



ACCIDENTAL
WITCH

DARK ROADS TRILOGY BOOK ONE

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Chenoweth  *Press*

DEDICATION

To my beloved brother, Andrew Lyle Thomas, born May 8, 1987, died Sept 25, 2005. I wish you could have been here to see me become an author. You would have laughed to read about Sebastian. I don't know how e-books work in heaven, but hopefully someday you can read this. You were in my heart the whole time I was writing it.

Love you and miss you. Always.

Your sis,

Lydia

“Sheesh, Mom, what’s the big deal?”

“The big deal is that you are sixteen years old and we expect better behavior from you. We taught you to respect your elders. How could you do something like this?”

I winced inwardly at the disappointment in my mom’s voice, but kept my face stubbornly set. “He insulted me in front of the entire class. It’s not my fault our math teacher is an insufferable prick.”

“Sebastian.”

My dad’s warning growl should have brought me to my senses, but I was in too deep to back down now. After all, the guy had insulted me first. “It’s not like I’m saying anything new. Everyone knows Mr. Hensley is the worst teacher in our school, probably in all of Atlanta. He’s only kept his job because he’s banging the—”

“Sebastian!” my mom gasped in horror, but I paid more attention to the snort from my older brother in the back seat beside me. He had his nose stuck in some college textbook—as usual—but withdrew it long enough to give me what was no doubt supposed to be a look of sympathy. His permanent expression of smug superiority ruined the gesture, though.

Freddie was the “golden boy” in the family and I knew he secretly enjoyed seeing me get in trouble.

If I had been smart, I would have shut my mouth then and there, just to deprive him of the pleasure. I wasn't doing anyone any good, and the look of distress on my mom's face as she twisted in her seat to meet my eyes sent a flash of guilt through me.

But I was young and stubborn, a mix that always seemed to get me into trouble. Crossing my arms, I avoided my mom's gaze, instead glaring at the back of my dad's neck. “I was only telling the truth. Isn't that what you taught me to do?”

Mom's expression hardened. “Sebastian, you will speak with respect when addressing your father. What has gotten into you? Your brother never acted like this when he was your age.”

I could almost feel the grin on Freddie's face as he bent lower over his book. The look was imprinted on my memory and hung before my eyes, mocking me. I told myself to shut up, to let it go. But my mouth seemed to open of its own accord, angry words escaping in a hot torrent. “Well maybe if you weren't so busy being uptight about everything you'd notice—”

“—now see here, young man—”

“—Sebastian, honey, please—”

A horn blared, overpowering our competing voices. It was the only warning, a useless second of noise that drew our attention. But too late.

The piercing screech of tires split the air. I felt only a moment of explosive terror before everything was overcome by a tumult of breaking glass and crumpling metal. My body slammed forward, the seatbelt digging painfully into my chest as it kept me from colliding with the driver's seat being shoved toward me by a tremendous, crushing force. Even so, my head whipped back and forth, hitting something with a painful crack. The world

went black.

BEEP...BEEP...BEEP.

The noise, intermittent yet persistent, was the first thing I heard. It sounded familiar, but the harder I thought about it, the more my head hurt, so I stopped.

Voices, soft but urgent, argued in the background. I tried to ignore them and sink back into blissful unconsciousness, but then I heard my name.

“Sebastian deserves to know!”

“Absolutely not. Even were he not already in a fragile state of recovery, his father would not have wished it. It will only make the situation worse.”

“How can you say that after what happened? I’m out of my mind with worry for Stephen, heaven knows what has befallen him. The boys could be next. They need to be prepared.”

“It is precisely because of what happened that I base my decision. The boys are better protected now than they ever have been. I have taken every precaution, used every ward and spell at my disposal. The truth will help no one.”

“Wards? We need the police—no, the Stewards! They’ll put a stop to—”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Eliza. This is a family affair. You know as well as I do that the wizard conglomerate would not lift a finger to help us. There is no proof.”

“But—”

“Not another word about it. I was appointed guardian and my decision is final. You should not even be here, it is too risky. Besides, Stephen would want you somewhere safe. Go back to England. No wizard is foolish enough to tangle with the Dee

family.”

I had a hard time following the conversation. Why did my head hurt so much? I tried to raise my hand, but felt resistance as if it was attached to something. Confused, I opened my eyes and turned my head, but gasped as blinding pain shot through the base of my skull like a hundred stabbing needles. I lay there, jaw clenched, trying to ride it out and remember what had happened to put me in this state. But thinking hurt. Everything hurt.

I must have passed out, because the next thing I knew, I felt gentle fingers on my wrist, checking my pulse. This time I didn't turn my head, just cracked my eyes enough to see the paneled ceiling above. It was an uninspiring shade of tan—the color of choice in hospital rooms, it seemed, perhaps because of its calming nature. But I figured it just made it easier to hide body fluid splatter. The thought floated aimlessly around in my head for a while before I managed to focus. What had I been doing before I passed out?

Movement at my side reminded me I wasn't alone, and I carefully shifted my eyes to see a nurse checking the monitor beside me—the source of that beeping. I opened my mouth and tried to ask a question, but only a rasp came out. It was enough to alert the nurse, though, and a smile spread across her face as she noted my conscious, if groggy, state.

“Well look who's awake! Good morning, Mr. Blackwell. Here, let me get you some water.” Her voice was annoyingly perky, but the straw she held to my lips made up for it.

As soon as my throat stopped feeling like an unfortunate piece of beef jerky left out under the Saharan sun, I tried again. “What happened? Where am I?”

“You're at the North Atlanta Memorial Hospital. You were in a nasty car wreck, but your seatbelt did its job and your only

major injury was a blow to the head and some whiplash. You had a concussion and you've been out for a few days, but it looks like everything is healing up just fine. We'll keep an eye on you for another twenty-four hours, and then you can go home."

Well, that explained why my head and neck hurt like the dickens. I slowly relaxed, grateful I wasn't in a full body cast. But then a thought hit me and I tensed again. "Wait, what about my family? My parents? Are they okay?" That sickening crunch of glass and metal echoed in my memory, making my stomach churn.

The nurse hesitated. "Let me go get your...relative that's here. It might be best if she explains." She offered me a tight smile and left.

My nausea intensified and spread, and I had to fight the urge to vomit. My relative? Who in the world? I lay, tense and shivering, mind racing even as I tried not to consider the possibilities.

"No, I will tell him, thank you." The muffled words floated through my door, wrapped up in a voice that was familiar, yet different.

A soft swish of skirts accompanied the click of a latch as someone entered my room. The door was out of my direct line of sight, so I had to wait until they entered my field of vision before I knew for sure.

Tall, slender, and austere, dressed from head to toe in black, my great-great-aunt reminded me of a Victorian headmistress with her embarrassingly antique clothes, full skirts, and stern bearing. Her faint British accent only cemented the impression. I vaguely remembered my dad mentioning she had been born in England. Her hair, grey yet still thick and full, was pulled back in a severe bun, and with her flashing eyes and thin lips she always seemed ready to punish you for something—which in my case

she usually was.

But today, she looked...diminished. It was why I hadn't recognized her voice; it was so much softer than the stern tone I was used to. The flash was gone from her eyes, replaced by dark shadows that had no end. Her usually stick-straight back was bent and her lined face was white. So very white.

"W—where's Mom and—and Dad?" I asked. My chest felt painfully tight. "Where's Freddie?" I might have disliked him, but he was still my brother, and in that moment all I wanted was to see his stupid face, smug expression and all.

My aunt sank slowly onto the end of my bed. I'd never seen her look so old. I mean, I knew she was old—the two "greats" in her title weren't there for show—but she'd always come across as capable of anything, as if her age was a mere fashion statement rather than a handicap. The fact that she was a wizard made her all the more intimidating. It was part of our family's dark secret, and the reason my parents had kept their distance all these years. But now, here she was.

"Sebastian..."

I'd never seen her act this way before, and the slow, creeping realization of what it could mean made it hard to breathe. Everything felt numb. "Just say it," I croaked. My whole body was trembling.

She hesitated. "Your parents...the crash...they died instantly."

"No," I whispered, eyes staring desperately, my whole body paralyzed with horror. I heard the groaning scrape, felt the seatbelt cut into me, and saw the briefest flash of the back of my dad's head, half-turned to scold me, as everything before me crumpled. The vision snapped me out of my frozen state and my lungs expanded in a yell. "No! Bring them back! You're—you're a wizard, you can fix it. You can do something!"

“Magic cannot bring back the dead,” she said quietly, her face filled with pain.

“NOOO!” I tried to get up, to punch something, to destroy something. To destroy myself. It was my fault. I’d been arguing with them, distracting them. They’d died because of me, but I had survived.

“Sebastian!” My aunt’s sharp word cut through the torrent of agony as her bony hand pushed down on my chest. If I’d had the strength to resist her, I would have. But pain pounded in my head, making me dizzy, so I fell back onto the bed. Instead of tearing the hospital room to pieces, my insides were torn to pieces. I could feel myself breaking apart, bit by bit, as cold reality barreled around inside me like a wrecking ball. Tears pricked the corners of my eyes and made wet trails down the sides of my face. Whether they were tears of rage or grief, or simply the storm inside leaking out, I had no idea.

“Frederick survived. He has similar injuries, but should make a full recovery.” Her tone was gentle, but I felt no relief, only emptiness. I would trade my brother’s life for my parents’ in a split second. All his survival did was spare me that much more guilt, and at this point it barely made a difference.

The touch of her cool, dry skin as she took my hand brought me briefly out of myself, but I refused to meet her eyes. Her hesitant squeeze surprised me, though. I’d never seen her show affection before, not even to Golden Boy Freddie. Approval, maybe, but not affection. I should have been comforted by the effort, but instead it made me angry. I didn’t want her—I wanted my mother. I wanted to be a child again as mom tucked me in, brushing a stray lock of hair from my face before bending over to kiss my forehead. I wanted to hear her say she loved me, and that everything was going to be okay. I wanted it so badly my whole body ached as my heart slowly tore in two.

I would never hear her voice again.

No, I didn't want my great-great-aunt, a woman so strict she insisted we call her "Aunt Barrington"—who ever heard of calling their aunt by her last name? Pulling my hand back, I extricated it from her grasp. As the endless pit of guilt and grief yawned before me I viciously pushed everything away. Every feeling, every thought.

"Get out." My own voice echoed in my ears, as dead as a corpse swinging from the gallows.

My aunt sat motionless for a long time. When I didn't move or speak, she eventually rose, her face barely visible in the corner of my eye. I thought I caught a glint of moisture on her cheek, but I wouldn't let myself look.

Finally, without a word or even a sigh, she turned and left.

The funeral was a blur. At least that's how I tried to remember it, because anything else was too painful. The spring weather was surprisingly obliging and poured down rain throughout the whole thing. I was grateful. It gave me something to concentrate on so I could block out the murmured words of condolence and pity. As an added bonus, it cut down on the number of attendees. It had been three days since I'd gotten out of the hospital, and I still hadn't spoken a word. I didn't want to see anyone, talk to anyone, acknowledge anyone. I wanted to stop existing.

I wanted to die.

Dad would have shaken his head in disappointment, but Mom would have understood. Maybe not approved, but understood. It was a weird way of remembering them, and I didn't understand it, but it got me through the funeral.

Freddie was subdued, yet played his part as the oldest "responsible" child well. He thanked people for their words and spoke a few himself over the fresh, wet dirt long since turned to mud everywhere but under our little canopy. I envied the black veil Aunt Barrington hid behind. All I had was a blank stare to shield me as the people who had known my parents murmured

their sad farewells, then filed away through the rows of dripping headstones.

After the funeral Aunt Barrington took us back to her house. She lived in North Druid Hills, farther south and east of where I grew up, but still in North Atlanta. I had been twelve the last time I'd visited her house. It was a number I remembered vividly because it was how many times she'd made me scrub the kitchen floor after she caught me stealing her tea scones. It could have been worse. She'd originally threatened me with a curse that would have made all food taste like spinach for the rest of my life, so I suppose I got off light.

The house itself was some sort of historic building. I'd once heard my mom call it Queen Anne-style as she cooed over its intricate wood trim, wraparound porch, and cute little tower on one side. I thought it looked positively antique and screamed "old lady house," but at this point I didn't care where I went. My aunt could have dropped me in a field in the middle of nowhere for all I cared. At least then I wouldn't have to talk to anybody.

Freddie—a sophomore in college—had been home on spring break when...when it happened, so he would be returning to school in a few days. Aunt Barrington had asked whether it was wise to go back so soon, but Freddie was adamant. He didn't want to miss a single day of class. Part of me knew it was his way of coping, to throw himself into work and forget. But part of me called him an unfeeling, self-righteous bastard. He hadn't spoken to me, hadn't even looked at me, since we got out of the hospital. But I couldn't blame him. He knew what I'd done.

Me? As far as I was concerned I could sit in a corner and stare at the wall until I rotted. I didn't care about school, not even about the upcoming soccer season that was usually my time to shine. None of my "friends" would miss me, I was sure. Not a single one had shown up to the funeral, which was almost a

blessing. I couldn't face them. I felt like a walking shell.

Dinner that night was as silent as the graveyard we'd left my parents in, minus the pattering of the rain. I ate until I couldn't stand the feel of tasteless ash in my mouth anymore. Halfway through my plate I got up and left, feet automatically taking me down the hall and up the stairs to the second bedroom on the left.

Ignoring the bag of clothes and toiletry items someone had brought from my house, I collapsed on the bed and stared listlessly at the dim ceiling. I'd barely slept since that awful moment when I'd realized my life was over, and I had no interest in the painkillers I'd been instructed to take. My pain was my punishment, justly deserved.

With thoughts my only companion, I escaped into memory, finding solace in a time when things were still...normal. Even though I rarely saw my aunt growing up—on account of her being a wizard—occasionally Mom and Dad would take mysterious trips and leave me and my brother with her. It always made me mad. I wanted to stay at my friends' houses, and didn't understand why we had to put up with my grouch of an aunt since we avoided her at every other opportunity. Dad had been a wizard himself by blood, but had renounced the use of magic and lived like it didn't exist, trying to raise us as normally as possible. That was, except for the semi-annual lecture on the dangers of getting mixed up with “all that nonsense.”

Not that it would have done me any good. I was a “mundane,” a normal human who didn't know a thing about magic. The gene, or whatever it was, hadn't passed to me. Golden Boy Freddie, on the other hand, not only had it—and so was favored by Aunt Barrington—but was also perfectly content to ignore it, making him Dad's favorite as well. I'd always been unhealthily curious about it, according to my dad, but since I couldn't use it, I'd

focused my attention on what I was good at: sports and being popular. Both were arts that took study and practice, and both were more fun than things like math. It wasn't that I was terrible at math or any of my other subjects. They were just boring. What was the point of spending a bunch of time on boring stuff?

Dad had often lectured me on the importance of a good education. Once he even went so far as to complain that I would have made a terrible wizard, what with my "undisciplined" study habits. Mom would tut-tut at my grades, but then she'd take me out to her garden and teach me the names of all of her herbs and flowers, along with their useful qualities. I'll admit, I was more interested in the ones that could be distilled into poison, but it was generally more interesting than math homework. At least knowing about plants was useful. Dad had been the scholar of the family and he'd seemed disappointed I didn't love books more than air and food. Mom, on the other hand, had gotten me. She'd understood that knowledge was only as useful as what you did with it, no matter if you were a mundane or a wizard.

For a brief moment, I could see her face in front of me, smiling and shaking her head at some trouble I'd gotten up to. But then, like the sun being hidden by scuttling clouds, the vision faded and reality pulled me back under.

They were...no. I couldn't say it. Couldn't even think it.

Darkness crept in as evening progressed and light faded from the patch of ceiling I was staring at, trying to keep my mind blank. I dreaded the night. During the day, I was distracted by things around me, by people trying to care and me ignoring them. But in the darkness of my room, there was nothing between me and that gaping pit. It made me want to rage at the heavens, or curl up in a ball and cry until there was nothing left in me. But instead I just lay there, unable to escape the torment

in my head. I longed for, yet hated the dawn, because it meant I had to live another day without them.

DAYS PASSED. Freddie went back to college. As my legal guardian, Aunt Barrington decided I would move in permanently with her, so she arranged for my things to be brought over since I couldn't stand to set foot in my old house. I especially couldn't stand to see my mom's garden, no doubt full of sprouting weeds without her calloused but gentle hands there to pick them out. My things didn't matter, though. All my possessions were meaningless without the people I loved there to share them with me. I even started to miss Freddie's sarcastic remarks, which said a lot.

Along with my boxes of stuff, my aunt gave me a long list of house rules, including, but not limited to: no running, no yelling, no loud music, no friends over, no touching of the antiques—which was basically everything in her house—and, most importantly, no trespassing in the library. In addition to the house rules, my aunt explained in rather cryptic language that the house was “protected” and that I shouldn't go in and out willy-nilly. There were no house keys. If for some reason I needed to get in when she wasn't there, I was to go to the front door and touch the doorknob, and the door would unlock for me. She refused to elaborate on how all this worked. I knew it was magic, but she seemed as reluctant as my dad to even mention the word in front of me.

Once the ground rules were set, Aunt Barrington left me to my own devices, staying downstairs and doing whatever it was wizards did when they weren't pretending to be normal. I knew she had a mundane job—she was a librarian or archivist, something with books—but she must have taken time off after

the funeral, because she never left the house. On occasion there were visitors, usually older men and women who all looked as austere and old-fashioned as my aunt. But there was one middle-aged woman who visited several times that always seemed to know when I was staring at her down the hall stairs. She would turn and give me a piercing look before disappearing with Aunt Barrington into the library.

Except for meals and the occasional restless foray, I stayed in my room. One afternoon, though, the agony of unending silence sparked a sudden thought, and I ventured downstairs in search of my aunt. At home, my brother and I had shared a game console. I didn't know where it was, but it hadn't been brought over with the rest of my things. I thought if I could get it, I could lose myself in mindless video games.

Treading hesitantly down the hall stairs, I stuck my head in the kitchen, the dining room, and finally the parlor. All empty. The sunroom at the back of the house—full of potted plants and brightly lit on sunny days—was dark and empty. Finally, dragging my feet, I headed for Aunt Barrington's library. It was the only room on the first floor that had no windows, and the door was always closed. I'd only caught glimpses inside once or twice when I was a boy, seeing nothing but the corner of a tall bookshelf. The one time I'd tried the doorknob—when curiosity had overcome my common sense—I'd found it locked. As soon as I'd touched it my aunt had appeared behind me, as though she had some sort of alarm against the pawing hands of young boys. I was pretty good at talking my way out of things when the need arose, but the sight of her beady eyes and grim mouth had tied my tongue in knots. I considered myself lucky to have gotten off with just an ear boxing and a warning: if I ever so much as touched the doorknob of her library again, my hands would shrivel into twigs and stay that way until I learned not to snoop.

I'd avoided her library ever since. Even now, standing in front of the door, I eyed the doorknob warily, opting instead to knock gently on the wood.

There was absolute silence until the door opened abruptly with a whoosh. I jumped back in surprise, resisting the urge to wilt under my aunt's glare of impatience. She peered at me through the slight gap in the entrance she'd made, blocking most of my view with her body. Strange whirring, rustling, and clicking sounds came from the room behind her, and I marveled that I hadn't heard a peep until the door was open.

"What do you want, Sebastian? I am very busy at present."

"Well, I was wondering," I began, but the sight of a book casually floating past the opening above my aunt's head struck me momentarily dumb.

"Yes? What were you wondering?" Her sharp question snapped me out of my shock.

"Uhhh...yeah, um. I was wondering where my game console was? From my, um, house?" I wondered if she even knew what a game console looked like.

Aunt Barrington's eyebrows drew together. "It was taken away with the rest of your parents' things to be sold."

"What? But it was mine!" I didn't care so much for the equipment as for the loss of my escape.

"As a matter of fact, it was not. You were simply allowed to use it. Being your guardian and the executor of your parents' will, I decided it was not a healthy addition to this household. While some mundane technology is...useful, this was one thing you most certainly could do without." Seeming to think the conversation over, she began to close the door.

"But what am I supposed to do all day?"

The door halted, then reopened a few inches. "I take it you are ready to return to school, then?"

I tensed and drew back, shaking my head. The mere thought of facing the world, facing life, made me nauseous. I wasn't Freddie. I needed to escape reality, to escape the constant knowledge of what I'd done and lost.

With a sigh and a not-unkind expression, my aunt opened the door a little wider and stepped out, closing it firmly behind her.

"Very well, then. Since you obviously require a task to keep your idle hands occupied, it is time you began earning your keep."

"What? But, all I wanted was—"

"Idle hands are the devil's workshop," she said, ignoring my protest, and began describing a frighteningly long list of chores, from washing the dishes to sweeping the floors, dusting the furniture, and ironing the linens. I didn't even know how to use an iron.

"But why don't you just enchant things to do all those chores for you?" I asked. "Isn't the whole purpose of magic to make life easier?" According to my dad, magic was a dangerous liability to be avoided at all costs, but I'd never really believed him. Maybe at last my aunt would teach me about magic. Just because I couldn't use it didn't mean I wasn't curious.

My aunt arched a brow. "I see you are not familiar with Goethe's *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*. As a mundane, you have no need, nor reason, to consider magic. Yet, since the subject has arisen, it would be irresponsible of me to not disabuse you of your childish misconception. Magic is both powerful and highly dangerous and should never be used for frivolous things that our own two hands can do perfectly well on their own. Manual labor is healthy for the mind and body. Now, if you would kindly cease your prattling, I have a very delicate spell I am working on." With that, she closed the door.

I stared glumly at it, wondering what the point of being a

wizard was if you couldn't have self-cleaning dishes. It sounded terribly boring. But I had been looking for something mindless to stop me from dwelling on...other things. And if this kept her from bringing up the subject of school again, it would be easier to go along than to argue. I was too drained, too empty of feeling to care about anything for very long, not even my annoyance at having to do chores.

Unfortunately, my plan only half worked. While the chores did fill some of my endless days with less tortuous moments of mind-numbing activity, it didn't ease the pain, and nights were just as sleepless. The chores also failed to stop my aunt from bringing up school. I took to simply not responding. I figured she wasn't strong enough to pick me up and carry me to the car, and there was nothing she could threaten me with. If she cursed me, I would deserve it. Unfortunately for my sense of guilt, Aunt Barrington seemed determined to be as patient as she was capable of being and never threatened me with so much as a jinx. For some reason it made me angry, but that was a nice change from empty, so I welcomed the resentment.

One night we were at the dinner table and I'd gotten to the point where my disgust toward food won out over my instinctive will to survive. I dropped my fork on the table and got up, intending to head upstairs and lie on my bed, then stare at the ceiling until I passed out from weariness or the sun rose again.

"Sebastian, I have informed the school principal that you will be returning to class tomorrow."

I stopped. No subtle prodding this time. I guess she'd gotten tired of waiting and had reverted to her normal, no-nonsense self.

"The teachers have been notified," she continued, "and will have catch-up material ready for you in addition to your regular homework."

I didn't look at her.

"They will be lenient, at first, I am sure. But the end of the semester is fast approaching, and you will have to work hard to finish with satisfactory grades."

Moving my leaden feet, I started toward the stairs, still silent.

"Sebastian!"

Her sharp voice made me pause. I wanted to ignore her, but I'd been taught to obey authority. Just because I flouted it on occasion when it came to prigs and idiots didn't mean I had no respect for authority. My aunt was neither a prig nor an idiot, and her tone brooked no refusal.

Slowly, I turned, fixing my listless gaze on a leg of the dining room table.

"You will pack your school things tonight. You will retire at a decent hour and rise in time to prepare your own breakfast before I drive you to school. I am not your maid, nor your mother—"

"You're right you're not my mom!" I yelled, suddenly furious. I didn't know if it was her bossy tone or the mention of my mother, but I snapped. "I don't have a mom anymore! You think I'm going to just skip off to school like nothing happened? Well, you're crazy! I hate you and I hate this house! I should be dead. It should have been me! It was my—it was my—" I choked, unable to get the words out. I couldn't face it.

My ears were buzzing, my head throbbed, and I suddenly felt as weak and flimsy as tissue paper. Staggering, I grabbed at my recently vacated chair and collapsed into it, slumping down in defeat. It was as if all my energy, my anger, my very life force, had blown out in one furious gust, and I was empty again.

Eyes on the floor, I heard my aunt shift, the long skirts she always wore scraping faintly against the legs of the table. "Whether or not you like me, or this house, is irrelevant." Her

tone was firm, but lacked the bite of anger I'd expected. "This is your current situation, and it will remain so until you come of age. Your parents left you in my care, and they would have wanted you to finish your education."

I made a derisive sound, showing just what I thought of school.

"Your mother, rest her soul," Aunt Barrington continued, her voice a tad harder, "would have wanted you to at least graduate high school. She sacrificed a great deal for you and your brother, and I pray you do not sully her memory by continuing in this petulant manner."

Eyes jerking upward, I glared at her, ready to start yelling again. She must have seen past the stubborn rebellion in my eyes, though, because instead of scolding me, her gaze softened. "I miss them as well, Sebastian. And before you protest that your pain is unique and no one could possibly comprehend it, you should know that my mother died when I was only a young girl. Our father..." She paused, lips thin and jaw tight, then sighed. "Our father was stern and not used to showing affection. He raised us as best he could, but was by no means a loving man."

Her expression softened again, and for the first time since the car crash I actually felt something besides blinding pain, rage, and guilt. I didn't know what it was, but it gave me pause long enough to listen to what she was saying.

"Death touches us all, but it is not ultimate. Should the whole world simply lie down and die? Give up the fight? If not, then why should you? Your parents would want you to live. The least you can do is honor their memory."

She fell silent, and we sat together in the darkening room. I didn't say anything for a long time as I let her words sink in. It was hard. Everything hurt so much, physically, emotionally, mentally. I didn't want to live. I didn't want to face life without

them. Maybe other people could go on, people who hadn't killed their own parents, accident or not. I wasn't sure I could. But looking up at my aunt's face, lined and weathered, yet strong, I decided it would be less trouble to go to school tomorrow than argue.

I would go for one day, and one day only. It was all I could imagine coping with. Beyond that, everything hurt too much to think about.

"Okay," I finally said, and slowly stood. My aunt didn't stop me this time, and I dragged myself out to the hall and up the stairs. As soon as I collapsed on my bed, intending to stare at the ceiling and steel myself for tomorrow, I was overcome by a wave of weariness. My eyelids slid shut like trap doors and I slept, really slept, for the first time in days. Unsurprisingly, my school things did not get packed.

Despite my usual inability to get anywhere on time, by some miracle—or perhaps wizardry—my aunt had us at the doors of Brookhaven Academy a good five minutes before the bell rang. Normally I would have ridden the bus, since it was one of those nice private schools that could afford them. But I didn't live in Brookhaven anymore, and Aunt Barrington had yet to fill out the paperwork to get her house added to the bus route. I hoped she did it soon, because I'd never been so glad to get out of a car before. Let's just say that my aunt wasn't one for small talk.

It was rather ironic, then, that after only five steps toward the school's front doors I wanted nothing more than to get back in that car and beg her to take me home...well, back to her house. It only took those few steps for people to notice me, and, inevitably, to start pointing and whispering.

“Oh my gosh, look. It's him.”

“What happened?”

“Parents died. Car crash or something.”

“Dang. That sucks.”

Again, and again, the same exclamations, the same morbid curiosity, the same half-pitying, half-distasteful looks. And

always, the same inevitable conclusion: orphan.

I felt sick.

Before everything happened, I used to saunter around school like I owned the place, head held high while I flashed my dashing handsome smile. Any other incident or embarrassment I'd have laughed at and brushed off. But this... this was different. It wasn't people's opinions that bothered me, it was the terrible, crushing pain of that gigantic hole inside. And every side-long look, every whisper, made it worse. The thought of spending a whole day being reminded that my parents were dead and that I was an orphan—I couldn't take it. But as I slowed and looked over my shoulder, I saw I didn't have a choice. Aunt Barrington's ancient Buick had already disappeared down the street.

Shoulders hunched and eyes on the ground, I turned and walked quickly up the front steps and through the entryway, hoping to disappear into my first class as soon as possible. Yet, when I finally reached the door to my US History room and slipped in, what I found was ten times worse.

Normally, I would time my arrival to class carefully: just late enough to be the last one in and have everyone's attention as I swaggered nonchalantly to my seat, but not late enough that the teacher bothered writing me up. Now, as I slid through the door just before the bell rang, every eye in the room locked on to me with unnerving intensity. Excited whispers rustled through the class like dead leaves blown by a winter wind. I was momentarily frozen in place, pinned down by their callous scrutiny.

“Welcome back, Sebastian. We're...sorry for your loss.” The soft words of Mrs. Kimball, the history teacher, broke the spell.

Even as grief washed through me I had to fight down a flash of anger, resisting the urge to yell at the whole class to shut up and stop whispering about my parents like they were the latest

hot news in a gossip magazine. Hands clenching and unclenching on the straps of my backpack, I forced myself to look at the ground and walk to the back of the room where I picked the most isolated seat possible and slumped into it.

I didn't hear a word the teacher said during class. I just withdrew into a blank shell and tried to ignore the curious faces stealing glances at me over their shoulders. Some of them may have even been my "friends." I didn't want to know, didn't want to acknowledge or talk to them. I just wanted to be left alone.

Second and third period were more of the same, though I had at least learned my lesson and hurried from class to class, slipping in and hiding at the back before everyone else arrived. Nobody spoke to me, save for a few murmured platitudes that made me wince and gave me flashbacks of my parents' funeral.

Only once did I hear a friendly voice. Cory, as lanky as me but with a shock of straw-blond hair, called out my name in the hall between second and third period. He was one of my soccer teammates, and probably the only person in school I would consider a real friend and not just a groupie. But I ignored the call and ducked around a corner, hoping he wouldn't follow. If he did, I knew he would say something, would try to be kind and understanding. But no matter what anyone said, all it did was hurt more.

Class was bad, but I knew lunch would be worse. I considered taking refuge in the library to get some peace and quiet, but I hadn't had time for breakfast that morning as I'd rushed to pack for school, so by now my stomach was tight and aching.

Dredging up energy, I forced myself to think, carefully strategizing the most direct yet unobtrusive path to the cafeteria line. The plan I came up with was good. It might even have worked, if my soccer team hadn't been waiting to ambush me. They must have been keeping an eye out, because as soon as I

came through the door one of them shouted my name and they all crowded over.

“Hey, man. It’s good to...to see you back.” Derek, our goalie, took the lead in what was obviously going to be an awkward conversation.

I shrugged, not looking directly at any of them.

“Yeah, you’re just in time!” Cory enthused. “Remember, our first game is this weekend and, no offense to Finn or anything, but we need you. Bad.”

At Cory’s comment, Finn shot the gangly kid a glare, and if things had been normal, I would have rolled my eyes. My friend’s mouth was going to get him killed someday.

Finn, a forward like me, must have been picked to fill my place as striker. The striker’s job was to be the central forward player and lead goal scorer—and, by default, the most popular kid on the team. Finn had held the spot until two years ago when I came along and “stole” his position while I was still a wet-behind-the-ears freshman. He’d never forgiven me for it.

At this point he could have the position for all I cared. I couldn’t stand the thought of playing soccer anymore. I would never again hear my mom yelling my name from the stands, or need to explain the scoring system to my dad, who always forgot even though he went to every game. The thought made my gut tighten and I wondered if I’d even be able to eat lunch.

For the briefest moment I tried, I really did try, to care. I tried to want to go back to my old life where all that mattered was winning games, being popular, and staying out of trouble. Okay, not that last one, but at least avoiding suspension.

But it was pointless. My attempt at caring was flattened by the vast weight of loss that swept everything else away.

The abrupt crash of a student dropping his lunch tray across the cafeteria made me flinch. It reminded me of car metal

screeching, crumpling, collapsing...

Caught in the silent stare of my teammates, all I could do was shrug. I couldn't even look at them, tell them 'no' like a man, and walk away. They would want to know why, and there were no words to describe the utter despair I felt inside. I was letting them down, and the shame of it only added to the rest of my guilt slowly suffocating me.

"Come on, man. What's going on? We need you." Josh, one of the midfielders, punched me good-naturedly in the arm. I jerked back, remembering my body being battered and jerked about in that metal casket of death.

"Hey! Lay off," Cory growled and shouldered Josh away, perhaps sensing my discomfort.

The silence returned and I knew I had to say something to get them to leave. "I...can't," was all I managed to get out.

"What?"

"No way!"

"Come on!"

My teammates shuffled in agitation as Derek spoke up, trying to restore calm. "I'm sure Seb just meant he needs a couple weeks to get back into practice. We've been training hard, we'll be fine our first game. It can't be easy going back to normal after..." He trailed off.

There was a moment of tortuous silence before Finn, of all people, saved me further pain. He was a good player, almost as good as me. But even though we worked together as a team to win each game, we weren't friends. He probably spoke up more to cement his place as the new top dog than because he had any altruistic feelings toward me.

"Come on, guys. Let's give him some space. We'll be fine this weekend. I'll make sure of it."

One by one they turned away, some more quickly than others,

and returned to their seats. The soccer team's groupies that usually surrounded me stayed glued to their chairs, whispering to my teammates as they sat. I kept my eyes down, avoiding their looks—whether scornful or sympathetic, I didn't want to know. Soccer wasn't the most popular sport in the school, but we were way cooler than the track and field geeks and out-ranked the usually popular lacrosse team by our sheer volume of wins for the school. The football team, of course, considered themselves the greatest thing since sliced bread, but since fall was their season and spring was ours, we managed to pretend they didn't exist.

When the shuffle of feet had finally quieted I looked up to find Cory still standing there, looking concerned.

“You sure you're okay, Seb?” He took a step closer.

I shook my head, whether in answer to his question or a desperate plea for him to leave me alone, I didn't know.

“Here, let's go get some food. I'll sit with you,” he said in a cheery voice, attempting to sling an arm around my shoulder.

I shrugged him off, backing up. “Leave me alone, Cory. I...I need to be alone.”

He deflated, looking hurt, but nodded. “Alright. Just yell if you need me, okay?”

Though I gave no response, he seemed not to need one as he offered a half-hearted grin and turned to rejoin his teammates.

Blessedly alone once more, I kept my head down as I navigated the edge of the room, heading toward the food. Anyone who noticed me got out of the way, and by this point I was getting better at blocking out the whispers. I tried not to think about anything but lunch. If I could just get some food and sit down somewhere quiet—

Feet entered my field of vision, giving me just enough warning to stop before bouncing off the chest of Bryan,

Brookhaven Academy's star quarterback. He and I were about the same height, but he had a good hundred pounds on me, and not all of it muscle. His less-than-perfect physique didn't stop him from winning games, though it did put a dent in his following of female admirers. The cheerleaders tended to gravitate toward the other, more trim team members. Maybe that was why he was so surly all the time.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't Sebby, back from the dead," he sneered.

One of his three thick-necked teammates chortled. "Yeah, we thought you'd died."

"Shut up, idiot," Bryan snarled, obviously wanting to be the sole focus of my attention.

I glared into the quarterback's meaty face, hate flaring and warming my muscles. My fists clenched of their own accord. Bryan was a bully, pure and simple, and the fact that our soccer team had beaten the football team in number of wins the last two years running meant there was no love lost between us.

"Shut up and get out of my way," I growled, having no patience for this mouth-breather and his cronies. They guffawed, as if I'd tried to say something funny, and failed.

"What? Can't take a friendly little joke? Gonna run home crying to your mommy?" Bryan paused, a malicious smile spreading across his face. "Oh, wait. I forgot. She's dead."

I lunged, not even conscious of my own rage-filled movement until I'd landed a solid blow to Bryan's jaw that whipped his head around. Before I could follow up, his teammates were on me, and the fight was in full swing. It didn't matter that I'd made the critical error of starting a fight without a backup, or that I would probably be suspended. All I wanted to do was pound Bryan's face to a bloody pulp.

I don't remember the words I shouted, but I'm sure they

alone would have gotten me a week's detention. I don't remember how many times I was punched or how many blows I dealt in return. I barely recall the circle of students around us, yelling encouragements and placing impromptu bets. But I most certainly remember the hot goth chick decked out in a studded leather jacket and spiked boots that emerged from the crowd to give Bryan a swift and devastating kick to the groin just as the football player reared back to punch me in the face. I stared in shock and awe as Bryan's massive bulk dropped like a rock and he curled into a fetal position, moaning in agony. His cronies, busy holding my arms behind my back, were as shocked as I was. Their hesitation gave the goth chick time for a second go at her downed opponent, and the crack of Bryan's nose breaking was music to my ears. I only got to enjoy it for a second, though, before teachers arrived and the crowd of students scrambled to make themselves scarce.

Bryan was carted off to the school nurse, but I, despite my black eye, bleeding lip, and tender ribs, was marched away to await the principal's wrath along with the goth girl and Bryan's cronies. Phone calls were made, words were had, and I was threatened with suspension. Ironically, it was the happiest I'd been all day. If I got suspended, I wouldn't have to come back to school and face all the painful reminders of what I'd lost. A small part of me felt ashamed, the part that knew my mom would be disappointed. But I locked it away, refusing to even think about her face after that flash of pure agony Bryan's words had caused. For the first time in days, weeks even, I had something to think about besides what had happened, and I relished the feeling, stoking the anger that kept my guilt and pain at bay.

Through it all, I couldn't help sneaking peeks over at the girl who'd come to my rescue—not that I'd needed rescuing, of course. She never glanced in my direction or acknowledged

anything anyone said, nor did she seem angry or worried. In fact, she looked bored, alternating between picking at her black nails and staring at the ceiling with an expression of utter disdain. I recognized her as one of the juniors, though I'd never met her in person—I'd gotten the impression she avoided all human beings on principle. I didn't even know her name. Everyone just called her the goth girl.

I tried not to be curious. She meant nothing to me and was probably just one among Bryan's many enemies. The fact that she'd had the balls to strike while the iron was hot, so to speak, was intriguing, but I pushed it from my mind. I was probably going to be suspended anyway, and I'd never see her again. No big deal.

My aunt finally arrived to collect me, lips pressed together and face white with rage. She said nothing, however, and I dragged myself after her, shoulders slumped as I drew back into a blank shell and prepared for the inevitable tirade. It would suck, but at least I'd be away from all the curious eyes and callous stares.

It didn't come in the car. It didn't come once we arrived at the house. Without being told, I made a bee-line for my room. She let me disappear upstairs without comment. Her restraint surprised me, but I pushed it away with everything else so I could collapse on my bed and stare blankly at the ceiling, finally able to relax.

A while later, someone knocked on my door and, when I didn't bother answering, came inside. Eyes closed, I desperately told myself it was my mother, come to talk to me after I'd caused some sort of ruckus at school. She would always sit down on the bedcovers with a long-suffering sigh and, instead of scolding me or asking why, she'd tell me a story. Usually they involved her own adventurous youth living in inner-city Atlanta or the

summer trips her family used to take to her grandparents' farm. Sometimes she'd talk about her college days and holding down two jobs just to afford tuition. But she'd always get me laughing at some caper or prank, some ridiculous situation she or her friends had gotten into and, impossibly, gotten out of again. Only after I was smiling and had rolled over to look into her sweet, beautiful face, would she grow serious and ask me what had happened. Somehow, no matter I'd done, she would manage to tie my situation back into her own story and show me how my actions had hurt other people. Other people were always her primary concern, not herself. Again and again she would tell me to "be kind, even when the world punishes you for it." After our talks, I would always feel sorry and promise to do better. I wanted to be like her, to be kind to people, even though my low tolerance for stupidity made it almost impossible.

The memory vanished like a candle snuffed out by a gust of wind as I heard the rustle of skirts brushing against wood and the creak of an antique chair. There was a long silence before Aunt Barrington finally spoke.

"I have tutored many students in my long life, but never have I raised a child. When I was a girl, students who fought in school were caned by their teachers, though such a punishment would doubtless be wasted on you."

I didn't reply, too drained to care.

"Very well. Tell me what happened."

I still didn't speak, but this time because I couldn't believe my ears. Was she asking me for my side of the story?

"Come now, Sebastian. While a rank troublemaker you most certainly are, I have never known you to be physically violent. I assume you had a reason for attacking that boy. I wish to know what it was."

Stunned into obedience—my aunt had always been a "punish

first, ask questions later” kind of disciplinarian—I told her what Bryan had said.

Her lips tightened and her eyes flashed at my description. The reaction made me fantasize for a moment about her turning Bryan into a slimy, hideous, wart-covered toad. More realistically, his parents would be getting an earful later that evening, but it never hurt to dream big.

At the end of my story, she sighed. “Would that children these days were taught the basics of manners and human decency. While someone else’s rudeness does not legitimize your violent response, in light of the situation, the principal and I have decided it would not be in your best interests to suspend you. On my recommendation, however, he agreed you may benefit from time in a less...crowded environment. You will, therefore, spend your lunch period in detention for the next week, in addition to after-school detention—”

“What?” I sat up suddenly, horrified at the thought of spending even more time at school when I’d assumed I had escaped it altogether.

“Counseling was considered,” she continued, ignoring my interruption, “but for the present, I believe time and a little space will do the most good. Professional counseling will most certainly enter the picture, however, should any such incident reoccur.” She gave me a steely-eyed look and I fell back on my bed, eyes squeezed shut, groaning.

There was no point trying to explain how it felt, how having to listen to “I’m sorry for your loss” all day was like losing my parents a hundred times over again. Maybe she’d gone through similar loss when her mother died, but at least she hadn’t caused her mother’s death. I couldn’t, I literally could not, bear another day like that.

I heard the chair creak as she stood up. In the following

silence, I could feel her staring at me. I didn't move.

“Fire tests gold as suffering tests brave men. What is done cannot be undone. Therefore, a wise man would persevere, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance, character, and character, hope.” With that she turned and left, closing the door behind her.

I lay in the darkening room for a long time, wrestling with despair and confusion. Her words rankled me. Was I a brave man? I didn't like to think I was a coward, but maybe I was. I wanted to dismiss her little speech as the empty nattering of an old fool. Who was she to talk? A cranky old woman, alone in an empty, boring house. I didn't need her stupid "wisdom." But without it, what did I have left? My parents were dead. Worse, it was my fault. My brother couldn't care less about me, nor I about him. School was empty, and my future held nothing but years and years of loneliness and pain. My life was over. Why should I persevere? What hope was there?

Darkness fell, and I fell with it, sinking into a restless sleep. I saw my mother and cried out for her, but she only smiled and turned away, disappearing into the mist with a soft word: Wait. What did she mean? Wait for what? Then I saw my father, but he looked strange. Taller, and younger, as if I was seeing him through my eyes as a little boy. I sat on his knee and he told me a story, one of Aesop's fables. I remembered how he used to love those old tales, but I couldn't recall ever hearing the one he shared with me now. It was about a king who dreamt one night that his son would be killed by a lion, and so he locked the boy up

safely in a palace full of beautiful pictures of animals to keep him company. But the prince grew to hate his gilded cage and tried to use a branch of thorns to tear up the picture of a lion that he blamed for his captivity. He hurt himself on the thorns and the wound grew infected and the prince died. As my father faded, I could hear him say, “Goodness, what a silly lot we are.”

The dream changed again and now I could see both of them, but they were so far away. I yelled their names over and over, running toward them, but they only grew smaller. Just before they disappeared from sight, they both turned and pointed up.

I woke in a cold sweat, my limbs tangled in the sheets and my throat raw. Tears of frustration and pain leaked from my eyes as I struggled upright, throwing off the sheets and sitting on the side of the bed, head in my hands. My chest ached like I’d been run through with cold steel. But that wasn’t what hurt the most. Mentally, emotionally, it felt like I’d been cut in two, right down the middle. Half of me was gone, dead forever, and the other half was flailing about gasping desperately for air.

“I can’t live like this,” I said aloud, half hoping someone would answer me back, prove me wrong. But there was only silence. Teeth clenched, I pressed my palms against my eyes, trying to block out the terrible thoughts I couldn’t keep at bay. They pulled me inexorably down a dark road I knew wouldn’t end well.

“I should be dead, not them,” I whispered into the darkness. “It should have been me.” Maybe I should just kill myself, I added silently, unable to say the words out loud.

“Ahem-hem. Excuse the intrusion, but that’s codswallop, that is.”

I yelled, and yelled loud. The voice had come from somewhere above me, and in my panicked attempt to get away I fell forward onto the floor, rolling over and scooting back against the wall

like a trapped crab. Looking up, I saw...well, a ghost. I blinked rapidly, then rubbed my eyes and looked again. It was still there.

We stared at each other for a long time and my fear gradually faded, turning to curiosity. Growing up in a wizard family meant I knew more about the supernatural than most. That is, I knew the “supernatural” was mostly a load of crap that people made up for profit, for entertainment, or for their own misguided delusions. Ghosts, though—they were real. I didn’t know much about them except that genuine sightings were rare, and that those who allowed themselves to be seen did so for a reason.

“W—what do you want?” I asked, slowly rising from the floor. My heart had calmed from its jackhammer pounding to a much more respectable thump in my chest.

“Well, you not dying would be an excellent start, young chap. Believe me, it’s not all it’s cracked up to be.”

I gave a startled laugh that ended in a nervous hiccup. The ghost appeared to be of an old man, wearing house shoes and some kind of bathrobe—or was that a dressing gown? He had a truly impressive mustache which curled up at the tips, and a bushy beard that was just this side of untidy. The fine specimens on his face, however, were in comical contrast to the few wisps of fluff left on his head. For a brief moment, my old self surfaced and I opened my mouth to make a joke. Then I remembered I was talking to a ghost.

“Um, okay. So, I’m still alive. Now what?”

“Well, that would be up to you. Tea and biscuits are an excellent choice, one of my personal favorites. But in your situation, sleep is most likely the best course of action. As I recall, you have school in the morning.” The ghost’s British accent reminded me strongly of my aunt. Who was this guy?

I sat, stunned and unsure how to take this odd response. Or the whole situation in general. Oblivious to my confusion, the

ghost floated down from his hover around the ceiling to sit on my bed, crossing one leg over the other as he dug around in the dressing gown's pocket for something. Of course, he couldn't really dig into anything, just stick his ghostly hand through the spot where his pocket was and wiggle it about in a vague gesture of rummaging. Then he pulled the hand out, appearing to hold something I couldn't see, and rooted in another pocket with the other hand. Now holding two invisible items, he put one down and gestured with the other as if opening a box and plucking out something within between his thumb and forefinger. Setting the "box" down, he lifted the other object and mimed stuffing a pipe. Finally, he appeared to light said pipe—invisible or imaginary, I couldn't tell which—and brought it to his lips for a good, long draw.

Noticing my stare, he shrugged. "An old habit. I can't smoke anymore, of course, but there's nothing wrong with my imagination. It is comforting to remember life's little pleasures, at times."

I shook my head, wondering if I was still dreaming. "What the heck is going on?" I murmured. The question was meant for myself, but the ghost thought otherwise.

"Technically speaking, you're having a conversation with a constrained spirit who—"

"No, no. I meant, who are you and why are you here?"

"Ah! That is simple enough. I am Peter Blackwell, your great-great-grandfather. But for heaven's sake, do not call me pappy, or pawpaw, or greatpa, or any such nonsense. Peter will suffice. And as for why I am here, well, that should be obvious. I'm here because you called."

I stared at him, completely nonplussed. Besides my aunt, I'd never met anyone on my dad's side of the family before. "Uh... you're my great-great-grandfather?"

“Indeed. Not much family resemblance, I’ll admit. But then I’ve looked better,” he said, his mouth twisting wryly as he gestured at his ghostly form.

“Okaay...so...what do you mean I called?” I asked, thinking of my dream and trying to remember if I’d said anything to anyone but my parents. But even though barely a few minutes had passed, the images of my mother and father were already slipping away.

“Well, not called, exactly. I can, ahem, sense, you might say, when my descendants are in a tight spot. Since I’m still around, it seems a shame not to make myself useful.”

“And why are you still around?” I asked, the seed of an idea growing in my mind. I tried to contain my excitement. General lore about ghosts said that they were the disturbed spirits of those that died with something left unresolved. Of course, general lore was about as accurate as a compass next to a magnet, but I figured the lore had to have come from somewhere.

“That is none of your business, young whippersnapper,” Peter huffed.

My curiosity was sparked, but at that particular moment I had more important things to do than pursue it. “Never mind that for now,” I said, leaning forward, my whole body tingling. “What about my parents? Have you seen them? Did they send a message?”

“Ah. Well. Not exactly.” The old ghost looked uncomfortable. “I haven’t gone on, you see. Nothing returns after passing through the veil. No words, no messages, and no spirits.”

Disappointment exploded in my chest and I gasped at the unexpected pain of it. For one brief moment, I’d thought I would see my parents again. Struggling against despair, I pressed him. “Are you sure? They might not have gone on, right? They could

still be here? Could you call for them? Find them for me, please?”

“I am sorry, lad,” the ghost said very softly, putting down his imaginary pipe. “They are gone. To something much better than this, I’m sure, bless their souls. Thomas was a bit rough around the edges, but had a good heart, and poor, sweet Alison...” He fell silent, completely unaware of the tumult he’d inadvertently sparked inside me—grief, guilt, despair, and...hope. Stubborn, stupid hope, refusing to be crushed.

“But surely there’s something you can do?” I asked, voice desperate. He shook his head, eyes on his hands. I flailed, grasping at anything I could think of. “Tell me about the other side, then. Where are they? Are they alright? Are they happy? Do they know—” my voice broke, but I cleared it and forged on, “—do they know how I’m doing?”

But he simply sat there, shaking his head until I petered out. His gaze met mine, and for a moment, I saw my own fathomless pain mirrored in his eyes. Heaving a great sigh, he shook his head a final time. “I already told you, boy. Nothing comes back through the veil. It is a one-way road. A good thing, I should think. Those that pass it deserve some peace and quiet, after all. And if we knew for sure what lay beyond, we’d have no use for faith, now would we? No, better not to know...”

I shivered, wanting to curl up in a ball and wither away. If I passed through that veil, would I see them again? “So...what’s the point?”

“Of what, my lad?”

“Of anything!” I burst out, wondering why this stupid ghost had even bothered me if he couldn’t fix a single thing.

“Why, everything, of course!” Peter exclaimed, seeming shocked at my question. “Life is the point. It is a gift that many would die for. What do you have against it?”

“My parents are dead, that’s what!” I hissed at him, fists clenched. I would have thrown myself on my bed if he hadn’t been sitting on it. Instead I just stood there, quivering in a tumult of anger, pain, and despair, with no way to let it out.

“And a great, terrible tragedy it is,” Peter said, his face showing some of the same strain I was feeling. “Come here, Sebastian my boy. Sit.” He gestured to the bed beside him in a fatherly sort of way.

I didn’t want to. I wanted to scream and rage and destroy things. It wasn’t fair! They shouldn’t have had to suffer for my mistake. But my feet moved of their own accord and I slumped down onto the bed, feeling a chill on my arm where it almost touched Peter’s ghostly form. He refrained from putting an arm around me, perhaps aware of his effect on the living.

“No one can deny that a terrible thing has happened. Tragedy does not discriminate. It comes to the old and young, the happy and unhappy, the evil and the righteous just the same. It is, you might say, a symptom of our imperfect reality. Our saving grace, the reason humanity survives, is a curious phenomenon. While tragedy crushes some, others it strengthens, and through that strength, life goes on.”

I sat, drained once again of all feeling, and tried to care. Aunt Barrington had said something like that as well, something about being brave. But why bother? Why not be crushed and let it end?

Be kind, even when the world punishes you for it.

I could hear her words so vividly, as if she were right there beside me. Would it be kind to end my own life? It would be just, certainly. But kind? Would anybody even care? Aunt Barrington might, a little, though most of the time she acted like I was a nuisance, so I wasn’t really sure. Golden Boy probably wouldn’t even notice. Cory would be bummed, but my soccer team had

good ol' Finn to lead them to victory. So who was I supposed to be kind to: myself, or everyone else?

I groaned, rubbing my eyes again with my palms as if I could find answers behind my eyelids. None were forthcoming, however, so I finally fell back on my bed, empty and worn out.

“A tired mind does not wise decisions make,” Peter intoned, rising into the air. “Get some rest, and we shall see what answers the dawn brings.”

Not bothering to reply, I crawled under the covers and shut my eyes, hoping the darkness waiting for me would be empty of dreams.

Thankfully, it was.

End of sneak-peek excerpt

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The *Creatures* box set releases August 15th. If you are the social media type, join us for our Facebook release party here: <https://www.facebook.com/events/345753235839138/> Play games, interact with the authors, and win free stuff! I'm excited, and I hope you are too. Start counting down the days until you can *brave the beasts!*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Author of magic, tea, and snark-filled urban fantasy novels, with a few science fiction and dystopian stories thrown in for good measure, Lydia Sherrer believes the world is built on dreams and aims to add hers to the mix. She is convinced that dark chocolate and tea are legitimate sources of nutrition, and one day hopes to visit every country in the world. Currently residing in Louisville, KY, she is supported by her wonderful and creative husband and their two loud, but adorable, cats.

You can connect with Lydia online!

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DARK ROADS TRILOGY: Book 1
Accidental Witch

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Published by **Chenoweth Press 2017**
Louisville, KY, USA

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