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**ADAM SILVERA**

**THEY  
BOTH  
DIE  
AT  
THE END**

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PART ONE

# Death-Cast

*To live is the rarest thing in the world.*

*Most people exist, that's all.*

—Oscar Wilde

September 5, 2017

**MATEO TORREZ**

12:22 a.m.

Death-Cast is calling with the warning of a lifetime—I'm going to die today. Forget that, “warning” is too strong a word since warnings suggest something can be avoided, like a car honking at someone who's crossing the street when it isn't their light, giving them the chance to step back; this is more of a heads-up. The alert, a distinctive and endless gong, like a church bell one block away, is blasting from my phone on the other side of the room. I'm freaking out already, a hundred thoughts immediately drowning out everything around me. I bet this chaos is what a first-time skydiver feels as she's plummeting out of a plane, or a pianist playing his first concert. Not that I will ever know for sure.

It's crazy. One minute ago I was reading yesterday's blog entry from *CountDowners*—where Deckers chronicle their final hours through statuses and photos via live feeds, this particular one about a college junior trying to find a home

for his golden retriever—and now I’m going to die.

I’m going to . . . no . . . yes. Yes.

My chest tightens. I’m dying today.

I’ve always been afraid of dying. I don’t know why I thought this would jinx it from actually happening. Not forever, obviously, but long enough so I could grow up. Dad has even been drilling it into my head that I should pretend I’m the main character of a story that nothing bad ever happens to, most especially death, because the hero has to be around to save the day. But the noise in my head is quieting down and there’s a Death-Cast herald on the other end of the phone waiting to tell me I’m going to die today at eighteen years old.

Wow, I’m actually . . .

I don’t want to pick up the phone. I’d rather run into Dad’s bedroom and curse into a pillow because he chose the wrong time to land himself in intensive care, or punch a wall because my mom marked me for an early death when she died giving birth to me. The phone rings for what’s got to be the thirtieth time, and I can’t avoid it any more than I can avoid what’s going down sometime today.

I slide my laptop off my crossed legs and get up from my bed, swaying to the side, feeling really faint. I’m like a zombie moving toward my desk, slow and walking-dead.

The caller ID reads *DEATH-CAST*, of course.

I’m shaking but manage to press *Talk*. I don’t say anything.

I’m not sure what to say. I just breathe because I have fewer than twenty-eight thousand breaths left in me—the average number of breaths a nondying person takes per day—and I might as well use them up while I can.

“Hello, I’m calling from Death-Cast. I’m Andrea. You there, Timothy?”

Timothy.

My name isn’t Timothy.

“You’ve got the wrong person,” I tell Andrea. My heart settles down, even though I feel for this Timothy person. I truly do. “My name is Mateo.” I got the name from my father and he wants me to pass it down eventually. Now I can, if having a kid is a thing that happens for me.

Computer keys are tapping on her end, probably correcting the entry or something in her database. “Oh, apologies. Timothy is the gentleman I just got off the phone with; he didn’t take the news very well, poor thing. You’re Mateo Torrez, right?”

And just like that, my last hope is obliterated.

“Mateo, kindly confirm this is indeed you. I’m afraid I have many other calls to make tonight.”

I always imagined my herald—their official name, not mine—would sound sympathetic and ease me into this news, maybe even harp on how it’s especially tragic because I’m so young. To be honest, I would’ve been okay with her being chipper, telling me how I should have fun and make the

most of the day since I at least know what's going to happen. That way I'm not stuck at home starting one-thousand-piece puzzles I'll never finish or masturbating because sex with an actual person scares me. But this herald makes me feel like I should stop wasting her time because, unlike me, she has so much of it.

"Okay. Mateo's me. I'm Mateo."

"Mateo, I regret to inform you that sometime in the next twenty-four hours you'll be meeting an untimely death. And while there isn't anything we can do to suspend that, you still have a chance to live." The herald goes on about how life isn't always fair, then lists some events I could participate in today. I shouldn't be mad at her, but it's obvious she's bored reciting these lines that have been burned into memory from telling hundreds, maybe thousands, about how they'll soon be dead. She has no sympathy to offer me. She's probably filing her nails or playing tic-tac-toe against herself as she talks to me.

On *CountDowners*, Deckers post entries about everything from their phone call to how they're spending their End Day. It's basically Twitter for Deckers. I've read tons of feeds where Deckers admitted to asking their heralds how they would die, but it's basic knowledge that those specifics aren't available to anyone, not even former President Reynolds, who tried to hide from Death in an underground bunker four years ago and was assassinated by one of his own secret

service agents. Death-Cast can only provide a date for when someone is going to die, but not the exact minute or how it'll happen.

". . . Do you understand all of this?"

"Yeah."

"Log on to death-cast.com and fill out any special requests you may have for your funeral in addition to the inscription you'd like engraved on your headstone. Or perhaps you would like to be cremated, in which case . . ."

I've only ever been to one funeral. My grandmother died when I was seven, and at her funeral I threw a tantrum because she wasn't waking up. Fast-forward five years when Death-Cast came into the picture and suddenly everyone *was* awake at their own funerals. Having the chance to say good-bye before you die is an incredible opportunity, but isn't that time better spent actually living? Maybe I would feel differently if I could count on people showing up to my funeral. If I had more friends than I do fingers.

"And Timothy, on behalf of everyone here at Death-Cast, we are so sorry to lose you. Live this day to the fullest, okay?"

"I'm Mateo."

"Sorry about that, Mateo. I'm mortified. It's been a long day and these calls can be so stressful and—"

I hang up, which is rude, I know. I know. But I can't listen to someone tell me what a stressful day she's been having when I might drop dead in the next hour, or even the next

ten minutes: I could choke on a cough drop; I could leave my apartment to do something with myself and fall down the stairs and snap my neck before I even make it outside; someone could break in and murder me. The only thing I can confidently rule out is dying of old age.

I sink to the floor, on my knees. It's all ending today and there is absolutely nothing I can do about it. I can't journey across dragon-infested lands to retrieve scepters that can halt death. I can't hop onto a flying carpet in search of a genie to grant my wish for a full and simple life. I could maybe find some mad scientist to cryogenically freeze me, but chances are I'd die in the middle of that wacky experiment. Death is inevitable for everyone and it's absolute for me today.

The list of people I will miss, if the dead can miss anyone, is so short I shouldn't even call it a list: there's Dad, for doing his best; my best friend, Lidia, not only for not ignoring me in the hallways, but for actually sitting down across from me in lunch, partnering with me in earth science, and talking to me about how she wants to become an environmentalist who will save the world and I can repay her by living in it. And that's it.

If someone were interested in my list of people I *won't* miss, I'd have nothing for them. No one has ever wronged me. And I even get why some people didn't take a shot on me. Really, I do. I'm such a paranoid mess. The few times I was invited to do something fun with classmates, like

roller-skating in the park or going for a drive late at night, I bowed out because we *might* be setting ourselves up for death, *maybe*. I guess what I'll miss most are the wasted opportunities to live my life and the lost potential to make great friends with everyone I sat next to for four years. I'll miss how we never got to bond over sleepovers where everyone stayed up and played Xbox Infinity and board games all night, all because I was too scared.

The number one person I'll miss the most is Future Mateo, who maybe loosened up and lived. It's hard to picture him clearly, but I imagine Future Mateo trying out new things, like smoking pot with friends, getting a driver's license, and hopping on a plane to Puerto Rico to learn more about his roots. Maybe he's dating someone, and maybe he likes that company. He probably plays piano for his friends, sings in front of them, and he would definitely have a crowded funeral service, one that would stretch over an entire weekend after he's gone—one where the room is packed with new people who didn't get a chance to hug him one last time.

Future Mateo would have a longer list of friends he'll miss.

But I will never grow up to be Future Mateo. No one will ever get high with me, no one will be my audience as I play piano, and no one will sit shotgun in my dad's car after I get my license. I'll never fight with friends over who gets the better bowling shoes or who gets to be Wolverine when we play video games.

I collapse back onto the floor, thinking about how it's do or die now. Not even that.

Do, and then die.

12:42 a.m.

Dad takes hot showers to cool down whenever he's upset or disappointed in himself. I copied him around the time I turned thirteen because confusing Mateo Thoughts surfaced and I needed tons of Mateo Time to sort through them. I'm showering now because I feel guilty for hoping the world, or some part of it beyond Lidia and my dad, will be sad to see me go. Because I refused to live invincibly on all the days I didn't get an alert, I wasted all those yesterdays and am completely out of tomorrows.

I'm not going to tell anyone. Except Dad, but he's not even awake so it doesn't really count. I don't want to spend my last day wondering if people are being genuine when they throw sad words at me. No one should spend their last hours second-guessing people.

I've got to get out into the world, though, trick myself into thinking it is any other day. I've got to see Dad at the hospital and hold his hand for the first time since I was a kid and for what will be the last . . . wow, the last time ever.

I'll be gone before I can adjust to my mortality.

I also have to see Lidia and her one-year-old, Penny. Lidia

named me Penny's godfather when the baby was born, and it sucks how I'm the person expected to take care of her in case Lidia passes away since Lidia's boyfriend, Christian, died a little over a year ago. Sure, how is an eighteen-year-old with no income going to take care of a baby? Short answer: He isn't. But I was supposed to get older and tell Penny stories of her world-saving mother and chill father and welcome her into my home when I was financially secure and emotionally prepared to do so. Now I'm being whisked out of her life before I can become more than some guy in a photo album who Lidia may tell stories about, during which Penny will nod her head, maybe make fun of my glasses, and then flip the page to family she actually knows and cares about. I won't even be a ghost to her. But that's no reason to not go tickle her one more time or wipe squash and green peas off her face, or give Lidia a little break so she can focus on studying for her GED or brush her teeth or comb her hair or take a nap.

After that, I will somehow pull myself away from my best friend and her daughter, and I will have to go and live.

I turn off the faucet and the water stops raining down on me; today isn't the day for an hour shower. I grab my glasses off the sink and put them on. I step out of the tub, slipping on a puddle of water, and while falling backward I'm expecting to see if that theory of your life flashing before your eyes carries any truth to it when I grab hold of the towel rack and