

CHAPTER 1

Eight months ago, I watched my father's coffin being lowered into the ground. Today I was watching it being dug back up.

My uncle Myron stood next to me. Tears ran down his face. His brother was in that coffin—no, strike that, his brother was *supposed* to be in that coffin—a brother who *supposedly* died eight months ago, but a brother Myron hadn't seen in twenty years.

We were at the B'nai Jeshurun Cemetery in Los Angeles. It was not yet six in the morning, so the sun was just starting to rise. Why were we here so early? Exhuming a body, the authorities had explained to us, upsets people. You need to do it at a time of maximum privacy. That left late at night—uh, no thank you—or very early in the morning.

Uncle Myron sniffled and wiped his eye. He looked as

though he wanted to put his arm around me, so I slid a little farther away. I stared down at the dirt. Eight months ago, the world had held such promise. After a lifetime of traveling overseas, my parents decided to settle back in the United States so that I, as a sophomore in high school, would finally have real roots and real friends.

It all changed in an instant. That was something I had learned the hard way. Your world doesn't come apart slowly. It doesn't gradually crumble or break into pieces. It can be destroyed in a snap of the fingers.

So what happened?

A car crash.

My father died, my mother fell apart, and in the end, I was made to live in New Jersey with my uncle, Myron Bolitar. Eight months ago, my mother and I came to this very cemetery to bury the man we loved like no other. We said the proper blessings. We watched as the coffin was lowered into the ground. I even threw ceremonial dirt on my father's grave.

It was the worst moment of my life.

"Stand back, please."

It was one of graveyard workers. What did they call someone who worked in a graveyard? *Groundskeeper* seemed too tame. *Gravedigger* seemed too creepy. They had used a bulldozer to bring up most of the dirt. Now these two guys in overalls—let's call them groundskeepers—finished with their shovels.

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Uncle Myron wiped the tears from his face. “Are you okay, Mickey?”

I nodded. I wasn’t the one crying here. He was.

A man wearing a bow tie and holding a clipboard frowned and took notes. The two groundskeepers stopped digging. They tossed their shovels out the hole. The shovels landed with a *clank*.

“Done!” one shouted. “Securing it now.”

They started shimmying nylon belts under the casket. This took some doing. I could hear their grunts of exertion. When they finished, they both jumped out of the hole and nodded toward the crane operator. The crane operator nodded back and pulled a lever.

My father’s casket rose out of the earth.

It had not been easy to arrange this exhumation. There are so many rules and regulations and procedures. I don’t really know how Uncle Myron pulled it off. He has a powerful friend, I know, who helped ease the way. I think maybe my best friend Ema’s mother, the Hollywood star Angelica Wyatt, may have used her influence too. The details, I guess, aren’t important. The important thing was, I was about to learn the truth.

You are probably wondering why we are digging up my father’s grave.

That’s easy. I needed to be sure that Dad was in there.

No, I don’t think that there was a clerical error or that he was put in the wrong coffin or buried in the wrong spot. And,

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no, I don't think my dad is a vampire or a ghost or anything like that.

I suspect—and, yes, it makes no sense at all—that my father may still be alive.

It particularly makes no sense in my case because I was in that car when it crashed. I saw him die. I saw the paramedic shake his head and wheel my father's limp body away.

Of course, I had also seen that same paramedic try to kill me a few days ago.

“Steady, steady.”

The crane began to swing toward the left.

It lowered my father's casket onto the back of a pickup truck. His coffin was a plain pine box. This, I knew, my father would have insisted upon. Nothing fancy. My father wasn't religious, but he loved tradition.

After the coffin touched down with a quiet thud, the crane operator turned off the engine, jumped out, and hurried toward the man with the bow tie. The operator whispered something in the man's ear. Bow Tie looked back at him sharply. The crane operator shrugged and walked away.

“What do you think that was about?” I asked.

“I have no idea,” Uncle Myron said.

I swallowed hard as we started toward the back of the pickup truck. Myron and I stepped in unison. That was a little weird. Both of us are tall—six foot four inches. If the name Myron Bolitar rings a bell, that could be because

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you're a basketball fan. Before I was born, Myron was an All-American collegiate player at Duke and then was chosen in the first round of the NBA draft by the Boston Celtics. In his very first preseason game—the first time he got to wear his Celtic green uniform—an opposing player named Burt Wesson smashed into Myron, twisting my uncle's knee and ending his career before it began. As a basketball player myself—one who hopes to surpass his uncle—I often wonder what that must have been like, to have all your hopes and dreams right there, right at your fingertips, wearing that green uniform you always dreamed would be yours and then, *poof*, it was all gone in a crash.

Then again, as I looked at the casket, I thought that maybe I already knew.

Like I said before, your world can change in an instant.

Uncle Myron and I stopped in front of the coffin and lowered our heads. Myron sneaked a glance at me. He, of course, didn't believe that my father was still alive. He had agreed to do this because I asked—begged, really—and he was trying to “bond” with me by humoring my request.

The pine casket looked rotted, fragile, as though it might collapse if we just looked at it too hard. The answer was right there, feet in front of me. Either my dad was in that box or he wasn't. Simple when you put it that way.

I moved a little closer to the casket, hoping to feel something. My father was supposed to be in that box. Shouldn't

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I . . . I don't know . . . feel something if that were the case? Shouldn't there be a cold hand on my neck or a shiver down my spine?

I felt neither.

So maybe Dad wasn't in there.

I reached out and rested my hand on the lid of the casket.

"What do you think you're doing?"

It was Bow Tie. He had introduced himself to us as an environmental health inspector, but I had no idea what that meant.

"I was just . . ."

Bow Tie moved between my father's casket and me. "I explained to you the protocol, didn't I?"

"Well, yes, I mean . . ."

"For reasons of both public safety and respect, no casket can be opened on these premises." He talked as if he were reading an SAT reading comprehension section out loud. "This county transport vehicle will bring your father's casket to the medical examiner's office, where it will be opened by a trained professional. That is my job here—to make sure that we have opened the correct grave, to make sure the casket matches the public records on the person being exhumed, to make sure that all proper health measures have been taken, and finally to make sure that the transport goes smoothly and respectfully. So if you don't mind . . ."

I looked at Myron. He nodded. I slowly lifted my hand off the soggy, dirty pine. I took a step back.

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“Thank you,” Bow Tie said.

The crane operator was whispering now with a groundskeeper. The groundskeeper’s face turned white. I didn’t like that. I didn’t like it at all.

“Is something wrong?” I asked Bow Tie.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what’s with all the whispering?”

Bow Tie started studying his clipboard as though it held some special answer.

Uncle Myron said, “Well?”

“I have nothing else to report at this time.”

“What does that mean?”

The groundskeeper, his face still white, started securing the casket with nylon belts.

“The casket will be at the medical examiner’s office,” he continued. “That is all I can tell you at this time.”

Bow Tie moved to the cab of the pickup truck and slid into the passenger seat. The driver started up the engine. I hurried toward his window.

“When?” I asked.

“When what?”

“When will the medical examiner open the casket?”

He checked his clipboard again, but it seemed as if it were just for show, as if he already knew the answer.

“Now,” he said.

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CHAPTER 2

We were at the medical examiner’s office, waiting for the casket to be opened, when my cell phone rang.

I was all set to ignore the call. The answer to the key question of my life—was my father dead or alive?—was mere moments away.

A phone call could wait, right?

Then again, I was just hanging around. Maybe a phone call would be a welcome distraction. I quickly checked the caller ID and saw it was my best friend Ema. Ema’s real name is Emma, but she dresses all in black and has a bunch of tattoos, so some of the kids, way back when, considered her “emo” and then someone combined “Emma” with “emo” and cleverly (I’m being sarcastic when I say “cleverly”) dubbed her Ema.

Still, the name stuck.

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My first thought: Oh no, something bad happened to Spoon!

Uncle Myron leaned over my shoulder and pointed out the caller ID. “Is that Angelica Wyatt’s daughter?”

I frowned. Like this was his business. “Yep.”

“You two have become pretty tight.”

I frowned some more. Like this was his business. “Yep.”

I wasn’t sure what to do here. I could step away from my hovering uncle and answer it. Uncle Myron could be pretty thick, but even he’d get the message. I held up the phone and said to him, “Uh, do you mind?”

“What? Oh, right. Sure. Sorry.”

I hit the answer button and said, “Hey.”

“Hey.”

I mentioned that Ema was my best friend. We have only known each other a few weeks, but they’ve been dangerous and crazy weeks, life-affirming and life-threatening weeks. People could be friends a lifetime and not come close to the bond that had formed between us.

“Any word yet on the, uh . . . ?” Ema didn’t know how to finish that sentence. Neither did I.

“It could come at any time,” I said. “I’m at the medical examiner’s office right now.”

“Oh, sorry. I shouldn’t have disturbed you.”

There was something in her tone that I didn’t like. I felt my heart leap into my throat.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “Is this about Spoon?”

Spoon was my second-best friend, I guess. Last time I saw him, he was lying in a hospital bed. He had been shot, saving our lives, and it was now possible that he'd never walk again. I blocked that horrible thought nonstop. I also dwelled on it nonstop.

"No," she said.

"Have you heard anything new?"

"No. His parents aren't letting me visit either."

Spoon's mom and dad had forbidden me from entering his room. They blamed me for what happened. Then again, so did I.

"So what's wrong?" I asked.

"Look, I shouldn't have called. It isn't a big deal. Really."

Which only made me sure that whatever it was, it was a big deal. Really.

I was about to argue and insist she tell me why she had called, but Bow Tie came back into the room.

"Gotta go," I said to her. "I'll call you when I can."

I hung up. Myron and I stepped toward Bow Tie. He had his head down, taking notes.

"Well?" Myron said.

"We should have the results in a few moments."

I realized that I had been holding my breath. I let it out now. Then I asked, "What was all that whispering about?"

"Pardon?"

"At the cemetery. With the guys digging and the one operating the bulldozer."

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“Oh,” he said. “That.”

I waited.

Bow Tie cleared his throat. “The groundskeepers”—so, okay, that’s what they were called—“noted that the casket felt a little . . .” He looked up as though searching for the next word.

After three seconds that felt like an hour passed, I said, “Felt a little what?”

And then he said it: “Light.”

Myron said, “As in weight?”

“Well, yes. But they were wrong.”

That didn’t make any sense. “They were wrong about the casket feeling light?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

He lifted his clipboard, as if it could ward off attacks. “That is all I can say until I have the necessary paperwork.”

“What necessary paperwork?”

“I have to go now.”

“But—”

The door opened behind me. A woman in a business suit stepped into the room. We all slowly turned and stared at her.

“The medical examiner is finished.”

“And?”

The woman looked left and then right, as though someone might be eavesdropping. “Please follow me,” she said. “The medical examiner is ready to speak to you.”

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CHAPTER 3

“Thank you for your patience. I’m Dr. Botnick.”

I expected the medical examiner to look ghoulish or creepy or something. Think about it. Medical examiners deal with dead people all day. They slice them open and try to figure out what killed them.

But Dr. Botnick was a tiny woman with an inappropriately happy smile and the kind of red hair that borders on orange. Her office had been completely stripped of any sort of personality. There was nothing personal in the entire room—no family photographs, for example, but then again, in a room filled with so much death, did people want to stare at images of her loved ones? Her desk was bare except for a brown leather desk pad with matching letter tray (empty), memo holder, pencil cup (two pens and one pencil), and a letter opener. The walls had diplomas, and nothing else.