

Chapter One

Memories

A small office bathroom wasn't any sort of place someone would expect a life-changing encounter to take place -- it was too cold, too dark, too private.

Privacy was exactly what David needed. He was glad to close his eyes and clear his mind, leaning his head against the blessedly cool checkerboard of tiny blue and black tiles for a long moment. He wanted to rid himself of all of the unwanted memories that had been plaguing him again like old, unforgotten ghosts. Those thoughts were never really far away, but today had been especially bad. The memories seemed to grow and overwhelm him, tightening in his stomach like a blackened, rotten knot as his skin went cold from the tips of his fingers to the roots of his black hair.

It was only when he started shivering that he realized something had changed: the air around him had gone cold. He could see his breath in front of him and the tile wall was covered in perfect tiny bubbles of perspiration. David felt a chill crawl up his back as he shuddered, turning around and stepping away from the wall. The light above him was pale and pitiful, and the floor was slippery under the soles of his shoes. He cursed, sliding along the floor over to the heavy door. Its handle was slick and wet in his hand, but no matter how hard he pulled it refused to budge: the smooth, white door was so unyielding that it might as well have turned to stone. He beat against it, yelling and calling out for help from anyone who might hear him; he tugged against that handle until his shoulder ached and his fingers were numb and his hands stung from the cold, but it was useless.

There was a sudden flash as the fluorescent bulbs flared bright for just a short moment before they shattered, shooting sparks down onto the cold floor. A loud *crack* sounded in the dark room as the emergency light popped on. A curtain of white frost spread quickly across and down the back wall, across the floor, around the sides and past the periphery of his vision. He spun around and watched it continue towards the twin mirrors hanging on the wall; a thin layer of ice and delicate frozen crystals crept along the glass until it was covered in a pure, white glaze.

David staggered over to the mirrors as he hugged himself tight, teeth chattering together. There was no breeze, but the air itself seemed to hum like it was alive, and the floor cracked

underneath him as the thin layer of ice buckled and broke under his weight. With wide eyes, he watched as his reflection disappeared before something appeared *behind* the glass, like a butterfly behind a silk screen. As he watched, mesmerized, unable to whisper or cry out, the silhouette of a pale-skinned hand began to move, and a single finger wrote a crude message for him to read -- first in one frostbitten mirror, and then the other:

COME
BACK

TO
NEVER-END

David clasped his hands tight on the cold, hard edges of the porcelain sink under that second mirror. He reached up, swiping his fingers back and forth near the top edge to try and peer through the frosted glass, as if to prove that moment was more than just his imagination playing yet another trick on him.

The room beyond the mirror was too faint to see clearly, but he could make out a figure, one so close that he wanted to reach through that pane of glass and grab hold of her. She was wreathed in shadow, but he could make out the feminine features of her face, with two pale, shining eyes like polished silver that stared back at him.

As soon as he saw those eyes, he was overwhelmed by the memories that came flooding back to him. *Aya*. That was her name -- *Aya*, short for *Ayrlin*; a childhood friend, a playmate from what felt like a lifetime ago. The years had changed them both, and in one instant he could see all the agony, pain and sorrow etched into her otherwise youthful features. A look of pleading was in those eyes, a look of desperate hope and a thousand other things David couldn't put a name to. One thing was evident: she needed him, and was making one last cry for help.

She turned to one side, and he thought he could see fear and surprise before she darted away. "No! Wait, come back!" David yelled as a flash of light on the other side of the glass blinded him. Before he turned away, unable to stop himself, he heard some kind of small explosion or another cracking sound, and then a large shadow with several long, cruel legs and a monstrous body shot across his field of vision and disappeared.

Sparks danced in his eyes while his head throbbed like a kettledrum. David turned back to the mirror in the hopes of seeing something more, anything more, but his reflection had returned. There were only the lonely letters and the ice that was already beginning to melt. "No,

no, don't go! Aya, come back!" He cried out in vain, balling up his fist to pound against the cold glass as if that was enough to make the silver-eyed woman reappear.

The emergency light at the back of the room began to grow steadily brighter and brighter. There was another loud crack reminiscent of a pistol shot, and both the light and the mirrors shattered into a thousand ragged shards that fell to the floor, pouring down like frozen raindrops. He turned his head down, lifting his arm to shield his face as he watched the remnants of that mysterious message vanish to the floor. The ice that coated the walls from floor to ceiling began to give way; large pieces fell to the floor where they broke apart and covered the slippery tiles in a half-melted, watery mush. A thin sliver of sunshine at the edges of the bathroom door showed that whatever power or lock had barred it shut was gone.

He was free, but that didn't matter, not once he'd seen that message in the mirrors in front of him. No one still alive knew about Neverend; he was sure of that. No one besides his mother had ever known about it. Neverend had been her invention just as much as it had been his own: a place of imagination that they'd spun together when he was a boy. What had started as a simple story had become much more, something that no one would have ever believed. Of all the memories, Neverend held some of the darkest and most unwelcome memories -- nothing could make him want to think of *them*. He'd tried to leave those memories behind -- tried, and ultimately failed.

Outside the bathroom, rays of sunshine came through the narrow windows that lined the office hallway; the bright heat of midday was as hot and stifling as the Georgia summers he'd known growing up. His desk was only a short walk from the bathroom across a stretch of bland, mismatched carpet squares of black, red and beige that looked like a child's art project gone wrong.

The sunlight was so bright that David was sure that he was going to go blind. His vision was stymied so he rubbed his eyes for a moment. From across the room, David realized that his desk phone was ringing; he walked up to it, staring for a moment in confusion. He never got calls at work. He rarely got any personal calls at home, either, but someone trying to call him during the day was unheard of. He was tempted to ignore it, and very nearly did, if not for a nagging sense of curiosity that wouldn't leave him alone until he picked up the receiver and raised it to his ear.

“... H-hello?” There was a woman’s voice on the other end of the line, a young and halting tone, as if she had expected someone to answer or speak first when the line was connected. “Hello? I’m looking for David Samuelson.”

An unpleasant chill crept down his neck at the name, and he could hear it slither out his throat in a hostile, unfriendly tone. “I’m sorry. I think you have the wrong--”

“Sorry! Sorry,” the voice apologized, “I mean David *Inari* -- I need to speak with David Inari... This *is* David, isn't it?”

David nodded before realizing that the person on the other end of the phone couldn't actually see him. “Yes, it is.”

“David?” The speaker made it a question again, almost as if she didn't truly believe him. “It's Sara -- Sara Samuelson. Your sister,” she added. “H-how are you?” David knew that he shouldn't feel so callous towards her, but old habits were hard to break. It wasn't anything that Sara had done; it was who she was, whom she was related to, and all of the emotional baggage that came with that knowledge.

“David? A-are you there?”

“Yes, I'm here.” There. That was polite, at least.

“It's ... it's about Dad. Didn't you ... didn't you hear what happened?”

“No, I didn't. We haven't spoken in a long time.” *Since after my mother died* was the unspoken end of that sentence, something he left off purposefully. Of course, that was just as true of a statement about Sara -- the Samuelson family wasn't exactly the sort for Christmas dinners and family reunions. Not as far as David was concerned, anyway.

“It was an accident. It happened ... it was just this week. He was driving home from his office, and--” The young woman's voice broke for a moment, followed by sounds of sorrow and unsteady breathing. Sara was younger than David by a good ten years, and he could tell that she was rushing through her words, as if saying them any faster would bypass the pain of speaking them aloud. It didn't work that way, but he couldn't criticize her for trying, either. “There was nothing anyone could do. The fu--... funeral's this weekend, and we were wondering if you ... that is, *I* was wondering if you were going to ... to attend, or not.”

David had no interest or desire to attend his father's funeral. Their fights and arguments had nearly come to blows more than once, and David didn't care to put on a fake smile and say nice things about a man he'd come to hate. On the other hand, it was obvious that Sara was quite

upset, and whatever David's thoughts were about his father, it somehow just didn't seem right to turn her down flat or even hang up the phone on her. Flustered, he glared at the blank wall in front of him, wondering how he could let her down gently.

“David?” Sara's voice was very quiet, as if she suspected he'd already hung up on her.

“I'll ... have to think about it,” he said. One voice screamed in his head to hang up in disgust while another wanted him to apologize for his earlier rudeness. “We weren't exactly close, Sara. No one would expect me to come to his funeral anyway.”

“Maybe not,” she said, following it with several sniffs as she tried to recompose herself. “Actually, that isn't the only reason for my phone call.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. Daddy mentioned last year that he'd made some changes to his will, and I thought it was better that I tell you about it than for you just to get some phone call or letter in the mail.”

“About what?” David didn't want anything from the old man, but he wasn't going to turn down whatever it was without hearing about it first. Besides, it was only hearsay so far -- it didn't mean anything.

“Well, it's about his house near here, the one you grew up in.”

“You mean Whiterose Manor -- my mother's house.” David didn't have to tack that last part on, but he did it anyway. Whiterose would always be his mother's house.

“Right. No one's lived there since ... since everything that happened before -- with your mother, I mean -- and Dad was hoping that you'd be willing to come back and take care of it, or at least take care of selling it. I don't know all the details, but I just thought you should know.”

It was like another pistol shot rang out. David nearly dropped the phone from shock as that message flashed again before his eyes: *Come back to Neverend*.

Now it was his turn to stutter. “I ... I don't know anything about selling a house, Sara.” As soon as David said it, he twisted up his face in consternation. What kind of excuse was *that*?

“Then keep it and do what you want with it. Burn it to the ground if you want to. Nothing's official until after probate anyways.” He could hear the irritation in her voice. “I know you two never got along after what happened, but I also know he always regretted the way things fell out between the both of you.”

Immediately David felt old defenses and instincts lock back into place. “Sure he did. Look, I'll think it over. Right now I need to get back to work.”

“Alright. Thanks.”

“Thanks for calling.”

He felt numb as he carefully returned the phone to its cradle. After the encounter in the bathroom, he couldn't write off the phone call with Sara as mere coincidence. He'd been fighting against himself, against the thoughts, the *remembering*, for almost two decades. He knew it was better just to stow them away for as long as he could until they inevitably escaped again, bringing back remembrances of his mother wasting away day after day.

It'd been nearly twenty years since his mother had left him, unable to fight on any longer against the cancer that slowly ate away at her day after day. For David, just ten years old and still so full of life and the imagination she'd inspired inside of him, her death had seemed so sudden and unexpected, but for her it was a very long, painful process of tests and medication, of hoping and waiting, always followed by the bitter taste of sorrow and disappointment before the cycle started over again. David knew his resentment and frustration was useless, even childish, but something in him refused to let go the emotions that had overwhelmed him after her death.

It was obvious to everyone but young David that his mother was fading fast. The day it all changed was as vivid and clear in his mind now as it had been so many years ago -- the sun was shining, and the Alba rose bushes his mother had planted years before were still blooming, covered in spiraled white roses which almost never appeared so late in the year. Once inside, the house was even more silent than usual -- a hush had fallen over Whiterose; his sneakers sounded almost unbearably loud on the hard wooden floors.

When he went to visit his mother as he did every day after getting home ... she wasn't there. No one needed to take him aside and explain to him where she'd gone; he already knew, and it was the *knowing* that broke him even more than if someone had told him the awful truth. His father found him weeping bitterly with his fingers clenched tight in the comforter that still bore his mother's scent. The days afterward were fleeting and vague, just as the events of the day itself had been seared into his memory.

No one asked the boy if he wanted to attend his mother's funeral. Either out of sorrow, pity or mistaken good intentions, David was sent to the home of a family friend to dwell on his own grief in silence. David wasn't sure if he would have wanted to go, but the memory of his dismissal was still bitter, as the best intentions of others had stolen any chance for him to have any of the “closure” he might have needed.

That had been the first schism between father and son. Others had come later -- one of them so strong that he would even forsake his own father's last name -- but that first betrayal in David's eyes remained the greatest.

Now, David's father was dead, and Whiterose Manor -- his mother's house -- was waiting for him. Neverend was waiting for him. David knew he had to go back, of course, and he hated knowing it. Even so, staring at an empty wall wasn't going to solve anything. First, he'd have to explain a few things to his boss -- not the least of which was how he'd someone managed to flood the entire Men's Room.