

# DEATH PERCEPTION

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## Chapter 1

Kennet peered through the observation port on the door of the crematory oven. There were no more flames, nothing recognizably human in the mound of ashes inside. *Singleton, you sure know how to bake 'em.* He checked the thermometer's digital readout on the instrument panel: 738 degrees. *Cool enough,* he thought. Time to open the door.

Kennet had started working part-time as the crematory operator at Grinold's Funeral Home the summer after his freshman year in high school. More than a bit preoccupied with death in his youth, he decided to satisfy his curiosity about the position advertised in the McKeesport *Daily News*. He interviewed and, fascinated with the process, took the job when it was offered.

While he was still in school, the kids called him "Doctor Death." After all, he was the only student who cremated corpses on the work-study program. But he didn't care what they thought about his job. He knew he was good at it because he'd held the position longer than any of his predecessors, all grown men. Maybe they disliked part-time work or couldn't hack handling the dead. He didn't mind.

The procedure was routine. He always knew what to expect: pre-heat the oven, slide in the body, bake for two and a half hours, cool for an hour, sweep out and process the remains, and then funnel the ashes into an urn.

Like baking a cake. Almost.

Being a creamer suited him because the dead didn't talk back and therefore couldn't order him around. He'd had enough of that from his father growing up, and more than enough from Mr. Grinold, the funeral director.

The job didn't require time or worry during his off hours. After this cremation, he could forget about it and go home. Not a home like most people had, but a prison—for old people, invalids, and the mentally deficient.

Good job, bad home.

For the past three years, he and his mother had lived in Costa's Personal Care Home, she in a regular room like the other residents, he in cramped quarters hardly bigger than a closet. Ms. Costa, the proprietor, cleared the space for him as a favor to his mother, to keep them together until he graduated high school. That landmark event had come and gone, but there he was, still.

He'd dreamed about being on his own since his sophomore year. *Gonna find an apartment with a living area, a kitchenette, and my own bathroom.* And every time he wished this, he sounded like the big lummoX Lennie in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. "Tell me about the rabbits, George. . . ."

At the side of the oven, Kennet penciled the time onto the circular graph that recorded the temperature history for each cremation. He replaced the iron tray underneath the crematory with the stainless steel one used to catch the cremains for processing. It clanged as he seated it in place.

That's what he wanted, a place of his own. Although he loved the elderly folks he lived with, he preferred to be alone, and anything would be better than sharing the bathroom with five old people who crapped on the toilet seat and left gray pubes in the tub. He'd taken all he could stand of the depressing odors of age with its accidents and the solvents used to clean them up. The smell of bleach always reminded him of his mother cleaning up after his father,

who'd often broken things or gotten sick on the floor or down the side of the commode, if he made it that far.

Kennet wasn't sure what he wanted to do with his life. He was no scholar, so college was out. He didn't want to burn bodies forever, but his choices were limited. If he moved, it would be tough getting to work. Since he didn't drive, he needed to find a place near the funeral home. Even if he knew how to drive, he had no car. Young men who lived in the converted broom closets of personal care homes with their invalid mothers didn't have their own cars.

*Lame*, he thought for the thousandth time. *Very lame*.

He pulled on his white work coat, donned the plastic face shield to protect his eyelashes and eyebrows from being singed, and then tugged on the heavy thermal gloves. He thumbed the Open button on the instrument panel and the door slid up with a whine. The oven exhaled a ball of intense heat, forcing him to step back.

The orange and yellow flames and the glowing coals were long gone. All that remained of the evening's final cremation were an oblong mound of ashes and a few jagged bone fragments like the dying embers of a campfire.

Kennet glanced at the annex door into the funeral home and then at the big, round Westclox on the wall. 9:47 p.m. If Grinold didn't show up by 9:30, he didn't show up at all. Kennet was the last one on the premises, left to process the final cremains of the day, shut down, and lock up the annex. It was safe.

He tugged off the gloves and retrieved the metal skewer from behind the crematory. Then he fetched a plastic bag he kept buried in a box of black urn liners and undid the twist-tie. Marshmallows. Sweet, soft marshmallows, his favorite since childhood.

When his father was still alive and they all lived in the rental house, his mother cooked summer meals in the back-

yard over a campfire—hamburgers, mountain pies, and roast corn. When Sir finally trudged inside the house to get drunk and watch the tube, Kennet and Ma ended their evening by telling stories and toasting marshmallows over the dying embers. Those were some of his happiest memories. He figured if he had to deal with death daily, it should afford him some youthful delight, salvage what little joy he'd experienced as a kid.

Kennet impaled two of the powdery pillows and then thrust the skewer into the crematory, right over the ridge of ashes. In the shimmering heat, the puffs turned golden brown in a matter of seconds. He lifted the face shield, blew on the marshmallows, plucked the morsels from the skewer, and then stuffed them in his mouth. Savoring the caramel-carbon sweetness, he experienced what he always did after he opened the crematory door: his head swam and his vision blurred.

He sensed himself swirling up into a expanse of light, to a great hall lined with towering bookcases where secrets were filed on shelves he knew he could access if he stretched out a psychic hand. Yet he was afraid to reach. In this place, this realm, he stood very still, trembling and waiting.

The fact plunged into his spirit like a stone tossed into a pond. Not an image or a string of words, but a chunk of knowledge, as if an unseen hand had passed through the files, grasped one of the facts, and thrust it into the pool of his mind. Kennet imagined the hand was Sister Etta's, sharp and bony, but full of the power of God.

He always feared he wouldn't return from this place. Yet he descended from the library and found himself standing before the crematory. The vertigo and blurred vision subsided, and he was left as always with the uncanny sense of how the poor soul had died.

He rubbed a sharp pain from his neck. This time it was a fractured vertebra . . . in a fall or a car accident? He was never certain of the circumstances of a customer's death, but he always knew the cause. He felt keenly that this old man died from a broken neck.

This was only a game, a dark secret he indulged in, but when he was right—and so far he'd been right every time—it made him feel special. At least to himself.

Kennet had never told anyone about this trick or gift or ability, whatever it was. Who would believe him if he did? Well, his mother would believe him, but he wasn't about to add more fuel to her hyper-spiritual fire. If Mr. Grinold ever found out, he'd be mad as hell and probably fire his ass. Grinold put on a good show of sympathy for the customers, but his heart was cold as a tomb on a moonless winter night. Fortunately, the funeral director was already at home, kicking off his glossy Florsheims.

The familiar tension jangled Kennet's nerves, an unease that badgered him until he checked the death certificate. He hid the skewer and the marshmallows and from the work table picked up the envelope containing the paperwork, including the death certificate he hadn't yet looked at. He tore open the sealed flap. The form revealed the cause of death: "Fracture of the spine."

*Right again.* Kennet sighed in satisfaction and pulled the heavy gloves back on.

The door from the funeral home opened, and Cecil Grinold stepped into the annex. Kennet froze and stared at him.

Grinold was a pear-shaped, middle-aged man with slick, dark hair receding from a pale forehead. His mouth was a wide slit with frowning, liver-colored lips. With upturned face he sniffed the air, a puzzled look clouding his features.

Kennet prayed he wouldn't identify the smell of toasted marshmallows.

The puzzlement disappeared as quickly as it came. Grinold approached the crematory, chubby pink hands folded beneath his gut in his familiar gesture of Serene Comfort for the Bereaved.

Kennet reached for the long-handled hoe. "I was just about to rake out the ashes."

Grinold raised a hand and said, "I didn't come to reprimand you, Kennet." He dropped the hand. "Flavia Costa called. You must go home at once."

"But I'm not done processing the cremains."

"It's obvious you're not finished. But you must go home now." Grinold looked down his nose at him. "I'll sweep the oven and process the cremains—this time."

Kennet hesitated, realizing that the boss's offer to do his work indicated something dire. Then he leaned the hoe against the wall, yanked off the gloves, and fought his way out of the too-small lab coat. He wished he could as easily shed the intimidation he suffered in Mr. Grinold's presence.

"Did Ms. Costa say what she wants?"

Grinold hesitated for a moment and then said, "It's your mother."

Kennet felt as if he'd been punched in the gut. *Another call from Ma?* Whatever this was about, it was no good. He was about to ask Grinold more, but the funeral director was already donning his own work coat in the embalming area.

With a growing sense of foreboding, Kennet opened the back door of the annex and stepped into the chill of an overcast night.

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As he walked the quarter mile home, his fear gave way to agitation. Why was Ma pestering him? First the call that

morning, and now this. He held his annoyance at bay and tried to reason why she'd phoned a second time or, rather, had Ms. Costa call. Kennet hoped Ma hadn't taken a turn for the worse. He didn't want her to spend half the night in the emergency room again.

*Is she dying?* The possibility clawed at his heart, but he pushed it away. He preferred being peeved to dreading the worst. He continued down Smithfield Street, nauseated by the smell of the swollen river below. The marshmallows had turned to lead in his stomach, and he suddenly feared he might vomit.

*It's nothing*, he told himself. *Just more of her religious foolishness, that's all.*

Crunching gravel beneath his feet, Kennet jogged the dark lane to the side door of the care home. He took the three steps in one leap and entered the dimly lit kitchen that still stank of dinner's boiled cabbage. Everything was quiet, the residents having been put to bed by 9:30.

Flavia Costa swept in from the front hall. For a split second, Kennet pictured her in a black leather bustier and gartered stockings. But of course she wore only a red velour sweatsuit, something she put on after the residents were settled in bed. Her dark eyes were lined with blue-black mascara that matched her wavy hair. As she approached, she reached out her hands, small and manicured, in a sympathetic gesture. She embraced him with a sigh and stood back to dab her eyes with a tissue, although they weren't even wet.

Why was she hugging him? What had happened?

"I'm so sorry, Kennet."

"Sorry about what?"

She touched his forearm. "Didn't Mr. Grinold tell you?"

"Tell me *what?*"

“You poor dear.” She clasped his hands. “Your mother . . . her heart. She passed away just a little while ago.”

It was as if Flavia had taken down her big wooden rolling pin from the kitchen wall and struck him in the face. It couldn't be true. Ma had been sick before and always recovered.

“She can't be,” he said. “She was getting better. She, I . . .”

Ms. Costa shook her head.

He'd had no dreams about Ma, no visions. No warning at all. But he was unsettled ever since her stint in the hospital. And that feeling of suffocation he experienced at her bedside that afternoon. He'd thought nothing of it. Should he have?

For a moment, Kennet was convinced that when he went upstairs, his mother would be lying there, propped on pillows in her barred hospital bed like always, her misshapen hands worrying the bed sheet. He pulled away from Flavia and took the front steps by twos.

Under the wan bedside light, his mother lay motionless on the bed, her arthritic white hands folded atop the sheet. Her thin lips were bluish, parted as if she'd fought for her last breath. He slumped into her wheelchair beside the bed and gathered her frail hands. They were cool, and he knew she was dead, knew it was too late, knew he would always regret not standing up for her against his father. He began to weep.

The scar that snaked along the bridge of her nose was completely colorless now. Her eyelids were only half-closed, revealing the milky cataract in one eye. The blind eye. She had never blamed him for it. Yet he felt responsible and always yearned to make up for what happened that night twelve years ago. All his life he had depended on her, hid-

den behind her, trailed after her. He desperately needed to turn the tables and take responsibility not only for himself, but for her. Now it was too late.

He hugged her feeble form and said, "I'm sorry, Ma. Sorry. I'll make it up to you."

When he had cried himself out, Ms. Costa stepped in and drew him away from the body, whispering comforting words he failed to comprehend. Jack Dodds, one of the older men Grinold employed to transport bodies to the funeral home, followed her in. Jack briefly slipped an arm around him and murmured his condolences.

Kennet trudged downstairs to his claustrophobic room off the kitchen, threw himself on the bed, and listened to them carry his mother away.