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Kiss of Life

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CHAPTER ONE

PHOEBE.

Beautiful Phoebe.

Through the glass watch Phoebe leave bus walk to house Phoebe green skirt green eyes skirt trailing hair flowing black and shiny in the sun. Brown leather boots beige scarf wearing colors no black Phoebe beautiful Phoebe. Halloween Phoebe in costume no costume.

"Hey, Frankenstein. Get away from the window before the villagers go and get their torches."

Jimmy. Turn. Turn. Want to hit evil stepbrother Jimmy pound Jimmy turn can't turn. Turn left move right. Left left left.

"Don't strain yourself. It's your special day, Frankenstein! Happy Halloween!"

Turn can't turn Jimmy shoves fall falling heavy land hard head crack coffee table loud heavy body crash loud don't feel don't feel anything Jimmy grinning kicks ribs can't feel get up can't get up Jimmy laughs. Mom yells at Jimmy Jimmy yells back want to pound Jimmy. Hard. Get up. Can't get up.

"I said don't strain yourself."

Standing over FrankenAdam laughing ceiling is the sky get up can't two bulbs in ceiling skylight one burned out out get up Jimmy Jimmy sprays spits when he laughs get up can't.

Jimmy laughing. Mom cries get up can't holds arm pulls can't get up Mom crying can't feel. Feel feelings Phoebe. Get up get up can't get up.

Get up.

Get.

Up.

CHAPTER TWO

ALL PHOEBE COULD THINK ABOUT BEFORE GOING NEXT DOOR TO ADAM'S HOUSE WAS THE NIGHT HE DIED IN HER ARMS. THE ROSE OF BLOOD BLOOMING ON THE WHITE SHIRT HE'D WORN TO HOMECOMING, HIS STRANGLED CRY AS HE CAME BACK FROM WHEREVER IT WAS THE DEAD WENT.

He'd only been dead for a few minutes, but despite the rapid return, control over his body wasn't coming back quickly. Phoebe debated changing out of her school clothes before leaving, but didn't want to waste the time. Since Adam's death she'd become acutely aware of its value.

Other zombies, or "differently biotic persons," to use the politically correct vernacular, seemed able to overcome their physical issues as "life" went on. Tommy, who she had dated, and gorgeous Karen DeSonne walked and talked so well that they could practically pass for traditionally biotic. Even Colette Beauvior had "come back" at a much greater rate than Adam, partly due to her reconciliation with their good friend Margi Vachon. Somehow Margi had even convinced her parents to let Colette move in with them, and now the two were as inseparable as Phoebe and Adam.

Adam, however, didn't seem to be getting any benefit from Phoebe's constant presence, which left her wondering what she was doing wrong.

Phoebe dumped a half inch of sugar into a glass, took the rest of the morning's coffee from the refrigerator, and poured it over the sugar. She stirred it with a spoon, then drank half in one swallow, hoping it would make the world look a little brighter.

It had been nearly a month since Adam's murder. His movements were still random, his speech only occasionally intelligible. Adam, her tower of strength, had been laid low, reduced to the helplessness of an infant. His long, once-athletic body was now awkward and shambling, and his thick limbs jerked as if they were being pulled by unseen strings. His broad shoulders slumped when he walked, which he was able to do only with great concentration.

Phoebe took another sip and closed her eyes, rolling the cool vanilla-flavored coffee on her tongue. When they'd lifted Adam onto the stretcher, he'd looked at her, his arm flailing out helplessly as though he was trying to grasp something that would be forever out of reach.

Phoebe dumped out the rest of her coffee. She scrawled a quick note to her parents and got her backpack, which she'd stocked with a few bags of Halloween candy in case any kids came to Adam's house.

Adam's stepbrother Jimmy was leaving his house as she locked her door. He gave Phoebe a dirty look and muttered under his breath when she waved. She didn't know what it was about Jimmy; he'd been unpleasant enough when Adam was alive, but now that Adam was dead, he was *impossible*.

"Welcome to the morgue," he said, slamming his car door and backing out so quickly his wheels kicked gravel.

Phoebe let herself in. The kitchen smelled of this morning's fried eggs and burned coffee. Dirty plates and pans were stacked up on the counter by the sink, and there were thick
yellow smears on the vinyl cloth that covered the kitchen table.

"Don't mind Jimmy, Phoebe," a voice called out from the hall. Adam's mother walked into the kitchen, her once pretty face drawn, her cheeks sunken, and her eyes ringed with gray. "We all deal with life differently."

Phoebe nodded. The phrase was a mantra with the ex–Mrs. Layman, now Mrs. Garrity, and there didn't seem to be an appropriate response to it.

Phoebe watched her walk to the sink, where she moved one of the pans from the stove to the counter. Then she walked to the table with a sponge, went back to the sink and wet the sponge under the faucet. She made a single pass at one of
the clotted stains, then dropped the sponge and made a halfhearted attempt to straighten a pile of newspapers that sat on the table.

"Phoebe," she said, "I've got to do some shopping. Some grocery shopping. Would you mind staying with Adam for a few minutes? A couple hours?"

Phoebe tried to keep her smile even as she looked at Mrs. Garrity, whose hands were shaking like leaves. "I'd be happy to, Mrs. Garrity."

"Good. That's great. Adam's in his room. Great."

"Are you okay, Mrs. Garrity?"

"I'm fine," she replied. "Adam had another fall, that's all. I'm okay now. He's fine. I guess it doesn't really hurt him. Falling, I mean."

It took her twenty minutes to find her purse, time Phoebe spent washing the stack of dishes and bundling the papers so they would fit in the recycling bin. She wanted to run down the hall to see Adam, but she wanted Mrs. Garrity to leave first. She was scrubbing the crusted layer of sediment from the table when Mrs. Garrity bustled back into the room.

"Damn that Jimmy," she said, oblivious to Phoebe's efforts. "He took my cigarettes." She walked out the door without saying good-bye to either Phoebe or her son.

When Phoebe was finished and the dishes were left drying in the rack, she walked down the hall to Adam's room. He was sitting on his bed, his back straight against the wall behind him and his long legs stretched out on top of the covers. His large hands rested on his thighs, and although he was staring at her, it didn't seem like he was seeing anything.

"Hi, Adam," she said, aiming for a high level of perkiness, knowing that even on her best days she fell far short of

bubbly—and this was not one of her best days. Seeing him there—his face and his big graceful body frozen into
immobility—was heartbreaking.

He would have been a professional football player, she was sure of it. Just one summer of karate lessons had given him a fluidity that, combined with his incredible size and strength, made him a force of nature on the field. He'd been the proverbial hometown hero, universally expected to get a free ride to the college of his choice on a football scholarship. All gone. Spent, along with his life.

Because of her.

She sucked in her cheeks and ordered herself not to cry. She'd vowed, along with her promise to bring him back, never to let him see her cry.

"You're looking big, as usual," she said once she had regained control of her emotions. She walked to the bed and bent to give him a kiss on the cheek, letting her lips linger on his cool skin for a few heartbeats.

"I brought bags of candy," she said, "in case we get any rug rats tonight. Hershey's minis, Reese's cups, the good stuff. You know it's Halloween, right? I know we don't get many trick-or-treaters out here; most of the little ones hit either the Heights or Oakvale Manor. But maybe we'll see a few."

He was centered on the bed and there was no room to sit beside him, so Phoebe climbed over his legs and sat across from him, her bent knees tenting over his calves. His head tilted toward her with slow purpose, like a door improperly set in its frame.

She gave him what she thought was her winningest smile.

"Remember that year you and I went out with Margi and Colette? We were all Catwoman and you were Batman? What were we, like, ten? Eleven?"

She searched for any sign of remembrance, any flicker of recognition in his eyes, but they were flat and glassy.

"I'll say eleven. We got my dad to bring us to the Heights *and* the Manor that year. What a haul that was! I think Margi and Colette ate about a hundred SweeTarts just going from house to house. I didn't have a single piece of candy until the next day. My parents wouldn't let me have any until they'd gone through it all; they were fanatics about doing an inspection. Like they could detect by sight the myriad of deadly poisons, razor blades, and broken glass hidden in my Charleston Chews."

She thought she saw a faint twitch of his upper lip, but she wasn't sure. The light in Adam's room was terrible and her eyes stung. She slapped his leg, almost knocking one of his hands into his lap.

“You like how I used ‘myriad’ in a sentence, huh?” It was a game they used to play, dropping little-used words into their conversations to try to get a laugh out of the other. A twitching lip wasn’t exactly evidence of high hilarity, but Phoebe chose to take it as a positive sign.

“Then there was the year Margi threw her haunted house party,” she said, her voice trailing off as she thought of the other Haunted House, the one where Adam died.

They had been having a party, Phoebe and her friends—the zombies who “lived” there. Karen had hung streamers and a disco ball. The zombies had been dancing and laughing and having fun, able to forget, at least for a little while, that they were dead.

Tommy asked Phoebe if she wanted to take a walk, and she’d gone outside feeling happy, not only because her friends were enjoying themselves, but because she was with Tommy. Once they were alone in the woods he’d told her that the more loved a zombie was, the more alive they became. He’d been about to test his theory by kissing her, but his chance was ruined when Pete Martinsburg and his henchman, TC Stavis, came crashing through the brush. It turns out they hadn’t been alone after all.

Adam looked up at her as though he could sense what she was thinking. His mouth opened and he struggled to speak, a guttural vibration humming up from his throat.

He usually *could* tell what she was thinking, like they really did have the “telepathetic” bond that she had always joked about. Maybe that was why he‘d suddenly appeared that night in the woods, as Pete had taken slow and careful aim at the

center of her forehead. Pete had sworn to destroy Tommy, but when he’d raised his rifle, it was her that he’d aimed at. When he’d pulled the trigger, Adam was there. Being there for her had cost him his life.

“Ev . . . ry,” Adam said, his low, croaking, and dead voice filling his bedroom and calling her back to the present. Phoebe could count the number of words he had managed to say in the two weeks since his return—literally count them—because each night she’d gone home and inscribed them in her journal.

She watched him try to open and close his mouth for the next two minutes before completing his thought for him.

“That’s right, Adam,” she said, her voice soft. “Every day is like Halloween now.”

She took his hand in both of hers and helped him off the bed and onto his feet.

Tommy never got his kiss. Had she been about to kiss him? Among the many things that were unclear in Phoebe's mind, that was chief among them. She'd been attracted to him, but she'd also been worried that he was using her, that it wasn't her, Phoebe, that he'd wanted to kiss, but a living girl. Any living girl.

Even so—what could a little kiss have hurt?

She'd never know, not with Tommy, at least. She'd avoided him since that terrible night, when he'd just stood there like a graveyard statue while Pete Martinsburg leveled his gun at her head. Maybe she would find out with Adam. Holding him as his life drained away, she'd realized what she'd always known in her heart. That Adam Layman loved her, loved her so deeply and selflessly that he was willing to give his life for her, even when, to all outside appearances, she'd chosen another over him.

And she'd realized that she'd loved Adam all along, but she hadn't been *in love* with him. She'd always thought of him as a big brother, someone who was solid and dependable, someone in whom she could confide her deepest thoughts and secrets. Margi was always telling her that it was obvious to everyone in the world *except* her that one day she and Adam would be together. She herself couldn't understand how she'd been able to overlook their connection for so long.

And now?

Adam loved her. He did. And she'd promised herself that she'd do everything she could to bring him back.

She led him to a seat in the kitchen and started getting things ready for dinner. Phoebe didn't know what she could do to hasten Adam's "return," but she did what she could to keep the Garrity household running as smoothly as possible as each member dealt with their grief.

She cooked spaghetti for Adam's stepdad, Joe, and Adam's other stepbrother, Johnny, when they came home from the garage reeking of cigarettes, sweat, and crankcase oil. Unlike Jimmy, the remaining Garritys were kinder to Adam in death than they had been in life.

Mr. Garrity, Adam's stepdad, who he used to call the STD for short, surprised everyone by the way he'd responded to Adam's death and return. Prior to Adam's death, Joe had treated him with all the affection one reserved for the proverbial redheaded stepchild, seeing him as an inconvenient interloper in a house already cramped with two other teenage male bodies. It was as if Joe did not want to spare the extra percentage of his wife's love. The STD exhibited a complete change of heart after Adam's death, which seemed to galvanize him into a frenzy of parental

activity and responsibility. He drank less. He insulted less. He threw reporters off his front lawn, then pursued them in one of the many rusted hulks clustered in and around his driveway, literally chasing them out of the neighborhood.

He began to refer to Adam as “my son” instead of “my wife’s moron kid.” Adam did not appear to mind Joe’s new name for him, but Phoebe wasn’t sure if it was because it was something he’d longed for, or because it was too much effort to correct him. Confusing as his epiphany was, Joe’s new ’tude was refreshing in an age where many biological parents refused to let their undead youths return home.

“Where’s Mary?” Joe asked, a line of sauce trickling from the corner of his mouth like stage blood. He’d gotten so used to Phoebe’s presence that the whereabouts of his wife were no longer the first thing on his mind when he got home.

“Grocery shopping.” Phoebe refilled Johnny’s soda on her way to get herself some spaghetti.

Joe’s tanned and weathered face crinkled around the eyes, his fork halfway to his lips, and Phoebe was aware of his scrutiny.

“You’re a good girl, Phoebe,” he said. “I can’t tell you how much we all appreciate what you’re doing for my son. He does too.”

There it was again. Joe called him “son.” Phoebe turned back to the stove and dug her lime green fingernails into her palm until the pain allowed her to push her emotions back down. She couldn’t believe this was the same man who used to belittle Adam and push him around.

After dinner, Johnny and Joe lumbered off to watch TV. Phoebe helped Adam down the hall to the kitchen, sitting him where he could see the costumes of any trick-or-treaters. Little kids in costumes could cheer just about anyone up, and if Phoebe’s attention couldn’t bring Adam further into the world of the living, then maybe candy-snatching children could.

A handful came: a Disney princess, a pirate, a lion in a stroller who giggled without cease when Phoebe dropped
a Krackle inside the grinning orange sphere on her lap.

Adam was far enough away that he was hard to see in the dim light of the kitchen, but there was a pint-size vampire who spotted him when Phoebe turned back from the door to get her bag of candy.

“That a dead guy?” he said through the screen door, nearly tripping on his cape as he pointed at Adam with chocolatey
fingers.

Phoebe considered her response, wondering where the little boy's parents were. She didn't think that anyone let their kids out without a phalanx of parental guardians swarming around them.

"That's Adam," she explained, opening the door and dropping a couple of Special Darks into his pillowcase.

"Hey, Adam," the kid yelled. The little vampire turned back to her. "He's dead. Like me!"

Then he leaped down the steps, cape flapping behind him.

She looked back at Adam and again she saw the lip twitch, which lightened her heart. The doorbell announced a new group of trick-or-treaters.

Phoebe opened the door, and was startled to see three teenage boys in horrific zombie costumes. Except they weren't wearing costumes.

"Trick . . . or . . . treat," the closest said, a strange mirthless grin on one side of his face.

"Takayuki," she said, taken aback but still reaching automatically for the bag of candy. Takayuki had always gone out of his way to make her feel uncomfortable, and she hadn't seen him since Adam's death. "How have you been?" Her voice broke, betraying her nervousness.

"Dead." The comment put a mirthful, malevolent glint in the dull eyes of his companions. One of them was Tayshawn, who had dropped out of their Undead Studies class, but Phoebe didn't recognize the other two. Zombies were always showing up at the Haunted House, attracted mostly by the writing on Tommy's blog, mysocalledundeath.com. Phoebe hadn't been back to the house since Adam died.

The boy next to Takayuki was wearing a long silver earring and sunglasses with dark lenses. His shaved head gleamed like a second moon in the porch light. When he smiled, he revealed teeth that had been sharpened into rough points. He was wearing a leather jacket similar to Tak's, but the cuffs were stained and spattered with red, as were the tips of the fingers on his bone white hand. There was a very tall fourth boy lurking behind them, his face cast in shadow.

Phoebe reached into the bag and withdrew a few pieces of candy. Tak was the person who had "avenged" Adam, but his presence generated no warmth in her. Whatever it was that drove him to hunt Pete down, his motives were unlikely to have had anything to do with her, Adam, or any of the other "beating hearts" that Takayuki disdained.

"Where are your Halloween bags?" she asked, holding the candy in front of her, feeling foolish. The dead had no use for chocolate. They had no use for her either.

Tak looked over his shoulder. “George,” he said, “come trick . . . or-treat from the nice . . . soft . . . beating heart.”

Tak and the other boys moved aside so George could ascend the steps. The boy wore a tattered brown jacket, jeans with shredded cuffs, and a soiled T-shirt with holes big enough for Phoebe to see where patches of flesh were missing from his rib cage. He looked at her as he limped up the stairs with a big plastic trick-or-treat bag that had a garish jack-o’-lantern blazing beneath a green and warty witch. The boy was not a pretty sight. He was missing an ear and half his nose, and his hair looked as if it had been washed with sewage. He *smelled* as if *he’d* been washed with sewage.

But the scariest part of him was his eyes. They were like no other zombie eyes she’d ever seen. No matter how flat or glassy the eyes of the differently biotic were, there was always at least a glimmer of intelligence within. Not so with George. There was nothing in his eyes. Nothing at all.

Holding her breath, she forced herself to hold his non-stare. Some of my best friends are dead, she told herself. This boy may be more dead in appearance, but he’s no less a person than they are.

He looked at her, or looked through her, she couldn’t tell, and opened his bag. She dropped in a piece of candy, but the noise that it made when it landed was not the familiar paper on paper sound wrapped candy made. She glimpsed inside the bag and saw a round wet lump of red and gray fur, and a curling tail.

She shrieked, jumping back.

The dead pretended to laugh. “Can Adam . . . come out . . . and play?” Takayuki asked.

Her heart was beating wildly as she looked over her shoulder to where Adam sat with his back to the wall. He looked like he was trying, but failing, to speak.

“No,” she stuttered. “We’re spending the night at home, thank you.”

Takayuki cracked his knuckles, making sure she could see the ones that were no longer covered with skin.

“Someday,” he said, “he will . . . want . . . to be with . . . his own kind.”

“He is,” she said, regaining her composure. Tak was just another bully, and she was sick of bullies. “I’m his kind.”

“Sure,” Tak said as he and his companions began to fade into the night. “Happy . . . Halloween.”