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CHAPTER ONE

Amy

The coffin starts moving in mid-sentence. The conveyor belt must not have been oiled in a while, because the vicar's every fourth word is interrupted by a squeal that sounds like an unhappy cat being dragged by its tail down a blackboard.

"And so, Lord, we" – SCREEEEEEEECH – "commend thy daughter" – SCREEEEEEEEECH – "to thine divine mercy…" – SCREEEEEEEEECH

Despite the Reluctant Feline Symphony the vicar keeps his rhythm, his delivery unflustered. I guess he's had a lot of practice.

People die all the time, I remind myself for the thousandth time. *And the world doesn't stop.*

The vicar drones kindly on, and the box containing Mum inches closer to the fire. I don't know what to feel. No, that's not true. I know what I *ought* to be feeling:

Grief.

Desperation.

Despair.

That's what a good daughter would feel. Fuck good, that's what a replacement level human *being* would feel. Unfortunately, the only feeling *I* can muster is a nagging anxiety that all the tea the vicar poured into me before the ceremony will overcome my bladder's valiant rearguard defence before I can get out of here. If I do pee myself, Charlie will think I did it on purpose; he's already convinced I'm an incurable drama addict. I try to probe for deeper emotions, but it's like prodding your tongue at the dentist's. I'm numb.

Which is hardly going to make for compelling content, is it? says a nasty little voice in the back of my head.

Don't think about that.

I'm cold, even though the bright July sunshine is streaming in through the stained glass. A church on a sunny day should be for a wedding, not for … this. Shivering, I sneak my phone out of my pocket and my trembling fingers almost drop it. The screen shows 11:37. I glimpse my lips reflected in the glass: they're blue.

Huh, I must still be shock. She died a week ago, Amy. Get over it already.

My thumb twitches on muscle memory. I pull it back just in time. I swear – *I swear* – I only took my phone out to check the time. Now that I'm thinking about it, though, the three oval fabric patches on the back of my head – one behind each ear, and one at the top of my spine – have started to itch.

Forget it. You promised you wouldn't. Not today. Charlie would never forgive you.

I glance along the pew at him. His mascara's already drawing shadow stalactites as it runs down his cheeks. He catches my look, and tries to smile at me. I smile back.

The day of his mother's funeral is a terrible time to break a promise to your little brother.

Which is why I won't, I tell myself.*I won't I won't I won't. I.*

Won't.

Then why, the nasty voice in the back of my head says, *did you decide to wear the hat?*

The wide-brimmed black hat is, I realize, the reason my patches are itching. They normally breathe pretty well, but between the felt and the high turned-up collar on my dress they're getting stifled. I *could* take the hat off, but then everyone in here would see the coin-sized neuroreceptor pads stuck to my skull.

Come to think of it, the nasty voice enquires, *if you aren't going to stream, why did you even put them on this morning?*

Shut up.

But the voice is right, of course. I thumb the Heartstream icon on my phone. Not to stream – that's the promise. I won't stream – but it won't do any harm just to check my…

Oh. Shit.

15,733 notifications.

My spine ices up when I see the number. Careful to keep the phone below the edge of the pew, I skim the first

few. A lot of them, as always, are delightful. Messages of support and love: *We're with you, Ame; we love you, Amy. You're so strong, Ame; you're so brave, Ame. Chin up, girl, you can do this.*

But for every one of those, there are ten like the one from BeckerBrain4Life:

> Please, please, please let me feel! I'm so lost right now. I don't know what I'm going to do without Mum!!

Mum. I recoil from that word. I want to snap back, all caps – *SHE WASN'T YOUR MOTHER*. But that's the point, isn't it? As far as BeckerBrain4Life is *co*ncerned, she might as well have been.

I keep scrolling, everywhere the same phrases.

> Let us feel.
>
> You owe us.
>
> Let us feel.
>
> We need closure.
>
> Let us feel.
>
> Let us feel.
>
> Let us feel.

My hand starts to shake harder, so hard that the text on the screen blurs and for an instant *feel* reads as *feed*.

The conveyor belt squeaks and rattles and stops. The incinerator doors slide shut, sealing Mum inside. The doors have flowers and cherubs painted on the outside.

*Letusfeel,*thenotesbeg.Butthere'snothing*to* feel. Maybe my followers are right. Maybe I *do* owe them an ending, after

everything I've dragged them through. But I don't have one to give. I grope behind the immediate physical urgency of my aching bladder, trying to define my emotions, but there's just numbness, a howling, windswept *nothing*.

The vicar's stopped talking, and I hear a muffled *whump*. My mum, up in smoke, like so much condemned paperwork. She smiles up from the photo on the altar, her tight curly brown hair framing her face. The picture is from a picnic about eight years ago, but Mum basically didn't age until the disease kicked in.

What is *wrong* with me? Feel something, Becker, any - thing: *your mum is dead!*

But I can't. I think I'm broken. Sitting here in church with my full inbox and my empty heart with every single person I love in the world crying, and me with tear ducts a cactus would be proud of. It's staggeringly lonely.

And loneliness has always been my kryptonite.

I thumb the icon in the top-right corner of the app, the cutesy one of a blue heart giving off radio waves. The patches heat up behind my ears.

A couple of seconds later, the responses start to roll in.

> Thank youuuuuuuuuuuuu!!!
>
> Literally crying here, in floods. Thank you, Ame!!!
>
> OMG the numbness!!!
>
> So intense, so truthful!!!

I feel sick.

A creak of wood to my right draws my attention and Charlie runs for the door, stifling a sob. I didn't see him

check his phone. Did he see me break my promise?

No, idiot, he's upset because they just incinerated his mother; get over yourself.

I push past Aunt Juliet and go after him. Dad's also halfway out of his seat, with that look of well-meaning, semi-engaged concern he wears for everything from a broken egg in the carton to treating a major burns victim when he's at work.

"It's OK; I'll get him," I mutter as I pass. "You stay with the guests."

"You're such a good big sister." He puts a fond hand on my arm.

I don't reply. The patches on my head are so hot they're almost burning me.

Outside, the midday sun forces me to squint; the church's gravestones, trees and railings become a glare-drenched blur. I peer around me.

"Charlie?" I call. "Chucklemonster?"

"Don't call me that," a voice says from behind the door; at least that's what I think it meant to say. Blotted by sobs, it comes out as: *"D-uhn't c-c-ull m' tha-a-a-."*

"Whatever you say, Chuckerigar." I push the door closed and there he is, the spikes of his hair awry from where he's been pulling at it, mascara bleeding all over the white collar of his shirt.

"Chuckerigar? What even *is* that?"

"No idea, Chuckifawoodchuckcouldchuckwouldchuck, I just made it up."

He snorts through his tears, and for a second I think he's going to smile. "It's j-j-j-just," he begins, but then another sob chokes him.

"Hey, hey, I know. I know." I pull him to me and just hold him there for a while, feeling his skinny little chest expand and contract against mine. He sobs again, and my stomach twists. I can't bear hearing him in pain, I can't *bear* it, yet – and it's a hateful thought, but I can't *quite* bury it quick enough – I kind of envy him it too.

The irony is, Charlie would make an amazing streamer. He feels everything so vividly. My grief, by contrast, hangs over me like a piano on a fraying rope.

"It's OK," I tell him. "It's OK."

"Nuh-nuh-nuh…" he begins.

"No, fair point, it's not OK," I concede. "It's not in the same galaxy as OK. If OK was a star it would take decades for its mediocre light to reach us. But, still, it is what it is and I'm here in it with you, and I promise you, I won't let you be alone with it. OK?"

He clings tighter to me, burrowing his face into my shoulder. After a while his grip slackens and I let him pull away. He blinks tears back, smiling at me through his freckles. Charlie's like a miniature version of our father. The spitting image of Dad at that age, that's what everyone says. People say that kind of thing about boys.

Of course, fourteen-year-old Dad would never have left the house wearing enough slap to equip the Moscow State Circus for a month.

"How on earth did you manage to get make-up on your *ear*?" I ask him, smearing it away with my sleeve.

"Oh, I reckon earscara could be a thing." He poses, framing his face with his palms. "Dani says I have very sexy ears."

"Do feel free to keep your girlfriend's fetishes to yourself."

He sniffs back his tears and grins at me. He holds up his hand, and we interlock our fingers.

"Thanks, sis."

"It's what I'm here for."

"I know, that's why…" He tails off.

"Charlie?" I prompt him, but he doesn't answer.

His smile is still in place, but I realize he's not looking at me any more. He's staring past my shoulder and his hand squeezes mine so tight the knuckles pop.

"What?" He doesn't sound angry; he sounds baffled, and that's worse. "What are *they* doing there?"

I turn to follow his gaze, and feel my heart plunge.

There must be three – maybe even four – hundred of them. Most of them wear white T-shirts emblazoned with a crappy charcoal drawing of a bird, the lines of the avian stick figure all wobbly because the sixteen-year-old girl who drew it was so upset her hand was all over the place. To be fair, you can't blame me for the shoddy artwork: it was the day we found out Mum's disease was inoperable.

That T-shirt, plus the fact that they all have the same haircut – a close crop to allow the patches maximum contact, same as me – makes them look like inmates of the same goth prison. A lot of them have dark circles under their

eyes. I'm not surprised. This bunch must be the hard core; they'll have been keeping up with everything I've been putting out since last Thursday, which means they won't have been sleeping much recently.

"Amy!" A willowy boy in the front rank calls out. "What do we do now?"

I pull myself free of Charlie's grip and walk towards them. I feel light with horror. I *hate* that they're here and, in an appalled flash, I realize I'm still streaming, so *they know* that's how I feel. None of them seem to mind, though, if they've noticed. They're looking at me hopefully.

"What now?" the boy demands again when I reach the railings. He's so tall he looks like he should bend in the breeze. "What do we do now?"

I spread my hands helplessly "I wish I knew."

"But…" he stammers. "But…" He doesn't seem to know how to finish the sentence.

I look around at the other faces; a bunch of them are crying, or have been recently, reddened eyes staring at – or through – me in shock.

You knew what this was, I want to say. *I never lied to you. I never* forced *you to follow me, to stream off me. Go work it out for yourselves – that's what I have to do.*

I want to be cold, but I can't, because – in a way – they just lost Mum too.

"Look," I begin, "thank you, all of you, for—"

"YOU FUCKING VULTURES!"

I whirl around. Aunt Juliet is stalking towards the church

gate, her handbag raised over her head like a medieval chain mace. (Having carried it for her earlier, I know that handbag would make a tremendous weapon. It weighs as much as a baby elephant.) Dad bobs along in her wake.

"Is nothing sacred?" she yells. "Christ, this is a house of worship, you spiteful toerags – show some respect!"

"But, Juliet—"

My aunt bears around to bring the speaker – a small round girl with glasses at the left of the crowd – within her field of fire.

"Who's that? Who told you my name? Who gave you permission to use it? Who the hell are you, you little snot rag? This is a *private. Family. Funeral.*" She spits every word separately. "You miserable shit-heel tourists. No one invited you!"

"But … with respect, Mrs Rice … she did."

I freeze. The tall boy's finger is levelled at me.

"Hey," I protest, "that's not true. I never said—"

But I never get to finish my sentence, because, even while still sniffing backtears behindme,Charliemoveslike aviper. An awful look of suspicion on his face, he darts forward and yanks the black hat off my head. The patches on my head hiss slightly, starting to cool as they're exposed to the air.

"I didn't," I begin. I want to say *I didn't mean to.* But that's not true. It's not like I slipped this morning and fell into a bucket of neuro-conducting headwear.

Dad and Aunty Jules are gaping at me. Their expressions are almost identical: *How could you be so stupid?* That's bad

enough, but it's nothing compared with the look on Charlie's face.

"You promised." He says it so quietly I can barely hear him.

He drops the hat on the grass by a gravestone and runs off, towards the church. I make to go after him, but Dad's in my way, his placid smile belying his strength as he holds my arms.

"Give him a sec, eh, love?"

I look back over my shoulder. Four hundred faces look at me from above four hundred crow T-shirts. I kill the stream, but still, from every one of them I see my own regret reflected back.

There's no sign of the family car when my taxi pulls up outside my house. When Dad "suggested" I take a cab back on my own "just to give your brother a little space", I didn't argue. It was an hour's drive home through London traffic and I think Charlie's betrayed glare would have flayed me alive by the time we arrived.

While I was in the car I tried to take my mind off it by catching up on Lance Yalta's stream. Lance may be a ludicrous bronzed man-child with purely decorative biceps, but he's the biggest thing on Heartstream for a reason. His last update was 8 p.m. St Lucian time, which I guess is where he is with his yacht.

I hit the little purple "playback" icon, and felt my patches go warm as 7 gigabytes of Lance's recorded emotions pulse into them from Heartstream's servers. A wave

of contentment washed over me. I felt the Caribbean sun on my bare skin, the fresh-salty scent of the ocean tingles in my nostrils. I didn't *see* the sun glaring, or hear the soft lapping of the waves – Heartstream makes bandwidth space by leaving sight and sound out since regular VR does them better – but that did mean my eyes were open to see a gaunt-looking streamer in a crow shirt in tears by the side of the road; and all of a sudden, Lance's sun-drenched smugness felt like an unforgivable waste of time. I kill the playback. That's the problem with Heartstream. It can give you pretty much any feeling, but it can't take even a single one away.

I thank my driver, crunch my way up the path, slam the door behind me and dump my keys on the hall table.

"Dad?" I call, just in case. "Charlie?" But there's no response.

The house swamps our meagre handful of pictures and rugs the way hand-me-down clothes swamp a toddler. A year after we moved in, there are still boxes. Our life was already on pause when we arrived.

I remember the first time I came to see it, walking through the shell of a home with the fawning estate agent, ticking off items on my grim mental shopping list.

Proximity to a specialist hospital – check.

Doorways wide enough to get that massive mechanized bed through – check.

Bathroom on the ground floor for when the stairs become too much for her withered legs – check.

Other people get to hunt for their first house looking for a garden for the dog.

I dump my bag on the hall floor, kick my shoes off and exhale. "Home sweet home."

Now, the place seems quieter than I've ever heard it, quieter than when I wandered around it in the middle of the night and the only sounds were my own breathing and the creak of the floorboards under my feet. I wonder what's missing…

Oh.

I get it. Some stupid obstinate part of me was expecting to hear Mum's voice greet me as I came through the door. And all at once, the pain of it is overwhelming, raging up through me like I've got a hurricane bottled in my lungs.

I try to walk it off, but eventually I have to sit down on the bottom stair and watch tears run off the end of my nose to spot the parquet flooring. I fight for breath after hitched breath, forcing myself to study the interlocking wood panels until the air comes easier.

I guess it makes sense that it hit me here rather than at the graveyard. After all, it's not really her presence in the little flower bed where they'll bury her ashes that I'm mourning – it's her absence from everywhere else.

"Come on, Ame," I say aloud through gritted teeth. "The wake's about to start. There's like five thousand tonnes of coleslaw you need to peel the clingfilm off." Admittedly not the deepest mantra in the world, but repeated seven times it manages to get me on my feet.

As I head towards the kitchen, a sound finally does split the silence, a familiar hissing. Someone's boiling the kettle.

"Dad?" I call again. "Charlie?"

Have they been here the whole time? Again there's no answer. It can't be them anyway. I would've seen the car out front. Gooseflesh plucks at my skin, but it's too late – I've already pushed on the door.

"Would you like a cup?"

The woman beside the stove is wearing a down jacket despite the heat. She pours boiling water into our *Alice in Wonderland* teapot. She's got the buzz cut all streamers have, so close it's hard to tell what colour her hair is. At first, I think she's my parents' age, but then I realize she's only maybe in her early thirties, it's just the way the skin hangs dark under her eyes that makes her appear older. She looks like she hasn't slept in *weeks*.

"I'm sorry I couldn't make it to the funeral, but I didn't really think it would be appropriate, and there was *so* much to do here."

She potters fussily around the kitchen pulling out crockery. There's a Tesco bag on the table and she unpacks a box of iced buns and sets two of them on a plate. The platters and platters of sausage rolls, biscuits, finger sandwiches and home-made coleslaw we put out for the wake this morning are still on the counter, a supply dump awaiting a grieving army. She doesn't even touch the cling film covering them.

"I figured everyone likes iced buns." She ambles over and pushes the plate at me. "Cake, Amy? I got them for you."

It takes me a second to force words past the incredulous horror that's blocking my throat. I don't know who this woman is, but her buzz cut tells me why she's here.

"This is *way* over the line," I burst out. "This is my *house*! You can't *be* here!"

She blinks at me; her eyes turn down at the corners, baffled and a bit hurt. I feel like I just shouted at a puppy.

"It's only a cup of tea." She raises the plate again. "And I brought my own cake; I didn't want to presume."

Outside, a car growls up on the gravel.

"That's my dad, and my little brother," I tell her desperately. "You *cannot* be here when they come in. Look…" I fight to get my voice under control. "I know today's been tough if you've been streaming off me, but I just can't help you, not right now. I mean, she was actually *my* mum, OK? Charlie's already flipped out once today, and if he sees a random streamer in here he's going to *lose it*."

She just stares at me with those shadowed eyes.

I drag in a deep breath. "Look, I'm sorry to do this, but if you don't leave, right now, I'm going to call the police."

"Oh," she says, deflating like I've just told her it's going to rain on her birthday. "Oh well, I'm sure they'll be along sooner or later anyway."

Car doors slam outside. Feet crunch on the path. I freeze midway through reaching for my phone. "Wait, what?"

With an apologetic expression on her weird, youthfully wizened face, she unzips her jacket. For an instant, I think, *Did you rob a DIY store?* Through the zip, wires sprout, and

I glimpse tubes of transparent liquid next to glass canisters of nails and ball bearings. At first my brain refuses to recognize it, it's just so *incongruous*, but then it clicks into focus. I've seen enough obsessive rolling twenty-four-hour news reports to recognize a bomb.

"I just wanted to see you," she says. "Before the end."