

**SCENTED:
A Paranormal Story**

By RJ CRAYTON

Bryan thought his life had changed forever when he realized he could sense who would die next.
Then he met Lauraline.

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Prologue - Mother

(Eight years ago)

The last words Bryan ever said to his mother were, “You stink.”

His mother had been leaving for a Friends of the Library meeting. Wrapped in her winter coat and holding her gloves in one hand, she’d said, “Let me give you a hug and a kiss, because I won’t be back until after you’re asleep.”

He walked toward her, fully prepared to meet her request, but as he got nearer, he slammed into a putrid odor. He stopped immediately for it was as if he’d been slapped with funk. It was the worst thing he’d ever smelled. Worse than the “science experiment” he’d done with Tommy Johnson where they’d added turpentine, mud, paint, pond scum and a bunch of other gross things they’d found. At the time he’d thought nothing could out-stink that concoction. Clearly he’d been wrong.

He stopped short of her outstretched arms, just beyond the tips of her fingers. She startled at his abrupt halt, but still smiled at him. Her dark brown hair was straightened, instead of curly, falling just beneath her shoulders, fanning out across the chocolate-colored coat.

“Don’t stop,” she said with a chuckle. “Come on.” She leaned toward him and he realized the smell was coming from her. The odor seemed to multiply a thousand times in strength with each millimeter closer she came. Bryan stepped back two paces.

She knitted her eyebrows, truly confused

“Mom, you stink,” he said in the unapologetic tone only an eight-year-old could manage.

Hurt flashed across her face and then quickly morphed into a strained expression — though probably it was her attempt at neutral. The sound of the kitchen door opening broke the silence, and both Bryan and his mother turned to see Bryan’s father emerge. He’d been finishing dinner because he’d gotten home too late to eat with his family.

“What’s going on?” he asked, squinting distrustfully at Bryan, and then turning to his wife, trying to interpret her flustered face.

Bryan’s mother pulled her lapel up and sniffed, then lifted her arm and inhaled in the direction of her pit. She shook her head. “Bryan thinks I don’t smell well,” she said, turning an awkward phrase in a clear attempt not to repeat what Bryan had just said so bluntly: that she stank. “I think I’m fine,” she told her husband, though she still seemed to be surreptitiously inhaling the air around her, searching for this odor Bryan detected.

His father walked over to her, passing Bryan with a glare, and sniffed the air around his wife. He smiled. “You’re great, Marina.”

Marina returned her husband’s grin, then looked past him to Bryan. “Guess you’re outvoted, kiddo,” she laughed. “Come on, give me my hug and kiss now or I’m gonna be late.”

Bryan’s father moved aside so the boy could go, but Bryan found he couldn’t move. It didn’t matter what they said. She stank, and he wasn’t going near her or that smell. Bryan shook his head and stood firm. “You stink.”

The redness seemed to burst onto his father’s face like someone had turned on a switch. One moment, he was normal; the next he was filled with anger that had turned him the color of a beet. “That’s no way to talk to your mother,” he screamed.

Bryan took a step back. It had been to avoid his father’s rage, but it had also lessened the pungency of his mother’s newfound stench.

Bryan’s father moved toward him, but Marina’s mocha hand found his shoulder, and he turned back to her. “It’s OK, Jack,” she said soothingly. “Don’t worry about it.”

“What do you mean?” Jack argued. “That’s not how he should talk to you.”

She looked into her husband’s eyes and shook her head. “It doesn’t matter,” she said, softly. “Sometimes kids are like that. And this coat’s been in that downstairs closet, so maybe it’s a little musty.”

“He can still...” Jack started, but she held up a hand and he stopped.

“Goodnight Bryan,” Marina said, peeking around her husband.

Bryan didn’t know why, but he didn’t say anything. Marina said goodnight to her husband, turned and went out the door.

That was the last time Bryan saw her. On the way to the library, an 18-wheeler hit ice and overturned on top of Marina Harper’s Camry. The car was flattened beyond recognition, and the medical examiner said she’d died instantly.

While neither parent had smelled it, Bryan’s mother did stink that night. She was drenched in the perfume of impending death.

Chapter 1 - Father

LAURALINE

It was raining. A gentle pitter patter that would give lawns a tiny taste of the water they'd lacked for weeks. Lauraline was sure their next door neighbor would be ecstatic. She'd seen him scurrying about in the dark after midnight violating the drought-imposed water ban and spraying his rose bushes.

But Lauraline Reese was not like her neighbor. She dreaded the rain. Her father, Milton, wasn't that fond of it either, but they never spoke of this fact.

"Alright, Lauraline, this is going to be a great school," her father said, trying to sound upbeat as he glanced out the windshield and upward, toward the sky, rather than in front of him on the sparsely-populated road.

"I know," she said, anxiety coursing through her. She wouldn't fully feel calm until the rain stopped.

"You know, this was my high school," he said, yet again.

Yes Dad, the first 52 times you told me, it didn't sink in, but now I got it. She was about to verbalize her thought when the rain picked up its pace so it sounded like a steady drum beat smacking into the car window. She swallowed and said only, "I know."

"I'll pick you up this afternoon, too, but tomorrow, you can ride the bus," he said, easing his foot onto the brake as they took a curve in the road at his break-neck rain speed of 14 mph.

"The bus would have been fine today." Lauraline tried not to sound irritated. She hadn't needed to be driven like a child. She could've driven herself, or at least taken the bus and met some of the other kids. Unfortunately, once Milton Reese had seen the drizzle, it suddenly became an excellent idea for him to chauffeur. He was more resilient in the rain than she was, seeming not to abhor every single thing about it. But he still exercised more caution, insanely extreme caution if she were being honest, during the rain.

"Some kids would love door-to-door service," Milton said, his tone still upbeat, but clearly irritated that the rain had picked up its pace and was now falling heavily on the windshield. He slowed down as he drove, sped up his windshield wipers.

Part of Lauraline wanted to tell him that this wasn't helpful, that there had to be a better way to deal. But the other part of her understood his concern. Understood his desire to keep her safe. Understood his desire to make sure what happened before didn't happen again. She feared it, too. She tried to ignore it, but the fear and anxiety had soaked into her. They were a part of her being now. There seemed no way to shake their effects, so she let him drive her. It was better than the alternative.

She decided to just give in and tell him she appreciated him driving her. "Thanks for the ride," she said, trying to sound grateful.

They completed the drive to Knightsdale High School in silence. When they finally pulled into the parking lot, the rain was again a gentle simmer. Lauraline hopped out as quickly as possible, then opened the back door and grabbed her backpack from where she'd tossed it earlier.

"Have a good day," he said.

"You, too." Lauraline shut the door, ran through the drizzle as fast as she could manage safely and ducked into the school building. Once inside, she took a deep breath. Safe. The rain hadn't killed her today. It hadn't succeeded when Lauraline had been three, either. But she knew deep within her that the rain remembered its lost victim and would try again.

Chapter 2 - Something Old

BRYAN

This test was stupid.

Bryan knew this was, as his mother would say, a bad attitude to have. She'd told him once, "Good Lord, I don't know what you're going to be like when you're a teenager, if you're surly at eight." She'd said it jokingly, but he'd known she wanted him to improve. So, he'd always tried to be better.

His memory was funny when it came to his mother. Some things, like his mother teasing him for his surliness, came back to him clear as day. Yet, other things he couldn't remember, no matter how much he tried to grasp at the memory. It was like trying to grab hold of a wisp of smoke. No matter how much he tried, the exact sound of her laugh eluded him. It was happy, he knew. All laughs were that, but even as he tried to summon the sound to his mind, it remained out of reach.

Bryan breathed out, deciding he would not be surly now. Recently, he'd been trying not to be surly. He wasn't always successful, especially with his father, but he'd tried. Like today, he'd never tell Mr. Damascus that this test was stupid. But *the test was stupid*. It was one of too many crappy state tests you needed to take to graduate. Only, this wasn't the high-stakes test. This was some remnant from the past designed to ensure that each graduate knew the bare minimum to receive a diploma in the state of Illinois.

They first gave you the test in the 10th grade, to make sure you were going to pass it. Then, you got a shot at it each year. Bryan had taken it the previous year, but vomited midway through. If he'd had time to answer three more questions before expelling his breakfast, he wouldn't be in this classroom taking this ridiculous test again.

He read through a question and marked A. Two more questions. Answered C and A respectively. He was about halfway through, irritated that he even had to do this again, and about to fill in the D bubble when the first whiff hit his nostrils. It was like being smacked with an anvil made of funk. The putrid odor singed his nostrils — rotting flesh, feces, and body fluids.

Instinctively, he looked up and saw the classroom door was open. Mr. Damascus's foot was visible keeping the door open and he was clearly mostly in the hallway, talking to someone. Someone who was going to die.

Bryan cast his eyes down, silently berating himself for daring to look up. He tried to concentrate on the test. He wouldn't look up again. He didn't want to chance glimpsing who it was. He simply held his breath, trying to block the smell. He knew it wouldn't matter. Blocking the smell never worked. That pungent an odor couldn't be blocked. But he could pretend.

He closed his eyes, ensuring he didn't see who was in the hallway, who Mr. Damascus was chatting up. Bryan hated seeing their faces, knowing their time was up. This had been his lot in life for the last eight years: knowing that smell meant death.

Bryan made sure his head was tilted directly down, so his vision would be focused right in the middle of the desk, he opened his eyes and read the next question. He forced his brain to concentrate, to focus on the words. Only it wasn't working.

The smell permeated the entire room now. He pressed the toes of his tennis shoes hard into the tile floor. Sometimes, that helped reduce the gag feeling he'd get when the smell was so bad. He could hear Mr. Damascus whispering, then someone else whisper, though he couldn't make out the voice. This whisperer was the unlucky soul.

He closed his eyes again, waited, tried not to notice the smell, tried to think about something else. The test. He needed to focus on this test. But he couldn't. All he could wonder was, *What on earth could they be talking about that he can't just close the goddamn door?*

Open your eyes, he told himself. *Focus on the test*. He blackened in the C oval and watched a couple of errant crumbs of graphite fall to the side. He was pressing the pencil too hard on the paper. He eased his grip. Finally, he heard the door creak and bang as it shut. Bryan relaxed his feet and took in a half-nostril of air. It still stank, but not to the degree it had just a moment ago. Whoever had brought the smell was gone.

He didn't glance at the door. If the person was still standing outside, he didn't want to catch their silhouette through the frosted glass pane in the top half of the door. He continued taking his test, slowly testing the air, his nose opening up to take in a few whiffs of fresh air as the smell dissipated.

No one else had noticed of course. He was the only one who smelled it. He pretended like nothing happened. He just went through the questions, easy as they were, then he went back and reread the questions once more to make sure he didn't spot any obvious errors. He didn't particularly care about doing well on this test. School wasn't his life; he didn't seek perfection and straight As. But, today, he needed a reason to stay longer. He wanted something to focus on that would take his mind off that smell and which student was drenched in it, which student was going to die in the next couple of days.

Students were allowed to leave when they finished this exam. To head back to their regular classroom. But Bryan was afraid he'd run into the person who'd emitted that awful death scent if he left, so he lingered, re-checking his answers. Short of vomiting and leaving in the middle, he wondered how anyone failed this thing.

The bell rang. Bryan looked up and there was only one other student still in the classroom. When he handed the exam to Mr. Damascus, the teacher looked at him as if he'd expected better. Bryan ignored the look, telling himself it was worth it, so long as he avoided running into whomever the doomed soul was.

Once in the hallway, he walked to the boys' bathroom, went inside, found an empty stall and shut the door. He needed to be alone. Just for a minute. He needed to do it. He stood facing the toilet, closed his eyes, and said in his mind, "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

Bryan opened his eyes. The urine soaked toilet with its stained porcelain stared coldly at him. He turned, pushed the stall open, walked past a couple of freshmen horsing around, and bolted out the door. The hallway was teeming with students. No one waved hello or called his name or even acknowledged his presence, with the exception of moving out of his way. He wasn't popular and he didn't have a ton of friends. With the exception of Ferraz, he wasn't that interested in other people. The more people you hung out with, the more likely one of them would eventually start to smell. And more than anything, he hated that smell.

As Bryan started toward his next class, he told himself it would be OK now. He'd done all he could do. The person who'd emitted the smell was in the hands of a higher power, now. Bryan couldn't help him or her. He'd learned that over time, the hard way. He wished he could stop their deaths. Oh, how he wished he could.

The first time, of course, the very first time, was the one he most wished he could have changed, but he hadn't known what the smell meant at the time. The second and third times, he

hadn't been sure that the smell really was a prelude to the person dying. He couldn't be sure without waiting. But by the time he'd smelled it the fourth and fifth times, he knew. He'd deduced the pattern. Within three days, whoever wore that smell would be dead. At that point, he'd tried to help them, tried to save them, but nothing had worked. Telling them made them think he was crazy or mean-spirited. He'd tried telling people to be careful, he'd tried leaving anonymous notes. He'd done all the things possible for someone his age to do, and it had been useless. The person always died. By the time he'd smelled the seventh person, he realized nothing he did would change things. So, he did nothing. But he felt so sick, so disgusted at himself for doing nothing that by the time of the ninth and the tenth victims, he'd started saying the prayer.

And that had worked. Well, by worked, he meant it had helped him feel better. It hadn't actually changed the outcome. But it made Bryan feel like he was doing something, like he wasn't just sitting around like some sick, selfish bastard, doing nothing.

The students in the hallways were winnowing now. The bell would ring soon. Without realizing, Bryan started toward the parking lot, not second period French class. He stopped just short of the double doors that led out of the school. Through the rectangular window in the top half of the door, he could see the day, still a little overcast, but sunshine streaming through the breaking clouds. The emerging day was calling to him the way candy does a child.

Instead of turning back to the hallway, back to class, back to the possibility that he would cross that smell once more, Bryan took a step forward, intent on leaving. He couldn't stay in this building today.

Chapter 3 - Something New

BRYAN

Bryan was standing there, the door clutched in his hand, when he realized he had to do this right. Otherwise he'd get shit from his dad tonight. So, he let go of the door and headed back in. He would stop at the front office, tell Mrs. Ali he was sick, and she'd let him go home.

It wasn't quite a lie. He *was* sick. Sick of smelling death.

Bryan rounded the corner and walked the few paces to the door with the frosted window that read, OFFICE. Opening it, he walked in. Mrs. Ali, a petite, olive-skinned woman with shoulder length black hair and a gentle disposition, was the school administrative liaison and his best friend's mother.

Perched behind her desk, she sat talking to a girl Bryan had never seen before. The girl's hair was autumn red and hung down to the middle of her back, reminding him of one of those decorative grass brooms in a country store window. If hair could have a personality of its own, wild would describe this mane.

Bryan had let go of the door, and it shut with a thud. The girl turned to see what had made the noise, and when their eyes met, he felt an instant connection. *She's like me*, he thought. While brown-skinned people come in all hues, he knew with certainty that she was just like him, a child who got to check two races on the school forms, a person with one black parent and one white. Her skin, what his maternal grandmother called high-yellow, was about the same color as his. She had a smattering of freckles across her cheeks and nose, and eyes that were hazel. She smiled at him, the most beautiful smile he'd ever seen in his life, revealing perfectly straight white teeth. She'd had to have had braces, too. Or really great teeth genes. She was delightful, he'd determined in that brief glance. And she was probably interesting. There were very few people Bryan thought looked like they'd be interesting, like they'd be worth finding out more about, worth risking reaching out to.

Bryan smiled back and walked towards them. As he got closer, Mrs. Ali looked up at him and smiled.

"Hi Bryan," she said, her Iranian accent barely noticeable. "This is Lauraline. She's new, here."

He nodded, stepped almost to the desk, just a few feet away from Lauraline. Pretty name, he thought.

"Lauraline," Mrs. Ali said, "This is Bryan."

Bryan lifted his hand to wave hello. Then, it hit him. Her smell. His eyes widened a little as he stared at Lauraline, realizing this scent harkened from her. Although he wanted to cover his shock, he knew he was doing a poor job. His jaw had gone slack, half popping open and the intensity of his stare was more than what was acceptable among polite society. While seeming normal — even though he knew he wasn't — had always been one of Bryan's top priorities, the shock with which he was blunted by her abnormal scent had left him unable to do even that.

He tried to remember what he had wanted to say. Whatever it was — something he'd thought would sound impressive to her; maybe he was going to offer to walk her to class — had escaped his brain. He stood there mute, feeling as lost as a floundering seal. Lauraline took a step toward him, as if she meant to ask what was the matter. But it was hard to concentrate on her when the scent seemed intent on penetrating him. It wasn't the scent of death, but it wasn't the

one of life, either.

He wasn't sure what was going on, but he felt an urge to flee. Bryan took a step back and turned to Mrs. Ali. "I'm sick, and I'm going home."

Mrs. Ali crinkled her brow, frowned in worry. "What's wrong, honey?" she asked, taking on the motherly tone she often did with him.

He couldn't stand to be there. He had to go. Right now. "I'm going to vomit," he said, then turned, opened the door and quickly exited into the hallway. For a second, Bryan basked in the mingled scent of acne creams, hair spray and sweat. Then, he walked as fast as he could to the exit, pretending he hadn't heard Mrs. Ali call after him to wait. Consequences be damned. He wasn't staying one second longer.

Chapter 4 - Death Valley Girl

LAURALINE

That was weird, Lauraline thought. The boy, Bryan, had seemed fine when he entered. She'd instantly liked him, which was probably weird, too. But he seemed likable. His smile had been kind, his skin was about the same color as hers and he had short curly black hair. When she first saw him, she felt like he was someone worth knowing.

But before she could really orient herself, before she could really find out anything about him, all the color had drained from his face and he had stormed out.

The change had been so sudden, so instant, so different from when he walked in the office, to when he got closer to her that, for a second, she'd wondered if it had been something about her that had caused his reaction. Though, that was ridiculous. How could she cause the boy to be sick?

She turned back to Mrs. Ali, offering an awkward smile. Mrs. Ali didn't smile back. The woman had introduced herself, but hadn't said exactly what she did in the office. *Perhaps a secretary?* Mrs. Ali was silent, staring after the boy long after he was gone. The secretary was preoccupied with that boy, a scowl marring the face that had been so friendly just moments earlier.

"Just one moment," Mrs. Ali said, as if finally remembering Lauraline was there. The woman picked up the phone handset, cradled it to her ear, and dialed a series of buttons on the phone. When Mrs. Ali spoke, her voice crackled over the loudspeaker. "Would Ferraz Ali please come to the front office? Ferraz Ali, please come to the front office."

With her task accomplished, she looked up at Lauraline apologetically. "Sorry about that. Seems like Bryan is sick."

Lauraline nodded.

"Yeah, he's usually not that abrupt, so he must be feeling awful," Mrs. Ali said again, tapping her fingers absentmindedly on her desk. She reminded Lauraline of her father when he was distracted: repetitive and jittery. Mrs. Ali stopped tapping and forced a smile. "I called my son Ferraz. He can show you to your next class."

"Thanks," Lauraline said. "And I appreciate you finding the schedule mix up and getting it all worked out."

Mrs. Ali nodded and waved her hand as if to say, no worries. The gold bracelets on her right arm jingled slightly with the motion. "It's no problem. I'm just sorry no one remembered Mr. Damascus was administering the IPT today. That's the Illinois Proficiency Test, one of the many we have to administer this year. We do retests early, and his is the biggest regular classroom, so he does it. But tomorrow, you'll start off in Mr. Damascus's room."

"It's OK," Lauraline assured her. "He was very nice, very helpful to me."

Mrs. Ali nodded. Then, Lauraline heard the creak of the door and turned to see who'd entered. It was a young man with thick black hair in a stylish cut, skin the same olive tone as Mrs. Ali's, thick dark eyebrows and a slender nose. He wore jeans and a fashionable shirt. He looked as if he'd walked right out of a teen angst film — the friendly good guy, of course — and into the office. He gave his mother a bit of a scowl, but when he noticed Lauraline, flashed her a winning grin.

"What's wrong with Bryan?" Mrs. Ali asked.

Her son gave her a perturbed glare. "How should I know?" he responded with a shrug.

Mrs. Ali glanced briefly at Lauraline, then back at Ferraz. She used a single finger to bade

him closer and once he was nearer, spoke in a low voice, though Lauraline could still make out what she said. “He just walked out of here, saying he’s sick. I need to call Jack and tell him something. Something more than I let his son leave school grounds without explanation, and without a call to him. He’s still a minor. Text him, and find out what’s wrong. Tell him I’ll be calling him in 10 minutes.”

If this school job didn’t work out, Mrs. Ali could find work in the mob, Lauraline was certain. Mrs. Ali gave her son a look that said, “Capiche.” Ferraz nodded solemnly and equally mafia-like. Lauraline felt like an intruder in this exchange, but there was no place for her to go without making things more awkward.

With her orders understood, Mrs. Ali, relaxed. “Ferraz,” she said, cheerily, motioning toward Lauraline. “This is Lauraline. She’s new here.”

Ferraz smiled at Lauraline, but then glanced back at his mother, awaiting more information. “She needs to go to Madame Perry’s French class. Would you mind showing her?”

“Got it,” he said, clicking his heels, straightening his back and giving his mother a military salute.

She rolled her eyes, but smiled a little. “Thanks,” she said.

Lauraline couldn’t help smiling at the exchange. They seemed like a nice family. Ferraz relaxed his stance to normal teen and addressed Lauraline. “Follow me.”

Lauraline followed Ferraz through the school’s corridors, making mental notes of where things were so she could find her way back. Though, part of her longed for a bag of bread crumbs.

Ferraz seemed nice enough, giving her a little run down of the things they passed. They’d come down the Freshman locker corridor, and throughout their journey — which she suspected was the long way so Ferraz wouldn’t have to go back to class yet — he’d pointed out the gymnasium, locker rooms, study hall, library and computer lab. It was a typical high school, but all helpful to know.

They must have passed all the interesting stuff, because Ferraz had stopped speaking. They now walked the hallways—painted green and white in the school’s colors—in silence.

“So,” Ferraz said, seeming to sense they’d gone too long without speaking. “Where did you move here from?”

“Death Valley,” Lauraline said absentmindedly. As soon as she said it, she realized it had sort of sucked the air out of everything. Ferraz actually stopped walking briefly, doing a stutter step, before resuming his gait.

He gave a half-hearted smile and said, “Hope you didn’t bring any death with you.” She appreciated his attempt to recover from her conversation-killing tidbit.

Lauraline went with it, smiling back. “No, I just brought along the drought,” she said. “Death Valley’s called that because it almost never rains. It actually hasn’t rained since I got here, not ‘til today.”

Ferraz nodded, though he still didn’t seem totally at ease. It was odd for Lauraline to have said Death Valley. She almost always told people she was from Beatty, Nev. Most people didn’t know it was in Death Valley, though they assumed that if it was in Nevada it was sunny, hot, and dry. But something had inspired her to say Death Valley.

For some reason, she was feeling out of sorts and off her game. Perhaps it was the rain. But today was the one day she needed to be on her game. This was going to be her first impression, the one that would last. Somehow, she had stupidly turned herself into the Death Valley Girl.

What was it about her today that was causing this mood? She realized it wasn’t her causing

the problem. She'd felt out of sorts since coming into this school. There was something unsettling about this place.

Ferraz stopped walking. They were in front of a door marked Rm. 107. "So, this is Mme. Perry's French class," he said.

At that moment, Ferraz's phone chirped. He looked at the phone, read something, then smiled and rolled his eyes. She wondered if it was a text message from that boy, Bryan. She didn't want to ask. It would be rude. Instead, she said, "Thanks again. I'll see you around."

"Sure," he said, friendly, nodding. "And if you're in the C lunch period, you're welcome to join us. We sit in the back right."

Lauraline smiled, as a wave of relief hit her. She hadn't completely weirded him out. She opened the door, "I will. Thanks," she trailed off as she headed into the already in-session class.

Chapter 5 - The Text

BRYAN

Bryan hadn't expected Ferraz's text saying Mrs. Ali needed him to call her ASAP. He probably should have, but he'd been rattled by what happened at the office with the girl. Once he got home, he took a few minutes to formulate what he wanted to say, and then called Mrs. Ali on her cell phone. He did his best sick voice, retched a few times during the call and swore he'd vomited moments after he ran from the office.

He laid it on a little too thick, because at one point, Mrs. Ali said, "I can call your father and have him come take you to the doctor, or that urgent care place on Knoxville."

His sick voice fled and an emphatic, "No" escaped at this suggestion. He managed to talk Mrs. Ali down, convincing her he just needed rest, and begging her to please explain this to his dad. As usual, she promised she would.

Mrs. Ali was good to him that way. Bryan and Ferraz had been friends since first grade, with Mrs. Ali and Bryan's mother being carpool buddies. When Marina had died, Mrs. Ali had come to the funeral, had brought meals by and ever since then, had tried to be motherly to him whenever she could. Most importantly, Nadia Ali was a voice of reason with his father. If Mrs. Ali said Bryan had to leave school, his father would believe it. Jack Harper wouldn't give a damn that no one had called him for his permission, so long as Mrs. Ali explained it.

Bryan was grateful that she was going to smooth things out. However, he felt a twinge of guilt because Mrs. Ali had promised to stop by and bring him soup tonight.

As he lay on his bed, staring at a Chicago Bulls poster that hung from the wall, he felt better that he wasn't going to be in trouble. What he didn't feel better about was that girl: Lauraline. And her smell. When he'd gotten close enough to smell it, it had shocked him so much that he'd almost reached out and touched her just to make sure she was real. That she wasn't an apparition or a figment of imagination. He had never experienced that smell coming from a living human being. Ever.

The smell was hard to describe but it reminded him of honeysuckle and cinnamon, yet more robust and more pleasant. For Bryan, that smell invoked a sense of peace, tranquility, and warmth. He had only smelled it, ever, after death. Sometimes around a casket. Always at cemeteries. As wretched as the scent of a person near death was, the scent after was the polar opposite — heavenly pleasant. Bryan thought of it as the smell of ashes to ashes and dust to dust. The smell of moving on, of passing on to a better place. It seemed other worldly and untouchable.

Yet she had it. That smell of something beyond death had been coming from her.

Bryan slid his phone from his front pocket, and looked down at the last few text messages on the screen:

Me: Thx for heads up bout ur Mom

Ferraz: No prob

Me: Wazup @ school?

Ferraz: theres a new grl

Me: Yeah, met her

Ferraz: So what did u think of the grl from death valley?

Bryan hadn't replied to that one. He didn't know what to say. He didn't know what to think. Death Valley Girl. He did know one thing. She was different. And he needed to know why.