problem with it.”

She held out her hand for him to take. “What are you going to show me today?”

It was an awful, drizzling, Saturday afternoon. Travis was sitting on a rock under a huge willow, while Victoria amused herself among a patch of flowers. What a strange, dreamy-looking individual he seemed as he sat there gazing intently on nothing. His mouth, too, was pursed as if in pain. There was something odd and unexplained about him.

Victoria was so quiet, he had almost forgotten her. When she began to move about again, he raised his head once more. He watched her crouching, putting her face in the flowers. The wisps of her crisp red hair blew about her as she stooped. She liked to weave the flowers and place them on some of the graves. She plucked a mangy-looking piece of grass and tickled his shoulder with it.

“Why are you always sad?” she asked him.

“Sad!” he said, looking up at her with startled, big brown eyes.

“Yes,” she said, “you look sad.”

“I don’t know. I don’t feel sad.”

There was no spontaneity or abandon about him. Everything was gripped stiff with sensibility. She kneeled in front of him.

“It feels like you can’t relax and be yourself,” she said. “Why can’t you just be yourself?”

“When I’m near you,” he said, “I’m foolishly tempted to say and do many things that may well get me into the sort of trouble I can do without.”

"But you're not doing anything wrong," she answered impatiently. "If you don't like being alone with me, we could meet somewhere else."

"Meet you where?"

"Somewhere—anywhere you want."

"I can't meet you anywhere. You can keep calling here. But if you don't, I can't meet you elsewhere."

"Why not?" she asked. What a strange, heavy weight of mystery he seemed to carry.

"We've only just met," he said, in a tone of great sensibility. "Don't you think you should be off home now?"

"Why?"

"It's 4:30."

That was no answer, no reason. It told her nothing. She stayed kneeling, detached from him.

"Let me walk you to the front gate," he said. "It will be dark within the hour."

"I live in that huge white house across the road," said Victoria. "You can come see me whenever you like." He looked doubtful. "I have a brother and a sister. My parents are very laid back. You might even like my father. Where do you live? You can tell me."

"My family is very private. We aren't used to visitors."

"You're not going to run away again are you?"

He bent over her and kissed her on the left eye. For some strange reason it was more intimate than the cheek and somehow more rousing than if he had kissed her mouth. He looked surprised, too, that he had been prompted to do that. Victoria had a roused sensation, a new feeling. He seemed to make her feel the distinction of their sexes. It was a strange stimulant. And as soon as she could recover from the flutter of pleasure awakened by such tender demonstration, she said, "Will you be here tomorrow? I'm afraid you're going to disappear."

"I won't disappear," he promised.



Four



That night in her bedroom Victoria sat at the computer in her nightdress.

“Can you not walk over everything like you own it,” she said to her cat, plucking him off the desk, and putting him on the floor. She couldn’t do her homework. She only stared at the screen.

She had a small, pretty face, and was proud of her fair skin and blue eyes. She went to the window and drew open the curtains. Beyond her reflection was darkness. If he was out there he might be able to see her. The idea of that thrilled her.

Burning to satisfy a curiosity, she changed into warm clothes and boots and went downstairs. The dull light from the television flashed on the walls inside the lounge. She crept past unnoticed. Her father was in the kitchen, moving about as if in a trance.

Victoria flitted across the dimly-lit street like a shadow. The air was chill and frosty. She stopped at the front gates, putting her hands on it. A sign said, “Highgate Cemetery. OPEN. 6AM—8PM. MONDAY—SATURDAY.” The bars were so closely spaced, she wouldn’t have been able to fit through, not even a child could. Then the lock clicked and the gate came ajar.

Victoria paused.

Perhaps Travis had left it unlocked intentionally. She pushed and the gate squeaked open. She went in quietly, softly closed it behind her. With some flutter of the nerves, Victoria shone the torch. The entrance was shrouded with a dense tunnel of overhanging trees. It was quite spooky at night. All was black, cold, and lifeless. She was afraid, but confident.

She kept walking, promising herself she would find him or he would find her. All around were the graves, and the statues with their ghostly silent air—the faces all austere, frozen, staring.

Being in such a place, Victoria started to form a verse in her mind: “The coming of death is so dark and so cold. They bury you deep in a deep dark hole, leave you there to rot and mould.”

While pondering such thoughts, Victoria thought she heard the sound of footsteps, but so far away and faint that if real at all it must have been in a far corner of the cemetery. Other strange, restless thoughts began working in her. She could not tell, nor could she have ever been able to describe exactly how it was, but all at once her heart leaped up and began beating wildly in her throat, as if her whole body had received a sudden shock. She did not move except to cast a quick glance around, but there was nothing there to account for this sudden extraordinary rush of sensation.

“Is somebody there?” she said, barely loud enough to hear her own voice.

The cemetery kept its secrets.

“Travis,” she said, hoping he would hear her. “I’m scared.”

Fingers of wind touched her, and she closed her eyes to quell her fears, worried lest any sign of weakness might waken some phosphorescent spectre in the gloom, staring at her with a strange pity. A chilly breeze blew across the cemetery, dispersing the fog, and three figures, hardly more than outlines, emerged. They had no glowing light as Victoria would have expected ghosts to have. They were merely transparent. Two women and a man.

“Strike me silly if that’s not a girl,” he said.

“Of course it’s a girl,” said one of the women.

“What’s it doing here at such an hour? Trouble for sure.”

Victoria stared transfixed in terror. Her throat made a small sound, as she tried to scream. Then terror reached that climax, where either her senses had abandoned her, or she had burst through the spell. She

found her voice and issued the most bone-chilling sound she'd ever heard herself make.

The commotion was attracting attention, other pale figures were coming from all over the graveyard, drifting greyly upon the darkness. Victoria turned and ran into something hard—Travis's chest. She screamed and hid herself against him. For a long moment she let him clasp her closely. "Tell me you can see them," she said tensely.

"I can see them all."

"How many are there?"

"Quite a few," he said. "You seemed to have drawn a crowd."

She slowly looked up at his face. Her hands were on his chest which was remarkably still. If he had breath or heartbeat both were so faint as to be undetectable. Turning only her eyes, she looked at the floating figures. They stared blankly at her. Next to them another figure appeared, a raw flickering shape, all curious and inquiring. Victoria went deathly pale and scrunched the front of Travis's shirt.

"She's looking right at me!" said the ghost. "Is she seeing me?"

"Yes, I would say so," said Travis.

"Bravo!" said the ghost. He hung before her, looking at her fixedly, as she stirred uneasily.

"Can you go away now?" said Travis. "All of you."

"So rude." The ghost vanished as quickly as a light switched off. The others lingered silently. One of them reached out and touched Victoria, made her flinch.

"You should take the girl home," said the sensible figure of Mrs. Slaughter. "What a girl is doing out so late at night, I don't know. But you should be more careful, for your own sake if nothing else."

Victoria glanced up at Travis, who seemed to be having a conversation with thin air. She couldn't see or hear any of them any longer, yet she could feel them crowding around her.

"I'm all right now," she said to Travis. "You can show me more. They don't have to go away. I want to see them."

Travis touched her face gently with his hand. He wasn't cold, but he wasn't warm either. She put her hand over his, keeping it pressed on her cheek.

"Who are you?" she asked. "What are you?"

She shivered from a chill in the air, looking at him with frightened, gentle wonder. He took her hand, and suddenly they were briskly walking across the cemetery down toward an old gravestone. She could hardly keep pace with him even though he walked with his short, shuffling step, as though he had an injured ankle. The torchlight flashed all over the dark, her arm flailing freely. Then they stopped. He released her hand, and pointed at the gravestone.

"That's me," he said in a low voice, half ashamed.

Victoria shined the light. "Travis Godspeed, beloved son and brother, 1799 - 1824, sleeping till we meet again," she read aloud. She turned the torch on him.

"I died on March 16th, 1824," he said.

"Are you a ghost?" she asked, perplexed, and as if she were on the point of tears.

"No."

"What are you, then?" She tried to touch him, but he withdrew. His clenched hands alternately relaxed and contracted with uncertainty, and he seemed meditating how to explain. For some time he was fixed, his face troubled, his dark eyes upon her with a fretted gaze. He turned and walked away with the appearance of intense agitation. He hesitated, however, and with a face pallid and drawn as death, approached her slowly.

"Victoria," he said, "you mustn't say anything to anyone, not even your parents. Wait here."

With that he turned and walk away hurriedly. Victoria glanced around nervously. She wasn't happy being left alone. In a few minutes Travis returned with a spade. She waited while he dug up the thing she had been craving to uncover since the moment she had first met him.

The drizzle of rain fell greyly past the darkness. It was quite dark. Tossing aside the shovel, Travis pulled something small and square out from the ground. It was simply a wood box with a hinged lid. He brushed off the damp soil and handed the box to Victoria. She took it with hesitant hands, not knowing what to expect.

“Open it,” he said.

She carefully opened the lid. Inside was an old pocket watch, an antique locket, some yellowish scraps of parchment, and at the bottom was a book. A very modern book with a gruesome picture of a zombie on the front cover. Its mouth gaping wide and its arms outstretched. She looked up at Travis with perplexity in her face.

“I keep my most precious possessions in there,” he said. “Except the book. I only keep it hidden in there because it would cause strife if my family knew I had it. I shouldn’t be wasting my time, but I thought there might be useful information. It seems each book is more useless than the last.”

He covered the illustration with his hand, so she couldn’t see it any more. “That is what I am, Victoria. That is what I’ll become if I don’t take care.”

Victoria’s lips moved to speak, but did no more than quiver. Travis took out the locket and held it delicately between his hands. “This was my mother’s. She loved to wear it whenever my father took her out for the evening. And this was his,” he said taking out the pocket watch. “These are letters. Some from dear friends, others from my sister. I read them sometimes, when I feel most alone. They’re all I have left of my real family.”

He put everything away, carefully closed the lid, and place the box back in the ground. Victoria blinked as if awaking from a fearful reverie.

“Why—why aren’t you all rotting and hideous?” she asked.

“I’ll go that way, if I let it happen.”

“I don’t believe you.” She stood up, and so did Travis.

“Wait,” he said, becoming desperate. “I’ll show you. Just wait. Look.” With a look of blinding pain, he snapped his finger off, right off, and

showed it to her in the palm of his hand. There was no blood, no blood at all.

“No blood,” she whispered, staring at the lifeless thing in his hand. He was like a doll, a wax doll. “So you and your family are—”

“We’re Delicates—that’s the correct term,” he said, uncomfortably.

“And so, what, um, how . . . ”

“Don’t agitate yourself,” he said. He put the detached finger safely in his pocket. He could see that the unnatural agitation she had just undergone would trigger an hysterical attack. “I’ll take you home, shall I? Let me.”

“I can’t go home just yet. Please. Can we just walk?”



Five



Travis walked with Victoria, and talked softly with her. He wanted so much to hold her again. When she put her arm in his, it caused him almost torture.

“How do you keep yourself from falling apart?” she asked as if she was hungry for the details but might not be able to swallow too many at once.

“A seamstress in town,” he said. “She’s very good at her craft, very particular.”

“She sows you together?”

“There are many things we do to keep intact.”

“Or you’ll die?”

“I can’t die. I already have.”

“Of course.” She shook her head.

“Nothing that can be done to me will end me. My soul is trapped in this body, whatever shape it’s in. It’s my worst fear—to be strewn all over the place, my spirit lost.”

“Are you afraid of being like this forever?”

“I still enjoy life and everything in it. But those who made it rich are no longer here, so if I had a choice, I would end it.”

His words were deeply depressing. For a moment Victoria was silent. They stood motionless together on the foggy path. He felt himself to be small and helpless. He wanted her, to touch her, to hold her. He would

have given his head to have her love him, but being with her he felt his unfinished condition.

“Whereabouts in town is the seamstress?” she asked.

“Not here in Hall,” he said. “Somewhere else.”

“Will you show me some time? I want to see where you live.”

“Perhaps, some time.”

“How many Delicates are there?”

“Too many to mention.”

A familiar breeze darted around Victoria. “What is that?” she asked. “That breeze that keeps darting around.”

“That’s Jack. He’s been infatuated with you since the first afternoon you came here. He unlocked the gate tonight for you, apparently.”

“I can’t see him.”

“He doesn’t know how to show himself. Not all ghosts can. He would like you to see him.”

Victoria could feel Jack touching her hair and her face, more like a breeze, encompassing her. She half wished he wouldn’t caress her so. Yet it thrilled her.

Travis took her to Jack’s grave.

Jack Turner, Called Back to his Maker,

1831 – 1848.

Rest in Peace.

“He was only seventeen when he died,” said Victoria. “That’s my age. How did it happen?”

“After a boating trip he became very ill with pneumonia.”

“How terrible.” She knelt down at the gravestone and touched the lettering. “I’m so sorry, Jack,” she said, then looked up at Travis. “Is he able to see his family, are they here too?”

“Their bodies are buried here, but they’ve moved on.”

“Why didn’t Jack?”

Travis shook his head. “He doesn’t know.”

Victoria glanced around at all the other graves. One day she would have one of her own.

"It's depressing, isn't it," she said.

"It's heartbreaking," said Travis.

Victoria stood up. "How did you die?"

Travis took a step backwards, the directness of the question overwhelmed him, submerged him for a moment.

"You don't have to tell me, if you don't want to. But I'd like to know, if you would like to tell me." Her breast was very near him; his head lifted like a horse rearing.

"Aren't you afraid?" he asked.

"Of what?"

"Of death, of this place, afraid of me?"

"I'm more afraid of you going away," she said firmly, "or not letting me come here any more."

They looked at each other, and saw the other as strange, yet near, very near. With an incredibly delicate movement, he put his arms around her, drew her to him. With nervous intensity, he bent to her mouth, slowly, and touched her mouth with his ugly-beautiful mouth. She stood very still, feeling his lips on her lips, but he drew away at once. He half turned from her and caught hold of the fence as if he needed to catch his breath. He was wound very tightly. He looked over his shoulder. She was still watching him.

Victoria felt a wonderful thrilling inside. Yet she wanted, somehow, to cry. "I know it's selfish," she said, "but I'm glad you can't die."

He turned around and she hugged him tightly. After the initial shock, he put his arms around her, and even put his face in her hair. It was beautifully fragrant. He liked her—he liked the feel of her. She looked up at his face. He was suffering a confusing mix of deep embarrassment and even deeper temptation.

"Kiss me," she said wistfully. She lifted her face to him, and he bent forward and kissed her, with a slow, tender kiss, lingering on the mouth. No one had ever quite kissed her as he kissed her, with that strange stillness, and timid abandon of himself. She cleaved her body to his, and with her hands pressed upon his shoulders, behind his neck, feeling him

right through. She seemed to know his strange, tense body intimately. He paused to look at her. A faint, delicate flush was on her cheek. She had drunk so beautifully. She drank his full kiss, drank it deeper and deeper. The kiss lasted in the moonlight.

Afterwards, Travis took her to the entrance gate. They lingered in the dark. They were shy of each other.

“Does this mean I get to keep you?” he asked.

She smiled, unanswering. She had never imagined anything like this was possible, it was overwhelming, unreal.

At last, he took her hand and kissed it with the gesture of an English gentleman.

The house was dark when Victoria got home. The television was on in the lounge, and she darted upstairs. She went to bed feeling all warm with a secret warmth. The night swirled in her head like a bizarre dream. She would see Travis again tomorrow. She was determined that there would be no parting between him and her.