

Chapter 1

“My name is Hayden Barnes and I am dead.”

The sidewalk beneath Hayden was cracked and the small town he used to be living in bustled under the midday summer sun. If the temperature mattered Hayden would be hot with his heavy Levis and thick kelly green striped flannel, but hot or cold was no longer a concern for him.

“I know. I’m surprised too. And just to get the dramatics out of the way, I’m not gonna tell you how I got here. It doesn’t matter. Also I’m not gonna get into how or why I’m still around because honestly I have no idea. I have no answers about the afterlife. I have no answers about...well...anything, really. One minute I was alive and now, not so much.”

Hayden’s hands stayed in his pockets and a scowl wrapped around his face as he rounded a corner, keeping to himself. Hayden, moving faster now, propelled himself around another corner and the world around him re-focused like a camera being swung around violently for a split second. You don’t move any faster when you’re dead, the world just moves a bit slower.

“I have a checklist. I wasn’t aware I had a checklist for things I would do if I ever wound up dead, but it turns out I knew exactly what I wanted to try. The beginning of the checklist was pretty straight forward. Try to push people to freak them out: failed. Try to open doors to let in wind and make everyone feel creepy in a public place: failed.

Bring lightning down from the sky to light my spectral face and scare children on the playground: all failures, as if being dead weren't a big enough drag. The last item on my checklist was happening today, though...and it's attending my own funeral."

A big black gate with long bars topped with menacing spikes now stood between Hayden and a field of white marble gravestones that took him 20 minutes to walk to from where he had been trying to sleep in front of his old middle school, but it turns out sleep wasn't a thing he could do anymore. His feet stopped and pointed him in the direction of the road that coursed through the death park like a varicose vein, leading up to the end where a long black hearse sat idling.

As his feet entered the sanctuary Hayden noticed two people dressed in black about 100 feet to his left. Right behind those two people was a girlish figure who looked 18 or so with a bright red zip up hoodie with the hood up and dark jeans. A few steps further his peripheral vision caught a larger crowd in front of him. He was now almost to the center of the graveyard and could clearly count 10 people all dressed in black huddled around a grave. Between him and the grave were a few lopsided trees and patches of grass hanging on for dear life.

"I didn't go to the wake. I felt like it would be depressing and full of people who were invited out of courtesy. I figured the grave site might be a more personal space. My Mom would make it that way for sure. It would be her, my step father, my little sister, Father Michael, probably Neil and Finch, plus some other family stragglers."

About 20 steps away from the crowd Hayden stopped moving suddenly, almost against his will.

"I won't lie and say I've never thought about what this would feel like -to stand and listen at my own funeral. I always wondered who would really give a damn. Who would say nice things about me? Even who would be crying?"

Now stiff as a board, panic washed over Hayden and his transparent skin flushed even more than he thought was possible. Apparently panic was something alive and dead Hayden both had a knack for. Hayden tried to swallow the fear but he ended up just swallowing dust.

“And then...I couldn't do it. I can't. I won't. My closest friends and family all here for one reason...because I'm not.” Hayden turned right back around with his eyes wide as he started fast walking back towards the gate.

“What if they're not crying? How terrible would that be? What is they were all happy I was gone? Or worse, what if they didn't care either way?”

He knew this was all messed up thinking but he couldn't help it. Looking up slightly he realized he was close to one of the older and more crooked looking trees in the lot so he stopped to put his back against it, slowly sliding down the tree to sit on the ground.

“I know it's crazy but nothing is certain. I'm already dead, I don't know if the added stress of my death being someone else's comfort is really what I need right now.” Hayden's voice cut over the gusts of wind and leaves that flew by his head and around the tree.

His head slammed back against the ailing oak. You can only flash through certain objects he learned earlier that week – and trees aren't one of them. Again he threw his head back into the tree, making no noise and causing no pain.

“Physical pain: gone. Mental pain: as insane as ever.”

Looking back towards his own funeral Hayden saw people starting to disperse which instantly frightened him to his feet. Running around the tree he saw the gate in the distance which was good being leaving this place was his new and only goal. The constantly windblown trees were acting like obstacles that needed to be run around every few seconds

and were successfully obscuring his vision. As he cleared the last tree he looked back quickly to see how close everyone was – a good bit away – and with a sigh of relief he turned back around only to realize someone was right in front of him. His body, to compensate, viscosly yet weirdly wiggled to the ground, landing him straight on his face.

“Hello” said the red hooded girl standing above him now.

“Um?” Hayden hadn’t seen or spoken to anyone since his death so this came off as more than odd. On a closer inspection he could see straight through this girl to see the road and cars passing by.

She was dead too.

Her hair was a dark blonde that was mostly hidden by her hood and her face was a soft porcelain white accented by blue eyes. Like the blue they put on blankets to give to newborn baby boys.

“You been dead long?” She was talking like this was completely normal.

“Me?”

“I’ll take that as a no. I’m the first shade you’ve seen, huh?”

“What is...?”

“It means we’re both dead and most likely clueless. I added the clueless part.” An awkward beat occurred then while Hayden looked back to see that all of the people attending his funeral had stopped to talk to each other once more and were no longer coming his way. “So” the girl said, “when did you expire?”

“What? Like milk?”

“Yes like milk. Just call me two percent – NO! *Not* like milk. Like when did you cease to be, man?”

“Oh uh, about a week ago.” It was exactly a week ago. Hayden started to bring himself to his feet.

“Try to do generic ghost stuff yet?”

“Yeah pretty much nonstop.”

“That will pass.”

Hayden was now fully upright and looked back again to see his procession moving towards them once more. He could clearly see his mother who was hugging a bouquet of flowers holding it together as much as she could which instantly made Hayden feel ill.

“That your funeral?” The girl said like it was nothing and Hayden’s head turned back around.

“Uh yeah. You coming from yours?”

“Eh, something like that.”

The girl turned around and started walking towards the street which was exactly what Hayden wanted to do so he followed suit. As they reached the street the girl walked across without hesitation while Hayden looked left and right for cars and followed wearily.

“Ya know they can’t hit you, right?”

“I know...but it’s still weird.” Hayden’s faced grimaced while he tried to hold back symptoms of hyperventilation.

The girl looked forward and laughed at Hayden, reaching the other side of the road and took a right out of the graveyard.

“New guy, you’re cute. But in a monkey looking into a mirror sort of way.”

Hayden reached the other side of the street and eeked out a smirk, but as endearing as this lady was he was still feeling the residual pain of the graveyard on his shoulders, weighing him down with enough force for his legs to quiver.

“Umm, what’s your name? I can’t just call you read hooded lady.” Hayden spoke up to distract his own thoughts.

“I’m Zoe,” she said not turning all the way around, “Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“Zoe. Hi Zoe. I’m Hayden...also, where are we going?”

“To sleep if you keep asking me questions.” Zoe stopped to meet Hayden’s gaze. His body stopped in full, inches away from her face.

“So which were you, a Whiskey or a William?” Zoe said.

Hayden looked back again – his house was the other way so the cars were leaving the graveyard to the left and away from them.

“Hey, pay attention” Zoe tapped Hayden’s stomach with the back of her hand...and he felt it. He hadn’t felt anything physical for a week now – not the ground on his feet or the wind in his hair – but this he felt, and it elated him. “Which one are you, boy?”

“How do you know which one you are?”

“Uhhhh” Zoe thought hard about this one, “Umm. Okay. Name your biggest regret in life?”

“Um, I don’t know. I’d have to think about it I guess.”

“Whiskey. Got it.” With a satisfied grin Zoe turned back around and started walking. Hayden, bewildered, followed once more.

“Wait, how did you know that? And what does it mean anyway?”

Zoe kept walking and talked louder over the wind.

“There are two kinds of shades – Whiskeys and Williams. A Whiskey is someone who shades out when they die because they need to fix something they didn’t do. A William is someone who needs to fix something they did.”

“Huh. Okay...so which one are you?”

“Ha! I’m so William you might as well call me Bill.”

“Okay. So how did you know I was a Whiskey? I didn’t even answer the question.

Zoe stopped again and turned around for the full affect. Her face was more serious this time.

“Because Whiskey’s need to think about the answer to that question and William’s don’t answer it.” Zoe’s eyes blinked faster a few times and looked away before she turned around once more and kept walking. They were now almost to the end of the side street that dumps out onto the main road through town full of cars and patrons in the middle of the day shopping and eating.

“Where are we going?” Hayden really didn’t know which was frightening, but he enjoyed not knowing more than being alone.

“Who is *we*?” Zoe was playfully offended.

“*We* is me and you.”

“I knew what you meant.”

“Great, so where are *we* going?”

“Well, *I’m* going to Richard’s place, and you happen to be following *me*. Ergo, you are going to Richard’s place.”

“Who is Richard?”

“Again with all the questions, man!”

The back of Zoe’s red hoodie was digging into Hayden’s soul he thought he must have at this point. At the very least she was an intriguing human being....shade...he had no idea.

“I’m dead and talking to a more attractive girl then I ever talked to when I was alive, so I think I’m allowed to be curious!” Hayden raised his voice a bit higher than usual at the end of the sentence as he realized what he was actually saying. *~You don’t just call girls attractive. It makes you look like an idiot!~* thought Hayden while he ground his teeth in disappointment. Zoe stopped again and turned back, this time with gusto.

“You think I’m attractive?” It was at this point Hayden realized how short Zoe was. The girl was at least a foot shorter than him so she had to look up to fully engage, piercing straight through him with the deep ocean eyes placed so nicely on the front of her head. If Hayden’s hands could clam up at that moment, they would have. Before he could answer he also noticed he had never seen this girl in his life. She was buried in the same cemetery and looked sort of the same age – but he didn’t know her or her name.

“Huh? What? I don’t know. Other words? Yeah.” Hayden stuttered at a rapid pace that he didn’t know he had the ability to do. Zoe pierced her lips and resisted the urge to bite her lip because biting your lip is for teasey bitches.

“He’s a shade.” Zoe said with a half clinched jaw.

“What?”

“Richard – he’s a shade, just like us.”

“Oh.” Hayden composed himself. “Well um, how did you meet him?” He would try anything to change the subject although Zoe’s slight smile was the only evidence that it hit home to her at all.

“You know this conversation we’re having right now?”

“Yes. Very much so.”

“That’s how I met him.” Zoe turned and took a left down Main Street putting her hands in her jean pockets.

“Sooo you told Richard he was hot?” Hayden laughed a few times then realized he didn’t change the subject like he was planning on doing. Sometimes his mouth did things his brain was minutes away from being aware of. He waited for her to turn once more and acknowledge that he was an idiot, but she did not. Five or six steps later he saw she wasn’t stopping for any more pleasantries.

“Hey! Wait up!” Hayden putted along behind her because there was nothing else to do and she didn’t object, putting his hands in his pockets too, ya know, for good measure.