

A KIND OF DEATH



CRIME SCENE DO NOT CROSS

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A CAV CRAWFORD MYSTERY

**Excerpt from *A Kind of Death* by Josh Aterovis
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Later that night, alone in my room, my thoughts returned to Mason. I eyed the candle and wondered if I should try to summon him again, assuming that was even what I had done. I didn't debate long. I wanted to know what had happened to him, and this seemed like my only chance.

I grabbed the candle, sat down on the floor, and lit it.

"Now what?" I mused aloud.

Maybe I should just do what I did before. It couldn't hurt to ask for my ancestors' protection before summoning a spirit, even if he was my ex.

With the prayer fresh in my mind thanks to Nana, I started. "Tonight, I honor my ancestors. Spirits of my fathers and mothers, loved ones who have gone before, I call to you and welcome you to join me for this night. You watch over me always, protecting and guiding me, and tonight I thank you. Your blood runs in my veins, your spirit is in my heart, your memories are in my soul. With the gift of remembrance, I remember all of you. You are dead but never forgotten, and you live on within me and within those who are yet to come."

I took a deep breath, then said, "Mason, if you can hear me...."

What? What exactly was I asking for? Maybe I should have thought this out a little more before starting.

"Mason, it's Cav. If you can hear me, come back."

Nothing happened. What was different? Then I remembered that I'd used his full name last time. It was worth a try. I repeated the prayer and ended with, "Mason McKibben, if you can hear me, come back to me."

The words hadn't even left my mouth before the candle flame flickered so violently I thought it would sputter out. The fire returned to normal just as suddenly as it had started its wild dance. My attempt hadn't worked. Maybe it had just been my imagination after all, just seeing what I wanted to see.

"Cav?"

I knew that voice anywhere. I spun around and gasped. Mason stood behind me, looking every bit as alive as the last time I'd seen him... well, alive. Mason was about five ten and was very handsome—or, as Nana once described him, quite dashing. He had a lithe build and big, soulful brown eyes with floppy brown hair that tended to fall over his forehead. He had a habit of pushing it back with one hand when he was excited or flustered or upset. He was doing it now.

I scrambled to my feet.

“You’re here,” I said, my voice suddenly hoarse. “You’re really here.”

“What’s going on?” he asked. He had a sort of half smile and an uncertain look, as if he thought I was playing some sort of elaborate prank and he wasn’t sure he liked it. “Why am I in your bedroom? How did I get here?”

“I... think I summoned you?”

“Summoned me? What’s that supposed to mean?”

My heart sank. Did he even know he was dead?

“What’s the last thing you remember?”

His face screwed up in a familiar expression that meant he was thinking hard. “I don’t know. It’s all... dark. I... I remember... it’s our anniversary, right? Wait.... Is this some sort of surprise party?” He paused and gave me an incredulous look. “Did you drug me?”

“No! Of course not.” I sat down heavily on my bed. He didn’t know he was dead. And if he didn’t know he was dead, he almost certainly wouldn’t remember how he died.

“Then why is my head so fuzzy? What’s going on, Cav?”

Was I going to have to be the one to break it to him that he was dead? How did one even do that? Was there a protocol?

“I don’t know how to tell you this.”

“Are you breaking up with me? On our anniversary?”

“No! I mean... it’s not our anniversary.”

“What do you mean? Why are you acting so strange?”

“Mason, our anniversary was over a year ago.”

“That’s not possible. Is this some sort of sick joke? If so, it’s not funny.”

“I wish it was a joke. You.... You were....” I couldn’t force the words out.

“I’m what? Just spit it out.”

I shook my head. This wasn’t turning out the way I’d thought it would at all.

“Are you mad at me? Did I do something? Whatever it is you think I did, I promise I’ll make it better.”

“Mason, you’re dead.”

He stared at me with almost no expression. “What did you say?”

“You’re dead. You disappeared on our anniversary over a year ago. Nobody knew where you were. We were all so worried. Then they found your body in a park months later.” Once I started talking, it was like a dam had burst. The words kept tumbling out. “I was devastated. We all were. Nothing made sense. Why did you go to a park? Were you killed? Did you fall?”

“Cav,” he said softly, but I couldn’t stop.

“It’s been tearing me up inside. I accidentally called you a few nights ago, and I tried it again tonight. I don’t even know how it worked.”

“Cav.”

“I just needed answers. I wanted to know what happened to you.”

“Cav!” he shouted.

My verbal torrent finally stopped with a shuddering breath.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Mason said, an edge to his voice.

“You’re dead.”

“Stop saying that!” he roared.

The candle flickered again.

This was new territory for me. Every ghost I’d encountered in the past knew they were dead. Some were melancholy about it, but most seemed to have accepted it. They were just happy to have someone who could see and talk to them again. Some of them faded away after a while,

lost their connection with the living world. Some lingered longer, but I'd never encountered one who didn't know they were deceased.

"I'm sorry," I said finally. I felt a tear spill over and run down my cheek.

This had been a mistake. I could see that now. I was being selfish. I had no idea where Mason's spirit had been for the past year, but I'd yanked him from whatever state he'd been in and forced him back into our plane. Maybe it wasn't too late to send him back.

I slid off the bed and reached for the candle.

"The joke has gone far enough, Cav."

"I wish it was a joke," I mumbled.

I leaned in to blow out the candle, but just as I did, Mason closed the distance between us. I paused and looked up at him. He crouched down next to me and studied my face.

"You're crying," he said softly.

"Yeah." I didn't know what else to say.

"Cav...." His gaze shifted to the candle. He reached out as if to take it from me, but his hand passed through it. His eyes grew wide as they returned to my face.

"Cav?" He sounded scared now.

"I'm sorry," I said again.

Suddenly the room grew cold and darker, as if all the light and warmth were being sucked out, the circle of illumination shrinking until all I could see was the candle and Mason's terrified face. The hair stood up on my arms, and the candle flame jumped in a wind that seemed to spring up out of nowhere.

"No," Mason said hoarsely, almost to himself. "I can't be dead."

The wind swirled around us with increasing speed. I tried to shelter the candle with my hand.

"Mason, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have called you. I didn't know what I was doing. I'm so sorry."

His eyes never left my face. "Why? Why would you do this?"

“This isn’t.... I didn’t....”

The wind was growing even stronger. I pulled the candle in closer to my body. Its feeble light wasn’t much, but it was all I had.

“Mason, listen. Maybe I can help. Maybe I can find out—”

“Can you bring me back to life?”

My breath caught in my throat. “No.”

“Then what *can* you do?”

The wind kicked up until it was howling around us. There was a crash, and the candle went out, leaving me in pitch black with only the sound of wind rushing in my ears.

And then it was over. The wind didn’t die down. It was just gone, along with the utter darkness. A streetlight outside my window lit the room. Someone was banging on my door.

“Cav, are you okay?” It was Haniah. “I heard a crash.”

“I’m... I’m fine,” I managed, even if my voice was a little shaky. “I just knocked something over.”

“Okay, well, keep it down. I’m going to bed.”

“I will. Sorry.”

Had that really happened? I looked down at the candle in my hand. In the dim light, I could just make out a splatter of wax across my fingers. I set the candle down and pulled myself up using the bed. My bedside lamp had fallen over. I stood it up and turned it on, revealing that my room was a mess. Anything paper on my desk had been scattered, my rolling chair was on its side against the wall, and the framed poster over my desk hung askew. My curtain rod dangled drunkenly from one bracket. Mason was nowhere to be seen.

What had I done?

Back in my room later, I was straightening up a bit. I moved a sweatshirt I’d tossed on my desk, and it uncovered the candle I’d used to summon Mason. I dropped the shirt and picked up the candle.

“Oh, Mason,” I sighed.

Where was he now? What happened to him after I summoned him, now that he knew he was dead?

I placed the candle back on the desk and finished cleaning up.

As I was dozing off, someone whispered my name. I sat up to find a figure standing by the window, illuminated softly by the moonlight. Somehow, I wasn't surprised.

“Hi, Mason. You came back.”

He took a step closer. “I didn't know where else to go. Cav, why did you—what did you call it? Summon me? Why did you call me back?”

“I don't know. I didn't really think it through. I just missed you so much. And I wanted to know you were... okay. I wanted to know what happened to you. But wait. Where were you before I called you?”

“Darkness. Nothingness. It was like I was asleep, a deep dreamless sleep. Then you were calling me. Or I felt it. It's hard to explain. And then I woke up here in your room.”

I scooted up so my back was against my headboard and turned on the lamp on my bedside table. He looked so solid, even in the light. Every fiber of my being wanted to leap out of bed and throw my arms around him. But I couldn't. How could something that appeared so substantial just vanish? Where did he go? “Okay. What... what happens when you're not... here? Where did you go the other night?”

“I wandered around for a while, but I keep feeling drawn back here, to you. I fought it though, and I thought a lot. I went by my old place. Someone else lives there now. It was weird. Then I went to my parents'. They seemed older, sadder. But they're okay, I think. Or as okay as they can be. They have some things of mine on the mantel. There was a... there was an urn. I guess that's... me?”

“You're here. That's just... ashes.”

“Ashes to ashes, dust to dust,” he muttered, then sighed. “I guess I'm really dead.”

“I'm sorry,” I whispered.

“Did you kill me?”

“What? No!”

“Then you shouldn’t be apologizing.”

“I just... I hate it. I hate everything about this. I hate that you’re gone. I hate that I can’t give you a hug even though it’s all I want to do. I hate that I’m the reason you’re here now.”

He paced a bit while I talked, then stopped to stare out the window again. “That’s a lot of hate. Not to say it’s not justified and all, but I feel like if anyone should be filled with hate and anger, it should be me.”

“Yeah, uh, you do seem a lot calmer now.”

“Like I said, I’ve done a lot of thinking. It’s all I’ve done, really, since I left. I guess I don’t sleep anymore.”

“So you’re just awake all the time?”

“No. Not exactly. Sometimes it’s like I drift back into that darkness.”

I pulled my knees up and hugged them. “That sounds scary.”

“It’s not bad, really. It’s kind of comforting. Especially since when I’m... awake, for lack of a better word, all I can do is think about how I’m dead.”

“Oh. Yeah. That, uh, does sounds worse. But you seem to be at peace with it?”

He started pacing again. “Well, if I am dead, and that’s pretty hard to argue at this point, I guess I have to accept it. I thought maybe a bright light would appear once I did and I could just walk into it or something. I don’t really know how this works. But no such luck. When nothing happened, I didn’t know what to do, so I came back here.” He stopped and turned to face me. “What happens now?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “What do you want to happen? Do you want to go into the light? Or move on or whatever?”

He ran a hand through his hair, and my heart skipped a beat at the familiar gesture. It was something he always did when he was frustrated.

“I have no idea. I’ve never felt so alone and adrift. But there’s something pulling me back to you.”

A shiver ran down my spine. That was the second time he’d said something like that. I remembered Nana saying his untethered spirit might attach itself to me. Was that what he was describing now?

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t explain it. I know it’s a cliché, but maybe I have unfinished business or something. Maybe I need you to help me.”

Or maybe you’re just attached to me because I’m the one who summoned you. But I didn’t want to say that out loud.

“Help you how?”

“How did I die?”

I sucked in a breath. “There’s a lot we don’t know. Can you remember anything?”

“About how I died? No. It’s just a blank. Everything from that last day is blank. You said they found me in a park? Which one?”

“Leakin Park.”

“No wonder it took so long to find me.”

Leakin Park was huge, one of the largest urban parks in America. It was over a thousand acres of wooded trails.

“Why were you even there? Were you meeting someone? Did someone take you there?”

He frowned. “I don’t know. I wish I could remember. I used to go there sometimes to clear my mind, but I haven’t—*hadn’t* been there in months, maybe even years.”

“If you can’t remember anything, what do you want me to do?”

“Investigate my death. Find out what happened.”

“The police tried. They couldn’t even definitively say if there was foul play.”

“Yeah, but you’re a private investigator. You can find things maybe they couldn’t.”

“I wouldn’t even know where to start....”

“Cav. Please.”

I looked away. “Walker won’t let me.”

“What?”

“I wanted to investigate. After you disappeared. Especially after they... found you. He said I was too close and that the police would handle it.”

“But they haven’t handled it.”

“They ruled it an accidental death.”

“Okay, but is that what you think?”

“I don’t know what to think. There’s no reason to believe it was anything else.”

“But you suspect something.”

“I don’t. I mean, not really. It’s just.... It’s the not knowing. Not understanding. That’s the worst part. Do you suspect something?”

He rubbed his face. “Something feels wrong.” I opened my mouth, but he cut me off before I could get a word out. “And before you ask, that’s all I know. Maybe it’s just not knowing, like you said, but I just have this nagging feeling that something bad happened.”

“Well, yeah....”

“I mean besides just me dying. Something doesn’t feel right. I wish I could remember. But I can’t. And I don’t know why. That’s why I need your help.”

“But Walker....”

“He doesn’t have to know.”

“You want me to go behind my boss’s back?”

“Is it any of his business? It’s not like I’m hiring you. What am I going to pay you with? Ghost dollars? It doesn’t have to be anything official.”

“Where would I even start?”

“How would I know? You’re the investigator.”

“I’m in the middle of this case—”

“Then I can wait. It’s been a year already. What’s a few more weeks?”

“I... but...”

“But what?” He stared at me intently. “Cav, if you don’t want to do it, you can just say that. I... I would understand. I just don’t know who else to turn to. I need your help. Please.”

I was torn. Part of me wanted to agree. I couldn’t say I hadn’t thought about it. A lot. But I didn’t want to betray Walker’s trust in me. Maybe he’d feel differently about it now, with a little distance.

“Maybe I could talk to Walker again, see if he’d give his approval, you know, since it’s been a while.”

His face lit up with hope.

“But I can’t promise anything,” I rushed on. “He might say no. And it won’t be until after I wrap up this case. And even if he says yes, it’s been so long. All the leads might have dried up, assuming there ever were any leads. Maybe you just went on a hike and fell and hit your head on a rock, like the police believe.”

“Maybe so, but at least I’d know. At least *we’d* know. Just say you’ll try.”

I sighed. “Yeah. I’ll try.”

He broke into a wide smile. “Thank you. You have no idea what this means to me.”

“I think I have an idea.”

“Oh, hey, watch this,” he said, sounding so much like the old Mason I remembered that tears welled up in my eyes.

He walked over to my desk chair and reached out, an intense look of concentration on his face. He placed his hand on the back of the chair and slowly swiveled it around to face me, then sat down.

I watched all of this in amazement.

He grinned at the look on my face. “I’ve been practicing.”

“But how...?”

“I just have to really focus. I can’t really pick something up, at least not yet, but I can push things around. And I can sit.”

I shook my head in disbelief.

He reached out again, his brows creased, and pushed against the candle. It slid about an inch, and he gave me a look filled with pride. “I guess I’m starting to get the hang of this whole ghost thing.”

“That’s amazing. I’ve seen ghosts all my life, and I don’t think I’ve ever seen any of them do that before.”

He beamed. “Guess I’m just special.”

I blinked rapidly. “I always knew you were,” I said softly, and the smile faltered a bit.

“Hey, uh, we’ve been talking a lot about me. Which, you know, makes sense since I’m the ghost and all, but... how have you been?”

I quickly looked away. “It’s... been hard.”

“But you’re okay?”

“I wasn’t. For a long time. I was devastated. I suppose I’m doing a little better. It’s a process. That’s what everyone keeps saying. ‘Everyone grieves differently.’ Or ‘Give yourself time.’ And then after a while, it becomes, ‘You need to move on eventually.’ And ‘You need to get back out there and start dating.’ But I haven’t felt ready, you know?”

He looked surprised. “Hold up. You haven’t dated anyone since me? At all?”

Kyreh entered my mind like an intrusive thought. “No. Someone asked me out recently, but he turned out to be married, so I declined. Just not what I’m looking for, you know?”

“Sure. But you haven’t even been interested in anyone?”

“No. Or...”

“What?”

“Not until recently.”

“Oh.” He blinked at me.

“Mason, I—”

“No. It makes sense. I died. It’s been over a year. And you just said it. You have to move on at some point.”

“I mean, that’s what everyone keeps telling me. But I’m not sure I’m ready.”

“You won’t know until you get back out there, right?” He looked down at his hands. “What’s he like?”

“He, uh.... This is really weird, right?”

“What, discussing your new boyfriend with your dead boyfriend?”

“He’s not my boyfriend! He may not even be into me.”

“He’d be crazy to not be into you. Tell me about him.”

“He’s nice.”

“Nice? You can do better than that.”

“I don’t really know him that well yet.”

“Oh, come on. How’d you meet him?”

“He’s in one of my classes. We’re working on a paper together.”

“What’s the paper about?”

“Whether or not ghosts—” I cut myself off.

“You can say ghosts, Cav. I promise I won’t freak out again. No more indoor storms.”

“How did you do that, anyway?”

“No clue. I couldn’t exactly control it. Now stop trying to change the subject.”

“I’m just saying. If you can’t control it, you can’t guarantee it won’t happen again.”

“Cav,” he said patiently. “You’re trying to change the subject. What the paper about?”

“Whether or not ghosts are real.”

He gestured at himself. “Paper finished.”

I laughed. “I wish it was that easy.”

“What’s his name?”

“Kyreh.”

“Is he hot?”

“Um...”

He laughed again. “I can tell by your blush that he’s hot.”

“Mason...”

“Okay. Maybe you’re right. Maybe this is a bit weird.”

“Just a bit.”

He looked around the room, as if just realizing where he was. “What time is it, anyway?”

I shrugged. “Late?”

“Do you have class in the morning?”

“Yeah.”

He stood up. “Then I should let you get to bed. I’ve haunted you enough for one night.”

“Where are you going?”

He looked toward the window. “I don’t know.”

“Maybe...,” I started, then stopped.

“Maybe what?”

“If you can sit, do you think you can lay?”

He tipped his head to one side and gave me a confused look.

I slid over in my bed and smoothed the blankets next to me. “Maybe you could just, like, lay here for a little while.”

He swallowed and stared at the spot on the bed I’d indicated, looking like I’d just punched him. “I... I’d like that.” His eyes found mine. “But are you sure?”

I nodded.

He took a few steps toward the bed. “I haven’t tried laying down yet.”

“Was sitting hard?”

“No. I just did it.”

“Then just... do it.”

He walked around my bed to the far side and stopped to stare at me again. “You’re sure?”

“Just lay down. Damn.”

He gave me a small smile, then sat gingerly on the edge of the bed. The mattress didn’t move. He slowly leaned back as he swung his feet onto the bed, his arms rigid at his sides. The pillow depressed ever so slightly as his head settled into it. He stared up at the ceiling.

I leaned over and turned the lamp off, then slid back down under the covers. We lay next to each other, both of us staring up at the ceiling. Somehow it was both familiar and foreign, comforting and confusing, all at the same time.

I rolled onto my side facing him, and he turned his head and met my gaze. I wanted to snuggle into him so badly, the way we used to. That wasn’t possible, though. Nothing was the same. Instead we just lay there, eyes locked in the darkness.

“You should get some sleep,” he said softly.

“I just don’t want this moment to end,” I whispered back as tears threatened to spill over again.

He reached out a hand as if to touch my cheek, but then pulled it back. “Me either.”

I don’t know how long we lay there, just staring into each other’s eyes, but his face was the last thing I saw before my eyelids got too heavy and I faded into sleep.