

Landlords don't rent apartments to zombies.

I scratched the four-day stubble on my jawline and parked my mom's Camry behind the brown brick walk-up. Home-Not-So-Sweet Home.

As I stepped into the cramped apartment lobby Sergei was waiting.

"The rent," he said, his guttural Russian accent turning his words into a nonsensical de-REN. I paused, reluctantly meeting the bushy brows lowered ominously over his steely slitted eyes. Easy to translate.

I nodded and darted my own eyes to the stairway. One of these days my landlord would surely raise a heavily muscled arm and crash his ham hock fist into my face. Emitting my zombie grunt, I pivoted to the stairwell and rushed up, expecting Sergei to follow. Relieved when he didn't.

It would be a brief reprieve. When my mom lived here Sergei only showed up once a month, but in the three years since she died, he'd pounded his frustration with my spotty payments onto my apartment door with increasing frequency, not budging until I opened the creaky steel barrier. Saying nothing, he'd hold out a meaty palm that looked like it could strangle me all by itself.

Back when I still had cash, I'd offer a wad of fifties and hundreds that he'd snatch up like grabbing cash from an ATM. Only the Will Lockhart machine was now empty, and Sergei looked as though he wanted to kick it into compliance. Kick me. Face flushed with fury, he'd study me with those hard gray pebbles, taking in my disheveled hair and sagging clothes. A gaze that told me exactly what he thought about me—a twenty-one-year-old slacker who clearly cared about nothing. A deadbeat. A zombie. And this was mostly true except for the one thing I cared deeply about: those last seconds with Mom. I relived them daily, the guilt as fresh and dangerously addictive as a drunk's bleary-eyed yearning for a Bloody Mary the morning after a bender.

I deserved the memories. If not for me, Mom would still be alive.

I closed my eyes against the inevitable scene rolling through my mind. The flash of headlights slicing through my Honda's dusky interior like a white-hot comet, too fast to stop, too bright to blink away; a violent force whirling me into its vortex. My neck twisting painfully, head hitting something hard. The car's interior exploding into a slow-motion kaleidoscope. How I'd instinctively thrust my arm out to protect my mom, instant pain bolting from fingers to shoulder; glass shattering and raining down upon us like the stinging embers of trailing fireworks.

And then, the stillness. The church-like quiet.

I'd blinked into the silence as the noises trickled in—the hissing of the steaming engine, and a tinny song coming through the radio from somewhere under the car's hood. A far-off voice belted out a twangy country tune. "Put on the bacon and the eggs, darlin' . . ."

Mom and her country music. Mom and her . . . Mom. Head throbbing, I'd scanned the smoke-choked twilight. She was right where she was supposed to be, still hooked in place by her seatbelt, staring straight ahead, like she was listening for something.

"Mom? Are you all right?"

Beyond the jagged glass edges of her blown-out window I saw the lines of the truck through the smoky haze, the words "Barclay's Bread" written in fancy red letters on its wide, boxy side. Mom said nothing.

Painfully bolted into our twisted metal cage, waiting for the Jaws of Life to extract us, I'd reached out, trying to touch her with my other hand, the one that still worked. If I could just shake her out of her trance.

But in those final precious seconds our bodies existed in the same world, I knew. She was already gone.

I shook my head, forcing me back to the present, wishing my mind could be like the Etch-a-Sketch Mom bought me when I was six. One harsh shake in each direction and the contents of the screen disappeared. But my mind retained in painful detail the truck driver's distinctive profile, the beak of a nose angled down, a squinted eye and bulbous cheekbone lit up by his cell-phone screen.

As a kid, the thought of Mom dying had set waves of terror rolling through me. Not just because I loved her, but because a part of me always dreaded the day she'd be taken from me. Convinced it would happen but unsure of when, I'd spent a good four years waking up each night and tiptoeing to her bedroom door, peeking through the crack between the edge of the flimsy wood and the wall to ensure she was still in bed, alive. Ridiculous as it seemed, even then, it was understandable, given our track record. I mean, not long before my dad left us, just after my fifth birthday, we'd been a family of four.