

## DANZA MACABRA

The air was hot, even with the ocean breeze. November shouldn't be hot. November should be sweaters and cocoa, not sushi and shorts. Emma missed Montana. She missed the open plains, the lush mountains; even, sometimes, the cold unforgiving rivers. She had never learned to fit into Los Angeles. There was too much concrete, too much glass, too many people.

She wanted to climb back into her nice air-conditioned car, but she was late. Not that that was a problem, everyone was always late in Los Angeles. It's impossible to predict or account for traffic – or find a decent parking space.

As she left the parking lot, someone with their face painted like a skull pushed past her. She avoided bumping them and instead walked right into a thick cloud of smoke. The skunky smell made her gag; she had always hated that smell. The teenage perpetrators sat smoking on the cement wall that separated the sand from the boardwalk. They giggled to themselves as the crowds passed them by.

Emma rolled her eyes, just children with nothing better to do – and access to too much. She looked up at the storefront signs that peeked out over the tops of the stalls. She didn't know

exactly where she was going. Her friend had just said to meet her at “that sushi place” on the Venice Boardwalk, as if that was helpful.

The deeper she pressed into the crowded boardwalk, the more people there were with their faces painted like skulls, like those elaborate Mexican sugary skulls. She’d seen that stuff all over the city around this time of year every year since her family moved to the area. She even saw a parade for it once when they were living in Hollywood. As she’d gotten older some of her friends from school had tried inviting her along for their family celebrations, but she’d had enough death in her life, and didn’t like to be reminded of it.

Finally, barely visible between the nearly overlapping wares of two overstocked pop-up tourist-trap stalls selling the morbid skull stuff, she spotted a generic neon sushi sign in a window. People were crowding around and between the stalls, but she managed to spot her friend in the window and caught her eye. She brought her hand up to wave and hit something. She turned to apologize.

There, right up in her face, was a grotesque, angry skull monster. It shouted at her in tongues and Emma swooned for a moment before realizing it was just an old woman with a painted face berating her in Spanish and wailing on her arm.

Emma got her wits about her and tried to apologize. Her phone began to buzz in her pocket. An embarrassed adolescent tried to tug the old woman away, but she continued to shout and swat at Emma. Emma raised her arms in the universal symbol of “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to, I don’t understand,” as she backed away through the crowd, bumping more people, stall poles, and garbage bins as she tried to escape. Her panic mounted with each bump, her vision started to swim. Sounds melted together to form a horrible cackling cacophony. Something

grabbed at her arm. She tore away from it and rushed away. She needed to find a quiet place to let the attack subside. The old routine came easily. She tried to count each breath, three in, three out, as she searched.

She heard a child laugh. It cut through the panic and the crowds and deep into her. She knew that laugh. Her eyes snapped toward it just in time to see the leather brim of his hat disappear between two buildings. A hat that was sitting in a box in her closet.

The crowd was thinner here between the stalls and the storefronts, she sprinted after him and rounded the corner into an empty alley. She had seen him come this way. She was sure of it. The panic set back in as she realized what she thought she had just seen. She leaned against the wall to stabilize herself and heard him laugh behind her.

She whipped around, but the crowd had thickened. She caught a glimpse of leather weaving between two stalls, heading for the boardwalk, and shoved her way through to the narrow space. The air felt charged as she scanned the crowd. All she saw now were painted faces, grinning the eerie permanent grin of death. All their eyes were on her. Her heart felt like it would pound itself out of her chest. A murmur swept through the painted crowd as her face flushed. None of them moved. The boardwalk was still bustling, almost behind them, definitely through them.

She felt a tug at the hem of her shorts. She nearly launched into the air. Her gaze shot down and she saw her brother, Mikey, standing beside her. He looked exactly as he had the last time she saw him alive, right down to the little leather cowboy hat their father had gotten him at the state fair all those years ago. No one ever could get him to take it off. He smiled at her.

Emma dropped to her knees and held him. Tears squeezed from her eyes and she laughed, not knowing what else to do.

She pushed him to arm's length. Her heart resumed pounding after its momentary rush of bliss. She inspected his face. His cheeks were rosy and warm, his eyes were bright and mischievous, as they always had been. He bore no resemblance to the bloated gray and blue monstrosity she had found on the riverbank when she snuck out to help the search party all those years ago. None of that visage, etched into her mind, remained.

Emma collapsed around him, sobbing.

"It's okay, Emma. I found you. Don't be sad. I love you," he said softly to her.

"I'm sorry Mikey, I love you. I'm so sorry," she managed to say between gasps for air. She wanted to tell him how horrible she felt, how she should have known better, did know better. They weren't allowed to go down to the river without their parents. She should have listened, she was the big sister, Mikey didn't even want to go, and then – but the words came out as tears instead.

"You need to go now Emma. You can't stay here."

Emma panicked. She wasn't ready, wasn't done. "No, I –"

"Emma?" someone said.

Her arms were empty. She looked up. The painted faces were gone.

"Emma, there you are! Why did you run from me? What's wrong with you?" her friend asked as she helped Emma to her feet.

"I'm sorry – I –"

“Hey, you’re shaking. Are you okay?” Her hands were heavy and warm and comforting on Emma’s shoulders.

“I will be.” Emma let the tears come again as her friend folded her into her arms.

THE END