

Prologue: De Mortuis Nil Nisi Bonum—

Say Only Good About The Dead

“Normally, I don’t have time for something like this, and you would be thrown out,” the senator said as he leaned back in his chair and unbuttoned his suit jacket. His face held an expression of amusement. “However, you go right ahead and tell me your crazy story. I happen to have a little extra time this morning, and I could use a good laugh.”

“I guarantee, Senator, I’m not here to peddle fairy tales.” Seth sat confidently in the chair on the opposite side of the desk. He was not intimidated by this man’s pompous attitude. The senator was still unaware that Seth was not only the superior man, he was also the superior species, and he held the senator’s life in his hands. He could end it at any moment, if he wanted. He might look as if he was fresh out of grad school, but in truth he was more than three times the age of the salt-and-pepper-haired senator. “I can also guarantee that you will come to see our time together as time well spent.”

Seth’s purpose was to give the man a small introduction to the world of the living dead. Not the world that existed in fictional stories of vampires, zombies, and other superstitious tales, but the truth that inspired those stories. A truth that was more fantastic than fiction. A truth that took time for the living to digest. Seth would have to explain it a little at a time, idea upon idea, letting the senator absorb one fact before feeding him another.

There was much the senator didn’t need to know. He didn’t need to hear how ancient civilizations had worshipped the Mortuis as gods, fearing them and serving their every need. He wouldn’t be told about the occasional uprisings by the living that would devastate the Mortuis’ numbers for a short time and end their rightful dominance. Those facts might prevent him from doing what Seth wanted him to do. After all, Seth’s goal was to restore that dominance, and right now he needed the senator.

What the senator had been told was that the Mortuis had been around for millennia; that they were a human race resulting from a small genetic evolution that occurred during the dawn of man and could now be found in every civilization and every corner of the globe. He had explained that Mortuis are born alive, but a premature death would prevent the soul from severing from the body. This in turn prevented the Mortuis from becoming victim to a full death. These were only the first small pieces of information he’d revealed, but there was much more. Seth would be careful how and what he revealed, though. His goal was manipulation, and he

would control what information the senator was given. After all, Seth was a master at both — controlling information and manipulation.

“Okay, Mr. Apep—”

“Please, call me Seth,” he said, interrupting the senator.

“Fine, Seth. Let’s pretend, for argument’s sake, that everything you’ve just told me is fact. Let’s say there are dead people who walk among us. Let me even suspend my disbelief that you yourself are one of these Mortuis, as you call them. Are you telling me you can prove all this?”

“I can prove it right now, right here, if that’s what you want, but there’s really no need,” Seth said. “You already know it’s the truth. You living beings, or antemorts as we call you, have an instinctual knowledge of our existence. Why do you think people are afraid to look into the eyes of strangers, or avoid the gazes of those they pass? It comes from an intuitive need to protect yourself from us.”

The senator leaned forward in his chair and a trail of sunlight falling through the window lit his face. “If all this is true, I have two questions for you. How will this information help me, and what do you expect me to do with it?”

The corners of Seth’s mouth slowly rose to display a grin. “I have a few ideas.”

Chapter 1

Suffocating heat was to be expected. The roof was really only usable in the spring and fall due to the extreme weather conditions the rest of the year. Stepping off the elevator, Wesley Lohmann climbed the final set of stairs to the access door and a blast of hot air hit him in the face as he opened it. Looking around, he was grateful to see the space deserted. The roof was set up for the enjoyment of tenants and was equipped with several small barbecue grills and a couple wooden picnic tables – but no one was enjoying it now. Mid-summer was much too hot. A slight breeze broke through the high temperature, blowing the smell of cooling tar from under Wes's feet to his nose. He took a drink from the bottle he was still holding, his second bottle of 190 proof Everclear – he was drinking to numb his thoughts, not for pleasure – and walked to the low concrete wall that ran around the top of the building.

The building, though smaller than those surrounding it, was close enough to Lake Michigan to provide a narrow view of the water between two taller buildings. Wes looked out at the lake, the setting sun at his back. He loved sunsets. Climbing up onto the wall, he sat looking down at the cracked pavement below. Yes, this building was tall enough for his needs.

He lifted the glass bottle to his lips to take another gulp, placed it on the wall next to him, and then tried to pull his feet over to the street side of the wall. As his leg came around it bumped the bottle, sending it over the edge. He watched as the glass shattered on the hard surface below. The remnants of his evening companion glistened in the glow of a nearby streetlight as it combined with the light from the setting sun reflecting off an adjacent building.

A sliver of rational thought returned. What was he doing? This was stupid. Was he really considering suicide? Wes pulled his legs back over the wall as carefully as he could in his inebriated state, and stepped down onto the black surface of the rooftop. He needed an escape, but death was not the answer. If his father's death had taught him anything, it was that death only resulted in more problems. He wanted only a temporary escape, not a permanent one. He left the roof and made his way back to his apartment.

Stepping into the bathroom, Wes turned on the faucet and watched as the cold water poured into the basin. Slowly, he splashed handfuls of icy liquid on his face, repeating the action again and again. When he felt he'd done it enough, he stood and stared at his reflection in the mirror above the sink. What was wrong with him? He felt drained, tired, unimportant, and insignificant. This wasn't like him. His usual positive outlook and confidence were gone.

Water dripped down his face as Wes tried to see himself as others might see him. He knew he was considered a good-looking guy. His face was kind of pale, not enough sun maybe, but he had good hair – light brown and plenty of it. His eyes were a dark hazel – they were probably a little too close together, and his nose was kind of crooked from a childhood accident. Well, maybe not all that good looking, but he was athletic and in good shape. He worked out at a gym in the neighborhood a few days a week.

One thing was true, he was smart and had always been told he had an active imagination. He'd coupled those qualities with the good education that had helped him land a great job. Okay, maybe it was just an entry-level position with an architectural firm, but it was a well-known firm in the big city of Chicago, and he was working hard to carve out a place for himself. He knew the company considered him an asset and “one to watch.” Weren't these things important to women? Maybe he just didn't have any social skills. Okay, there was no maybe about it. Jezebel had gotten to him in a way no one else ever had and he'd scared her away. What was he thinking? That someone could actually care about him enough to stick around? He gave a bitter laugh. His own family hadn't done that.

Wes splashed a few more handfuls of water on his face, turned off the faucet, and grabbed a towel to dry off. What he really needed was to take his mind off Jez and how he was destined to spend another night alone. He grabbed a new bottle of liquor out of the kitchen and rummaged through the cupboard until he found the pills his doctor had given him when his father died. Maybe they would help. Opening the bottle, he poured a few pills into his palm and sat back down on the couch. This should help. He took a few more than prescribed, but he needed a stronger effect than the suggested dose would offer. The act itself was enough to make him happy, and he sat quietly and let the blissful feeling of numbness take over.

Suddenly his cell phone rang.

Wes, drunk and already feeling the effects of the pills looked at his caller ID. It was Jez. This was by far the most inconvenient time for her to call. The universe must hate him.

“Hello?” He realized he was slurring his words and cleared his throat.

“Wes! Gosh, I'm so sorry. We need to talk.”

“I haven't heard from you in weeks.” His voice was still slightly slurred.

“I know. I've been sort of preoccupied. There's more to it than that, though. Can we talk?”

“Yeah. Sure. Look, I'm sorry if—”

“No, not over the phone. I’m actually close to your building. Do you mind if I come over to see you?”

“Sure, come right up. I’ll leave the door unlocked.”

Wes sat for a minute with his eyes closed, thinking about the conversation. It would be nice to finally talk things through with her. He stumbled to the front door and unlocked it. He didn’t like that he would be drunk when they talked. That was not how he pictured this going. He was feeling very fuzzy and thought about the pills. Once his mind focused on the severity of the situation, he stumbled toward the bathroom to expel the contents of his stomach but fell before he could reach it.

His vision was blurry; he must have passed out. Wes stared up at Jez, her black hair framing her face above him. His brain struggled to process thought. She looked nervous. He felt himself slipping away, but she kept slapping his face and telling him to open his eyes and look at her. Echoing in his head, the meaning of her statement slowly processed through his inebriated mind. Struggling against the weight of them, he forced his eyelids open one last time. His eyes locked with Jez’s and he passed out again.

Wes was awakened by the echo of a car alarm going off. It was morning, but he had no idea how long he’d been unconscious. He slowly got up off the bathroom floor. His body moved sluggishly and his joints were stiff. What had happened? Where was Jez? He looked around the apartment but could see no evidence she’d been there at all. Something about Jez was confusing him. He could see the door was slightly ajar, but his vision was hazy and he wasn’t able to focus. The images he saw seemed disconnected, as if he was looking through a camera lens. He hated hangovers.

Wes walked to the window in his bedroom and looked out at the busy street below. In spite of the blurry vision and hangover, he felt good. Whatever he’d done last night to improve his spirits had worked. Yes, today was a good day for a new start, and he suddenly felt optimistic about the future.

That is, he would if he could see. Wes tried rubbing his eyes to clear his vision, but discovered he couldn’t feel his hands touch his face. He opened his eyes wider, thinking it would help him see better, then looked at his hands. They seemed okay, so he tried rubbing his eyes again. He still couldn’t feel anything. He tried pinching himself. No, he couldn’t feel anything. Anywhere.

An hour later, he sat on a chair in the corner of the local Urgent Care Center's waiting area. He'd decided to go there rather than spend more time and money at an emergency room where a nurse would tell him his electrolytes were low and send him home. In disgust, Wes watched as the lady across from him blew chunks of green snot into the dozens of Kleenexes she kept pulling from her purse. From her appearance, she was probably there because her new-age herbal medicines hadn't worked. A man on the far side of the room stared into oblivion and wheezed while he murmured phrases in some language that sounded like German. Wes hoped he wouldn't catch anything from the dozens of sick people who entered and exited the waiting room.

The woman across from Wes noticed his expression when she filled yet another Kleenex with the contents of her nose. "What are you looking at?" she said, scowling at him. "You don't look so hot yourself. The rest of us should be worried about you. You look like death warmed over."

"Yeaeaea weeealll—"

Wes stopped himself. He didn't know why he wasn't able to talk. Did the pills and booze have something to do with it? Wes tried to remember if he'd spoken earlier and realized this was the first time he'd said anything all day. The receptionist had been on the phone and had just handed him a clipboard stacked with papers to fill out.

He took in a breath of air and contracted his diaphragm, making another series of grunts and noises similar to the ones a deflating tire might make. He moved his tongue around, not realizing that because he had no sense of touch his tongue was extended as far out of his mouth as it could possibly go. The lady sitting opposite him stood up after watching the show for about 30 seconds.

"You really aren't okay, are ya? Well, I'm not one to be rude, but I'm gonna move to another chair. Don't take offense, now."

Wes didn't notice the woman get up and move. He concentrated on trying to form words – without success. A nurse waved her hand in front of his face.

"Wes Lohmann? You can come with me."

He stood up and followed the large black woman through a door and down a hallway. She patted her head a couple of times as they walked; probably had an itchy scalp because of her weave. She led Wes to a large room divided into sections by long curtains hanging from the ceiling. These served as movable walls, effectively dividing the space into smaller rooms for the examination of patients. Unlike the more common white ones found in most exam rooms, these

were pink. Wes hated pink, but noticed the color complimented his nurse's purple scrubs. She must have chosen her outfit for that purpose, Wes thought. She's perfectly coordinated with her surroundings. She had painted her nails pink and placed pink shoelaces in her white tennis shoes.

The nurse directed Wes to sit on an empty exam table and pulled the curtain along a track separating her and Wes from the rest of the room. There were a handful of other patients in the room, and through the closed curtain on his left, Wes could hear a doctor talking to the Kleenex lady from the waiting room.

"So Mr. Lohmann, what's the problem today," the nurse asked, looking through the forms Wes filled out when he arrived.

Wes attempted to talk but only managed a series of grunts.

"Um... okay. I think that says a lot right there," the nurse said, making a note on the papers. "You just don't worry about talking anymore. I'll do enough of that for both of us."

Wes forced a smile. He really would have liked this woman under different circumstances. The nurse placed a thermometer in his ear, waited for the beep, looked at it, and tried it again. After the device beeped again, the nurse looked at it, shook her head, and placed it down on a small table next to the exam chair where he was seated. She pulled an oral thermometer out of a drawer, gave it a couple of swipes with an alcohol wipe, put it in his mouth, then wheeled over a small blood pressure machine.

"Let's see here, let me just get this cuff around your arm to get your blood pressure. Wes, huh? That's an interesting name. I don't think I've known a Wes since high school." She took the thermometer out of Wes's mouth, looked at it, shook it, and put it back in. "Yes, I think he was on the football team. I was in choir though. Our paths never really crossed. He was in my English class one year. Dumb as dumb can be, but that boy sure filled out a shirt nice. Mmmm hmmm."

The blood pressure machine beeped. The nurse looked at the results and pressed some buttons to start the reading cycle over again. She pulled the thermometer out of his mouth, looked at it, then pushed through the curtains on the side opposite from where the Kleenex lady sat, and returned with a different thermometer. She placed a cover on it and stuck it in his ear. It beeped.

"Still that low?" she mumbled to herself. "I'll go get another and we'll try again."

A moment later the nurse returned and shoved a new thermometer into Wes's ear. While doing that she looked at the results on the blood pressure reader.

“What is wrong with all our equipment? I tell you what, technology is never worth the cost. If I go by what this reader says, I would have to put you down as dead. Could you imagine?” the nurse asked, chuckling to herself. “I’ve seen some crazy things in this world, but I’m pretty sure that would put me in a fit.”

She pulled the new thermometer out of Wes’s ear and looked at it. She looked at Wes and then back at the thermometer a second time. After a pause, she reached up and placed her hand on Wes’s forehead.

“You wait right here, sugar,” she said as she walked out.

Wes watched the nurse push through the pink curtains. He listened as she interrupted the doctor, who had moved to a patient hidden behind more pink curtains on the far side of the room. After some indecipherable whispers, the doctor pushed agitatedly through the curtains with the nurse following closely behind. He was short and his messy blond comb-over matched the bush of chest hair that was visible over the top of the V-neck in his scrubs. After performing the same tests the nurse had already administered, the doctor pulled his stethoscope into his ears and placed the chest piece above Wes’s heart.

“Am I right or do you still think I don’t know how to do my job?”

“No, no, you’re right. I’ve never seen this before. I can’t even begin to imagine what it means. I’ve got to make some phone calls.” The doctor exited, leaving the nurse behind to attempt to explain his findings.

“Well Wes, honey, it appears you’re dead. Now, you just wait here and we’ll see if there’s anything we can give you for that.”

Chuckling at her own joke, the nurse carefully closed the pink curtain behind her. Feeling a little disoriented at her words, Wes pulled the blood pressure cuff off his arm. This was ridiculous. What did she mean he was dead? How could he be dead? He was moving and conscious, wasn’t he? He began counting off his symptoms. Okay, he couldn’t feel anything, he couldn’t speak, and his vision was fuzzy. Apparently he didn’t have a pulse, a temperature, a blood pressure, or a heartbeat. Still, he couldn’t be a walking dead person. Zombies didn’t exist. On the other hand, what if they did and he *was* one? His examination and the reactions of both the nurse and the doctor were beginning to convince him of the possibility. Well, one thing was certain: he had to get out of here. Wes peeked through the pink curtains and located an exit sign over a door on a wall around the corner. It was an emergency exit marked with a big, red warning sign: EMERGENCY EXIT ONLY. No problem there, he thought. Wasn’t being dead an

emergency? He ran for the exit and pushed his way outside, ignoring the warning bell that sounded behind him when he opened the doors. He moved quickly to put some distance between him and the clinic.

The wind was blowing. Wes could see it fluttering the leaves in the trees and moving the litter on the streets. He wanted to feel it on his face, but the sensation wasn't there. Passing strangers gave him funny looks as he wandered aimlessly through crowded intersections, and he thought it might be best to find a place off the street. He didn't want to go home. If he was dead, then it was the place of his death; nobody wants to revisit the place where they died. He found a quiet spot in an empty alley and sat down to think as he pulled his cell phone from his pocket. Maybe Jez would call. The thought troubled him for some reason, hadn't she promised to come over last night? But what would he do if she did call? He couldn't seem to talk.

Suddenly, he remembered what was bothering him. He was almost positive that Jez had come the night before. He had a vague but definite memory of her slapping his face, but if it had happened, where had she gone? Why had she gone? She had to have seen the alcohol and pill bottle. Had she left him to die? The thought sickened him, and he pushed it away.

"What are you doing back there?"

Wes looked up to see two policemen approaching. The alley had grown dark. There was only a small amount of light coming from some windows in the surrounding buildings and a street lamp. The two officers stopped about 10 feet from where he was seated.

"What are you doing here in the alley," one of the policemen repeated.

Wes stood up. He wanted to answer the officer's question, but knew he couldn't. He just wanted them to leave so he could sit in peace. However, that didn't appear to be an option.

"Why don't you want to tell us what you're doing back here," the other officer asked. "You don't look very good. You on something?"

The policemen started moving closer to Wes, and he decided his best option was to make a run for it. As he maneuvered to run around them, one of the officers grabbed him, but Wes was no lightweight, and he struggled to get away. The policeman was no lightweight either, and he hung on as Wes thrashed about. When he noticed the other officer pulling out a pair of handcuffs, he turned and sank his teeth into the arm of the officer holding him. The officer yelled and pushed Wes down, knocking his cell phone out of his hand and onto the ground, where it broke apart. Wes rolled onto his stomach and pushed up, hoping to quickly get away. Then he heard a

large thud come down on his shoulder. One of the officers had hit him. There was no pain, only restraint.

Wes moved to get up again. The officer who was the recipient of Wes's bite pushed him down on the ground and held him in place while the other officer twisted Wes's arms behind him and roughly snapped the handcuffs in place. Wes still felt no pain. He didn't need to catch his breath. He couldn't even sense the pressure from the weight of the man on top of him. That was good, he thought, as he continued to push up off the pavement and shook the policeman off his body. He felt as if he had superhuman strength. The other policeman grabbed for him but only managed to grab the handcuff chain.

Wes fought to escape. By now both policemen were holding him back by the handcuff chain. Abruptly, Wes lurched forward, almost falling to the ground. The policemen had let go of the chain. He turned around to see why and at the same time noticed his arms weren't cuffed behind his back anymore. The two policemen were both staring at something on the ground. It was a hand.

Wes looked at the hand for a moment before realizing it was his. He looked at the mutilated stump at the end of his left arm and then at his right hand with the handcuffs still fastened around the wrist. He wanted to pick the hand up but didn't know what he'd do with it. He willed it to jump up and rejoin his arm, but it just laid there amid some trash and didn't move. The policemen didn't move. Wes turned and ran down the alley.

Now that it was dark it was easier to avoid the looks of disgust and fear on the faces of passing pedestrians. He should have paid more attention in his philosophy classes. As he considered the missing hand he thought about how the "mind-body" problem had become a true dilemma: His mind was functioning better than ever, but his body was decaying fast. Yep, he was dead alright.

Not sure where to go or what to do, Wes thought again of Jez. He wanted to confront her and find out what had really happened, but what purpose would that serve? She couldn't bring him back to life. Wes laughed to himself. He was dead. That was definitely the problem that needed his full attention, not Jez. With nowhere else to go, he returned to his apartment.

That night Wes found he couldn't sleep. He sat in the dark thinking about his death and his existence as a zombie. It was much easier to be reasonable when thought processes and emotions weren't influenced by complicated chemicals in the brain. He hated that he'd had to die to be rational again. He'd lost everything so quickly, and now he was forced to stick around so his