

# **I Wake The Dead** in Westerlin Park

**I Wake the Dead, #1**

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# Chapter 1

## Until We're Here

Short rows of headstones rose from the earth like quiet sentinels, each one a familiar comfort that told Holly Singer she was home—in the quiet countryside of Quincy, Florida.

“Pull around at an angle so the trunk faces the woods—not the road, or the adjacent lot—so we can change clothes behind the car when we’re done,” Holly said to the driver.

She stepped out of the silver SUV before it had fully stopped, her canvas sneakers crunching against the freshly mowed Bahia grass. The scent of cut greenery mingled with the earthy smell of damp soil and sun-warmed stone. The narrow green strip stood in sharp contrast to the wild tangle of shrubs and untouched forest that bordered the northern edge of the Singer family cemetery. Spanish moss swayed from the limbs of old oaks, and the air buzzed with the low, constant drone of cicadas.

Hollis Singer—Holly, to everyone who knew her after she’d outgrown the stiff formality of her given name—moved with purpose through the lattice of marble, granite, and concrete. Six generations of Singers rested here, along with their spouses and partners. She greeted each grave with a quiet word or a soft smile, pausing longer at the ones that still tugged at her heart.

The first grave she visited was Grandma Julia’s. Holly knelt beside the stone, brushing away a few stray leaves and adjusting the artificial bouquet she’d assembled. The granite was cool beneath her fingers, its surface rough with age and speckled with lichen. Julia had been Grandpa Red’s wife, the mother of Holly’s still-living mother, Marty—and the person with whom Holly had shared the deepest bond, second only to her connection with Marty and her fiancé, Nick. She whispered a greeting, then moved on.

The driver, Nick Sheridan, lingered by the car, stretching his long legs and taking in the quaintness of the rural road with its scattering of red brick ranch homes, wooden farmhouses, and metal sheds, nestled among heavily lived-in mobile homes and brand-new double-wide trailers. It was a world

## AYDEN LOCKWOOD

away from the manicured suburbs of Palm Beach, where he'd grown up. Nick slipped two bottles of water into his back pockets and shut the car door. He opened the trunk and unloaded two plastic bins, a folded trash bag, two spray bottles, scrub brushes, and two pairs of gloves before lining the trunk with a plastic drop cloth.

Despite attending one of the poshest and most academically rigorous prep schools in South Florida—the same one Holly had attended, though they were two years apart—Nick was at home doing the kind of work their classmates would have hired someone else to do. The son of a prominent South Florida physician and grandson of a self-made industrial electronics magnate, a retired hockey player, Nick had no problem with physical labor—whether it was hard, gritty, monotonous, or mundane—as long as it wasn't unsanitary.

Like Holly, who descended from farmers, schoolteachers, housekeepers, carpenters, bus drivers, and dock workers, Nick found dignity in work that required hands and heart. Although Nick and Holly's experiences were often very different, they saw the world in much the same way. They were kindred spirits. Among the many things the couple had in common was their aversion to germs—an odd but bonding quirk that made them both meticulous, and occasionally comical, in their routines.

Nick handed Holly a pair of gloves before pulling on his own and retrieving the supplies for the arrangements they'd brought—bins of artificial flowers in soft pastels, and bold yellows, oranges, and blues.

Together, they moved from grave to grave, replacing faded plastic bouquets and sun-bleached silk flowers with the new ones they assembled on-site.

The morning sun climbed higher, turning the air thick and hot. Sweat beaded on their brows, and biting gnats hovered in erratic clouds around them. The scent of mildew and sunbaked earth clung to the air, mingling with the faint sweetness of nearby Florida Flame Azaleas, with their wispy blooms of yellow and orange.

One might have expected Holly to reconsider her commitment to nonviolence as she and Nick swatted at the swarming insects. But she didn't. Her belief in the sanctity of life—every life—ran deep. She thought constantly about mortality: the inevitability and unpredictability of death,

## I WAKE THE DEAD IN WESTERLIN PARK

the fragility and preciousness of life. It was this awareness that shaped her veganism and her refusal to kill even a gnat if she could avoid it.

Growing up with Southern grandparents who ate everything from opossum and raccoon—“possum” and “coon” among her kin—to squirrels, boiled turtle eggs, and rabbit stew might have influenced Holly’s path to veganism. If not, it was having a Southern father who hunted and had no problem slaughtering the livestock that Holly regarded as “pets” raised on their family land in the backwoods of Georgia where she lived before her parents’ divorce. She’d grown up with far too many stories about ringing chickens’ necks and hogs rounded up for slaughter. Among her relatives, those tales were told and retold almost as often as stories of mysterious superstitions and spirits of the dead returning for unfinished business.

Unlike Grandma Julia, who occasionally referenced spirits and haunts, Grandpa Red had never expressed an opinion about the paranormal. Holly’s mother, Marty, avoided the topic altogether, and Holly herself had never given it much thought. But here, surrounded by the dead, she felt the weight of their presence—not ghostly, exactly, but enduring.

In this garden of familiar dead, Miss Annie’s headstone stood tallest, its edges softened by time. She had been the oldest matriarch of the Singer family buried here, a woman who nurtured with a velvet glove and a spine of steel. Just beside her lay Great Grandpa Frederick Singer, the Singer family patriarch, and his first wife, Sadie. Miss Annie had been Frederick’s second wife—and the last of their generation to pass away.

The oldest living matriarch of the Singer family, however, was Henry Ann Singer, aged ninety-three, who lived just a few miles west on the same land she had shared for seven decades with Grandpa Red’s late brother, Odesta Singer, one of the ten Singer siblings at rest in the family plot.

Nearby, Grandpa Red’s grave bore a bronze plaque dulled by weather but still legible. Holly knelt and gently wiped away the cobwebs and mildew that had collected in the grooves of the fish etched into the plaque—a tribute to his love of fishing. The dates of his life were carved into the stone above, bookending the life of the WWII veteran, schoolteacher, dockworker, father, and grandfather.

Working through stinging sweat and bug bites for half the afternoon, Holly and Nick scrubbed away brown, green, and black grit from every

## AYDEN LOCKWOOD

headstone and slab. The scraping of bristles and the crunch of floral foam—trimmed and then pricked with green plastic stems—created a rhythm, melodic and continuous. Occasionally, a breeze stirred the trees, carrying the scent of pine and the faintest trace of southern red cedar from somewhere deeper in the woods.

Nick took a deep breath and let the clean country air fill his lungs. “Ah. This is great.” He cracked the cap on one of the water bottles and handed it to Holly. “Stay hydrated.” He surveyed the cemetery. “I counted about seventy-three graves. You know everyone buried here?”

Holly took a sip. “Most of them. The first time I came was about thirty-five years ago. I was small, so I’m not sure of the exact number, but I don’t believe there were more than fifteen graves here. Just three short rows.”

Nick surveyed the cemetery. “Wow. You lost a lot of family. I’m sorry.”

The floral foam crumbled at the edges as Holly forced it into a vase attached to the headstone. “That’s okay. I miss them, but most of them were already pretty old even then. My grand-uncle Odesta and his stepmother, Annie, lived to ninety-nine and ninety-seven when they passed away, and that was over ten years ago.”

Nick handed her a few stems of plastic greenery. “Odesta Singer—I saw that name on the way here. Same person?”

Holly stood back to inspect the fresh arrangement. The pop of yellow stood in contrast to the polished gray granite. “Yeah. Uncle Odesta was the eldest of my grandfather’s seven brothers. He was a prominent farmer in Gasden County and one of the first African American landowners in the area. The elementary school is named after him.”

A cool gust of wind danced through Nick’s hair, and he smoothed the strands. “Wow. Your family’s part of Gasden County history. How cool it must be to be so connected to your family heritage.”

Holly dropped a bunch of faded plastic into the half-full trash bag and gave it a tug as she moved to the next grave. “It is nice. It keeps me grounded. There’s a plot of land just off the road that’s been in my family since the nineteen-twenties. How about you? Is there somewhere you go to reconnect with family—other than Palm Beach?”

Nick dumped faded flowers from a cement planter. “Nope. I don’t have a lot of family. My father’s grandparents immigrated here from Ireland. They’re

## I WAKE THE DEAD IN WESTERLIN PARK

buried somewhere in New York. I kind of feel like I need to find out where. Except for my cousin Patrick, we have no close ties to Ireland that I know of. And my mom's parents were academics. They taught economics in Denmark and moved to the States during World War II. They taught at a few universities out west before retiring in South Florida. They're buried at Forest Lawn Memorial in Davie, but I can't remember the last time I visited their graves."

Eventually, the couple took a break, sitting with their backs resting against the cool granite sides of two headstones. The sun filtered through the trees, casting dappled shadows across the grass. It was quiet except for the hum of insects and the occasional rustle of wind through the leaves.

Nick leaned his head back against the granite and let out a slow breath. "You ever think about how weird it is that we do this?"

Holly glanced over. "Clean the cemetery?"

Nick shook his head. "Walk around unaware of the fact that it's completely natural for the clock to run out. Until we're here."

Holly rubbed a drop of sweat from her nose with her sleeve. "Sitting in a cemetery. Swatting bugs and talking to air, thinking someone no longer living will hear us."

Nick rubbed his eyebrow with the back of his hand. "No. In the ground, or in an urn on some dusty shelf."

"Or ashes spread over a mountain or in an ocean," Holly added. She pointed to the area just east of Grandma Julia's grave. "See that space over there? That space is Marty's, and the one next to hers is mine. I guess you could go next to me. But honestly, I don't want to be buried. I hate caskets more than I hate funerals. Although I worry that if I'm cremated, traces of my remains will get left in the furnace or mixed with someone else. And then I'll end up tied to the ghostly plane with a stranger."

Nick picked at a blade of grass. "I believe there's a rigorous process to prevent cremains from mixing. And, honestly, I don't know if I believe in ghosts. If I saw one, I would probably shit one of these plastic flowers." He laughed. "You sure you still want to marry me now that I've confessed I'm not as fearless as I might seem?"

## AYDEN LOCKWOOD

Holly leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. “Knowing how committed you are to everything you do, if you ever see a ghost, I’m expecting a full floral arrangement.”

Nick shook with laughter, then said, “I want to believe there’s more. But sometimes I think this is it. Just this. And then we’re gone.”

Holly smiled and looked at the slabs to their left and right. “Nick, there are bodies under these slabs. So technically, my loved ones are here. Not their ghosts necessarily, but what actually remains of the people who related to me, who raised me, sent me cards with crisp two-dollar bills on my birthday, put ribbons in my hair for picture day. So I guess I’m talking to echoes of those actions. When I’m here, I feel a collection of all the experiences I shared with them. All at once. Energy. Memory.”

“Do you believe in anything after?” he asked. “Like, really believe?”

She was quiet for a moment. “I believe in legacy. In the way people shape us, even after they’re gone. I believe in the way Grandma Julia’s voice still lives in my head. The way Miss Annie’s stubbornness shows up in my mother. In me.”

Nick nodded slowly. “Maybe that’s why it matters so much. Not because there’s more after—but because there might not be. So we love hard. We show up. We clean graves and arrange fake flowers and whisper to the wind.”

“And we value every living thing. Even if people think that makes us meek, weak, and weird.” Holly smiled. “Miss Annie used to say, ‘Pure intentions and deeds outweigh pissant opinions.’ Which is why I have a lot of unbridled energy going all over the place trying to make even small things better, with little regard to naysayers.”

Nick looked over at her, his expression soft. “You’re kind of amazing, you know that?”

She shrugged. “I guess I’m just trying to make peace with the fact that everything ends.”

He reached for her hand, gloved and dusty. “That’s why we make the middle count.”

“And that starts with getting home in time to finish preparing for our engagement party,” Holly said, squeezing Nick’s hand. “Correction. My love for you is one thing that will never end.”

## I WAKE THE DEAD IN WESTERLIN PARK

Nick rested his sticky forehead against Holly's. "There it is. Cockroaches, Twinkies, plastics, and our love 'til the end of time."

Holly laughed as they stood and grabbed the plastic bins—now almost empty—and moved to the remaining rows of graves. An hour later, their work was done. They stuffed the last of the ragged flowers they'd removed, and the sun-bleached litter they'd collected throughout the day, into a large black bag, and Nick carried it to the car. Holly followed with the empty bin. They placed both on the plastic drop cloth in the trunk.

Any passersby might have thought they were securing a body and ridding themselves of DNA evidence by the way Nick and Holly wiped down, stripped to their undergarments, and redressed before adding their discarded clothing to a white kitchen bag, which they placed in the trunk as well. Nick took their gloves and dropped them in the back. After wrapping the bin and bags in the large plastic sheet, he gathered the corners and tied them into a knot.

Nick grabbed soap from the hands-free dispenser in the backseat cupholder, scrubbed his hands front and back like his surgeon father had taught him, then rinsed them with water from a repurposed shampoo bottle in the backseat door pocket. Holly did the same, using the bottle on the passenger side, while Nick slid into the driver's seat.

Hands still dripping and dotted with bubbles the makeshift rinsing station hadn't fully washed away, Holly returned to Grandma Julia's grave. She squatted carefully, mindful not to soil her change of clothes, and whispered, "See you soon."

As they readied themselves for the seven-hour drive back to South Florida, Nick and Holly stole a glance at the transformed cemetery. What had looked drab and forgotten when they arrived was now dotted with splashes of color and touched by love.

As Holly turned her attention to the center console to select an audiobook for the trip home, a shimmer of sunlight danced off Miss Annie's grave, catching her eye. It felt like a wink—playful, proud, and unmistakably Annie.

The silver SUV rolled slowly down the dirt path, tires crunching over gravel. There was no gate to pass through, only the open stretch of road

**AYDEN LOCKWOOD**

ahead. As the car pulled away, two orphaned shadows stretched across the green of the Bahia grass—long, still, and unmistakably human.

But no one was there to cast them.