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NEAL SHUSTERMAN



SIMON AND SCHUSTER

For Christine

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and incidents are either a product of the author's imagination or are used
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or locales is entirely coincidental.

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A "Read Me" from Mary Hightower

Hello, and welcome to Everlost. For new arrivals, I am happy to provide a comprehensive list of everterms and definitions that may help you in your postmortal journey. Naturally I've included my own personal opinions as well, for what list would be complete without the wisdom of someone who knows? Thank you, and I look forward to meeting you very, very soon.

Yours most truly,

Mary Hightower

afterglow: This is the gentle light that all spirits in Everlost generate. Of course some shine more brightly than others.

Afterlight: All residents of Everlost are properly referred to as "Afterlights." To call us ghosts is insulting.

chime: To hang one's captives upside down by their ankles from long ropes, allowing them to swing free. As it is impossible to feel physical pain in Everlost, certain evil entities,

such as the McGill will chime their prisoners in an attempt to induce long-term boredom.

chiming chamber: A place where such unfortunate afterlights are chimed.

deadspot: This is a small patch of ground that has crossed from the living world into Everlost. In most cases these spots are just a few feet wide, and mark the place where someone has died; however, in certain instances deadspots can include larger areas.

dominant reality: When a building is destroyed, and crosses into Everlost, and a new structure is built in the living world to take its place, which of those buildings is more real? To us in Everlost, the older, "crossed" building is the one we see. Therefore, it is my opinion that Everlost is more real. You can read more about this in my upcoming book *The Living World and Other Myths, as Told by Mary Hightower*.

ecto-ripping: One of the criminal arts, as I like to call them. "Ecto-ripping" or "ripping" is the ability to reach into the living world, and rip things out of it, and into Everlost. Avoid ecto-rippers at all costs. Any ecto-ripper sighting should be reported to an authority.

evercookies: Certain individuals (whose names I shall not mention) claim that all Chinese fortune cookies cross into Everlost, and if that's not enough, they also insist that every

fortune in Everlost is true. I say that these are lies, lies, lies. I advise you to stay away from fortune cookies as if they carry the plague.

eversight: We Afterlights can see the living world, but it looks blurry and out of focus to us. Even the colors of the living world are subdued. Only the things and places that have crossed into Everlost appear bright, solid, and clear to us. Such is the nature of eversight.

everslugs: You may have discovered a time-worn coin in your pocket when you awoke in Everlost. Throw it away. It's worthless.

The Everwild: The unexplored, uncharted, and mostly dangerous regions of Everlost.

fleshie: A skinjacker slang term for a living, breathing human being.

gravity fatigue: Afterlights are not immune to the force of gravity—it pulls down on us just as it does to the living. Unfortunately, since we sink in the living world, there is always a clear and present danger that we might sink all the way to the center of the earth if we don't keep moving when on living ground. Once one sinks over one's head into the ground, there is usually no hope that that person will ever pull himself back to the surface. We call this gravity fatigue.

Interlights: After crossing into Everlost, Afterlights sleep for nine months before awaking in Everlost. During that hibernation period, they are properly referred to as Interlights.

peel out: When a skinjacker pulls out of a fleshie, it is sometimes referred to as "peeling out."

skinjacking: Another criminal art—perhaps the most useful—if any of the criminal arts can be called useful. Skinjacking is the ability to "possess" a living person, by leaping inside of that person, and taking control of, him or her.

vapor: This is the proper way to refer to a gathering of Afterlights. A flock of birds, a gaggle of geese, and a vapor of Afterlights.

PART ONE

A Vapor of Afterlights

CHAPTER 1

Fresh Havoc

There were rumors.

Of terrible things, of wonderful things, of events too immense to keep to oneself, and so they were quietly shared from soul to soul, one Afterlight to another, until every Afterlight in Everlost had heard them.

There was the rumor of a beautiful sky witch, who soared across the heavens in a great silver balloon. And there were whispers of a terrible ogre made entirely of chocolate, who lured unsuspecting souls with that rich promising smell, only to cast them down a bottomless pit from which there was no return.

In a world where memories bleach clean from the fabric of time, rumors become more important than that which is actually known. They are the life's blood of the bloodless world that lies between life and death.

On a day much like any other in Everlost, one boy was about to find out if those rumors were true.

His name is unimportant—so unimportant that he himself had forgotten it—and less important still, because in a brief time he will be gone forever.

He had died about two years earlier, and, having lost his way to the light, he slept for nine months, then had woken up in Everlost. The boy was a wanderer, solitary and silent, hiding from others who crossed his path, for fear of what they might do to him. Without camaraderie and friendship to remind him who he was, he forgot his identity more quickly than most.

On the occasions that he did come across packs of other Afterlight kids, he would listen to them from his hiding spot as they shared with each other the rumors of monsters, so he knew as well as any other Afterlight what lay in store for the unwary.

When the boy had first crossed into Everlost, his wanderings had a purpose. He had begun in search of answers, but now he had even forgotten the questions. All that remained was an urge to keep moving, resting only when he came across a deadspot—a solid, bright patch of earth that had, like him, crossed into Everlost. He had learned very quickly that deadspots were unlike the faded, unfocused world of the living, where every footfall pulled you ankle-deep, and threatened to take you all the way down to the center of the earth if you stood still for too long.

On this day, his wanderings had brought him to a field full of deadspots—he had never seen so many in one place . . . but what really caught his attention was the bucket of popcorn. It just sat there on a deadspot, beside a huge Everlost tree, like it had no better place to be.

Somehow, the popcorn had crossed over!

The dead boy had not had the luxury of food since

arriving in Everlost—and just because he didn't need to eat anymore, it didn't mean the cravings ended—so how could he resist that popcorn? It was the largest size, too—the kind you order with big eyes in the movie theater, but can never finish. Even now the corn inside glistened with butter. It seemed too good to be true!

Turns out, it was.

As he stepped onto the deadspot and reached for the tub, he felt a trip wire against his ankle, and in an instant a net pulled up around him, lifting him off the ground. Only after he was fully snared within the net did he realize his mistake.

He had heard of the monster that called itself the McGill, and his soul traps—but he had also heard that the McGill had traveled far away, and was now wreaking fresh havoc across the Atlantic Ocean. So then, who had set this trap? And why?

He struggled to free himself, but it was no use—his only consolation was that the bucket of popcorn was trapped in the net with him, and although half of its contents had spilled onto the ground, half still remained. He savored every single kernel, and when he was done, he waited, and he waited. Day became night, became day over and over, until he lost track of time, and he began to fear that his eternity would be spent strung up in this net. . . . Until he finally heard a faint droning sound—some sort of engine approaching from the north. The sound was echoed from the south—but then, as both sounds grew louder, he realized it wasn't an echo at all. The sounds were different. He was being approached on two sides.

Were these other Afterlights coming for him, or were they monsters? Would he be freed, or would he become the victim of fresh havoc himself? The faint memory of a heart pounded in his ghostly chest, and as the whine of engines grew louder, he waited to see who would reach him first.