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PART ONE

Death-Cast Eve

Everyone wants to know how we can predict death. Tell me this. Do you ask pilots to explain aerodynamics before boarding the plane or do you simply travel to your destination? I urge you to not concern yourselves with how we know about the deaths and instead focus on how you'll live your life. Your final destination may be closer than you think.

—Joaquin Rosa, creator of Death-Cast

July 30, 2010

ORION PAGAN

10:10 p.m.

Death-Cast might call at midnight, but it won't be the first time someone tells me I'm going to die.

For the past few years I've been fighting for my life because of a severe heart condition, straight scared that I might drop dead if I live it up too hard. Then an organization called Death-Cast appeared out of nowhere and claimed they could predict when—not just if—we're about to die. It sounded like the premise of a short story I'd write. Real life never hooks me up with wins like that. But everything got really real, real fast when the president of the United States held a press briefing where he introduced the creator of Death-Cast and confirmed their abilities to predict our fates.

That night, I signed up for Death-Cast.

Now I'm just hoping I won't be one of the first to get an inaugural End Day call.

If I am, at least I'll know it's game over, I guess.

Until then, I'm going to live it up.

And that starts with attending a once-in-a-lifetime event: the Death-Cast premiere.

Death-Cast is hosting so many parties across the country, I think to lift people's spirits and get them hyped about this program that will change life and death as we know it. They're already underway in so many places, like the Santa Monica Pier in California and Millennium Park in Chicago and the National Museum of the United States Air Force in Ohio and Sixth Street in Austin, to name a few. Of course I'm at the best one—Times Square, the heart of New York and home to the first Death-Cast offices. I love my city, but you'd never catch me out in Times Square on New Year's Eve—it's way too cold to do all that. But I'm chill hanging out on this hot summer night for something so historic.

It's wild how much bank Death-Cast must be dropping across the country. Or even in Times Square alone. These jumbotrons are always promoting a million things at once, everything from soda products to TV shows to new web addresses, but not tonight. Every screen has been replaced with a digital black hourglass with a radiant white background. The hourglass is almost full, signaling the End Day calls that will begin at midnight. But it feels bigger than that. It's almost like the product that Death-Cast is pushing is time itself. That marketing is working because people are lining up to the information booths as if a new iPhone is on sale, all to talk to the Death-Cast customer service reps.

"Imagine working at Death-Cast," I say.

My best friend, Dalma, looks up from her phone. "I could never."

"For real. It's like every call is saving someone's life, but also, not really. How do you sleep at night knowing everyone you spoke to that day is dead?"

"I know you always got death on the brain, Orion, but you're killing me."

"I got death on the heart, technically."

"Oh my god, I hate you. I'm going to get a job at Death-Cast just so I can call you."

"Nah, you can't live without me."

I don't add how she's going to have to at some point. No one's banking on me living another eighteen years. Not even Dalma, even if she'll never admit it out loud and always talks about everything we'll get to do together in life. Like her dreams of my first book signing whenever I get serious enough to pursue publication of my super-short stories or the novel I'd love to write if only I believed I'd live long enough to finish it. Or cheering Dalma on as she takes the tech world by storm. And ragging on whatever dates we bring home, which has always felt unbelievable because there's no way we'd ever be bold enough to say what's up to guys we think are cute and/or interesting. If I didn't have this stupid-ass heart, we could have all that and more.

I just got to be present. I might not make it to the future, but I can live in the now.

Though it's kind of hard to get death off the brain—yeah,

brain, not heart this time—when some fortysomething dude walks past us with a sign that reads *Death-Cast Is Ending The World*. Like, okay, he's not a fan of Death-Cast, but claiming that they got the power to end the world? That's a lot. He's not alone, though. Since Death-Cast was announced at the start of the month, these doomsayers have been running their mouths about boiling oceans and sweeping storms and crumbling grounds and burning cities. I get that apocalyptic and dystopian novels are hot right now, but people need to take a breath and chill.

Freaking out about death every minute isn't a good life, and yet, tons of people are freaking out about death every minute.

It's like the end of the world is actually beginning.

In the past few days there's been a record number of super-market break-ins as looters stock up on canned goods and gallons of water and toilet paper. There've been too many killing sprees because life sentences won't last long if the world ends as quickly as the doomsayers are predicting. But nothing hits harder than hearing stories about those who've taken their own lives because we're speeding toward a future with too many unknowns.

I was pissed after hearing about those deaths.

How could Death-Cast have access to this info and not prevent the murders, or intervene with the suicides? But apparently that's never been in the cards. Death-Cast claims they can't pinpoint someone's cause of death, only their End

Days to prepare them. And unfortunately, once someone's name comes up in their mysterious system, their fate is written in stone—and later on their headstone.

Death-Cast may not be all-knowing, but they'll do wonders for my anxiety. If I don't get the End Day call, I'll be good to live more boldly instead of second-guessing, triple-guessing, quadruple-guessing every damn thing I do out of fear of pissing off my heart and triggering cardiac arrest. I'll also never be caught off guard again by loved ones dying. Like I was at nine years old when my parents went into the city for a meeting and were killed after a plane was flown into the World Trade Center's south tower. My parents obviously didn't have Death-Cast back then, but I'm forever haunted thinking about how there must've been a clear moment when they were certain they were going to die.

I swing at those heartbreaking thoughts, knocking them all back.

Death-Cast will make sure I'm never denied a goodbye ever again.

Well, the chance to say my goodbyes.

I know I don't have all the time in the world, I feel it in my heart.

I got to go live my firsts—maybe even lasts—while I can.

VALENTINO PRINCE**10:22 p.m.**

Death-Cast can't call me because I'm not registered for their service. Not that they would anyway since my life is only getting started.

If anything, I feel like I've been reborn today.

Rebirths feel appropriate as someone born and raised in Phoenix, Arizona. Now it's time to restart my life in none other than New York. From the Valley of the Sun to the Big Apple. I've been dreaming about this city for so long that after I printed out my boarding pass at the airport and saw PHX → LGA, I broke down and cried. That one-way ticket meant I would never have to see my parents ever again. That I could build a new home with my twin sister.

I probably shouldn't have booked the window seat on my flight over. I did my best to keep it together as the plane bulleted down the runway and shot into the sky. It turns out my best is awful. As all the buildings and roads and mountains

DEATH-CAST EVE

kept shrinking from view, I cried in the clouds. My seat-mate seemed judgy, admittedly. It made me wish even more that my sister was next to me as she should've been before a last-minute work opportunity came up. Thankfully, Scarlett will be on the first red-eye out to join me in our new apartment.

Five hours later, when New York came into focus, everything felt right, even though I'd never stepped foot among those skyscrapers and parks. Then we landed and I rolled my suitcases straight to the taxi line, where everyone else seemed miserable waiting, but I was so excited to finally ride inside these classic yellow taxicabs that I'd seen on TV and as props in magazine ads. The driver could tell I'd never been here before since I never stopped watching the street life. That first step onto the curb felt like a movie moment, as if cameras should've been flashing; there will be time for that later.

As of tonight, as of now, I can call myself a New Yorker.

Or maybe I have to wait until my landlord finally greets me with my apartment key so I can be certain that I wasn't scammed after finding this studio on Craigslist. While I'm waiting, I'm taking in my little corner of the Upper East Side. There's a tiny pizzeria right next door that's trying to lure me inside with the smell of garlic knots. Honking cars pull my attention back to the street, where someone old enough to be my grandfather is screaming into his phone to be heard over

the music blasting from the bar on the corner.

This city is loud, and I love it.

I wonder if I'll ever miss the quiet of my old neighborhood.

The door opens behind me, and there's a man wearing nothing but a white tank top and basketball shorts and slippers. He has a thick mustache and thinning black hair, and he's glaring at me.

"You going to come inside?" he asks.

"Hi, I'm Valentino. I'm a new tenant."

The man points at my suitcases. "I can tell."

"I'm waiting for the landlord."

He nods but doesn't leave. As if he's waiting for me to come in.

"Are you Frankie?"

He nods again.

"Nice to meet you," I say.

He reluctantly shakes my hand. "Are you moving in or what?"

I was warned that not every New Yorker will be nice to me, but maybe Frankie is tired since it's pretty late. I grab my suitcases and enter the building. It's a warm night, but once I'm inside, I understand why Frankie is dressed like he's grabbing the morning paper in Arizona. It's so hot in here it's as if I walked straight into the pizza oven from next door. The hallway is narrow, painted this mustard yellow that is not fun

on the eyes, but I respect the choice. There are steel mailboxes built into the wall with packages on the floor waiting to be picked up, and a trash bin overflowing with junk mail including Death-Cast flyers. I take it many people in this building aren't registered for the End Day calls. I'm personally not either, because my parents are total skeptics, but that paranoia is another inheritance of theirs I need to abandon.

Frankie pauses while going up the first flight of stairs. "Where's the other one?"

"The other one?"

"Your twin."

"Oh, she's flying in tomorrow morning."

Frankie continues ascending. "Make sure if any other big boxes arrive you handle them in a timely fashion. Carrying all your deliveries up these stairs was bad on my back."

"I'm so sorry." I had to ship some things early, like an air mattress, blankets, towels, pots, and pans. Though I'm guessing the biggest culprit for his back pain were the five boxes of clothes and shoes and accessories, which are just as essential as making sure I have somewhere to sleep until my proper mattress can arrive on Tuesday. "Is the elevator broken?"

"It's been broken since my father ran this place," Frankie says.

I see. I'm not sure how legal it is to advertise the building having an elevator if it's purely decorative, but I'm going to make the most of it. All those years spent in my family's small