

New York Times Bestselling Author

RACHEL
VINCENT

A SOUL SCREAMERS NOVELLA

REAPER

Reaper

A Soul Screamers Novella

Rachel Vincent

HARLEQUIN®
TEEN

Tod Hudson was a typical teenager. He liked girls, sports, food and tolerated his younger brother, Nash. In fact, he had his whole life in front of him—and due to his bean sidhe heritage, it was going to be a very long life indeed. And then the car accident occurred.

Suddenly Tod's future wasn't so sure, and he had to make a choice. Life... Death... or something Between....

* * *

The world spun around me.

Nash flew forward and his head smacked the windshield. My seatbelt punched the air from my lungs as the entire dashboard lurched toward me.

Then everything went still.

The only sound was the soft hiss of something ruptured. Every breath hurt, and my neck was so stiff I could hardly turn my head. I exhaled slowly and closed my eyes, stealing a moment in the near-silence to appreciate my pounding heart, and the fact that it continued to beat.

Then I twisted in the dark to face my brother.

“Nash?” He was slumped in his seat half facing me. His eyes were closed, his head steadily dripping blood from an injury I couldn’t see in the dark. My relief bled into dread as I pushed my door open and the interior lights came on. “Nash?” I said again, but he didn’t answer.

He wasn’t breathing.

To all the readers who've asked for more of Tod,
I couldn't be happier to oblige!

Staring down at the man on the bed, I couldn't help but suspect the coincidence. What were the chances he'd be brought in on my first day at the hospital? Levi was a shrewd little bastard, and the man on the bed—practically gift-wrapped for me in a hospital gown, terror dancing in his eyes—was proof of that. I was no angel in life. Why should that be any different in death?

“Okay, I’m heading out...” Mom slid her purse over one shoulder on her way through the living room. “There’s leftover lasagna in the fridge. And there’s some bagged salad.”

I nodded absently and flipped the channel to VH1 concert footage from one of the kids’ networks—where I was *not* trying to catch a glimpse of my ex-girlfriend Addison, who’d dumped me for a chance at stardom when she was cast in a pilot..

“Tod.” Mom sat on the coffee table, right in front of the television. “Did you hear me?”

“Yeah.” I leaned to the left and she mimicked my movement. “Lasagna. Salad. Got it.”

“I’m serious. Eat something green, okay?” She snatched the remote and aimed it over her shoulder, and a second later the screen went dark. I started to complain, but then I noticed how tired she looked—the beginnings of lines on a face that would look thirty years old for the next half a century—and came up with a grin instead.

“Do Skittles count?”

Mom rolled her eyes. She never could resist my smile. “Only if you save me the purple ones.” She handed me the remote, but wouldn’t let go when I tried to take it. “You’re staying home tonight, right?”

“What am I, a leper? It’s Friday night. I have plans.”

She sighed. “Change them. Please.”

“Mom...”

“I need you to keep an eye on Nash.”

“Am I my brother’s keeper?” I tried another grin, but this time she wasn’t buying it.

“Tonight, you’re his warden. It doesn’t do me any good to ground him if I can’t keep him at home.”

“Then why bother grounding him?”

She leaned closer and lowered her voice, bright blue irises swirling slowly in dread and frustration, and the fact that she let me read her eyes was my first clue how serious she was. Humans wouldn’t have been able to see it—only a fellow *bean sidhe*—banshee, to the uninformed—would be able to read her emotions in her eyes, but she usually hid them from us too.

“Because he snuck out in the middle of the night and drove to Holser House on a license still warm from the lamination! And an ineffective consequence is better than no consequence at all. At least, that’s what I’m telling myself.” She raked one hand through her hair, then met my gaze with a worried one of her own. “He’s not like you, Tod. Aside from a couple of notable exceptions, you tend to think things through, but Nash is ruled by his heart—”

I nearly choked on laughter. “I think the organ he’s ruled by is a little farther south, Mom.”

She frowned. "My point is that he's not taking this separation from Sabine very well. I thought some time apart would help...cool things down between them. But it seems to be doing the opposite." She let go of the remote and gave me a wistful smile. "You and your brother could not be more different."

"Because he thinks he's in love, and I don't believe in faerie tales?"

"Love isn't a faerie tale, Tod. But it isn't child's play either, and it makes me nervous how intense they are together."

"You just don't want to be a grandmother," I teased, trying to lighten the mood.

"That's definitely part of it," she admitted. "My future grandchildren deserve better than teenage parents could give them. But beyond that, it isn't healthy, how wrapped up they are in each other. Relationships like that burn bright, but when they burn out, they leave everyone blistered. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"You're condoning my playboy lifestyle, right? Because I'm your favorite."

Mom laughed out loud. "At least Nash doesn't get bored a month into a relationship. You, my hedonistic firstborn, are an entirely different kind of problem."

"Hedonistic is another word for favorite, right? So that's a compliment?"

She stood, still smiling. "Eat something green. And read something without pictures. Those are not suggestions."

I turned the TV back on as she headed for the door. "I'll take them both under advisement."

“Nash!” Mom called, one hand already on the front doorknob. “I’m leaving!”

A door squealed open down the hall, and a minute later my little brother stood in the doorway, dark hair standing up all over like he’d just woken up. “And this is noteworthy because...?”

“Because this is your official reminder that your grounding does not expire with daylight. Do not leave this house while I’m at work.”

Nash gave her a crooked grin—possibly the only feature my brother and I had in common. “What if the house catches fire?”

“Roast marshmallows. And if it floods, you’ll go down with the ship. If there’s a tornado, I’ll meet both you and this house in Oz, after my shift. Got it?”

I chuckled and Nash glared at me before turning back to our mother. “Total house arrest. I got it.”

“Good. I’ll see you both in the morning. Don’t stay up too late.” Then the door closed behind her. A moment later an engine started and her car backed down the driveway.

“Mom told me to watch you. She thinks you’re up to something,” I said, when Nash just stared at me, leaning against the doorway into the hall.

“She’s right.” He crossed the room and sat on the coffee table, where she’d sat minutes earlier. “I need a favor.”

“Move.” I shoved him out of the way and started flipping through the channels again. “What kind of favor?”

“The kind that only you and I can do,” Nash said, and his hazel irises twisted in an intense storm of greens and browns. I turned the TV off and dropped

the remote on the center couch cushion. “I’m going to pick up Sabine, and I need help convincing them to let her go.”

Shit. “I’m confiscating your hair dryer—you’ve fried your brain. You can’t just ‘pick up Sabine’ without a court order—she’s in a halfway house!”

Nash nodded, like he didn’t see the problem. “That’s where the ‘convincing’ comes in.”

And by convincing, he meant Influencing. The female of our species was better known, historically and mythologically, by her iconic wail for the dying. What most of the human race didn’t know was that where they heard a head-splitting scream, male *bean sidhes*—like me and Nash—heard an eerie, compelling song calling out to disembodied souls, keeping them from moving on.

Male *bean sidhes’* most prominent ability—Influence—was also vocal in nature, and much more subtle than the female’s wail. But no less powerful. With nothing but a few words and some serious intent, we could make people do things. Make them *want* to do things. Like release Sabine from her court-mandated halfway house into the custody of her sixteen-year-old boyfriend.

“You really think I’m going to drive all the way to Holser House on a Friday night just to help you score a conjugal town pass for your delinquent girlfriend?”

“Not a town pass, Tod. I’m not taking her for a walk—I’m breaking her out. *We’re* breaking her out. You talk to whoever’s on duty while I get Sabine. Then we leave. Simple.” He shrugged, like things were really that easy in NashWorld.

"You're simple." I leaned back on the couch and crossed my arms over my chest, trying to figure out how to explain the problem so that even an impulsive, lovesick idiot twenty-two months my junior could understand. "Okay, look...everything you've said so far will probably work." I'd certainly talked us both into and out of tougher situations before. "But what happens after?"

"After what?"

"After we leave and the night staff realizes they've just lost a girl put in their custody by the state of Texas? You think they're just going to shrug and move on? Hell no, they're going to report her missing. And at the very least, they're going to have the description of the two guys she left with." Because my Influence wouldn't last much longer than it would take for the sound of my voice to fade into silence, and no matter how powerful I got with age and experience, I'd never be able to make someone forget what they saw or did. It just didn't work like that. And Nash damn well knew it.

He shrugged, and I wanted to smack him over the head. "So we come up with another plan. It won't be the first time you snuck a girl out of her house in the middle of the night."

"Nuh uh." I sat straighter, shaking my head at him. "Don't pretend this is the same as sneaking out for a beer at the watershed. You're talking about helping a convicted criminal escape from corrective custody!"

"She doesn't belong there."

"Okay then, genius, what are you gonna do with her once you have her? Put her in a box and poke some holes?"

“She can take care of herself. And I can help.”

I searched his face for some sign that he was joking, but found nothing. “She’s *fifteen!*”

Nash shrugged. “That’s just a number. It doesn’t say anything about her.”

“It says something pretty damn funny about your IQ!” I said, and he opened his mouth to retort, but I spoke over him. “Fifteen is too young to drive, too young to get a legal job, too young to sign a lease, and obviously too young to pick a boyfriend with half a brain.”

Nash’s confidence crumbled and fell apart, exposing blind desperation and pain so intense I could hardly wrap my mind around them. And while I wanted to believe this was all drama and hormones, *he* obviously believed it was more than that. “They won’t even let me talk to her, Tod. I think they found the phone I gave her, ‘cause she hasn’t answered it in three days.”

Finally I leaned forward, right in his face, determined to give him the wakeup call he desperately needed. “What did you expect? You date a criminal, and you’re eventually going to have to share her with the state. Hell, she’s probably got a girlfriend on the inside by now.”

“You’re an asshole.”

“And you’re living in a fantasy world. There are other girls out there, Nash. Maybe even a few who’ve never seen the inside of the police station.”

He glared at me, waiting for me to cave, but that wasn’t gonna happen. Not this time. Mom was right—he’d lost it. Over a *girl*. “Fine. I’ll do it myself. Gimme the keys.”

“No way. I’m meeting Genna in an hour.”

“I thought you were supposed to stay here and babysit.”

“I thought *you* were supposed to be the smart one. So why are you acting like such an idiot?”

“Just give me the keys!” Nash glanced around the living room, then lunged for the end table when he spotted the keys to the car I’d been forced to share with him since his birthday. I rammed his shoulder, knocking him to the carpet halfway across the room.

“Sorry.” I grabbed the keys and shoved them into my front pocket. “But Mom says you’re grounded.” I stuck my hand out to help him up, but he smacked it away, glaring up at me with his jaw clenched.

Nash shoved himself to his feet and stepped forward like he’d take a swing. But he wouldn’t. I could see hints of our father’s build in the width of his shoulders, but I still had two inches and twenty pounds on him, and he knew better than to start a fight he couldn’t win.

“I’d do this for you,” he spat instead. “Because you’re my brother. But obviously that concept is wasted on you.” Then he stomped off to his room and slammed the door.

“You’ll thank me for this later!” I shouted, trying to deny the fact that his parting shot stung almost like a physical blow.

A couple of hours later, the credits scrolled down the darkened TV screen, and Genna sighed. She sat up, and I missed the warmth of her back against my chest.

I wrapped one arm around her waist and leaned forward. “Hey, I liked you there.”

She twisted in my grip to straddle me, delicious pressure in exactly the right place. Her brows arched and she gave me a slow smile as she bent toward my ear. “I thought you might like me here better,” she whispered, her breath an intimate warmth against my ear.

She was right.

She laid her hands flat against my chest, warm, thin fingers splayed over my shirt. My pulse spiked and I pulled her down for a kiss. My mouth left hers to trail over her chin and down her neck, tasting her bit by bit. She sat taller and threw her head back to give me better reach, shifting closer on my lap, and—

My cell phone buzzed on the end table.

I groaned, and Genna leaned back to brush hair from her face. “Aren’t you going to get that?”

“Nothing on *earth* could make me take that call right now.” I tried to pull her closer, but she leaned over the arm of the couch instead, peering at the display on my phone.

“It’s your brother.”

Damn it. I shifted her to one side and looked around her shoulder at the dark hallway. “Nash, come out and get it yourself!” Then I re-centered Genna on my lap. “Sometimes he texts mom with snack requests, but I’m not gonna wait on the lazy little punk.”

Genna laughed, staring down at me. “He’s been in his room this whole time?”

“Yeah. Sulking.”

“He’s probably afraid of what he’ll see if he comes out.”

“Oh yeah?” I slid my hands slowly up her sides. “What’s he gonna see?”

“A little more of this...” She kissed me again, and Nash’s call was delivered to voice mail.

Two minutes later, the phone rang again, and I wanted to throw it through the front window. Genna handed me the phone. “He’s not gonna quit until you answer.”

I groaned and flipped the phone open, one hand on her hip, and loud, bass-heavy music blasted from Nash’s end of the line.

Oh shit. There was no music coming from the hall. When had he snuck out?

“Where the hell are you?” I snapped into the receiver.

“I need a ride,” Nash slurred into my ear, and I rolled my eyes. He’d found a party.

“Where *are* you?” I repeated. “And how did you get there?”

“Arlington,” Nash said, his words slushy but coherent. “I walked to Brent’s and he drove us out here, but now he’s shitfaced.”

The tip of Genna’s tongue trailed up my neck, hot and damp, and full of promise. “We leave for Florida tomorrow morning,” she whispered into one ear, while Nash barked threats into the other. “I won’t see you again until school starts. But I don’t have to be home for another hour...”

“You’ve already failed as a brother once today,” Nash snapped. “Put your ass in the car and come get me.”

“I’ll be there in an hour,” I said, only half focused on him while Genna leaned back and started

unbuttoning her shirt. My pulse raced, anticipation sparking in my veins. “Just hang out until then...” I finished, vaguely aware that my voice was little more than a suggestion of sound by that point.

“Come get me, or I’m calling Mom,” Nash threatened. “And *you* can tell her I’m at some stoner party in Arlington because you were too busy making out with your girlfriend to notice me leaving.”

Shit.

“You’re a complete pain in the ass, Nash.”

“If you’re not here in twenty minutes, I’m calling the hospital.” Where our mom was pulling a twelve-hour shift. Nash spat out the address, then hung up before I could argue.

“Damn it.” I flipped my phone closed, then lifted Genna from my lap and set her on the middle couch cushion.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, frowning as I shoved my phone into my pocket and grabbed my keys.

“I have to go get Nash. But then we can take this to my room and pick up right where we left off.” After a moment’s hesitation—and one more long look—I pulled her up from the couch. “You’ll never even know he’s here.” Because I’d bind and gag him if I had to, to keep him quiet.

“Where is he?” Genna buttoned her shirt, then ran her fingers through pale brown hair.

“Arlington. Let’s go.”

“Wait, Tod, I can’t go to Arlington.” Her frown deepened, and I could feel my plans for the evening being downgraded from X to PG13. “We’ll barely make it back here before my curfew, and I’ll be late by the time I get home.”

“You want me to take you back now?” I asked, while on the inside I chanted, *please say no, please say no, please say no* over and over.

“No,” she said, pressing herself against me. “I want you to let your brother wait a few minutes.” She tugged on the button at the waist of my jeans.

I put one hand over hers to stop her, cursing myself silently. “I can’t. When left to his own devices, Nash finds trouble.” And sometimes tries to break it out of jail. “You sure you can’t miss curfew? I’ll make it worth your while....”

“I’m sure you would.” Her smile practically sizzled, and the flashes of memory that surfaced scalded me from the inside out. “But if I’m late, my mom will jump to all the right conclusions, and then my dad will *kill* you. Seriously. And what am I gonna do with a dead boyfriend?”

“Nothing that doesn’t defy the norms of polite society...” I mumbled, disappointed when she stepped back and turned toward the door.

If Nash isn’t dead of alcohol poisoning by the time I get there, I’ll kill him myself...

Five minutes later, we pulled up in front of Genna’s house, and as she’d predicted, the living room windows were still blazing with light. “Sure you don’t want to reconsider?” I spread my arms and grinned. “All of this could be yours....”

“I’m reconsidering as we speak.” She leaned toward me, and I met her halfway. “But we’ve already been spotted,” she said, lips moving softly against my jaw on the way to my mouth. I glanced up to see that she was right; a tall, shadowed form stood in the front window, staring right at my car. “I gotta go.” Genna

pushed the door open and stepped out, small pink purse in hand. “Say hi to Nash for me.” Then the car door closed, and she was halfway up the walk before I’d even shifted into drive.

Her front door opened and her dad stepped out to put one arm around her shoulders, and as they stepped inside, she turned back to smile at me once.

And that was the last time I ever saw Genna Hansen.

“What took you so long?” Nash asked, as he slid into the passenger seat and pulled the door closed.

“I stopped to donate all your underwear to the homeless. You’re gonna wanna take care of those tighty whities—they’re all you’ve got left.”

He leaned against the door, either too tired or too drunk to sit up. “And to think, most people don’t understand your sense of humor.”

“Fools, all of them.” I flicked on my turn signal and merged with the highway traffic, typically heavy for a Friday night. “What are you doing out here, anyway?”

“Drinking alone, while my best friend and my brother feel up their respective girlfriends, with no thought for the less fortunate.” His eyelids looked heavy, and I wondered how much he’d had. “Unfortunately, the juvenile justice system doesn’t consider Sabine’s separation from me cause for concern.”

“Bastards.” I swerved around an SUV, then back into the right lane. “Clearly the system is flawed.”

Nash shrugged and slouched lower. “At least you got laid.”

I glared at him before turning back to the traffic. “No, I got a brother who redefines the concept of ‘*coitus interruptus*.’”

“Sorry.” Nash frowned, his unfocused stare aimed out the windshield as I eased the car off the highway and onto the first street in a tangle of suburban neighborhoods. “But hey, since you’re not busy anymore and we’re out anyway...we could head over to Holser House.” I started to shake my head, but he kept talking. “Please, Tod. That place is going to kill her.”

Irritated, I clenched the wheel and stared at the road. “You’re drunk, Nash.”

“Then *you* can do the talking!” he snapped, sitting straighter now. “I’ll stay in the car.”

“You should have stayed in the *house*!”

“You didn’t!”

My hands clenched around the wheel. “I came back with Genna instead of going out, so I could keep an eye on *you*!”

“Great job.”

I shook my head, fighting the urge to punch the steering wheel. “No way. *You* snuck out and got drunk. You’re not blaming this on me.”

“But Mom will,” he said, and it only took me a second to realize he was right. “She doesn’t have to know.” He twisted in his seat to face me, rather than the windshield. “Let’s go get Sabine. I’ll be sober by the time we get home, and we’ll tell Mom she ran away on her own. Sabine will back us up, and Mom never has to know either of us left the house.”

“No.” *Hell* no. Mom would see through that in a second, and I’d get into worse trouble than Nash for

letting him go through with such an idiotic, *illegal* stunt.

“Come on, Tod, I never ask you for anything!”

“Bullshit!” I glanced at him, furious to realize he actually believed his own load of crap! “You ask me for gas money, and condoms, and alibis, and favors, and advice you never follow. And now you’re asking me to drive your underage, drunk ass to break your jailbird, jailbait girlfriend out of corrective custody. And *I’m* the one who’ll get in trouble when that brilliant piece of on-the-fly planning goes south.”

“If something goes wrong, I’ll take the blame,” Nash insisted.

“No you won’t, because no one will point the blame at you. Sabine will lie to protect you on her end, and Mom will let you slide because she thinks you’re some ‘sensitive soul.’ It’s always, ‘Poor Nash, he wears his heart on his sleeve, then wonders why it’s always bruised.’ Or, ‘He’s only so reckless because he lives in the moment and he *feels* things so deeply.’”

“She doesn’t say that.”

“The hell she doesn’t. But your problem isn’t the heart on your sleeve, it’s the head on your shoulders. You don’t *think* about things, you just *do* them, and it never even occurs to you that you could be screwing someone else over.”

“You mean you?”

“Yeah, *me*! I can’t turn around without tripping over whatever trouble you’re in. I spend half my life cleaning up your messes, and all you do is take up space and get in my way!”

I couldn’t see Nash. The suburban street was unlit, and I was staring at the road. But I could tell I’d gone

too far because he went completely still and quiet. For nearly a minute. Then he grabbed the door handle, like he'd pull it open with the car still moving. "Let me out."

"What?"

"I'd hate to take up any more space in your life," he spat. "Stop the car."

I rolled my eyes, but slowed down, in case he tried to jump. "Are moronic overreactions a side effect of dating a delinquent, or is this the alcohol talking?"

"You don't know anything about me," Nash snapped, tightening an already white-knuckled grip on the door handle. "And you don't know a damn thing about Sabine. Stop the car, or I'm gonna jump and roll."

"No, you're gonna go home and sleep it off in your own bed," I insisted, as we rolled past the last house on the block, the rest of which was taken up by a large community park.

"Stop the damn car!" I felt his Influence almost before he spoke, and his words washed over me in a rush of anger, chased by a backwash of resentment. The urge to pull onto the side of the road was overwhelming.

I slammed on the brake and we screeched to a halt at the corner in front of the park, not because he wanted me to stop, but because I was too pissed to drive. "Don't even *try* to Influence me, you little—"

Nash's eyes widened, staring straight ahead. I glanced up just in time to see a car gliding toward us on the wrong side of the road, sleek and black against the night, no headlights to announce its approach.

Adrenaline surging through me, I shifted into reverse and cut the wheel to the right, but it was way too late. The car slammed into us head-on. There was a loud *pop* of impact and the squeal-crunch of bending metal.

The world spun around me.

Nash flew forward and his head smacked the windshield. My seat belt punched the air from my lungs as the entire dashboard lurched toward me. The steering wheel stopped two inches from my chest.

Then everything went still.

The only sound was the soft hiss of something ruptured. Every breath hurt, and my neck was so stiff I could hardly turn my head. I exhaled slowly and closed my eyes, stealing a moment in the near-silence to appreciate my pounding heart, and the fact that it continued to beat.

Then I twisted in the dark to face my brother.

“Nash?” He was slumped in his seat half facing me. His eyes were closed, his head steadily dripping blood from an injury I couldn’t see in the dark. My relief bled into dread as I pushed my door open and the interior lights came on. “Nash?” I said again, but he didn’t answer. He was barely breathing, and I was afraid to make things worse by shaking him awake. “Shit!”

I unbuckled my seat belt and had to slide out the door sideways, because of the crunched dashboard and the steering wheel that had nearly crushed my rib cage. The street was lit only by the red glow of my taillights—the wreck had obliterated the headlights—and I spared a moment to glance at the bastard

crumpled over the deployed airbag in the other car. Where the hell were *our* airbags?

My car didn't have them. It was too old.

I raced around the rear of the car and pulled Nash's door open with one hand, while the other dug in my pocket for my phone. I flipped it open and knelt by my brother.

He wasn't breathing.

Shit!

Heart racing in panic, I felt for his pulse with my free hand, but couldn't find it in his neck. I tried his wrist—my mom had taught me years ago—but couldn't find it there either. His heart wasn't beating.

"No!" I shouted, out loud this time. I dropped his arm and pressed the 9 on my phone, my hands shaking, my pulse a roar in my ears. "No, no, no..." I chanted, shock and guilt warring inside me as I pressed the 1. "Not like this. Not after I..."

Not after what I'd said to him. These couldn't be his last moments—drunk on the side of the road, alone except for the asshole brother who'd put him there in the first place.

If Mom were here...

If my mother was there, we could fix him. A male and female *bean sidhe*, together we could reinstate his soul and save his life. Nash would live, and I wouldn't be a killer.

There'd be a price—*someone* had to die—but it'd be worth it. Let the reaper take someone else—some old man sleeping down the street. Someone who'd already lived a full life. Someone whose brother hadn't just told him he was taking up space and getting in the way.

But my mother wasn't there, and she'd never make it in time, even if I called her. Neither would the ambulance. There was no one close enough to help Nash except me and...

The reaper.

Because no one dies without a reaper there to take his soul.

I blinked as the thought played out in my head, and with it came a chilling spark of possibility.

I flipped my phone closed and shoved it into my pocket. My head throbbed and my chest ached, and my stomach pitched at the very thought of what I was about to do—of who I was about to appeal to—but nothing compared to the nameless, formless agony rising through me with the knowledge that I'd gotten my own brother killed.

Standing, I squinted into the dark, looking for someone I probably wouldn't—and *shouldn't*—be able to see. I swallowed, my hands shaking from either fear or shock. "I know you're here, reaper," I whispered, suddenly glad no one had emerged from the nearest houses, now more than a block away. "I know you're here somewhere, but there's been some kind of mistake. It's not his time. He's too young."

"There's no such thing as too young to die," a soft, oddly high-pitched voice said behind me, and I whirled around to find a small boy watching me, freckled face crowned in hair cast red by my taillights. "Trust me."

Momentary confusion gave way to both horror and hope. "*You're* the reaper?" I stared down at him, heart pounding, and he nodded slowly.

"One of them, anyway."

Because the concept of reapers isn't creepy enough without adding dead kids to the mix.

My pulse raced with a dizzying combination of fear and anger. No good could come of arguing with a grim reaper. But I had nothing left to lose.

"Sorry about your premature death." I paused to clear my throat, then continued, trying to project confidence I didn't feel. "Missing out on puberty must suck. But this can't be right." I gestured toward Nash without taking my focus from the reaper. "Can't you double check your list or something?"

The dead child shook his head slowly, and his dark gaze never strayed from my eyes. "I died right on time. As did he." He nodded toward my brother, still slouched in the passenger's seat. "See for yourself." He pulled a folded piece of paper from his pocket and held it out to me. My hands trembled so badly I almost tore the paper when I opened it.

It was a printout of an official looking form, with a seal I didn't recognize. I read by the crimson glow of my own taillights. *Nash Eric Hudson. 23:48 Corner of 3rd and Elm.*

"No. Not like this." Determination burned within me, feeding flames of anger. I tore the paper in half, then ripped it again and dropped the scraps on the ground. "It can't go down like this."

"You know that doesn't change anything, right?" The dead kid put his hands in his pockets and watched the scraps of paper blow away, then looked up at me, frowning. "You're a *bean sidhe*, right? So you know how this works?"

"Yeah." My mom had always been straight with us about death. Even when my dad died, when we were

just kids. "But I also know you can change it, right? There are ways to change this...?"

The reaper raised one brow and suddenly looked much older. The difference was in his eyes—in the sudden interest I saw there.

"Please. It can't happen like this," I insisted, talking to us both now. "I wasn't paying attention, at home or on the road. This is my fault. You have to help me fix it."

"He would have died anyway," the reaper said, shrugging again. "If you'd kept him home, he would have choked on his dinner. If you'd left him at the party, he would have made his friend drive, and they'd have wound up exactly like this."

"How did you know...?" I demanded, confusion trailing into the night with my aborted question.

"I watched. But my point is that you aren't the cause of Nash's death. You're merely the instrument." He glanced at the driver of the other car, unconscious, but obviously breathing. "One of the instruments, anyway."

"I *can't* be the instrument of my brother's death!" I snapped. "That's *beyond* screwed up."

The reaper eyed me closely, like he could see beyond my words and into the thoughts I didn't voice. "Which is it you object to? His death, or your part in it?"

I hesitated, for just an instant, but he saw my indecision. He heard that moment of silence. "Both!" I shouted, running my hands through my hair, resisting the urge to simply close my eyes until the entire nightmare blew over. Because it wouldn't. "It can't happen like this. Can't you...give him more time?"

Please? I'll do whatever you want. Just give him a few more years."

The kid shook his head, and I realized that his hair really was red—it wasn't just reflecting the taillights. "There are no extensions." He squatted to catch my gaze when I sank onto my knees, as my anger began to fade into a welcome numbness. "There are only exchanges. One life—" he gestured toward Nash, palm up "—for another..." He held his other empty hand toward me, miming the act of balancing a set of scales. "How badly do you want him to live?"

The question seemed to echo all around me, and it took me a moment to realize I was hearing it in my own head.

I looked up slowly to find him watching me, his intense eyes an indeterminate color in the dark. "You mean I can...?"

"I have to leave here with a soul, but it could as easily be yours as his. It's your choice."

I glanced up at Nash, unmoving, his arm hanging limp against the side of the bucket seat. The reaper was right; Nash would have died no matter what I did or said to him. But I couldn't deal, knowing that I'd ignored him in favor of a girl, told him he had no place in my life, then driven him into the path of the car that killed him.

I couldn't live my life, knowing the part I played in ending his.

My next breath was long and deep—I'd decided it would be one of my last.

"Yes. I'll do it. But I have one condition."

The child's brows rose again, this time in dark amusement. "Death makes no promises."

“He can’t know.” I stood, staring down at my brother. What good would it do to give him life, if he’d spend it feeling guilty for my death? I turned to the reaper. “I’ll do it, if you swear he’ll never know it was supposed to be him.”

The child smiled slowly, and his satisfied expression raised chill bumps on my arms in spite of the warm June night. “That, I can do.”

And suddenly the enormity of what I’d just agreed to hit me with the unyielding weight of eternity. Isn’t your life supposed to flash before your eyes when you die? Then how come all I saw was regret?

The reaper glanced at Nash, then back at me, and the hint of a grin told me the little bastard enjoyed this part of his job. “Any last words?”

Pushing everything else aside to clear my head, I knelt next to Nash, wishing with all of my last few seconds of life that he could actually hear me. “Can’t clean up after you anymore, baby brother, so don’t punk out. Make it count.”

I stood and started to turn toward the reaper. But then something hard slammed into my chest, and my legs folded beneath me. I blinked, and the car went fuzzy. Nash’s face slid out of focus. He took a breath. Then he coughed, his eyes still closed.

The child knelt over me, red curls backlit by the moon, finally emerging from thick cloud cover. The last thing I saw was the creepy little bastard’s smile....

Bright light shined, red and veiny through my closed eyelids. I blinked, and suddenly the world was white instead. But not Heaven-white, with clouds, and robes,

and chicks with wings. Hospital-white. White walls. White ceiling. White sheets and pillows, on the bed beneath me.

I sat up with a sudden flash of memory and brought my hand to my chest. But there was no pain. I took a deep breath, and everything felt fine. Which was weird.

“Welcome back.”

Startled, I twisted on the bed to find the child reaper in a waiting room style armchair by a darkened window, his short hair bright red in the glaring fluorescent light. His feet didn’t reach the floor and his smile didn’t reach his eyes.

“Shouldn’t you be getting back to Snow White?” I snapped, rubbing my chest again, still surprised when it didn’t hurt. “No one ever mentioned that death would come in the form of a sucker-punching little dwarf.”

The reaper raised one rust-colored eyebrow. “You may be the first person to ever use that particular description of me.”

“Would I also be the first person you hit with a...what *did* you hit me with?”

“The post from the traffic sign your car knocked over.” He shrugged. “And no, you’re not the first. I could have killed you without touching you, but it’s easier for both your family and the coroner if I give them an obvious cause of death. At a glance, impact with a blunt object should look like your chest was crushed by the top half of your own steering wheel—you really should have been buckled.” The child shook his index finger at me in mock disappointment. “But the hard part was getting you back in the car.”

“For a kid, you pack a lot of power.”

The reaper scowled. “If you really think I’m a child, maybe I should have left you in that coffin.”

I blinked, briefly surprised by the mention of my own death. “Speaking of which, what’s with the encore performance?” I’d traded my life for Nash’s—I’d *tried* to, anyway—but if I was still alive, did that mean he was still dead?

Pissed now, I stood and realized I didn’t recognize the stiff white dress shirt I wore. “What the hell did you do?” I demanded. “We made a deal. My life for his.” My hands curled into fists, but before I could do anything stupid, I realized I didn’t really have any recourse. What was I gonna do, punch a kid? A dead reaper kid, at that? “I wanna see your supervisor.”

The kid laughed, and my urge to punch him became an imperative. “I don’t even want to see my supervisor.” His smile looked a little more genuine, but that only made it harder to buy. “Before we go any further, my name is Levi.”

“I don’t care what your name is.” But at least now I’d know who to blame when I got in touch with his boss.

“Relax. Your brother’s alive—he was released from the hospital three days ago—and you’re as dead as disco.” The reaper shifted in his seat, but made no move to stand. “That’s what you were buried in.” His careless gesture took in my stiff shirt and the pressed black pants I’d never seen in my life.

I looked like a waiter.

“If I’m dead, why am I in the hospital?”

“This is a nursing home.” He pushed himself forward, then kind of hopped onto the floor, standing

no more than four feet tall. “Specifically, Colonial Manor, room 118. You’re here on a temporary visitor’s pass, of sorts. No one alive can see or hear you.”

“I’m visiting a nursing home in the clothes I was buried in, but no one can see or hear me. Which part of that is supposed to make sense?”

“Have a seat, and I’ll explain.” He gestured toward the bed, and I sat reluctantly, tugging at the sleeves of the shirt I already hated.

“You’re visiting *life*, not a nursing home—we’re only here because this is one of the places I’m working at the moment. And you’re here—in the grander sense of the word—so I can recruit you.”

“Recruit me?”

“Yes.” His widespread arms indicated the entire facility. “There are nine elderly care facilities in this district and we’re down one man—specifically, we’ve lost the man who covered the night rotation, circulating between them as needed. The sooner I fill the spot, the sooner I can get back to the managerial position I’ve damn well earned.”

“You brought me back...” A surreal thought on its own. “...to work in a nursing home? Like, changing bedpans?” Was I dead or *damned*? “I think I finally understand the phrase ‘hell on earth...’”

Levi frowned. “You’re being recruited as a reaper. I thought that part was obvious.”

“If by obvious, you mean cryptic and baffling.” And suddenly I was glad I was sitting. “You’re gonna have to give me a minute here. This may take a while to sink in.”

Levi shrugged narrow, thin shoulders. “Actually, you’re handling it better than anyone else I’ve ever

recruited. I'm attributing that to the fact that you already knew about a good bit of this, by virtue of being a *bean sidhe*. Which is why I want you for the position. With any luck, your orientation and training will take about half as long as it takes most people. And the less time it takes to train you..."

"...the sooner you can get back to the managerial position you've damn well earned. I caught that the first time." *If the afterlife has managers, does that mean there's also a customer service department?*

His smile was real that time, and all the creepier because of it. "I knew you'd pick it up quick."

My thoughts chased each other fast enough to make me dizzy. "All I've picked up so far is that you brought me back from the dead to make me a reaper."

"I didn't bring you back. The reanimation department did that. And because you're a *bean sidhe*, they tried to keep you for themselves. But I insisted that the reapers had a prior claim to you."

"Yeah, that's not creepy or anything," I mumbled. "So, do I have any say in this?"

"Of course. It's your choice. But consider carefully before you decide, because this 'visitor's pass' is only valid for twenty-four hours, and reanimation only works once. If you take too long to decide, you're dead for good. If you turn the job down, you're dead for good. If you take the job, then give management any reason to fire you, you're dead for good. Understand?"

I nodded slowly. "Mess up and I'm dead for real. That may be the only part I *do* understand."

"Questions?"

"You bet your scythe."

Levi chuckled and stood, straightening a blue polo shirt with a Gymboree label embroidered on the pocket. “We don’t actually carry scythes.”

“Damn.” I snapped my fingers in mock disappointment. “I gotta be honest—that was the real selling point. There’s a black hood, though, right?”

His brows rose again. “A reaper with a sense of humor. This should be interesting.” Levi started across the room. “Let’s walk and talk. You had questions?”

I followed him into the hall, and with my first steps, it became obvious that he was right—no one could see either of us. Our shoes didn’t squeak on the faded linoleum. We cast no shadows. I felt like a ghost. Displaced, like I was out of sync with the rest of the world.

Like I wasn’t really there at all.

“How long has it been? Since I died.”

“Ten days.”

“*Ten days*?” I was dead for more than a week?

Levi nodded. “The reanimation process takes some time.”

An aide headed down the hall toward us, pushing a bald man in a wheelchair. It was surreal, walking unseen among so many people who—even if they died that very night—had already outlived me. “And Nash just got out of the hospital?”

“He had a cracked rib and a skull fracture. They ran several tests. But he’s young and resilient. He’ll be fine.”

“What, were you spying on him?”

Levi dropped into an empty chair in the hall, feet swinging inches above the floor, and the incongruity between his child’s body and the dark knowledge in

his eyes left me a little dizzy. “Experience has shown me that new recruits have trouble concentrating on the job until they know those they left behind have actually survived them. So I checked in on your brother.”

“Can I see them? Nash and my mom?”

Levi frowned and crossed his arms over his chest. “Usually, that’s forbidden. Watching your family makes it hard to resist contacting them, and contact with anyone who knew you before you died is a firing-level offense. Which is why we typically place new reapers far from where they lived. However, you’re being recruited for a specific position and your family actually lives in this district.” He shrugged. “Considering the circumstances, I don’t think anyone would object to you checking in on them occasionally, so long as they never see you. But you won’t find them where you lived. They moved yesterday.”

Two days after Nash got out of the hospital. My mother did the same thing after my father died—moved us to a new house, in a new town. She seemed to think it’d be easier to live without him if our house held no memories of him.

Had she already given away my clothes? Boxed up my stuff? If my family lived in a house I’d never set foot in, did that make me dead *and* homeless?

I slid down the pale green wall until I sat on the floor with Levi looking down at me. Where would I go now—if I took the job—when I wasn’t killing people and harvesting their souls?

Nursing shoes squeaked down the hall, drawing me from my self-pity. “Why can’t they see us?” I asked, staring at a wrinkled old woman with bright red,

thinning hair hobbled past us, leaning on a walker. She seemed to avoid us instinctively, even though she couldn't see us, and that made me feel a little better. If she was scared of us—even subconsciously—then we had to be real. Right?

Levi slid out of his chair and I stood to follow him. “They can't see *you* because you're just visiting.” We stepped past a room full of square tables, where senior citizens sat playing cards and dominoes. “They can't see *me* because I don't want them to see me, and that's a reaper's prerogative. Selective corporeality, visibility, etc...” He glanced up at me, one brow arched. “Usually *that's* a selling point.”

I felt a grin tug at one side of my mouth. There *were* obvious perks with that particular fringe benefit. “So, ‘reaper’ is really just a nice word for ‘covert pervert?’ Is that what you're saying?”

“Not if you want to keep your job for long. But the officials tend to overlook innocent observation in the rookies, because after a few years, most of them outgrow the phase.”

I stopped in the middle of the hall, frowning down at him. “Okay, first of all, how open to interpretation is the phrase ‘innocent observation?’ And second, why would anyone *ever* outgrow that phase?”

“They outgrow it along with their humanity, Tod. The longer we're dead, the less we have in common with the living, and you don't lust for what no longer interests you.”

Great. “So you're saying the afterlife is hard on the libido? FYI, that's probably not a good bullet point for your recruiting brochure.”

“Yet it rarely scares away potential recruits. Any idea why?” Levi blinked up at me, studying my eyes like he could see the gears turning behind them, a hint of grim amusement in the curve of his little-boy mouth. And suddenly I understood.

“Yeah.” I started walking again, staring ahead to avoid his gaze. “Because we all think we’ll be the exception.” Myself included. Surely if I could still be near my family—even in an altered state of existence—I wouldn’t lose my humanity. How could I, if I surrounded myself with it?

When I looked up, he was still watching me, but the smile was gone. “It won’t work,” he said, his child’s voice soft but confident. “They won’t be enough.”

I frowned, but held eye contact. “Reapers can read minds?”

“No, but I was always pretty good at connecting the dots.” Levi shrugged, hands in his pockets. “It may work for a little while. But the more time you spend with them, the harder it’ll be for them to accept your death. Even if they never see you. And beyond that, they *will* grow old, and when they die, there will be nothing left of your humanity. Death will have you eventually, Tod, and the longer you cling to what you had, the harder it’ll be to let go in the end.”

“So, you reap souls *and* crush hopes? Is that part of the job, or just a service you offer for free?” My chest ached, like my heart had bruised it from the inside—the first physical discomfort I’d felt since waking up dead—and I couldn’t decide if that was a good sign or a bad one.

"I thought you'd want the unvarnished truth, rather than the glossy veneer. Was I wrong?"

I closed my eyes, then opened them to meet his gaze. "Bring on the truth." Even if it made me want to end my own life. Again.

Though his expression never changed, I could have sworn Levi looked...satisfied.

"So, even taking into account this unvarnished loss of humanity, does anyone ever turn you down? I mean, the choices are reap or die, right? So does anyone actually ask to be nailed back into the coffin?"

Levi nodded slowly, and I squinted at the red-tinted haze cast by the light shining through his copper curls. It was like a crimson anti-halo, gruesomely appropriate for a child of death, and a reminder that Levi wasn't there to help me. He was there to fill a vacancy.

"It happens. But more often than that, they accept, then change their minds."

"Why?"

"Some people can't handle not being a part of the living world. Others don't have the stomach for the job."

"What exactly *is* the job? Do you actually...kill people?" Because, having even indirectly contributed to my brother's death, I knew for a fact that I didn't have whatever it took to play executioner.

Levi shrugged. "It's not murder, by any means, but yes, we extinguish life when the time comes. Then we collect the soul and take it to be recycled."

"So...you killed Nash?" Part of me was horrified by the thought, but the other half was relieved that someone else was willing to take the blame.

"And you saved him."

But that wasn't right. I hadn't so much saved him as given back what I'd played a part in taking. That didn't make me a hero. It just made me dead.

And that's when a new fear broke the surface of confusion that defined my afterlife so far. "Hey, you're not gonna go back and kill him if I turn this down, are you?" Because I was far from sure I wanted to spend my afterlife extinguishing human existence, one poor soul at a time.

Levi shook his head firmly, and for once the wide-eyed, innocent kid look worked in his favor. "We made a deal, and that deal stands no matter what you decide. Nash will live until the day you were scheduled to die," he insisted.

"And when was I supposed to die?" Knowing my luck, my noble sacrifice had only bought him a couple of extra weeks, half of which he'd spent in the hospital.

"I have no way of knowing that until your exchanged death date appears on the schedule. Which hasn't happened yet." He glanced up at me. "Anything else?"

"Yeah. Why me?" What had I done to deserve an afterlife, when everyone else evidently got recycled back into the general population? "How was I chosen?"

"Very carefully," Levi hedged.

I rolled my eyes. "I'm gonna need more detail than that. If I hadn't taken Nash's place, would you have recruited him? Is that why you were watching him?"

He motioned for me to follow him again, so I fell into step beside him, ambling slowly down the bright hallway. "I was watching both of you." Levi paused to

watch a nurse's aide walk past us in snug-fitting scrub pants, and I realized that he'd obviously avoided the loss of humanity—and human urges he'd never grown into in life. “But no, I wouldn't have recruited Nash. I *couldn't* have. He was scheduled to die, but I was there for you.”

“What the hell does that mean?” I snapped, frustrated by his suddenly cryptic explanation. “Why couldn't you recruit Nash?”

Levi sighed. “A person has to meet very specific criteria to even be considered for this job, much less actively recruited. Reapers literally hold the power of life and death in our hands.” He cupped his creepy little child-palms to illustrate. “The list tells us who to take, and when. But the decision to actually follow the list—the responsibility—ultimately rests with each of us individually.

“Imagine what would happen if the wrong person was given such a power. If a reaper had a God complex, or a personal vendetta? What if a reaper was susceptible to bribes or threats? Or even just lacked a respect for the position? We screen our candidates very carefully to make sure nothing like that ever happens. We evaluate their personal relationships and the decisions they make when something real is on the line. And then we test them.”

“And you chose *me*?” I huffed. “I hate to question your dedication to the recruiting process, but it sounds more like you ran up against a deadline and grabbed the first sucker with the balls to call you out.”

At the end of the hall, Levi stepped through a glass door and into a dark, mostly empty parking lot.

“We’ve been watching you for almost two months, Tod,” he said from the other side of the pane.

“Then you know my brother snuck out when I was supposed to be watching him.” After a moment of hesitation, I followed him, and was surprised when I felt nothing. Not the glass I stepped through, not the asphalt beneath my shoes, and not the night breeze obviously blowing through the branches of the trees on the edge of the lot.

“Yes. But you picked him up when he called.”

“Under protest. And that ride home ultimately got him killed.” I shook my head, confused on several points, but absolutely certain about one thing. “You’ve got the wrong guy.” I turned to give him a clear view of my back in the parking lot lights. “Notice the conspicuous absence of wings and a halo.”

Levi actually laughed, the first look of genuine amusement I’d seen from him so far. “What I notice is that the undertaker left your pants intact when he split the back of your shirt.”

“What...?” I couldn’t see my own back, but a quick check with both hands verified that my shirt had been cut open along my spine and was evidently pinned together at the collar. Since it was tucked into my pants and the earthly breeze never touched me, I hadn’t noticed the gaping hole in my wardrobe.

“Funeral directors sometimes do that to make bodies easier to dress. Doesn’t usually matter—most corpses don’t get up and walk around half-exposed after the funeral.”

Funeral. Corpses. Undertaker.

What obviously amused the reaper left me horrified and hollow. “If I unbutton my shirt, am I going to find

a roadmap of Frankenstein stitches?" I demanded, my voice trembling in spite of my best effort to remain calm.

This is real. I'm dead.

I sank to my knees in the middle of the parking lot, hunched over with my head in my shaking hands. I'd been on an autopsy table, and in a coffin, and in a hearse. My steps made no sound and my body cast no shadow.

I had *died*, and the world kept spinning, without even a wobble in its rotation to mark the occasion. I'd known life would go on without me, but seeing that was different than knowing it, and feeling it was worst of all.

If I turned down the job and died for good, no one would know I'd been granted one more day, and the chance to make something of my afterlife. No one would know, and no one would care. I could throw back my head right then and scream until my lungs burst from the pressure, and no one would hear me. Hell, I might not even *have* lungs to burst. There's no telling what they took out of me during the autopsy....

Levi's red brows arched as he stared down at me. "What, no quips about dissection or formaldehyde?"

I scrubbed my hands over my face and stood, glad that I could at least feel the texture of my own skin, even if I couldn't interact with the rest of the world. "Sorry, but the whole walking corpse epiphany kind of threw me off my game." Still, I had to know... "So, would you say I'm closer to a zombie or a vampire? I gotta know—are my parts going to rot and fall off, or am I forever frozen in youthful perfection?"

Levi gave me that satisfied look again, like refusing to be broken by the psychological shock of my own death was some kind of nifty dog trick I'd mastered. "Relax. You weren't autopsied. The cause of death was obvious, thanks to my quick thinking, and the coroner was one of our reanimators. Instead of cutting you open, he prepared you to return, completely intact and functioning. If you take the job, you'll look just like this forever." Levi waved one hand at my body, then shook his head and stared up at the sky. "You know, we never had to plant employees before the advent of chemical preservation. It was a much simpler time..."

"Were the recruits simpler then too?" I asked, when he finally glanced away from the stars. "Cause I still don't understand how I earned this whole 'get out of death free' card. You know, the lack of wings and all..."

"We don't want angels." Levi walked across the lot without looking back, leaving me no choice but to follow. "Or saints, or do-gooders. A saint would spare everyone scheduled to die, and that would lead to a drastic imbalance between life and death. We need someone who will do the right thing, even when that means ending a life. Which it usually does, for us."

So... I'd been recruited because I *wasn't* a humanitarian? I wasn't sure how to feel about that. "Why didn't Nash qualify?"

"Because he didn't have a chance to be tested."

"Neither did I."

Levi settled onto the bumper of the last car in the lot. "You've already been tested, and you passed."

“Because I picked Nash up instead of leaving him to die of alcohol poisoning? That doesn’t make me worthy. It barely makes me human.”

Levi shook his head. “You passed because you saved his life at the expense of your own.”

“That was survivor’s guilt! I couldn’t face my mother every day, knowing I got Nash killed.” And I sure as hell couldn’t face myself.

“You claimed no credit for what you did, and you died without knowing that wouldn’t be the end for you. That’s the test.” He shrugged and leaned forward, like we were getting to his favorite part. “To weed out the power-seekers and those who just want to prolong their own lives, we can’t take anyone who actually volunteers for the position. The theory is that only those who don’t want power are truly qualified to wield it. So a recruit has to willingly give up his or her life for someone else, with no expectation of reward.”

For a moment, I could only stare at him. I was being granted an afterlife—naturally, it came with strings—because I’d volunteered to die? “Is that irony intentional, or just coincidence?”

Levi laughed. “I’m going to let you answer that for yourself, after you’ve been reaping for a few years.”

“How did you know I’d do it?” My mind was spinning with the sudden realization. “You must have known. Why else would you have been watching me for so long?”

“I didn’t know. I took a chance on you, and I’m really hoping it pays off. We had a position to fill, so I started weeding through the possibilities. None of those actually scheduled to die qualify, of course, but anyone willing to die *for* one of them might. Usually

that's the parent of a small child, but there weren't any of those on the lists I had access to, so I moved on to siblings. Nash was one of three scheduled to die in my district, and he was the only one with a same-gender sibling close in age. Theoretically, the two of you were likely to share a closer bond than any of the others I looked at. And the fact that you're a *bean sidhe* meant that you knew an exchange was possible. Which, though unusual in a recruit, worked in my favor."

"But that's all just theory," I insisted. "In reality, one sibling could be such a heartless bastard that he'd make out with his girlfriend instead of looking out for his pain-in-the-ass little brother, thus dooming the poor kid to death by head-on collision."

Levi frowned. "You need to remember that Nash would have died anyway. Keeping him home wouldn't have stopped that. And since you took his place, I think your survivor's guilt can reasonably be put to rest now."

"You must have been dead a long time, if you think that's even possible."

Levi gave me a creepy half smile, but made no comment on his age.

"What about the other guy? The one who hit us?" I asked. "He survived, right? Couldn't you have traded his life for Nash's, and left both of us alive?"

The reaper's smile faded into an even creepier puzzled expression. "Yes. I could have. But he didn't volunteer. And if I'd taken the drunk driver instead of you, I'd still be looking for a new recruit, now wouldn't I?"

I could only stare at him, stunned in spite of my knowledge that for the reaper, filling his vacancy was

the bottom line. “You let a drunk driver live and killed me instead, just to get yourself out of the nursing home?”

Levi shrugged. “The driver was of no use to me. You are.”

“Where are we?” I pulled my hand from Levi’s even as the world solidified around me, and I was glad to be rid of the feel of dead flesh. Not that his hand felt different than any other hand, but knowing it was attached to a dead kid kind of creeped me out.

As did the sudden realization that my hand was now also attached to a dead kid.

“This is where they live now,” he said stepping off the sidewalk and onto the grass, lit only by a streetlight on the corner.

I didn’t recognize the house. I only knew the town because we’d lived there as kids, before my dad died. But this time, my mom had settled into the older section of a large development. She’d found a corner lot, but the house was too small to have three bedrooms.

There was no room for me.

And though I knew I wouldn’t be moving back in, even if I took the job, that fact still stung much more than I’d expected. Mom and Nash were trying to move on from my death, and my presence would only disrupt their adjustment. The last thing I wanted was to make it harder for them.

So why had Levi brought me?

“What is this, a bribe? I thought potential reapers were supposed to be above bribes.”

He shrugged. "If you're going to take the job, there's something you need to understand first."

"Something beyond the fact that I'm dead and invisible, and I was evidently dressed by Edward Scissorhands?"

Levi ignored my sarcasm. "Yes. Officially, I'm supposed to explain to you that no matter how alive you might look, and feel, and even function, you're not alive. Not like your friends and family are. You died, and your soul was removed from your body, and even though you've been reanimated, you don't truly belong here. And you never will. I'm supposed to tell you that the sooner you come to terms with that fact, the sooner you can start to accept your new state of being and your job. And the sooner your family and friends can start to accept your death."

I frowned, arms crossed over my chest. "That sounds like advice from the Grim Reaper website."

"The recruiting handbook, actually, but you obviously get the idea."

"Yeah. So if I'm supposed to be letting everyone move on, why did you bring me here?"

"Because I think that steering you away from your family is just going to make you more determined to see them. You need to understand that stepping back into their lives would only be making things worse. They'll think they have you back, but when you start becoming more reaper, and less son and brother, they'll just have to let you go all over again. A clean break is easiest for all involved."

Maybe. But anyone who's ever broken a bone knows that even a clean break hurts like hell.

“Are you going in?” he asked at last, squinting up at me in the light from the street lamp. “You can walk through doors and climb through windows, but walls and floors will be barriers. And, of course, no one can see or hear you.”

I frowned. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

Levi shrugged. “Even visitors bow to physics, in one form or another.”

Is that what I am? A visitor in my own family’s home? I couldn’t take my eyes off the house, a physical reminder that I didn’t belong here. Not in their home, and not in their lives—which was just what he wanted me to see.

“When you’re a reaper, there will be fewer physical rules to follow. But that’s a perk of the job. No benefits until you sign on the dotted line.”

“In blood?” I asked, only half kidding.

“Don’t even joke about that,” Levi said, and a chill raced the length of my spine. “Meet me at the hospital when you’re done.” Then he disappeared before I could ask him how I was supposed to get there, or why he’d be at the hospital.

As I walked toward the front porch, that feeling of displacement swelled within me. My shoes made no impression on the grass. I couldn’t feel the breeze rustling tree leaves over my head. I was caught somewhere between dead and living, and even my mother had moved on without me.

As evidenced by the house I’d never seen.

I reached for the doorknob, and my hand went right through it. I should have seen that coming. Yet each new demonstration of my physical absence was more unsettling than the last.

I closed my eyes and stepped through the door, and when I looked again, I found myself in an unfamiliar room, surrounded by familiar furniture. And stacks of boxes. The worn couch against one wall still sported the stain where I'd spilled a can of Big Red on the center cushion. The end table was still cracked from where I'd fallen on it, goofing around with Nash.

The sound of running water drew my focus to a swinging door on the right hand wall. The kitchen. I crossed the room and stepped through the door, which refused to even swing in acknowledgement of my passing.

My mother stood at the sink, drying her hands on a faded dish towel over and over, staring out the window at an unlit backyard I'd never played in. Then she dropped the towel on the counter and leaned forward, gripping the edges of the sink, staring down at the drain. Her knuckles were white with tension, her back curved, half-hidden by a mass of long blond curls.

"Mom?"

But she couldn't hear me, and that reminder made my throat tight. Her shoulders shook, and suddenly she grabbed a glass from the counter, a quarter inch of milk still standing in the bottom. She hurled the glass at a fridge I'd never seen, spraying shards and white droplets all over the kitchen.

"Mom?" Nash called from somewhere else in the house, and my breath caught in my throat. Levi was right; he was okay. Or, at the very least, he was home. In this new house, which couldn't possibly feel like home yet.

"I'm fine!" my mother lied, sliding down the cabinet to sit on the floor, just outside the shrapnel

zone. Her face was pale and streaked with silent tears, and I hated knowing I was the cause.

I sank to my knees in front of her, inches away, but worlds apart. I watched her private pain, aching to heal the wound I'd caused, but there was nothing I could do. I'd never felt so worthless in my life.

Finally, she dried her face on the dish towel, then started picking up the glass. When the kitchen was clean again, familiar dishes stacked in unfamiliar cabinets, she pulled a paper plate from the stack on the table and piled it with cookies from a platter near the stove. Chocolate chip with walnuts—her go-to comfort food.

I followed her out of the kitchen and watched when she paused outside the closed door at the end of the hall. Nash's room was silent—no music and no video game carnage. Mom took a deep breath, then knocked on the door. When he didn't answer, she pushed the door open anyway and stepped inside.

My brother sat by the window in his desk chair, staring outside. He didn't even look up when she came in.

"I brought you some cookies," my mom said, and I almost laughed out loud—not that they'd have heard me. Cookies were her solution to everything. Baking them distracted her, and serving them fulfilled her. But sugar never solved anything in the end. "And there's the cake, of course."

Cake? A housewarming cake? Or to welcome him home from the hospital—to celebrate the life he hadn't lost.

"I'm not hungry." Nash crossed his arms over his bruised, bare chest, even thinner than I remembered.

He'd lost weight in the hospital. But not as much as he'd have lost in a coffin.

"The doctor said you need to eat," Mom insisted.

"She also said to give me some space."

Mom frowned and set the cookies on his desk. "Doctors make mistakes sometimes."

Nash huffed, still staring out the window. "Then why'd you open this little heart-to-heart with a quote from one?"

I wanted to smack him. If my hand wouldn't have gone right through his head, maybe I would have. But Mom took it in stride. She sank onto the edge of his desk and pushed hair back from her face. "Nash, you can't sit in your room forever."

He shrugged. "Worked for Howard Hughes."

"That comparison doesn't really work for me."

"I'll try harder next time." Nash sighed. "I don't really want to talk right now, Mom."

She crossed her own arms over her chest, mirroring his stubborn posture. "Well, *I* want to talk."

Finally Nash turned to look at her, wincing with one hand over his ribs. "About what? Cookies? I don't want any. The move? I don't want to be here. Tod? I don't want him dead. But since this isn't the Republic of Nash, that doesn't seem to matter."

My mom sighed and picked up a cookie she probably wouldn't eat. "Nash, Tod's time was up, and there's nothing anyone could have done to prevent it. You have to stop blaming yourself."

The irony stung like fire in my chest, and I stumbled back a step.

Nash's expression went hard, but I could see the pain beneath. "Why, Mom? *You* blame me." She

opened her mouth to argue, but he cut her off. “You don’t blame me for his death—we both know how that works—but you blame me for *how* he died. If I hadn’t gone out, that damn drunk would never have hit us. Tod might have died peacefully at home, instead of on the side of the road, crushed by his own steering wheel.”

I blinked, stunned. I’d made sure Nash would never know what happened, but instead of absolving him of guilt, I’d saddled him with it. Nash thought it was his fault. And one glance at my mother told me he was right—she did too.

But she didn’t know the truth. He obviously hadn’t told her that I’d had Genna over instead of watching him—which had set the whole thing in motion. And *neither* of them knew about the rest of it.

Nash stared at our mother, silently begging her to argue. To insist that she didn’t blame him. But we could both see the truth, even if the colors in her eyes held steady.

“No.” I said it out loud, glancing back and forth between them, but no one heard me. “This isn’t what I wanted.” But my brother stared right past me.

Mom answered, finally, too late to be believable. “It’s not your fault,” she said, staring at the hands clasped in her lap.

Nash actually rolled his eyes. “*I* went to the party. *I* got drunk. *I* made him come get me. It’s my fault we were on the road. If I’d done any of that differently, he wouldn’t have gone out like that.”

I couldn’t take anymore. “*It was my choice!*” I stood, but they still couldn’t see me, and they damn well couldn’t hear me.

My mother shook her head slowly, wordlessly denying his guilt, even as her eyes argued to the contrary.

"I wish you'd just say it!" Nash shouted, and I stood in front of him, trying to interrupt, trying to keep him from saying whatever would come next, because there'd be no taking it back. But he looked right through me. "I wish you'd just yell at me and get it over with. I know I screwed up. I know I can never fix it, and I wish you'd just say it, so we can...so we can at least *start* to move on. Because he's not coming back, Mom. I'm the only one left."

"Nash, *no*," I said, but my words—like my presence—were worthless.

Mom sniffled. "Nash, I'm not going to..."

"Just say it!" he shouted, standing, and I tried to shove him back into his chair, but my hands went right through his chest.

"You knew better!" she yelled, and I spun toward my mom. She stood, and she was crying, and I couldn't stand it, but there was nothing I could do. "You were grounded, and you went out drinking anyway. Sabine *just* got arrested for the same thing and you saw her in that place, but it didn't sink in, did it? *You* went out and partied, and Tod paid for it. *You got him killed!*" Her legs folded and she dropped to her knees on the carpet.

Nash walked through me and sank to the floor with to her. He wrapped his arms around her and they cried, apologizing to each other over and over, mourning me together. And I could only watch, my fists clenched in frustration, separated from them by death, and life, and

the devastating knowledge that things could have been different—but that would only have made them worse.

I sank into Nash's chair, but the cushion didn't squish beneath my weight. In my current state—present, but powerless—I couldn't even affect the damn furniture, much less my family. I was no good to them like this. What was the point of making sure Nash lived, if he and my mom were both going to blame him for my death?

I had to take the job. I wasn't crazy about the idea of killing people for the remainder of my afterlife—I wasn't even sure I could actually do it—but I couldn't let them spend the rest of their lives thinking he was responsible for how I died. Not when the truth was the other way around.

I left them like that, crying and forgiving each other for shouting what they thought was the truth. Bonding over my death.

In the living room, I stopped cold in the middle of the floor when my gaze landed on what I'd missed before. The cake. On the coffee table. The candles looked burned, and I knew I would have smelled them, if I were really there.

I moved forward slowly, dreading what I'd see, even as the understanding sank in. The cake would be chocolate, with cream cheese frosting between the layers. The same every year, because it was my favorite. And there it was, printed in blue letters, in my mother's own curly cake script.

Happy Birthday Tod.

Today I would have turned eighteen.

I waited for the last bus of the evening with three other people, then stepped up through the folding doors when they closed behind the woman in front of me. The bus swayed beneath me as it rolled forward, but I wasn't jostled, like the other passengers. As if the rules of physics that bound me were a little less precise than they should have been. I was only *kind of* there, thus only *kind of* on the bus, and I couldn't quite shake the feeling that I was only one deep breath away from falling through the seat and onto the road, where the highway traffic would barrel right through me.

The bus stopped down the street from the hospital, and I didn't fully relax until my feet *kind of* hit the concrete and the bus rolled away. Two blocks later, I passed two EMTs unloading a man on a stretcher on my way into the waiting room, wishing like hell I could feel the air-conditioning or smell the antiseptic and bleach.

Levi sat facing the entrance. Waiting for me. "Well?" He stood as I approached, forced to project determination in my bearing, since he couldn't hear my bold, confident footsteps.

"I'm in." And I would talk to my mother, even if it got me fired. I hadn't expected an afterlife, so I wouldn't be losing much if I died again—for real this time. At least this way she would know the truth.

"I thought you would be." But Levi's smile was slow, his thin brows slightly furrowed, and I understood that he was connecting more dots in his head, and he didn't seem particularly bothered by the picture they formed. "Let's go make it official."

I still couldn't feel the wind.

Levi swore that when I got better at dialing up and down my corporeality, I'd be able to feel and smell things without becoming visible or audible. But that level of competence was obviously going to take more than two days' worth of practice.

For the moment, I was stuck with an all-or-nothing physicality, and since "nothing" had been deemed good enough for last night's shift on the nursing home circuit—hopefully my first of many—I figured "all" would work for what I had planned for the morning.

The house looked brighter in the daylight. A little nicer, but no bigger. There were still only two bedrooms and still only two occupants. I was still both dead and homeless, and the previous day spent wandering through town and watching Nash unpack between video games did nothing to make those facts of the afterlife more appealing. But the chance to talk to my mom and set things right made everything else worth it.

Assuming I didn't give my mother a heart attack.

In the shadow of the front porch roof, out of sight of most of the neighbors, I closed my eyes. I focused on what I should be hearing and feeling. The porch beneath me. The sweltering July heat. The buzz of bees hovering over a flowering vine climbing the porch post.

I thought about what I wanted. Day-to-day interaction in the afterlife is all about intent, Levi had said. Once you've gained some control, if you intend to be seen or heard by someone, you will be.

And I damn well intended to be both seen and heard.

Then, suddenly, I could feel it. All of it. Even the sun baking the backs of my calves, the only part of me not shielded by the porch roof. My smile was equal parts relief and triumph as I jogged down the steps, my own footsteps echoing in my ears. I nearly laughed out loud when my finally fully corporeal body cast a long shadow on the grass.

But both my laughter and my confidence died a moment later, when I stood at the door again. No matter how I approached the issue—and I'd thought of nothing else for the past two days—I came up empty. There was just no good way for a dead son to greet his mother almost two weeks after his funeral.

However, when the moment came, my lack of a plan ceased to matter. Fools may rush in, but only cowards run away.

So I knocked. Then I waited, the nervous pounding in my chest a steady reassurance that I'd actually achieved corporeality. That she'd be able to see me. If she ever answered the door.

And finally, the doorknob turned. I swallowed as the door creaked open, and there stood my mother, a sweating glass of soda in one hand. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail and a smear of dirt streaked her forehead. Behind her, I saw dozens of moving boxes, most open and half-unpacked.

She blinked up at me, looking just like she had the day I'd died, except for the dark circles under her eyes.

Then she blinked again, and her mouth opened for an unspoken, probably unformed question. The glass slipped from her hand and shattered on the metal threshold, splattering us both with cold soda and ice cubes I was relieved to be able to feel.

I grinned, trying to hide my nerves. “At this rate, you’re not going to have any good glasses left.”

Her mouth closed, then opened again. “Tod?” she whispered, her voice unsteady. She thought she was seeing things.

“Yeah, Mom, it’s me,” I said, ready to catch her if she collapsed. “Please don’t freak out.” But I should have known better—my mom wasn’t the freaking out type.

She reached for me with one trembling hand and cupped my jaw. Her eyes filled with tears. “You’re really here.”

“As of about five minutes ago, yeah.” I shrugged and couldn’t resist a real smile.

Heedless of the broken glass, she threw her arms around me and squeezed me so tight that I’d have been in trouble, if I’d actually needed to breathe. I hugged her back, reassuring her with my hard-won physicality until she finally let go and pulled me over the collateral damage and into the living room.

“I can’t believe this,” she said, the blues in her eyes swirling with a dizzying combination of confusion and wonder. “Is this real? Tell me this is real. Tell me you’re back, somehow, and I haven’t lost what’s left of my mind.”

“It’s real, Mom.” I wanted to stop there, without saying the part that would kill the new light in her eyes. “But I’m not back.”

She frowned, and that light dimmed, but wasn’t truly extinguished. “I don’t understand. You’re alive.”

“Not in the traditional sense of the word.” I sat on the arm of the couch, pleased when the cushion sank beneath my weight. “But I think I’m pulling off a

reasonable imitation. Check it out.” I spread my arms, inviting her to test my corporeality. “Pretty solid, right?”

She reached out hesitantly and laid one hand on the center of my chest. “But...your heart’s beating.”

“Nice trick, huh? I’m proud of that one.”

She pushed the front door closed with one hand, unwilling to break eye contact, and I could see her warring with denial and confusion. If she were a human mother, clueless about the non-human and post-death elements of the world until her dead son showed up on her doorstep, she’d probably already be in a straitjacket. “What’s going on, Tod? How are you here? I know of a few possibilities, but none of them are...” She dropped her gaze, and when she met mine again, the blues in her eyes had darkened with fear, or something close to that. “What happened?”

“You might want to sit down.”

“No, I think I’ll stand.”

I almost laughed. She always was stubborn. That’s where Nash got it.

“Fine.” I sighed and scrubbed my hands over my face, my initial excitement wilting along with hers. “This would be so much easier if they actually issued black hoods,” I mumbled, still struggling for an opening line.

My mother froze, her eyes narrowing. “Reaper. You’re a *reaper*?”

I glanced at her in surprise. “Wow, first try. Remind me never to play twenty questions with you.”

“This is serious, Tod,” she insisted, her voice hushed even beyond the original whisper. She glanced toward the hallway, where music—something heavily

melodic and moody—blared from Nash's room, then tugged me past the swinging door into the kitchen. "You have no idea what you're getting into."

"Uh, yeah, I do. The scythe was a little tricky at first, but—much like golf—turns out it's all in the swing." I mimed swinging a golf club, but she didn't even crack a smile.

"I'm not kidding." My mother pulled a chair away from the table and sank into it, her frown deepening by the second. "If you've signed on with the reapers, then you're not really here. You're not alive. I'm not even supposed to *see* you. They have *rules* against this kind of thing."

I shrugged. "Yeah, but as you might recall, I've never been much for rules...."

"This isn't *funny*! Reapers don't really die, but they don't truly live either. You can't possibly understand what that will do to you."

I sighed and sank into the chair next to her, folding her hand in both of mine. "Mom." I leaned forward, peering straight into her eyes. "I'm dead, not stupid. I know what I signed on for. Eternity in solitude. Gradual loss of humanity. General indifference toward the living, and a skewed perspective on both life and death."

"Yes, and—"

"And...there's the daily extermination of life. Which sucks. It *all* sucks. It's not like I'm looking forward to spending the next thousand years alone, disconnected from the rest of the Earth's population. But at least I'm here. I'm in your kitchen, solid and warm. I still have all my memories, and my own body, and..."

"It's not the same," she said. "You can't just pick up where you left off. You're here, but you can't go back to school. You can't graduate, or go to college, or get married. You can't have a career, or a family. You're just going to linger between life and death, sending other people on, but unable to follow them," she finished, shoulders slumped like I'd somehow added to her burden instead of lifting it. "Reapers either fade from life or start to enjoy taking it. They don't get happy endings, Tod."

"I know. I know all of that, Mom."

Her tears were back, and I couldn't understand that. Where was the joy? The relief? Could it possibly hurt her worse to think of me as alone and slightly less than human than to think of me as dead and gone? "Then why would you do this?"

"Because the alternative sucks!" I stood fast enough that my chair skidded several inches behind me. "I thought you'd be happy. I'm still here, and I'm still me. Would you rather I crawl back into my coffin? Because I can, if that's what you want."

"No..." She stood and reached for me, but I backed away, and she looked bruised. "I'm sorry. I'm grateful for the chance to see you again. To get to touch you and talk to you. But honestly, the circumstances scare me. You may still be yourself now, but death changes you, Tod. There's no escaping that. If you're lucky, you can slow the process, but you can't stop it. And I don't want to see you change."

"You won't have to," I said, crossing my arms over my chest. "As long as I have you and Nash, I'll still be me. And after you're gone, none of that will matter anyway. So why can't you just be happy for me? This

was the only way I'd get a chance to..." I stopped before I could say it. This wasn't how it was supposed to go. I wanted to tell her calmly, not on the tail end of a fight about my afterlife, which oddly mirrored every fight we'd ever had about my future—back when I'd still had one.

"A chance to what?" She waited expectantly, and suddenly I wished I could just tell her that I didn't want my death to hurt her like my dad's did.

That was true. But it wasn't the reason I'd come, and I hadn't signed up to ferry souls for all of eternity just to punk out on the most important truth I'd ever possessed.

"A chance to tell you that it's not Nash's fault. What happened...it wasn't his fault, and you both have to stop blaming him."

"I don't blame him." Guilt lined her face, though her irises held stubbornly still.

"You don't blame my actual death on him, I know. But you both blame him for the circumstances. But you don't understand what really happened. It wasn't his fault. It was mine."

"What does that mean? What happened that night, Tod?" she asked, sinking back into her chair, and I could tell from the dark thread of trepidation in her voice that she was starting to get the picture, even if it hadn't come into focus for her yet.

I sat across from her, leaning forward with my elbows on my knees, bracing myself for what had to be said, and for the possibility that she'd never look at me the same way again. "First, promise you won't tell Nash. You have to make him understand that it wasn't

his fault, but you can't tell him what really happened. It wouldn't be fair to him."

Knowing that he lived because I'd died—even if it was my choice—would lead to survivor's guilt thick enough to haunt him for the rest of his life.

"Okay..." Mom said, but I knew without asking that if she thought it was in his best interest to know, she'd tell him, no matter what she'd promised me. There was nothing more she could do for me, but he was still alive, and still her responsibility. Nash had to come first now. And I understood that.

"I'm not sure how much you know about Grim Reapers. Do you know what it takes to qualify...?" I asked, and the sudden startling comprehension in her eyes was answer enough.

"Oh Tod..."

"It's okay, Mom. It was my choice."

"It was supposed to be Nash?" She sounded stunned. Numb.

"Yeah." I frowned when I could see where her thoughts were headed. "But you're thinking about this all wrong. As much as I'd love to be remembered as a martyr—I'm sure that'd lead to some serious play in the afterlife—that's not how it happened."

"What do you mean?"

"I wasn't watching him that night. I left to pick up my girlfriend, and I didn't even check on him when I got back. Or at all. I don't even really know when he snuck out. Then, when he called, I bitched about having to pick him up. I yelled at him on the ride home, telling him what a worthless pain in the ass he was." I took a deep breath, then spit out the rest of it, to get the bitter taste off my tongue. "That's the last

thing he heard before that asshole slammed into us. The truth is that if I'd been watching him, he wouldn't have been on that road in the first place."

At first, she could only stare at me, trying to process everything. "So you...?"

"So when the reaper spelled it out for me, I had to do it. I couldn't let me yelling at him be the last thing he ever heard."

"I can't believe you did that...." She scrubbed her face with both hands, and stray curls tumbled over them, effectively blocking me out. I had no idea what she was thinking or feeling.

My heart dropped into my stomach, and the tone of my entire afterlife suddenly seemed to depend on what she said next. On the judgment I would surely see in her eyes. Her hands fell from her face slowly and my mother stared at me through layers of pain and regret I couldn't imagine. "I don't think you even understand what you gave up for him. I don't think you will, until we're both long gone."

"I don't think *you* understand." My own guilt was a strong, steady pressure on my chest, slowly compressing my lungs, sending an ache through my heart. "This wasn't some noble gesture, Mom. I wouldn't have had to save him if I hadn't put him in the path of that car in the first place. I just needed you both to know that it wasn't his fault. I made the call."

Finally she nodded, though she looked like she wanted to argue. "Thank you. For all of it."

I stood to go—I'd had all the post-death reunion I could stand for one day—and she stood with me.

"Are you going to get in trouble for this?" she asked. Translation: *Am I going to lose you again?*

“I don’t think so. My supervisor’s pretty cool, for a dead kid. He brought me here the other night, and I’m pretty sure he knows where I am now. If I get caught by someone else, he’ll deny knowledge, but he’s not gonna bust me himself.”

In retrospect, I’d realized what Levi obviously understood from the start. Watching my family mourn wouldn’t make me want to let them go. It would make me want to keep them close—and that was the only benefit worth accepting the job for.

“In that case, don’t be a stranger.” Her eyes teared up again and she sniffled, pulling me close for a hug. “It can’t be like it was before, but you’re welcome here any time.”

Relief eased some of the sting from our bittersweet reunion. That was exactly what I’d needed to hear.

“Do you want to talk to Nash?”

I shook my head firmly. “Not now. I’ll show myself eventually, but I’m not ready yet.” This soon after the accident, I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to keep the truth from him. He’d know something was weird—something beyond his brother’s less-than-triumphant return from the grave—and I wouldn’t be able to lie convincingly enough to cover it up.

“Okay.” Mom squeezed me one more time, then let me go. “But don’t drag it out too long. The longer you wait, the more jarring it’ll be for him.”

But what she didn’t say—what we both knew—was that no matter how jarring my return was for my little brother, it couldn’t be more jarring than waking up ten days postmortem in the clothes he was buried in. Nash would never know what that felt like.

Nor would he ever know that what was supposed to be the end of his life became the beginning of my afterlife instead.

Eleven months and ten days after my first nursing home rotation, I blinked into the hospital's ER to find Levi waiting for me, slouched in one of the lobby chairs. The sense of *déjà vu* was so strong I was actually disoriented for a moment, as I flashed back to my earliest days as a reaper—a rookie so green I couldn't even pull off the disembodied voice trick without my entire body flashing in and out of sight like a not-so-special effect.

"Glad you could make it," Levi said, sliding out of the chair to stand less than shoulder high on me.

"Yeah, it was tough to make time between the compulsive thumb twiddling and the lure of bingo night at Colonial Manor, but I managed to fit you in."

His forehead furrowed. "Glad I rank as a priority."

"You rank as accessory to the crime that is my eternal hereafter. So, why am I here? This isn't my beat."

"It is now." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded sheet of paper, and that sense of *déjà vu* became a startling certainty. "We inherited a rookie from another district, and he'll be taking over the nursing home circuit. Which means you're getting a promotion."

I huffed in amusement. "From adult diapers to bedpans? Move over, Elvis, *I'm* the afterlife of the party!"

"If you don't think you can handle it, you can go back to rotating between rest homes..." Levi threatened, copper brows raised in challenge.

"Gimme that." I snatched the paper and unfolded it to find a list of four names, times, and room numbers. Roughly the same workload I'd had on my old circuit, but these reappings would all take place in the same building. Obviously consistency was a privilege of rank.

"Don't make me regret this," Levi warned, frowning up at me through a dead child's eyes. "Most reapers spend nearly a decade in the rest home circuit before moving up."

"If I weren't already dead, I'd be alive with joy," I said, and dimly I realized that Levi was responding. But I couldn't concentrate on what he was saying because my ears were suddenly full of something else. Music. A beautiful, eerie singing faintly echoing from beyond a closed set of doors. If I didn't know better, I'd swear...

But then it was gone, and Levi was staring up me, his pouty child's mouth pursed in a frown I found *really* hard to take seriously.

"What'd you say?" I asked, fighting the urge to scruff his curls. He didn't like that. At *all*.

"I said, you're a smartass, Hudson."

I grinned. "I recognize no other kind of ass." I glanced at the list one more time, then started walking backward away from him. "Now if you'll excuse me, Death waits for no man. Except me." I shrugged, still grinning. "It waits for you too, obviously, but 'Death waits for no kid' just doesn't have quite the same ring."

Levi rolled his eyes, then blinked out of the waiting room, leaving me to my first non-geriatric reaping, scheduled in a mere five minutes, in Triage E.

I walked through the double doors, unseen and unheard, and made my way past a nurse's station and the first few rooms, most of which were blocked from view by curtains on steel tracks. But the third room was open.

In it, a girl lay strapped to a stretcher, arching fiercely against the restraints, throwing long brown hair with every violent toss of her head. She moaned incoherently, but something in that sound drew me closer, until I found myself in the doorway, listening, picking out low, eerie notes in the last sounds she produced before her voice gave out. She twisted toward the door then, and her medicated gaze met mine, pain and panic swirling in sluggish shades of blue in her irises.

Holy shit. A female *bean sidhe*. I'd never even seen one, other than my mom.

She went still then, her limbs lax, and for just a second, we watched each other as she blinked slowly and I was unable to blink at all.

Then a nurse walked through me and into the room, and the spell—whatever it was—was broken. And only after I'd walked away did I realize that she shouldn't have been able to see me. *No one* could see me, unless I wanted them to....

Several steps later, I found Triage E, and with it, the man whose time on earth was over. Martin Gardner, 58, had suffered a heart attack, and the doctors had just gotten him stabilized—or so they thought.

But before I could help Mr. Gardner into the great beyond, shouting at the end of the hall drew my attention. I turned to find a man on a stretcher being wheeled toward me, his arm flapping as a nurse walked alongside him, trying to calm him down. “Drunk driver,” the EMT pushing the stretcher said to a man in scrubs, madly scribbling on a clipboard. “Cops are waiting in the lobby. The bastard killed three people, but only broke his own arm. Figures, huh?”

As they wheeled the man closer, I saw his face, and rage shot through me, hotter than a bolt of lightning. I knew that face. I’d only seen it once, but I could never forget it, even if my afterlife stretched into eternity.

The bastard who killed Nash. And now he’d killed again.

I glanced at Mr. Gardner, sleeping peacefully with his daughter at his side. Then I turned and followed the other stretcher into Triage H.

Levi wouldn’t know the difference, so long as I turned in a soul. At least, not until the exchanged death date showed up on another list, farther down the road. And if he fired me then, so what? It’d be worth it to know this asshole wouldn’t be killing anyone else behind the wheel.

When the nurse finally left the room, I stepped in, taking on just enough corporeality for the man on the bed to see me. I watched his eyes widen in terror when I appeared out of nowhere. Then I leaned over and whispered into his ear.

“Time’s up, you drunk driving piece of shit.” His hands shook on the bed rails, and the scent of urine

blossomed into the air. “Just FYI, in your case, I think it’s okay to fear the reaper.”

* * *

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A native of the dust bowl, Rachel Vincent is the oldest of five siblings, and arguably the most outspoken of the bunch. She loves cats, devours chocolate and lives on flavored coffee. Rachel's older than she looks—seriously—and younger than she feels, but remains convinced that for every day she spends writing, one more day will be added to her lifespan.

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ISBN: 978-1-4268-7575-5

Reaper

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