

# BOY

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Light.

Bright. White. Light.

Ash's eyes snapped open, bringing intense pain, making him close them again and put his hands up for protection. A sharp ache bored through his skull and he lay still, trying to remember where he was.

For a moment his mind was blank; then his stomach heaved as an image leaped into his head. He had been at Dad's funeral—all those black suits and sad faces. People he hardly knew, talking about what a good guy Ben McCarthy had been. There was something else, though. There had been something *wrong*. Something to do with that scruffy potbellied man. Whatever he'd said to Mom had scared her and she had dragged Ash away, and . . .

And now he was here, in this firm bed, beneath crisp, clean sheets.

As soon as the pain started to ease, Ash pushed himself up on his elbows and squinted at the unfamiliar room. The ache of panic stirred deep inside like an awakening beast.

As everything came into focus, he saw that the room was bare. White walls reflected light from a fluorescent tube set behind a frosted glass panel in the white ceiling. Attached to the wall on the right-hand side of the bed was a panel with three touchscreens displaying digital numbers in glowing orange and green. A clear tube sprouted from the center of the panel, running down to a blue plastic connection that was stuck to the back of Ash's right hand by a large piece of clear tape. Beneath the tape, the needle that entered his skin was just visible. The sight of the shining steel piercing his body sickened him. For some reason it made him think of spiders in the dark.

"Mom?" His throat was dry and his voice croaked. His mouth felt as if it were filled with cotton wool, soaking up every last drop of moisture.

On a small bedside table was a plastic cup, and next to that was Dad's dog tag. The leather cord was coiled like a small black snake. Ash looked at the silver rectangle with its identification details for a moment, trying to remember what had happened. His thoughts were muddled, though, prodding the panic-beast harder, so he kept his eyes fixed on the dog tag—the one thing that could make him feel strong.

He reached out and took hold of the leather cord, which uncoiled as he lifted it. The tag swung from side to side and he sat up farther, using both hands to slip it over his neck. It was the only familiar thing in an unfamiliar room, and having it lying against his chest made him feel safer.

When that was done, he took the cup, drank half the water, then replaced it on the table and swung his legs over the side of the bed. The floor was white, with faint flecks of green running through it. It was cold on his bare feet.

He felt even smaller than usual as he sat there and looked around the room, trying to remember everything that had happened since the—

*He injected you,* said the voice in his head.

It was the same voice Ash had heard all his life. It had always been there to taunt him and doubt him—to make him feel useless and afraid.

*Don't you remember that little syringe? He drugged you. A slender man without any expression and a smooth, deep voice. And now you're dead. All alone.*

The voice made his stomach queasy, so Ash touched the dog tag for reassurance and glanced down to see he was wearing pale blue, light cotton pajamas. He felt an uncomfortable flush of anger and embarrassment; someone else must have put them on him. Maybe he was in some kind of hospital or something. That would explain the white sheets and white walls.

“Mom?” His voice was flat in the small white room, and anxiety tightened its grip. He waited a few seconds, then called again, this time louder. “Mom?”

Nothing.

*She died,* sneered the voice in his head. It came from somewhere dark and out of reach. *They stuck a needle in her*

*neck, and she got what she deserved. She's dead and gone, and you're all alone.*

"No."

It wasn't true. He would know, wouldn't he? He would feel it.

Ash pushed to his feet and put a hand on the wall to steady himself. Without even thinking about it, his fingers went to the tag around his neck, and a deep hollowness nestled among all the other terrible feelings. He shook it away and looked down at the needle in his hand. If he were going to leave this room and search for Mom, he would have to remove it.

"I *have* to." He peeled back the tape and the needle fell to one side, almost sliding out by itself. Clear liquid oozed like venom from the tip as he dropped the needle onto the bed and rubbed the back of his hand.

The numbers on the digital panel began to change, and Ash was afraid something terrible was about to happen. Maybe the drip was keeping him alive and now his brain would cloud over, or his heart would stop beating, and—

There was no change at all. Nothing.

Ash stayed where he was for a few more moments, staring at the numbers, then turned toward the door set into the far corner of the room. Taking a deep breath, he padded over to it.

*It'll be locked.*

He knew it right away, as surely as he knew his name was Ash McCarthy and that he was twelve years old.

Whoever had brought him here would have locked the door.

Preparing for the worst, he reached out and took the handle firmly in his hand, then twisted and pulled.

The overhead door-closer made a sucking noise as it opened, and Ash stepped back in surprise. The voice had been wrong. With his fingers still on the handle, he listened, hardly daring to cross the threshold. He wanted to know where he was and what was out there, but at the same time he *didn't* want to know.

His fingers curled harder around the handle and his stomach cramped as if the fear in his veins had turned to ice. He was tempted to call out, but something told him it was better to be quiet and unnoticed, so he took a step, leaning forward just enough to peek out.

The corridor ran in both directions. Long and white, with the same green-flecked floor. It was silent and empty. No nurses or doctors hurrying here and there carrying clipboards and clicking pens. No carts or visitors.

Just a long white empty corridor, and the steady hum of air-conditioning.

*See? You're already dead. You're in the afterlife, and you're all alone.*

The corridor was lined with doors on both sides, spaced evenly. Each one had a Roman numeral on it, close to the top. He turned and looked at his own door, seeing a little black plastic X.

Without warning, another flash of memory sparked in

his mind—of a woman injecting his mom the same way the man had injected him. And the woman had said something.

*Kronos needs to be resurrected.*

Ash didn't know what that meant, but he remembered the look on Mom's face.

It had filled her with terror.