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Opening extract from
Nemesis

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*THE SUN RISES. BUT NOT FOR ME.
I KNOW WHAT DAY IT IS.
WILL HE COME SOONER, OR LATER?
I DON'T KNOW, BUT IT DOESN'T MATTER.
HE'LL COME.
AND WHEN HE DOES, I'LL DIE.*

PROLOGUE

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 17, 2017

I swore to myself I wouldn't die that day.

Up and down.

Come at me, you bastard. Sweaty-palmed as I gripped a battered Louisville Slugger, eyes glued to my bedroom door.

He was already inside the trailer—early this time, as the first slanting rays of sunshine began peeking over the mountains. While Mom was still away at work. I'd heard the front stoop creak, and instantly knew who had come.

That I was trapped.

Right here. In my own home.

Another unpleasant first.

I wasn't scared. Not of him. Of this. That's just not how it worked anymore.

But my anger simmered near the edge of control.

A floorboard groaned.

I took a calming breath. Narrowed my focus to audible noises beyond the door, a flimsy piece of sliding metal that couldn't

stop a toddler. All that separated me from a monster who'd come to snatch my life away.

Silence stretched, then another muffled step. I tensed, prepping for battle.

There's no sneaking quietly across my crappy, not-so-mobile home, a fact I'd established many times during my sixteen years of life. I knew *exactly* where he was standing. How his weight was aligned. What the man was seeing as he peered across our shabby single-wide, eyes glued to the only other place I could be.

So why the delay?

I thought furiously, cycling through possibilities. Was he waiting me out? Could he possibly believe I didn't know he was there?

The first shot exploded through the door. High and left, but I panicked just the same.

A gun this time.

I dropped into a crouch, options rapidly dwindling.

The window.

I darted toward a grimy, dirt-streaked square of glass overlooking my single bed.

Too quick. I never sensed the trap.

The second bullet punched through the closet, slicing into my right shoulder and spinning me like a top. I gasped in pain. Fell against the bedside table.

The third shot tore into my chest.

My legs faltered. I tumbled to the floor, struggling to breathe, blood bubbling on my lips as I stared up at the drab fluorescent lights on the ceiling. Pain tinged everything red.

He'd been waiting for me to flee. I'd accommodated him.
Checkmate.

I lose. So I die. Happy birthday to me.

The door slid open. I barely flinched.

A man entered, tall and thin, with coal-black hair cut short. High cheekbones. Narrow, elegant nose. He wore the same unadorned black suit as always. Silver sunglasses. Shiny black boots. His work clothes, I supposed.

Behind the opaque lenses, his face was utterly expressionless.

That always got to me. What kind of human could do such horrible things, yet show zero reflection of them in his features?

A psychopath. That's who.

The black-suited man stood over my punctured, broken body. Squaring his shoulders, he pulled the slide on his weapon, a gleaming black handgun that fit snugly into his palm. The barrel rose.

"Why?" I croaked, as my heartbeat lost its rhythm.

We'd been through this before.

Same question. Always the same question.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly, taking aim directly between my eyes.

Same reply. He always apologized.

I wasn't going to scream. I'd done it before, and refused to give him the satisfaction. I wasn't going to beg either. I'd learned that didn't get me anywhere.

But I wanted an answer.

"Why?" More gurgle than words. Liquid was filling my mouth, hot and wet. The hole in my chest burned like a sliver of the sun.

I knew a response wasn't coming. So, ever so slowly, marshaling my last remaining strength, I lifted my left arm. Hand shaking like a storm-tossed willow, I crooked my elbow, turned my palm inward, and carefully extended my middle finger, thrusting it at his blank, stone-carved face.

"Go to hell," I whispered, choking on my own blood.

"I'm already there."

A thunderous bang, followed immediately by another.

Agony. Then, nothing.

Hello, death. Long time no see.

Darkness enveloped me.

PART ONE

MIN

1

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 18, 2017

My eyes slid open.

Blink.

Blink blink blink.

Birds zipped by overhead, squabbling as they rode the updrafts. Inhaling deeply, I smelled huckleberry and red cedar, mixed with the indescribable sharpness of evergreen trees. Pine straw was jabbing me in the back.

A sour tang filled my mouth, like I'd been sucking on pocket change.

No pain. No lingering hurt. Or sadness. Or rage.

I felt nothing. Absolutely nothing. Just a tenderness to the scar on my left shoulder.

Exactly like last time. And the time before that. And

the ones before those.

I was lying in the center of a forest clearing. *The* clearing, of course, tucked inside a stand of longleaf pines, on a jagged slope to the north of my tiny Idaho hometown. A glance at the sky told me it was early morning, but not the same day as before.

Though I knew it was pointless, I tried to remember how I'd gotten there. But I was grasping at smoke. There was nothing. No hazy impression. No magic flash. No blast of white light, or sensation of weightlessness, of flying, of rising through the clouds to my continually denied eternal rest.

That's not how it worked. I simply felt pain, died, and then woke up again.

Here. Always *here*. In this place.

"I'm *not* crazy. I am not."

I liked saying it out loud, as if challenging the universe to argue the point.

I bumped a fist against my forehead, then rose, pawing twigs and leaves from my short black hair. Unsnarled my necklace. No iPhone to check—I'd find it charging on my nightstand, right where I left it—so I smoothed my jeans and crumpled Boise State tee, the same clothes I'd been wearing during the attack.

No blood. No singed holes. No acrid stench of panic sweat. Not a misplaced thread to evidence the .45 caliber slugs that had ripped through my body. The faded garments looked and felt the same as always.

I shivered, and not from the temperature. Though it *was* chilly. My breath misted in the gusts swirling down the mountainside. Fall mornings at this altitude are no joke. It's a wonder I hadn't frozen to death while lying there exposed.

I snorted in a most unladylike fashion, then hugged myself close.

Yeah, it'd be a shame if I died, right?

I'm not immortal. At least I don't think so, anyway. I age normally, even though I have this curious habit of dying and coming back to life. I'm not like a ghost or vampire, either. Those guys are *un*-dead, or so I've been told.

No. I just . . . reset. Open my eyes. Get up. Start walking home.

If there's ever a zombie apocalypse, head for my town.

Tucked high in the Bitterroot Mountains, Fire Lake might not be *the* most isolated place in the United States, but it's close. Go any farther north and you're in Canada. There's only one way in or out of the valley—a slender, two-lane bridge spanning a three-hundred-foot drop into Gullet Chasm, some of the toughest river country in Idaho.

People make the trip, however, since the town is surrounded by national parkland. The lake itself is a tourist pull in summer months, balancing out winter ski-bum traffic and keeping the valley stocked with visitors nearly year-round. A few magazines have named Fire Lake the most beautiful vacation spot in America. I can't disagree.

Not that I cared that morning as I crept down the mountainside. I had one goal in mind: to slip back home without being noticed.

It took ten minutes to reach the first houses. There I paused to tighten my sneakers—had I been wearing them when shot?—before slinking into a park area north of town. I scurried along

back roads, skirting the neighborhoods above the main village.

I had no intention of telling anyone what had happened. Not after my experiences as a child. I was cold, hungry, and demoralized. Desperate for a shower. An emergency sit-down with my psychiatrist would qualify as torture.

I already had a little blue pill. Mandatory counseling. There was nothing I enjoyed less than my sessions with Doctor Warm Smiles, the two of us fencing while pretending not to be. For fifty minutes every seven days, I fought to protect my secrets while he pried at them with all his shrewd kindness. Exhausting.

Dr. Lowell hadn't believed me when I was little. No one had, not even Mom. My horrifying memories were "the product of a troubled mind."

So forget it. I wasn't saying a word.

Reaching the business district, I hurried west, toward the rougher end of the valley. The typically vibrant neighborhood felt deserted. I passed small-but-charming hotels with no signs of guests. Most of the vacation houses had their shutters locked up tight. The streets had an almost ghost-town feel. Strange, even that early.

Then, with a wince, I remembered what day it was.

The Announcement is tonight, genius. Think that could be it?

September 18, 2017. The most anticipated press conference in history. That evening, just after sunset in the Rockies, Asteroid 152660-GR4 would clear Jupiter's gravitational field, allowing its path to be definitively calculated.

We find out if the Anvil will kill us all.

Fear gripped me. It was a measure of my own problems that I'd forgotten the one tormenting everyone else.

I crossed a footbridge, then turned right onto Quarry Road, heading back upslope. Almost home. I knew time was short—I was pretty sure it was Monday, which meant school, which meant I had to hurry. The road dropped behind the ridge, and I turned left onto a gravel driveway plunging out of sight.

Fire Lake may be romanticized for its beauty, but the brochures aren't discussing my neighborhood. I hurried through the gates of Rocky Ridge Trailer Park, a sloppy collection of run-down mobile homes wedged conveniently out of sight from the rest of the valley. My mother and I shared a depressing tan-and-peach unit slumped in the far corner.

A few heads turned as I slunk along the dusty rows—dodging clotheslines, stepping over Fred and Joe Wilson, who were passed out in the mud beside their fire pit, Fred's lawn chair overturned and resting on his face. Early risers were puttering about, watering plants or coaxing dogs to do their business. But no one spared more than a passing glance. It wasn't that kind of place.

The gazes I did meet carried an unspoken anxiety. People moved stiffly, almost robotically, frowning to themselves, as if even mundane tasks were nearly more than they could bear. I bristled at the tension.

Yes, humanity was in danger of extinction. I knew the awful truth. If the Anvil struck the planet—at any angle—almost nothing would survive. Doomsday might be at hand, and we'd find out in just a few hours. But I couldn't deal with both things at once. Not then. Not after what had happened in my bedroom.

Sorry, world. I've got my own problems.

My steps slowed as I drew close to home. I'd been gone

nearly twenty-four hours this time. In all the deaths before, I'd never missed an entire night. My mother had grown used to my unexpected comings and goings—a pattern I'd cultivated to cover this very situation—but I was definitely pushing it this time.

She might not even be here.

Mom had been working the graveyard shift for three weeks, pouring coffee for the glory of minimum wage. It was possible I'd beaten her home, but there wasn't a car to tip me off. We didn't own or need one. I couldn't remember the last time we'd left the valley. Mom walked into town every day, same as me.

I studied the stoop for signs. A smudged handle. Wet footprints on our grubby welcome mat. But nothing outside the trailer caught my attention.

Then a shudder passed through me.

The black-suited man was here. He came right through to end my life.

Anything I detected could be *his* doing.

My pulse accelerated. It took me several moments to calm down. Then, disgusted with everything, I lurched forward and pulled the screen door wide.

She was home.

Keys on the counter. Her iPod was connected to a pair of desk speakers—our redneck stereo—and Adele was crooning softly in the gloom. The TV was off. Our router blinked at me from across the room. I'd demanded Wi-Fi to live, and had finally gotten my wish the day I turned thirteen. An odd-numbered birthday, so safe, and not unlucky at all. One of the few that had actually been pleasant.

Not that we paid for Internet service. There were dozens of tourist businesses in the valley. Nobody noticed a little stolen bandwidth. Mom and I usually swiped ours from the ski resort straight east. Even our cable was hooked up under-the-table, thanks to a friend.

Her door was closed. I imagined her crawling into bed a few minutes ago, worried sick about me but worn out after another backbreaking twelve-hour shift.

My room was at the opposite end. I crept across the living room, wincing with every creak. The irony wasn't lost on me. Reaching my door, I paused to examine it. No bullet hole. The metal slats looked exactly as they always had.

I slid the door open. The track failed to squeak for the first time I could recall.

My heart skipped a beat. I rarely discovered mistakes.

Inside, my room was in perfect order. Bed made. Clothes neatly folded. Shoes in a haphazard pile under my desk. The carpet was clean. No damage to the closet, walls, or floor.

My fifth murder, erased.

Like it never happened.

A thump carried across the trailer. *Crap.* I shed my clothes and ruffled the covers, hoping Mom might think I was just getting up rather than just getting home.

I waited a minute, then yawned theatrically, opening my door and trudging to our shared bathroom. It didn't take long—the living room stretches only twenty feet. A seedy couch, a beanbag chair, and Mom's ancient rocker surrounded a coffee table where we ate every meal. Bookshelf. Floor lamp. Battered desk. We could pack up everything and move inside of an hour, though

we'd probably just leave the stuff.

Her door stayed shut as I scrubbed my teeth while showering, washed my face, then ran a brush through straight black hair that barely reached my chin. I paused a moment, staring into the mirror. Saw the ghost of my mother, thirty years ago.

I looked away. Some things you don't want to see.

Crossing back to my room, I hurriedly got dressed—fresh jeans, *Walking Dead* tee, socks, sneaks, and a black zip-front hoodie. No one's ever accused me of being a fashion maven. I shoved books into a backpack and arrowed for the front door. The town had decided that school would remain open this week, and first bell was in thirty.

The knob was turning in my hand when my mother's door screeched open. Her head poked through the gap. One look, and I knew she wasn't fooled. Questions burned in her watery gray eyes, but she held them back.

“Promise me you'll be home for the Announcement.”

Mom was short and slim like me, with long, stringy hair going white at the roots. Pale skin, pulled tight over birdlike features and a thin-lipped, frowning mouth. Everything about her seemed fragile and overused, like a wildflower that never got enough water.

I silently cursed the deadbeat father I'd never even met—a daily tradition upon seeing my mother's weathered face. Then I cursed myself. Because I just wanted out of there.

Try as I might, at moments like this I felt nothing more strongly than . . . distaste.

Disappointment. That my mother had allowed her life to reach this point. That the same could happen to me.

Shame blossomed inside me. Unfolded. Spread.

“I’ll be home.”

Mom’s stare was unrelenting. “*Promise me*, Min. I don’t know where you . . . and on your birthday, again . . . but . . .” She trailed off. Neither of us wanted to go there.

Her voice firmed like it used to years ago. “I’d like for us to be together, come what may. Please, Melinda.”

“I’ll be home,” I repeated. “I promise.” One foot over the threshold.

She nodded gravely, retreating back into her elevator-sized bedroom.

The screen door slammed as I hurried down the lane.