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SHIMMER

A Novel



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Dedication

For my son, Matthew,
because life isn't fair and he's young enough
that he shouldn't have to know that.

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*"Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light."*

—Dylan Thomas

"Walkers don't believe in coincidences."

—Logan Walker

PART ONE

Rift

CHAPTER 1

Always the first to know when something horrible was about to happen. That was Logan's gift. More of a curse than a blessing. Invariably, his foreknowledge was limited to unexplained anxiety, never cold hard facts. Certainly not enough information to help avert whatever impending tragedy he sensed. Enough to worry about it, though, which was why he expected to suffer from bleeding ulcers by the ripe old age of twenty-five—assuming he lived that long. In the extended Walker family, longevity was as rare as death by natural causes. And as far as Logan was concerned, tonight had disaster written all over it.

One of Logan's *bad feelings* was the reason the three of them were loitering in the Hadenford Stop-On-Buy's parking lot past midnight on a weekday. Likewise, Logan's gift was responsible for the family's abrupt relocation to Hadenford. They'd come too far to settle for half-measures.

With a slight nod to the far corner of the parking lot, Logan said to Barrett, "There."

A study in black—long-sleeved silk shirt with cuffs rolled back to expose tanned, muscular forearms, leather pants and soft-soled Italian loafers—Barrett appeared at Logan's side as if by magic. A moment ago, he'd been six feet away, leaning against the bumper of his slate-gray Jeep Liberty. In the span of an eye-blink, and as silent as a passing thought, Barrett had crossed the distance separating them. He'd probably begun his approach with Logan's startled inhalation before he spoke. No magic involved, other than preternaturally fast reflexes. Freaky, though, in Logan's book.

"Where?" Barrett asked. "Show me."

Logan took a nervous bite of a hard pretzel before waving the remainder of the sourdough snack in the direction of the corner streetlight. The mercury-vapor lamp flickered, emitting an insectile buzz that made Logan's skin itch.

“Ah,” Barrett said dryly with a slow, exaggerated nod to underplay his sarcasm, “That light’s in danger of burning out, is it?”

“Didn’t you see? It just started to—”

“Wonder how many Walkers does it take to change a light bulb? I could shimmy up the pole if you’ll toss—”

“Bite me.”

“Enough bickering, boys,” Liana said, stepping away from the Jeep’s passenger side. In contrast to Barrett’s slick black attire and Logan’s casual ensemble of rugby shirt and distressed jeans, Liana was a ceremonial presence, almost ghostly in a flowing, translucent white gown. A narrow silver headband swept her shoulder-length wheat-blond hair away from the perfect oval of her face, framing dark, liquid eyes and full red lips. “Besides, Barry, you asked Logan to point out any manifestations.” She favored Logan with a wink.

“Thanks, Sis,” Logan said, grinning. “*Barry* certainly did ask.”

“I also asked not to be called Barry, dear cousin,” Barrett said. “Everyone conveniently forgets that.”

Liana smiled mischievously. “Who says we forgot?”

Logan chuckled, but his smile was fleeting. Instincts took over, pulling his attention to the boulevard intersection’s traffic light as it winked from yellow to red. He swallowed a mouthful of dry pretzel, and imagined a lump of dread squeezing down his throat.

Barrett frowned, still fixated on the corner streetlight. “I would hardly call a flickering streetlight a manifestation.”

“Start the Jeep,” Logan said, dropping his half-empty bag of pretzels as he rushed past Barrett and Liana.

“What now?” Barrett asked Liana.

She shrugged, raising both eyebrows. Her talents lay elsewhere.

Logan yanked open the driver’s side door. “Start the damn Jeep or toss me the keys!”

“Do as he says,” Liana said. Trailing Logan, she climbed into the backseat.

“Move over, hotshot,” Barrett said, close behind despite his initial hesitation. “I’ll drive.”

“Fine,” Logan said, scrambling over to the passenger side.

“Drive.”

“Right,” Barrett said with a curt nod as he started the Jeep, then paused as his hand clutched the gearshift. “Now tell me where to go.”

Logan smirked. "I'd love to... some other time. Right now, you'd better—" He gasped in anticipation, his head whipping toward the intersection a moment before he heard the shriek of car brakes.

A dark Civic stopped halfway through the intersection, inches short of a collision with a white Mustang that ran the red light. Where the road dipped in the middle of the intersection, the Mustang bottomed out in a shower of sparks, then roared away. The Honda driver pounded his horn and shook his head in disgust before continuing across the intersection.

Logan's gaze trailed after the speeding white sports car. "Follow the Mustang."

As if hoping for a consensus, Barrett glanced back at Liana. She was leaning forward, fingernails digging into the vinyl upholstery of the seatbacks as she stared through the windshield. She noticed Barrett's gaze the same time as Logan, but Logan spoke first. "What are you waiting for?"

"Go!" Liana said.

Barrett nodded.

Before facing forward again, Logan scanned Liana's forearms, nervously checking the elegant gold lines of her tattooed sigils. The swirling lines were as fine as spider webs, more cryptic than hieroglyphics. They represented an ancient language of ideas and power that he could not hope to comprehend.

Noticing his attention, Liana reminded him, "They don't work that way, Logan."

He shook his head. "I know... but, God, don't you feel it?"

"Not the way you do, Logan."

"So now we're chasing traffic violators," Barrett muttered as he drove across the parking lot and out into the street, racing after the Mustang. "Am I supposed to make a citizen's arrest?"

No one answered him.

Behind them, the streetlight stopped flickering, its anemic cone of pale light undisturbed once again. The change went unnoticed by Liana or Barrett, but Logan swallowed again, convinced that imminent disaster was now ahead of them. He wished he'd held onto the pretzel bag. Crunchy snacks eased his precognitive tension... and stopped him from grinding his molars to nubs. He massaged his jaw, shaking his head as he stared down the dark road, mesmerized and horrified by the Mustang's burning red taillights.

“What’s the plan? Midnight drag race? Or should I run him off the road?”

“Just follow him,” Logan said. This time of night, traffic was sparse. The Mustang was the only car in front of them, but it was gaining separation. “Hurry!”

“What’s happening... exactly?”

“I don’t know,” Logan said. “But that car is—or will be... involved somehow.”

“You knew that car was coming?”

“I knew *something* was coming.”

“How?”

“I just do,” Logan said, nibbling the corner of his thumbnail.

Barrett closed the gap between the cars. “Look, he’s slowing.”

“Not slowing,” Logan said. “Turning.”

A moment later, without signaling, the Mustang made a wide right turn down a side street, leaving the four-lane avenue behind. Barrett followed, making a crisper turn, but the other car had pulled away again. Barrett accelerated.

“Driver... and one passenger,” Liana noted.

Barrett glanced at Logan. “You’re in charge tonight. What’s my move here?”

“Follow, for now,” Logan said absently. “Don’t spook him, though. Not until I know. But... it’s coming soon.”

“What if they’re the cause?” Barrett reasoned. “Maybe we should stop them.”

“I don’t know *what* they are... yet,” Logan said. “We’re isolated for now. If we stop them, we might—we can’t risk losing the...”

“The scent?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Logan said. “We might need them to lead us to it.”

A couple miles away from the commercial district, trees closed in on either side of them, houses were spaced farther apart, porch lights or driveway lights creating islands of illumination in the unfolding darkness. The sense of isolation grew stronger. Logan clutched his stomach as a wave of nausea assaulted him. “It’s close...”

Tree branches reached over the narrow road, creating a natural tunnel and adding to the oppressive darkness pressing in from all sides.

The Mustang’s taillights winked out for a moment and, briefly, it seemed to Logan as if the white sports car was painted black. “What was that?” Logan asked, leaning forward. White again. “It changed...”

“A shadow,” Liana said, but sounded unconvinced herself.

“They’re slowing.”

“And... swerving!” Liana said.

The Mustang drifted across the dashed center line, decelerating as it veered toward the tree line on the left side of the road.

Logan shouted, “Stop the car!”

Barrett hit the brake pedal.

Thrown forward, Liana grunted in discomfort, but maintained her hold on the seatbacks. “That’ll teach me not to buckle up.”

“What the hell—?” Barrett said. “Look.”

The Mustang rolled down the gravel shoulder and lurched into a tree, crumpling its front bumper. Its headlights knifed into the deeper darkness, exposing more trees and underbrush but nothing else.

“What happened?” Barrett asked, already climbing out of the Jeep.

Liana followed, slipping out from the driver’s side, but Logan was reluctant to leave the nominal safety of the SUV. Whatever had happened a moment ago still had... *potential*. To him, the night felt coiled with deadly intent, like a cougar ready to pounce on unsuspecting prey. Swallowing his gorge, Logan clawed his door open with numb hands and stepped down to the gravel shoulder. Loose stones scraped together under his running shoes and made harsh grinding sounds.

Behind the Mustang, Barrett took hesitant steps toward the driver’s door, arms raised, hands spread in a defensive posture.

The Mustang’s front windows were halfway down, the car’s stereo blaring “Sympathy for the Devil” by the Rolling Stones.

“Barrett—*wait!* We need a threat assessment.” Liana shouted from the side of the road. “Logan?”

Logan exhaled as the tension suddenly drained from his body. He sprinted across the road to join them. “Whatever it was,” he said, “it’s gone.”

Barrett reached for the door handle, then froze and shook his head. “Oh, man, this is not good...”

Liana joined him. “What?”

Barrett held up a restraining hand. “Trust me,” he said, “you do not want to see this.”

“Don’t try to protect me,” she said defensively. “I’ve seen plenty of...” Her voice trailed off as she gazed through the side window. She gulped, clamped a hand over her mouth and stumbled away from the car, repulsed.

“What?” Logan asked, still too far away to see anything.

Doubled over and panting for breath, pale and trembling with both hands planted on her hips, Liana shook her head. “Dear Lord...”

Logan had to look—had to know. He’d sensed something bad was coming... and this was it, the confirmation. Familiar guilt began to scuttle around his stomach like a many-legged insect. So easy to blame himself. He always felt responsible when the bad things happened, as if his inability to see the final outcome was a personal failure. At times like this, he considered his talent useless. Worse than useless. It merely taunted him with the idea that he could make a difference.

With the grim weight of tragedy pressing down on him, he approached the car from the passenger side. Frigid air seemed to flow out of the partially open window, carrying with it the coppery scent of blood, the heavy scent of raw meat ... and something fetid, cloying with decay. Holding his breath, Logan peered through the gap in the window.

Blood—*God, so much blood!*—splashed across the windshield and the dashboard, glistening on the black vinyl bucket seats, dripping from the steering wheel, almost as if it had been splashed from gallon paint cans. Empty beer bottles on the passenger side floor, a few more in back, along with crumpled fast food wrappers, but...

“Where...?” Logan gulped. “Where are the bodies?”

Shaking his head as he walked away from the car, Barrett said, “Look closer.”

Against Logan’s better judgment and in spite of his renewed queasiness, he leaned forward... and noticed the irregular lumps in the blood. Even as he realized what those scattered lumps must be, he knew there weren’t enough of them—not nearly enough mass—not for two adult human bodies. His tenuous state of denial collapsed when he noticed something white and gleaming on top of the dashboard, its soft round shape wedged against the base of the windshield as it stared back at him—

“Oh, God...” Logan backed away from the car and fell to his knees in the middle of the road, one on either side of the white-dashed line dividing the long stretch of asphalt. Eyes squeezed shut, Logan’s chin dropped to his chest. “I hate this,” he said softly, on the verge of tears. “I hate this... I hate it...”

A flutter of ghostly white before him, then Liana’s hands on his shoulders. “It’s not your fault, Logan.”

He whispered his line by rote, “I know.”

“I mean it,” Liana said forcefully.

He looked up into her dark brown eyes. If he found no forgiveness in her gaze, it was only because he never found any blame there. “Li...” His voice trembled. “It’s bad this time. Really bad.” She nodded. “And this...” He nodded toward the Mustang. “It’s just the beginning.”

“You brought us here for a reason, Logan,” Liana said. “To stop it before it gets worse.”

Comforting words. But Logan had heard them before. And they were insufficient counterweight to the dreadful premonitions whispered into his subconscious by his gift—his curse. Worse, he sensed the Walkers would find no quick fix for this latest rift. The enemy would be formidable, the worst they had ever encountered. And many people would die.

Liana was right. Logan had brought them here, in his thankless role as the Walker harbinger of doom. And this time the message was literal.

Pure hell had come to Hadenford, New Jersey.