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Kami Garcia

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CHAPTER 1

Sleepwalker

As my bare feet sank into the wet earth, I tried not to think about the dead bodies buried beneath me. I had passed this tiny graveyard a handful of times but never at night, and always behind the boundaries of its peeling iron gates.

I would've given anything to be standing outside them now.

In the moonlight, uneven rows of weathered headstones reached into the shadows, a reminder that this neat stretch of lawn was actually the grassy lid of an enormous coffin.

A branch snapped, and I spun around.

"Elvis?" I searched for a trace of my cat's gray and white ringed tail.

Elvis never left the house. Until tonight. He took off the moment the door opened, and I had chased him six blocks until I ended up here.

I heard the sound of muffled voices and I froze, listening.

A girl passed under the pale glow of the lamppost in her gray and blue Georgetown University sweats. Her friends caught up, laughing and stumbling down the sidewalk on the other side of the gates, until they reached one of the academic buildings and disappeared inside.

It was easy to forget the cemetery was in the middle of a college campus, especially when I walked deeper into the rows and the lampposts vanished behind the trees. The air felt heavier here, as if it was bearing more than the weight of the darkness.

Something moved in my peripheral vision—a flash of white

I ignored the whispers in the back of my mind urging me to go home. Instead, I scanned the sea of headstones, now completely bathed in black.

Come on, Elvis Where are you?

Nothing scared me more than the dark. I liked to see what was coming, and darkness was a place where things could hide.

Think about something else.

My heart pounded, and the memory closed in before I could stop it. . . .

My mother's face hovering above mine as I blinked myself awake. The panic in her eyes as she pressed a finger over her lips signaling me to be quiet. The floor cold against my feet as we made our way to her closet, where she pushed aside the dresses to reveal a notch in the wood.

"Someone's in the house," she whispered, pulling open a small door. "Stay here until I come back. Don't make a sound."

I squeezed inside as she slid the board back into place, and the world disappeared. It was utterly dark in a way I had never experienced before. I stared at a spot just inches in front of me, where my palm rested on the door. But I couldn't see it.

I closed my eyes against the blackness. There were sounds—the stairs creaking, furniture scraping the floor, muffled voices—and one thought replaying over and over in my mind.

What if she didn't come back?

Too terrified to see if I could get out from the inside, I kept my hand on the door and listened to my ragged breathing, convinced that whoever was in our house could hear it, too.

I don't know how long I waited, but eventually the wood gave beneath my palm and a thin stream of light flooded the tiny space. My mom reached for me, promising the intruders had fled.

As she carried me out of her closet, I couldn't hear anything beyond the pounding of my heart, and I couldn't think about anything except the crushing weight of the dark.

I was only five when it happened, but still I remembered every minute of that night. It made the air around me now feel suffocating, and part of me wanted to leave my cat to fend for himself.

"Elvis, get out here now or find your own way home."

Something shifted between the chipped headstones in front of me.

"Elvis?"

A silhouette emerged from behind a stone cross.

I jumped, a tiny gasp escaping my lips. "Sorry," I stammered. "I—I'm looking for my cat."

The stranger didn't say a word.

Sounds intensified at a dizzying rate—leaves rustling, my pulse throbbing. A scream caught in my throat.

All I could think about were the hundreds of episodes of "Unsolved Mysteries" I had watched with my mom that started out exactly like this—a girl standing alone somewhere she shouldn't be, staring at the guy who was about to attack her.

I stepped back, thick mud pushing up around my ankles like a hand rooting me to the spot.

Please don't hurt me.

The wind cut through the graveyard, lifting tangles of long hair off the stranger's shoulders and the thin fabric of a white dress from her legs.

It was a girl.

I let out a long breath, relieved. "Have you seen a gray and white Siamese cat? I'm going to kill him when I find him."

Silence.

The girl's dress caught the moonlight, and I realized it wasn't a dress at all. She was wearing a nightgown. Who wandered around a cemetery in their nightgown?

Someone crazy.

Or someone sleepwalking.

You aren't supposed to wake a sleepwalker, but I couldn't leave her out here alone at night either.

"Hey? Can you hear me?"

The girl remained stock-still, gazing at me as though she could see my features perfectly through the darkness. An empty feeling unfolded in the pit of my stomach. I wanted to look something else—anything but her unnerving stare. My eyes drifted down to the base of the cross.

Her feet were as bare as mine. But they looked like they weren't touching the ground.

I blinked hard, unwilling to consider the other possibility. It had to be an effect from the moonlight and shadows. I glanced at my own feet, caked in mud, then back to hers.

They were pale and spotless.

A flash of white fur darted in front of her and rushed toward me.

Elvis.

I grabbed him before he could get away again. Elvis' ears flattening against his head. He hissed, clawing at my arms and twisting violently. I dropped him, my heart thudding in my chest as he darted across the grass and squeezed under the gate.

I looked back at the stone cross where the girl stood a moment ago. She was gone, the ground below nothing but a smooth untouched layer of mud.

The scratches on my arms stung as I walked across the graveyard, trying to reason away the girl in the white nightgown. Silently reminding myself that I didn’t believe in ghosts. But as the mud squished between my toes and the trail of footprints behind me grew with every step, I wasn’t so sure.