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# Life: Told by Death

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*Life: Told by Death*

By

Shannan Rivera

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
Requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Professional Writing in the  
Department of English  
In the College of Humanities and Social Sciences of Kennesaw State University  
Kennesaw, Georgia  
2018

After all, to the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure.

—J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*

**Dedication**

To Grandma Lirio, who had the best stories and the kind of spirit people will talk about  
for generations

## Acknowledgements

There are so many people who I need to thank for sticking with me through this process.

First, I would like to thank my capstone advisors, Professor Tony Grooms and Dr. Sergio Figueiredo, for their advice, feedback, patience, and time. They are two of the most incredible, knowledgeable, and talented instructors I have ever had the pleasure of learning from, and I will forever be grateful to have had their help and support on this endeavor of mine.

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## Introduction

The idea for this story came into existence in a white Ford Taurus sedan that was old enough to drive itself. I remember that I was making my way to the Shakespeare Tavern in Atlanta to watch *Macbeth* for an assignment in my Shakespeare class. I brought two of my friends with me, and we talked about how our semesters were going while we were stuck in Atlanta traffic. I excitedly chattered on about my fiction writing class, telling them how much I was enjoying all of our writing exercises, how useful our textbooks had been, and how our final project was completing a short story. And my friends, the story lovers that they are, asked me a really important question that day: “What story are you going to write?”

Looking back on this moment, I’m not sure why I hadn’t thought about it until then. I remember that I had spent the first two weeks of the semester fighting to get in the class, annoying my advisor endlessly and refreshing the class schedule search page on Owl Express, the university’s registration website, every several minutes until a spot finally opened. But, now that I was in it, I had completely forgotten about the point of it: to tell a story.

I looked at my friends completely dumbfounded with my mouth slightly open, and I told them that I didn’t have even the slightest clue what I was going to write about. They, of course, laughed at me, but we spent the entire rest of the car ride discussing story ideas. We talked about some of our favorite book series, characters, and stories that had been done over and over again until we landed on the topic of the Grim Reaper.

We delved into the stereotypes associated with a grim reaper character and whether or not we thought he was a good or bad guy. We also discussed several other things I can’t remember now, but the important thing is that I came out of that conversation with the idea to write a story

featuring the grim reaper as the main character. I've always loved "gray" characters who have unclear morals or motives, and I couldn't imagine a better one than him.

Although I didn't end up using that idea in a story immediately, it stayed in the back of my head all semester. I knew I wanted to do something different with the grim reaper character because there are so many different identities a Death personification can have. Typically, when Contemporary Westerners think of Death, they think of the grim reaper with a scythe and a long black cloak, but Death has many personifications in different cultures and religions that I wanted to be able to include. In Greek Mythology, Thanatos is the god of Death. Latin American cultures recognize Santa Muerte as a female folk saint symbolizing death. Archangels Azrael and Michael are angels of death in Islam and Christianity. And these are just some of the representations discoverable with a quick Google search. When trying to think of a way that my Death personification could encompass all the different representations, oddly enough, I thought about Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* series.

This series is about a young demigod named Percy Jackson who is destined to fulfill a great prophecy. These books include many figures from Greek Mythology, but I particularly recalled the way Rick Riordan handled Aphrodite's description. Percy meets her, and he can't pinpoint what she looks like; instead, he says, "Thinking back on it, I can't tell you who she looked like. Or even what color her hair or eyes were. Pick the most beautiful actress you can think of. The goddess was ten times more beautiful than that. Pick your favorite hair color, eye color, whatever. The goddess had that." I liked that this description didn't put a standard of beauty on Aphrodite. Instead, Riordan let Aphrodite be whatever the readers wanted her to be. In thinking about how my grim reaper could be all death personifications, I adapted this idea of "reader's choice" to fit my own story.

I decided that my personification of Death would be whatever the dying person's image of death was, so instead of having a figure with a cloak and scythe, Death could be an angel, a demon, or just another guy walking down the street. Death's appearance would be determined by the dying. This allowed a lot of room for me to create a new kind of Grim Reaper or personification of Death, and with all that freedom, I decided to make Death an average guy who falls in love with a dying girl.

For Professor Grooms's advanced fiction writing class, I wrote a short story called, "Death's Remorse" that follows a reaper named Sam as he tries to save Tristyn, a girl with a terminal illness she isn't aware she has. I chose to make Death just an average soul trapped in a purgatory-like state where he has to release souls into the afterlife. However, this particular soul has a hard time letting go of people, so he tries to save them when he can. In writing this story, Sam's character really took shape. I liked that Sam, a "grim reaper," was more interested in helping people live than releasing souls to the afterlife, and I wanted to develop him even more. I started asking myself questions about him. How did he become a reaper? What was his responsibility as a reaper? Were there others like him? How could he change his situation? That short story I wrote in my undergraduate advanced fiction writing class ended up being just the beginning of a project that I would work on all through my undergraduate studies and ultimately submit for my graduate capstone project.

Since writing that first short story, it has undergone several revisions and become a much longer work. It has developed into a short novel following Sam's existence as a grim reaper who takes on these different personifications for the various souls he releases to the afterlife. Sam is constantly challenged in his position as a reaper because of his desire to let souls live and because of his own fear of death. He, much like the souls he has to release, does not know what

awaits those who have died, seeing as he has not yet died himself, and he hesitates to release souls for that reason. As a reaper, Sam is confronted with an array of situations in which he is forced to make difficult decisions about the lives of others.

The narrative is set up in a way that Sam is telling his stories to Lily, a woman who has asked to hear a final bedtime story before he releases her soul to the afterlife. Each story Sam tells her is intended to represent a different stage in the grieving process. He starts with his own story about how he became a reaper and first denied his responsibilities of setting souls free. The second story he tells Lily is about his encounter with Amelie, a little girl who suffered a traumatic accident. In this story, Sam struggles with anger toward his limitations as a reaper and his inability to help this little girl. The third story Sam tells Lily is about Domingo, an elderly man with Dementia. Sam makes deals with himself and with Michael, another reaper, in attempts to extend Domingo's life and allowing his family time to gain closure, but his efforts are without much reward. The final story Sam tells Lily is about Tristyn, a young woman who he meets at a restaurant. Sam develops a relationship with this woman and falls in love with her. This situation brings Sam to his lowest point as a reaper and forces him to accept that no matter what he does, he will never be alive again. Lily's chapters throughout the story are representations of acceptance, the final stage of grief. To show this, instead of having her soul released, Lily decides to release Sam and take on the position of reaper herself.

I struggled a lot in creating the supernatural limbo world in between life and afterlife in which Sam exists and figuring out the rules and responsibilities associated with being a reaper, but I have really enjoyed building a world for him and exploring this character through the various difficulties he faces. After all these years of drafting and many revisions, I am excited to fine tune my story and share it with an audience larger than my creative writing groups and

classes. My intent for this story is ultimately to publish it, so, after manuscript completion, my next step is to decide how I would like to share my story.

Today, there are a few ways to publish a book. Aspiring authors may self-publish their stories through Amazon or other available avenues, or they may pitch their stories to potential agents or directly to publishers. Considering the numerous routes writers can take by writing cover letters to publishers, querying agents, and even participating in pitch wars on Twitter, I plan to utilize social media outlets for generating attention while also preparing query letters for agents and manuscript cover letters for presses. These documents will be used to pitch my story, explain my manuscript, identify a genre and target audience, and suggest a market placement for agents and publishing houses.

Considering the market as it is today in 2018, the pitch for my story would be as follows: *Life: Told by Death* is the story of Sam, a reluctant reaper of souls who isn't cut out for his fate. This novel follows him from his unwitting entrance into the life of a reaper to his struggle with his new existence and all the way through to his eventual escape into the afterlife.

After the pitch, I will explain that the target audience for this novel is young adults in their mid-teens to late twenties who enjoy Kami Garcia and Margaret Stohl's *Caster Chronicles* series or even Christopher Moore's *A Dirty Job* series. Both of these series contain similar paranormal characters and moral themes to my own story. *A Dirty Job* features a unique reaper forced to adapt to his new role as a Death Merchant. *Caster Chronicles* contains paranormal characters or "Casters" who are fated to be either good or bad and they struggle with their roles and identities as Casters. While my novel has similar themes and creates a unique world as these other novels do, my story offers something different from these similar titles because I have created a reaper that is what people believe he is and not subscribed to any one mythology.

Additionally, I will explain that my novel would be classified as young adult paranormal fantasy because of the biblical/mythological figures, moral dilemmas, and paranormal characters throughout my story. My protagonist, Sam, is initially described as a young man in his early twenties, so the tone of the novel appeals to readers in and around that age range. It also deals with the “Who am I?” question that is present in a lot of coming-of-age young adult literature.

There are, of course, other elements included in a query letter and manuscript cover letter that would explain who I am and how the novel came to be, but I believe that at this stage in the project knowing where my story fits in to current market and how I could pitch it to publishers and agents is invaluable information moving forward.

I have spent the last several years working and reworking this manuscript, and I still have more work to do. My time spent in Kennesaw State University’s Master of Arts in Professional Writing Program has provided me with incredible opportunities to rip apart and piece back together this story, learning something new about my characters, my craft, and myself each time. This capstone project is just one of the many ideas littering the pages of my notebooks, and I am truly eager to use the skills gained through this program to create new characters, new worlds, and new opportunities for myself as a student, a reader, and a writer.

## ***Life: Told by Death***

*Lily*

“Hello there,” were the first words the old woman had spoken in several hours. She had been rocking in the old, rickety swing on the front of her house shuffling playing cards absentmindedly all afternoon. Her granddaughter, who was sitting next to her reading a book, sat up startled by the sudden sound.

“Who are you talking to, Grandma?” she asked. Her large brown eyes followed her grandmother’s clouded gaze out to the front yard, but she saw nothing other than the grass and the flower-lined walkway that led out to the street.

Her grandmother didn’t seem to hear her. She cut the deck of cards she was holding in the middle and tapped them together before shuffling them back into one deck. She did that a few more times before turning to look at her granddaughter.

“Did you say something, Olivia?” she asked as she cut the deck again.

“I asked you who you were talking to,” Olivia answered.

“Well, that’s silly. I’m talking to you, Oli,” said the grandmother as the cards fluttered together between her aged fingers again.

“No, before that. You said, ‘Hello there.’ Who were you talking to?”

Olivia’s grandmother stopped shuffling her cards and squinted at Olivia as if she were having a hard time seeing her.

“Did I say something before just now?” she asked.

Olivia smiled with confusion and mild amusement.

“Yes, you did. *Just now*. Looking out to the street,” she said.

Olivia pointed where her grandmother had been looking. Her grandmother followed her finger with her eyes. Then she did something odd. She smiled and winked at no one in particular.

“Oh... Was there someone there?” asked the grandmother, turning her gaze back to Olivia who hadn’t seen her wink.

“No, Grandma, there’s no one there. That’s why I asked who you were talking to.”

Olivia was laughing a little now, and her grandmother was smiling.

“Huh... well, I guess I don’t know who I was talking to,” she said with a shrug.

The grandmother, done with the conversation, resumed shuffling her cards. Olivia stared at the spot for a few more seconds, but eventually she settled back into the swing, reopening her book and rocking the swing by pushing against the porch railing with her boot.

After a few moments of swinging in silence, the grandmother spoke again.

“Oli, did I take my medications this morning?”

Olivia immediately stopped the swing and looked at her grandmother with wide eyes. Her grandmother didn’t share in her worry. She continued shuffling her cards and stealing quick glances at the spot she had spoken to.

“I don’t know, Grandma. Did Mom leave it by your coffee this morning?” she asked.

Her grandmother shrugged carelessly, and the cards fluttered yet again.

“I’ll go check,” Olivia said quickly. She shot up in a quick movement and rushed into the house.

As soon as the screen door closed behind her, the figure only the grandmother could see moved to approach the porch, but the grandmother held out her hand, telling him to wait.

After a few moments, the screen door flew open again and Olivia appeared holding a bright yellow pill organizer.

“It looks like you did take them today,” she said, opening and closing the different tabs that were labeled for each day of the week. “But you don’t have any for the rest of the week and there aren’t any in the medicine cabinet either.”

“Oh. Well, I’ll call your mother or your uncle. One of them can—”

“No that’s okay, Grandma. They’re working. I’ll get your refills.”

“Will you, Oli? You don’t have to.”

“Sure, I can. No worries. You’ll be okay here for a little while?” she asked already picking up her book and walking back toward the door.

“Yes, yes. I’ll be fine.”

“Okay. I’ll be quick.”

The screen door creaked open and slammed closed at least two more times as Olivia collected her things. Lily, in the meantime, kept looking back to the spot she had spoken to with a smile on her lips. After a little time had passed, Olivia reemerged with a purse slung over her shoulder and car keys twirling on her finger.

“Be right back. Love you,” Olivia said as she shuffled down the front steps of the porch.

“I love you too,” she called after her.

The grandmother watched as her granddaughter walked down the brick pathway, got in her car, and drove away. When Olivia was gone, she motioned for the figure to join her on the porch. It ascended the stairs.

“Hello there, beautiful. What’s your name?” The figure asked as he reached the top step.

“Lily,” she said. “And yours?”

“You can call me Sam.”

Lily thought the man standing in front of her looked young, maybe even the same age as her granddaughter. He was sharply dressed in a black button up shirt, dress pants, and black wing-tipped shoes. But Lily knew he was young because his hair was disheveled, his shirt was untucked, and his hands were hidden shyly in the pockets of his pants. And his eyes. They looked young too. They were large and round and the clearest blue Lily had ever seen. In fact, they were almost silver when the light hit them. *Here he was, and he was just some bright-eyed boy*, she thought with a chuckle.

“You, my dear, are not at all what I was expecting,” she said as Sam sat down next to her. He leaned back in the swing and fixed Lily with a curious look.

“What were you expecting?” he asked.

“A long black cloak and a scythe to be honest.”

The corner of Sam’s mouth pulled upward into a shy smile.

“Oh that,” he chuckled. “It’s a funny thing what the media can do.”

“But it is you then? You’re here to take me away?” Lily asked.

For a moment, Sam didn’t answer. There was something refreshing about Lily’s tone, he thought. Her voice wasn’t broken or shaking like so many he encountered. In fact, it was quite the opposite. Strong, sure, playful. She wasn’t looking away from him either nor was she asking for anything. Sam worried for a moment about how his answer would affect her. He didn’t want to upset her, but, ultimately, he went with the truth.

He nodded cautiously, and Lily’s grin widened.

“In a sense, yes. I’m here to release your soul. But, as far as take you away, well, we aren’t actually going anywhere,” he said, trying to mirror Lily’s calm demeanor.

She was quiet for a moment, but her smile continued to grow.

“Thank God,” she said, finally, not taking her eyes from Sam. “I’ve been waiting for you, you know. It’s very rude to keep a woman waiting.”

Sam opened his mouth and closed it several times, not sure how to respond. He’d never been chastised for being late before. He clasped his hands together and wrung them as he tried to think of something to say.

“I didn’t...well, it’s not actually an easy thing to explain, but I come when I’m called or needed I guess. I’m sorry if I should have—” he stammered.

Lily’s smile spread nearly to her ears as Sam left more and more sentences unfinished.

“Calm yourself, dear boy. I’m messing with you,” she said.

Sam stopped stammering and noted the laugh lines that were clearly etched into her cheeks. He thought happily that her life must have been full of teasing people like this. His mouth was still open slightly, and he tried to find something to say, but when words didn’t come, he looked to the ground and smiled sheepishly.

“Have I embarrassed you?” she said, laughing. “I’d apologize, but I don’t really do that anymore.”

Sam shook his head and laughed with her for a peaceful moment. But, when the moment was over, he looked up from the ground and faced her. His expression grew very serious.

“Well, this certainly had been interesting. Not many people taunt death,” he said in an attempt to maintain the light tone.

“What sad lives most people must lead, then,” Lily said casually, shuffling her cards again. Sam waited for them to all fall into place before speaking again.

“Are you ready to go?” he asked her carefully. This was usually the part of the conversation where, no matter how calm they were when Sam first arrived, people started to unravel. He expected Lily to become sad or scared or some combination of both emotions, but she didn’t react. She simply shuffled the cards again as if death hadn’t just arrived on her front porch.

Minutes rolled by as Sam waited for her to answer. He started to get nervous just listening to the cards flutter over and over. He opened his mouth ready to ask his question again, but Lily spoke first.

“No. I don’t think so,” she said, meeting his eyes and holding her cards still.

Sam’s exhaled slowly and closed his eyes. He had thought, for once, that his job might be easy. Lily had seemed so eager to accept him when he first arrived, but of course she wasn’t ready. Sam couldn’t blame her. No one ever was.

He reopened his eyes, ready to comfort her with a speech that he had given many times before, but the words didn’t make it out of his mouth. In seeing her glowing eyes and wide grin, Sam immediately realized that she had been messing with him again.

“I thought you said you’ve been waiting for me,” Sam said, donning a grin of his own.

“Oh, I have been. But, now that you’re here, I think I’d like to taunt death for just a little while longer,” she said, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

Lily resumed shuffling her cards and waited for Sam to say something. He shook his head lightly trying to wrap his mind around his current situation. People had become fairly easy for him to read, but he wasn’t sure what this woman could possibly want from him.

“Well, alright then. How can I help you pass?” he asked.

Lily had her answer ready for him.

“Throughout my life,” she said, “I’ve always loved a good story, and I think I’d like to hear one more before I go. Sort of like a final bedtime story.”

Sam let out a deep breath, relieved at the simplicity of the request. He never had all the capabilities people expected him to have, and, more often than not, he wasn’t able to meet final requests. He couldn’t save people or cure illnesses, but he could tell a story.

“Of course,” he said lightly. “What kind of story would you like to hear?”

Sam looked up to the roof of the porch and thought back for a story worthy of a dying wish. None came to mind.

“One last good one would be nice. An interesting one. Like nothing I’ve heard before,” Lily said, still shuffling her cards.

“Oh. Um ... alright. I’m sure I have something.”

Sam ran his hands through his hair as he tried to remember any stories that stood out as particularly interesting. He was about to ask her what some of her favorite stories were when she spoke again.

“You know,” she said, “I bet the life of the Grim Reaper is really *interesting*... Fascinating and captivating even.”

Sam’s gaze quickly shifted from the ceiling back to Lily. He was hoping he had misunderstood her request and waited for her to continue. But Lily just sat there smiling and shuffling her cards as she waited for him to begin.

“You want to hear my story?” he asked.

“Yes, your story. You’re the Grim Reaper here, aren’t you?” she said with a confidence that surprised him. Sam tried to fight off the hollow feeling that was unfolding inside him.

“Ma’am,” he stammered, “my story is very long and filled with more tragedy than most. I’m sure there must be something else you’d rather hear.”

He delivered his plea in what he hoped was a calm manner, but the idea of recounting some of the things he’d witnessed in his existence did not appeal to him at all.

“You wouldn’t deny an old woman her dying wish, would you?” Lily asked playfully. When Sam didn’t answer, she spoke again.

“Please, Sam. I can’t imagine I’ll ever get the chance to ask Death about his life again,” she said, tilting her head and batting her eyelashes.

Sam couldn’t think of a worse way to spend such a lovely afternoon, but he liked this woman. She was full of fire and light, and who was he to deny this woman her dying wish.

“Right. Okay. If mine is really the story you want to hear, then I’m happy to tell it to you,” he said, defeated.

“You’re not happy, but yours is the story I’d like to hear,” she said, smirking.

“Well, all right. But you asked for this,” Sam said as he forced his thoughts to reach back into the dark corners of his memory.

“Where would you like me to start?” he asked.

“At the beginning, of course,” she said, setting her cards to the side.

Sam took a deep, long breath.

“Well in that case,” he said, “I will start with my death.”

*Sam*

I'm not sure how long ago I died, and I can't really remember any of the details from my life. I don't know what kind of person I was. I don't know what my interests were. I can't even remember what my name was before this existence, but I can remember my death. And it hurt. I was young but not so young that I didn't understand what was happening. But definitely not old enough to accept it either.

I went through four of the five stages of grief while I was dying. I started with denial, as many do. I remember trying to run from whatever had killed me. I was tripping over the twisted roots of tree trunks that seemed like they were going out of their way to disrupt my path. I was clutching the rough, blue fabric of my uniform, desperately hoping to stop my blood from flooding out. I was unsuccessful though. My vision blurred, and trees were growing from the sky. Then, I was on the ground watching the stars dance with the leaves, teasing me with their movements.

I couldn't get up. In fact, it felt like I was sinking. Drowning in a thick, red pool of my own making. I was thrashing around, digging my heels into the ground trying desperately to move myself forward, but my boots kept slipping on the slick, soaked soil. I became a beggar in that moment, shouting as loud as I could despite the noises that were shaking the ground around me. What I was begging for, I'm not really sure. For life I guess. I was just trying to hold on to consciousness until someone found me, and, for a brief moment, I thought someone had.

You see, I'd never thought of death as a hooded figure or anything like that. I'm actually not sure that I'd thought about death before that moment. Regardless, a mysterious figure approached me. He looked me over, chuckled to himself, and then he sat next to me. In that instant, the ground stilled, and the noises finally stopped.

"Hey! Sir—"

"Quit shouting, Son," he barked as he crossed his legs and leaned back.

"But—"

"No one can hear ya. It's just us two, now," he said with emotionless words. He didn't care that I was dying. I couldn't see how that was possible. It was all I cared about.

"Call help. Get a surgeon. Please," I begged.

There was a deep pain radiating from my gut. I was drowning. Everything smelled and tasted like metal. This man was my only lifeline, and he was laughing at me.

"I can't get help," he said lazily. He might as well have been picking his teeth.

"What do you mean you can't?!" I shouted.

This bastard was just going to let me die. How could he not help? I tried to sit up, thinking I'd wring his neck, but my vision darkened around the edges, and I fell back to the ground.

"Please, I'm hurt," I pleaded. "You could save me. You could be a hero."

The figure laughed again.

"I'm a villain, boy, and you're not just hurt. You're dying. Nearly dead. That's why I'm here."

I tried to focus on him, but I couldn't make out any facial features. He just looked like a dark blur. I've always thought that was due to my pain, but these days I'm not so sure.

“What do you mean, nearly dead?”

“You’re dyin’ and I’m here to reap your soul. Any last words.”

“What! No!”

“I was hoping you’d be more original than that,” he taunted.

He was playing with me. I meant nothing to him, and that struck a nerve with me.

“What are you? Who are you to decide if I die?” I shouted.

“Who am I?” he laughed. “Well, boy, I am the guy that gets to decide. That’s who I am, and all your griping won’t change that. So, If that’s all—”

“Listen, you—”

“No! Now this was fun for a minute, but now it’s your turn to open them ears and shut that mouth. You’re already dead, boy. The only reason you’re still here is because we’re having this nice little chat. But, I’m bored now, and I’ve got others to deal with, so I’m gonna let you go.”

“What are you talking about? I can’t be dead already. I’m hurt!” I shouted.

“Are you?” he laughed.

If you can believe it, it took me until right then to make sense of it all. Somewhere between his arrival and that moment, the pain had gone away. I couldn’t feel my body anymore, and I had to admit defeat.

“No...” I answered softly.

“Good. So, you ready to go now that you’re done with your little tantrum?”

“Go where?” I asked with a shaky voice.

“Don’t know. Don’t care.”

Panic gripped me. I would have hyperventilated if it wasn't for the fact that my body was already nearly completely shut down.

"No, I won't. I'm not going," I yelled.

"Everyone goes," he said, raising his voice. "Whether they're ready to or not. So, quit whining."

I looked at the figure, and an idea dawned on me.

"Not everyone goes. You're still here."

I still couldn't make out a facial expression, but if he had eyes, I felt like they would've been on fire.

"That's right, Son. I am still here, but you don't want this type of existence. It's nothing." There was an edge to his voice, but I couldn't place it at the time. Now, I realize it was desire.

"You watch others live and die, but you're still here. There isn't even any love or lust or vices to get you through this hell."

Instead of a warning, it sounded more like a taunt. Like a challenge. I thought about his words, and I should have heeded them but even a half-life in a world I knew sounded better than whatever was waiting in the unknown.

"Yes, I do," I said, crazed. "I don't want to die. Not yet."

I was begging again.

"This life is worse than death," he laughed.

"Nothing is worse than death."

I was so sure then. I know now that I was wrong.

"You're just being a coward. You're afraid to die."

He was right of course.

“I am afraid to die. Please let me join you,” I shouted at him.

“You don’t join. You trade. My soul is free and yours lingers on this earth doing this job forever.”

“Okay,” I said blankly.

“You don’t understand,” he said. He was right. I didn’t understand, but I couldn’t see it then.

“All I understand is that I can’t die today.”

“Well, if you’re sure.”

The excitement coming off him was almost tangible, and the humor in his voice was disgusting.

“You could be like me, I guess. If that’s really what you want.”

“It is,” I said in a determined tone.

“Well, the transfer it’s very simple you see. Just say ‘reaper, I release you’ and it’s done. I leave, and you get to stay...”

“Reaper, I release you,” I said quickly.

For a split second, I could see him for what he was. He was grotesque and smiling. Then, he was gone.

I was left there all alone. I remembered our conversation. I remembered the feeling of desperation I had had just moments before when I was begging to stay, but something changed in the moment I became this. It was like every connection I had to the world was severed. I couldn’t remember any of the reasons why I wanted to stay. I didn’t have any memories of myself before falling over that tree root. I didn’t have anything. Not even a name anymore.

I stood up and left my old body behind on the dirt. I looked back at my own corpse trying to remember who I was. I was wearing a uniform covered in my own blood. My guess was that I had died in war. I knew I should have been sad, but the body might as well have belonged to a stranger. I didn't feel anything other than confused.

I looked down at my hands and legs. They were still there. I patted my abdomen and ribs and face. Everything still seemed normal to me, but I knew something had to be different.

“So, what now...?” I asked myself as I tried to comprehend my new existence. I looked around my surroundings. The trees were thick. There wasn't any discernible path nearby. I did the only thing I could think of. I approached the nearest solid object, which happened to be a tree, and tried to touch it. My hand passed right through it, so did my leg, and so did my entire body. At first, I felt a rush of excitement, but it was almost immediately shattered when I heard a gruff voice behind me.

“You poor boy.”

I whipped around and was faced with a man. I couldn't quite place his age or appearance. He seemed older than me, and he gave off an air of wisdom. Or maybe he was actually glowing. Anyway, he was just standing in a nonchalant manner looking at me with a mixture of pity and disappointment.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“I'm a reaper,” he answered.

He looked down at my abandoned body and then back at me.

“A reaper?” I asked.

“Yes. A being designed to help souls pass on from one life to the next.”

“And I'm one? I set souls free?”

“You do now,” he said. “Come on.”

He turned away from me and started walking. He faded through the trees, moving effortlessly in the direction of his choosing. I rushed to his side and tried to match his stride, but I was clumsy. I kept thinking I would run into trees or trip on roots and rocks. The weight of these thoughts slowed me down.

“So how does this work?” I finally asked. “Do we answer to someone? How do we know whose souls to release?”

The other reaper was silent. He just kept moving forward.

“Sir?” I asked again.

Still nothing.

“Excuse me? Sir? Um, will you at least tell me your name?”

He finally looked at me and let out a deep breath.

“We have many names. Every culture calls us something different,” he said simply. “You can pick one that you feel suits you or you can allow those you release to name you.”

“Suits me? Name me?”

“Right. You’ll decide what to be called as you get into the job.”

“What did the guy before me call himself?”

“That monster you just let pass on called himself Satan. He wasn’t obviously, but he liked feeling like he had that much power. He got a lot of joy out of messing with people before they went. How he passed his time, I guess.”

“Huh,” I said, taking that in. Then I asked, “What do people call you?”

“I go by Michael usually.”

“Why?”

Michael sighed deeply.

“In Catholicism, it’s the name for the angel of death and the region I cover has a large Catholic population. They call me Michael, so I go by Michael.”

“That makes sense,” I said without certainty. It really did, but it wasn’t anything I had ever thought about before. “So what region will I be covering? What’s my name?”

Michael arched his eyebrow at me before answering.

“This one, seeing as you just let the reaper for this region pass.”

“Right. What do people in this region call reapers?”

“I don’t know. It’s not my region. I’m only here because I felt the shift of power and came to see what caused it. Eventually you’ll hear your name enough that you’ll just adopt it.”

“How long have you been a reaper?”

Michael shrugged.

“Forever.”

“Why hasn’t anyone released you yet?”

“I don’t give people that option. I have no desire to pass this fate on to anyone else. Not all of us feel this way, though. There are reapers who desire to be released, so occasionally we have new ones to teach.”

“Oh... Okay.”

I tried to let all the information sink in, but, with every question answered, a million new questions appeared.

Finally, I asked, “Where are we going?”

“To answer a call.”

“What? Where’s that?”

Michael ignored me and kept walking. I struggled to keep up, but eventually we walked into a large clearing. There were cone-shaped canvas tents everywhere. Some were small, and some were large. People were running in and out of the flaps going in every direction.

“Can they see us?” I asked as I watched them run.

“No.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

I could feel myself annoying Michael, but I couldn't stop.

“Why can't they see us?”

“Because they don't need us.”

“Need us?”

“Right. Need us. They aren't dying so they can't see us.”

“But why?”

“I guess because we exist on a separate plane. Somewhere in between life and death.

When someone is dying, and they need us, then they can see us, but not before.”

“Insane.”

“See for yourself.”

Michael gestured at the people around us.

I walked up to some people who were shoving things into their packs. I got within inches of them and waved my arms. I even walked through some, but aside from some of them shuttering, no one noticed me at all. Michael was watching me with pity or amusement or both.

“Are you starting to see?” he asked.

“See what?”

“That our existence isn’t the same as theirs.”

“Ummm... Sure,” I said.

“You’re here but you’re not actually here,” Michael continued.

“Okay,” I said.

“Let’s keep moving,” he said. “Come on. This way.”

“Where are we going?”

I’m going to try and show you the process as best I can. But then I have to go.”

I panicked as his words sunk in.

“Show me? What? Do you mean we’re going to kill someone! Wait –”

“We’re not murderers,” Michael said sharply. “We help people who’re dying pass onto what’s next. You can’t just release a soul that isn’t ready. It doesn’t work that way.”

“Oh. Thank God.”

Michael almost laughed. “Don’t thank him yet. You still don’t know your own role in all of this.”

I nodded and followed him deeper into the clearing through the maze of tents. Michael stopped suddenly.

“Feel that?” he asked.

At first, I had no idea what he was talking about, but then there was a terrible wrench in my gut. I nearly tripped and gagged. If I could have vomited in this new form, I would have.

“I... feel... uh. My stomach hurts.”

“You don’t have a stomach anymore.”

“Still. I don’t feel right. I feel–”

“– Like someone has reached inside you and is pulling you by your insides.”

That was exactly it. I couldn't breathe, not that I needed to anymore, so I just nodded. Michael seemed to understand.

“That's the pull of a soul that needs you. When a soul is ready to move on, you'll feel that pull. The closer the person is to passing, the more intense the pull will become. If you allow it to take over, it will bring you where you need to be when you need to be there. Try to relax.”

I tried to let the feeling wash over me, like Michael said, but it was a horrible feeling. It was like being dragged through someone else's consciousness. I could feel their pain, their fight, and their fear. I thought I might scream, but before I could I was in one of the tents we'd been walking through. A young man was lying on a crude attempt at an operating table. Field surgeons were rushing around and the sounds of metal tools clinking together filled the room. I felt winded, but no matter how much air I tried to take in, I couldn't feel my lungs expand.

Michael was already there in the corner of the tent. He was watching me. I could feel the pain of the young man. People kept moving and metallic sounds kept ringing. I could feel the struggle of the boy on the table, and I struggled along with him.

“What's happening?” I choked.

“He's dying. You need to release him.”

“Why do I—”

“Also feel like you're dying? Part of the job.”

You'd think I would have understood the seriousness of the decision I had made then, but I still hadn't.

“How do I do it? How do I release him?”

“Go over there. Talk to him. If you focus on him, time will freeze, which sometimes makes things easier. Anyway, you need to allow his soul to leave his body. Sometimes saying it

out loud helps, but the trick is to really allow it. You have to fully accept that the person is passing to release them.”

“But what if they aren’t ready? What if he’s not ready? The surgeons are still working, and he’s still got some fight left in him.”

“His soul wants to be released. That’s why you’re here. You need to release him.”

“Okay... So, do I just say it like I did for the reaper?”

“If that helps you.”

I looked at the boy and tried to be okay with his death. He looked really young.

“I release you,” I said.

Nothing happened. The pain in my abdomen grew worse. I doubled over and clenched my sides.

“What did I do wrong?” I shouted.

“You didn’t mean it,” Michael responded simply.

“Damn it,” I shouted.

Just as I went to try again, the surgeon spoke.

“Got the bullet out! We need to stop the bleeding!” she ordered. Another medic immediately started stitching his skin back together.

“Try again,” Michael said sharply.

“But they’re closing the wound. He’s got a shot.”

“You need to—”

“—Wait!”

“Are you —”

“He’s got a shot! Give the people a minute to work!”

“We’re here because his time has come!”

“Hold on!”

The pain got worse for both of us. Though Michael hid it better, I could see the anguish on his face. His jaw was clenched, and his eyes looked sharp and angry.

“Release him!” he shouted.

“No, not yet.”

The pain kept getting worse.

“Come on kid,” I whispered as I watched. Michael looked almost as uncomfortable as I felt now. He was shaking, and his arms were crossed tightly across his chest.

“If you don’t release him right now, I’m going to,” Michael shouted as the pain spiked.

“No! He may still make it!” I moved in between Michael and the boy on the table. I wasn’t sure if I could physically stop him. He might fade through me just like everything else, but Michael didn’t try to move forward. Time in the tent seems to slow for a second as the medic finishes stitching the wound. The man on the cot let out a deep breath and looked at me.

“Samael?” he asked. His eyes were glassy, but he had definitely seen me.

I didn’t know how to respond. I just stood there with my mouth open.

“We’ve stopped the bleeding and the wound is closed, Sir,” said one of the surgeons.

As the words left his mouth, the boy fell unconscious, and the strangling grip that had Michael and me became bearable again. We both let out a deep breath.

“Thank God. Hang in there, kid,” the head surgeon responded.

The medics kept working and the boy grew stronger. The grip holding me there loosened, but I still felt rooted to that spot in that room. I could still feel all the pain the boy’s soul was in.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Michael gasped.

“I’m giving him a fighting chance.”

Over the next few moments the pain continued to fade.

“He’s out of critical condition, Sir,” one of the surgeons said.

Michael looked at me and nodded towards the opening of the tent. We were able to leave now.

I thought Michael was going to hit me once we got outside, but he just stared at me.

“What was that?” he demanded.

“I wasn’t going to release him if he had a chance of surviving.”

“His soul was ready. That’s why you were brought here. He was ready to die.”

“Just because he was ready doesn’t mean it’s his time. I wasn’t going to give up on him if there was a chance he could pull through.”

Michael’s face was still and sharp. He didn’t even blink. “That torture you were feeling, he felt that too. Do you understand that?”

“Yeah, but he’s still alive.”

“You’re not meant for this,” he said, shaking his head and looking at the dirt. “You’re going to have this fight with everyone who needs to be released.”

He spoke as if he was stating facts. Like he knew already how I was going to be. He wasn’t wrong, but I like to think that he wasn’t entirely right either.

“He’s alive,” was the only thing I could manage to say. Michael eyes flicked up from the dirt back to me. They were sharp.

“This existence is not going to be an easy one for you if you can’t let people go,” he said finally. “It’s always going to hurt.”

“I’ll let people go, but only when there isn’t another option for them. What’s a little pain if someone gets to live?”

Michael didn’t answer me. He just continued to stare.

“Look, I need to go,” he said finally. “There are people screaming for my help in my region. Promise me you’ll release people who need to be released.”

“I will. I promise. He just had a chance to survive.”

“Right,” he said. He turned to leave just as I remembered something.

“Hey wait!”

“What?”

“That man. He called me Samael. What does that name mean?”

“Angel of Death in some mythologies,” he answered.

“Isn’t that what Michael means?”

“Yes, just different faiths. Samael is a darker figure than Michael in most religions. Viewed as both good and evil. Known for being grim and destructive but also a protector. A fallen angel of sorts in many faiths,” he said with a shrug. “I actually think it suits you, if I’m being honest.”

“It’s not evil to want to let people live,” I said, crossing my arms.

“That’s a matter of perspective,” Michael said, his eyes scanning me one last time.

“Samael? I guess I could shorten it. Sam, maybe?”

“That’s your choice.”

I suddenly felt the pull again, and Michael seemed to know what was happening.

“Can you handle that one on your own? I need to get back to my region.”

“Yeah. I think so,” I nodded.

“Death isn’t a bad thing. It’s inevitable. Just keep that in mind when you’re releasing people.”

“I will,” I said, but Michael could tell I was lying.

“Sure,” he said with a nod. “Good luck, Sam.”

*Lily*

“How fascinating. There's more than one reaper,” Lily said in awe.

Sam laughed, and the tension that had been building as he told his story washed away. Lily laughed with him. She was fascinated by the boy sitting next to her. She took pity on him, sure, but she couldn't help but think how interesting his existence was. When they finally caught their breath, Sam turned his clear eyes on her.

“That's what you took from that story? There's more than one reaper. Really?” he asked with a smirk on his lips.

“Right,” Lily chuckled. “Your name too, obviously. That's also important. I like that you've shortened it. Sam suits you better, I think. But... I just can't believe there's more than one reaper.”

“I guess.”

Sam looked as if he was on the verge of laughing again, but Lily stopped him before he could get started.

“Do you know how many there are?” she asked.

“I don't.”

He looked at Lily and saw her obvious disappointment at his lack of knowledge.

“I've only ever dealt with Michael,” he added.

“You've never asked? Aren't you curious about others like you?”

Sam smiled. “Well, obviously I should have been to be more informed for this conversation, but I’ve gotten comfortable enough to not ask so many questions, I guess. It definitely annoys Michael.”

“I don’t think I could ever be comfortable enough not to ask questions.”

Sam smirked skeptically at her.

“Yeah? You ask questions about all other people?”

“I get to know all those around me,” Lily said.

“You’re sure?”

“Course I’m sure,” Lily huffed.

She thought about how well she knew her street. Sure, it was quieter than usual today given her special circumstances, but it was still the same as it had always been. Her noisy neighbors with the rotten children who stole from the grocery store lived on the corner. Their house was always a mess with their grass overgrown and toys abandoned like landmines in the front yard. Their deck needed painting and the tire swing that hung from the large oak tree in their front yard couldn’t support anyone, even a child, due to the frayed condition of the rope. Lily was always waiting to hear about a lawsuit concerning the tire swing, but it never came.

The newlyweds with the copper colored dog just moved in across the street. It was a beautiful little blue house, and Lily thought it suited the cute little couple perfectly. They were always so nice, and they waved when they went running down the street together or when they were watering their weird little succulent plants growing in the hanging pots on their porch.

An elderly woman named Bobby lived a few houses down. She was at least 93 if not older, and she continued to tend to her own garden and mow her own lawn with some riding lawn-mower that Lily didn’t think Bobby should be operating anymore. Bobby did anyway, and

she always turned away the boys from the church who volunteered to help her. Lily started sending them over there and told them to stop asking and just work until Bobby scared them off.

“I know every person on this street. You can quiz me if you want.”

“What about the next street?”

“What about it?”

“Do you ask about the people on the next street over?”

Lily was silent, and she watched as the corner of Sam’s mouth crept upward knowingly. He knew that she didn’t ask about people two streets over. She didn’t know a single one of those souls nor had she ever thought to ask about them.

“Fine. Fine,” she mumbled as Sam chuckled softly under his breath.

“So,” she continued, “If I had died somewhere else at a different time, I might be having this chat with different reaper?”

“It’s very possible.”

“Well, how lucky I am that things worked out as they did. It doesn't sound like the other reapers would spend as much time with me as you have.”

“Probably not,” Sam said with a smile, “I’m sure I’m gaining a reputation for sticking around too long.”

“Sticking around too long?”

“Hanging out with people before they pass,” Sam stated. “I can never just do my job.”

“Is that so?” Lily’s eyes gleamed a little and a sly smile slipped across her face.

“Yeah,” Sam answered. “I, too, get pretty invested in stories, and lately I’ve been involved in prolonging some endings.”

“Prolonging endings, huh? How interesting...”

Sam was just a boy, Lily thought. He was trying to see people live in a way that he couldn't anymore. Trying to live through others.

Sam smiled and looked down at the porch beneath his shuffling feet. He joined his hands together and held them firm.

“Interesting enough for a final bedtime story?” he asked.

Sam watched as Lily smiled that grin of hers again. She closed her eyes and leaned back in the swing. Using her cane to push off against the wall, she rocked them. All she and Sam could hear was the creak of the swing as it carried them back and forth.

Sam thought she might be ready. It would be a lovely way to go. No guns, no blood, just swinging through the air on a beautiful clear day. He was about to ask her again when she spoke.

“Definitely interesting enough for the *beginning* of my final bedtime story, but we aren't done yet. Are we, my dear boy?”

“Are we not? I've told you my story,” Sam asked, confused by her resistance. “You know how I've come to be. How I got my name. That's what you wanted to hear, right?”

“Well, yes and no. I asked to hear your story. And while the beginning of your story was all well and good, that's not your entire story, is it? In fact, you've just told me how you were involved in many more stories, prolonging deaths and all that. I'd like to hear some of those too.”

“I have been involved in so many stories...”

“So just pick one or two then. Maybe some where you're really involved. No need to hear any like my own.”

Sam stared at her with an expression somewhere between amusement and confusion. Lily looked at him impatiently.

“Well, what's the hold up? I'm not getting any younger over here.”

Sam laughed and leaned back in the swing.

“You know, this is pretty unfair. Technically, I met your last request,” he teased.

“Please with the technicalities. You’ve only just told me the beginning, and it’s rude to leave stories unfinished.”

“Well, sure,” he said, “All right, I’ll tell you another one.”

“Good. And when I’ve heard enough, you can go on your way, and I’ll be just another life you’ve prolonged.”

Lily made herself comfortable, and turned to look at Sam.

“Well, what’s the hold up?”

Sam met her stare with sad eyes.

“You know,” he said, “My stories don’t have happy endings.”

“Why, because people die?”

“Well, yeah...”

“Everyone dies, Dear. That doesn’t mean their ending wasn’t happy.”

Sam laughed. “If you say so.”

“I do.”

“All right. hmmm...Let me think...A story where I was particularly involved...”

“Make it good.”

“I’ve only really got a few. There’s this one...”

“Let’s hear it.”

“There was this little girl I knew a while ago. She wanted to be a dancer, and she thought that I was her guardian angel...”

“An angel?”

“Yeah, an angel.”

“This can’t be good.”

*Amelie*

Honestly, until meeting Amelie, I thought my whole new existence was getting easier. I wasn't struggling as much when I was letting people go. Michael didn't check up on me as often. I'm not sure if that meant I was becoming callus or jaded or something, but it honestly felt like I was helping these people. They were old or in pain or had done so much damage to themselves that life wasn't even an option anymore. Accepting their deaths and letting them pass seemed like the least I could do. But Amelie was different.

It seemed like it was mid-day. The sun was hanging high in the sky, and cars were out on the road already. It was a hot day. Not that I could feel it, but I could tell. The people who were outside were sweating through their blouses or dress shirts and fanning themselves with whatever was available. I saw a lot of men using their hats as fans. I was wandering around wondering if anyone would die from a heatstroke that day when I passed a children's hospital.

The building wasn't anything out of the ordinary. It was designed with a combination of red bricks and white stone. There were rows of glass windows all across the face of the building. The name of the hospital was written in the white stone. The building itself was nothing I hadn't seen before, but still, I stood there staring at it.

Suddenly, it struck me that I hadn't had to release any children yet. Honestly, I wasn't quite sure how long I had been doing the job already but given the changes in buildings and style of clothing since my passing, I figured it at least had to be a few years maybe even a decade or

two since I had started the job. I had tried to keep track counting souls released or sunrises and sunsets, but nothing worked. It all got lost in the passing from soul to soul.

How, though, in all that time had I not had to release a child, I wondered. Children died just like everyone else, either due to illness or accidents, but I hadn't come across one yet. I was lost in this thought staring at the sign when a girl passed straight through me. She was maybe eleven or twelve years old, give or take a few years. She was skipping and counting beats aloud while holding a flower in her hand.

I remember this moment like it was yesterday. The sunlight shimmered on her golden-brown hair that was pulled back into a tight knot on her head. Her eyes were golden too, and they shone with excitement and determination. She was wearing a pink dance leotard, white tights, and skirt of flowing white fabric that fell down to her ankles. She stopped abruptly in front of the doors and spun on her toe towards her parents who were coming up the pathway behind her. As she waited for them, I watched her press her heels together, spread her toes apart, and straightened her legs, making them as long as they could be. Her arms floated elegantly in front of her, and she moved them with precision from one position to the next.

Some people thought I was an angel, but this little girl looked more like an angel than I ever imagined I could.

A woman who could only be her mother came up behind us. She shared nearly every feature the little girl possessed from her hair color and eye color to the length of her long, graceful fingers. She stopped and applauded as her husband caught up with them.

“Beautiful, my darling,” she said with deep admiration, “but your spin was a little shaky. You must spot. Before you begin your spin, find a spot. Concentrate on that spot always and you won't shake.”

“Yes, Mama.”

“Amelie, you need to be more careful,” her father said once he caught up to them. “You didn’t even look when you crossed the street. You could have gotten hurt.”

“Oh, Jonathan. She’s fine,” her mother said with an eyeroll. “You worry too much.”

“And you don’t worry enough, Louise. This is serious. She can’t just run around absentmindedly.”

“I’ll be more careful. I’ll even look both ways next time,” Amelie teased. Her mother giggled behind her hand.

“Girls! This is serious!” Jonathan said in an exasperated tone.

“All right, all right. Amelie will be more careful, and you will worry less. Come on. We’ll be late for her annual.”

Louise placed her hand on Amelie’s shoulder and led her through the glass door. After a moment and several deep breaths, Jonathan followed them. I stared after them for a long time. I even thought about following them to see if the little girl has some underlying terminal illness, but I was stopped by the sound of my own name or at least what I had come to know as my name.

“Samael,” Michael said in a deep, booming tone.

I turned away from the family to look at him. He was standing on the paved side walk with his hands tucked casually in his pockets, his posture perfect, and his signature kind-but-stern expression all over his face. He always looked so put together, and there was this fierceness to him that always seemed to be just beneath his cold exterior.

“Michael,” I responded, trying to match his intensity, but I just sounded childish.

I crossed my arms like his, but my shoulders were slumped, and my posture wasn't as statuesque.

"Don't do it, Samael. You're still not ready," he said.

"Do what?" I asked genuinely not sure what he was talking about. He arched his eyebrows and waited for me to speak again.

"Do what? What are you doing here, anyway?" I asked.

"This hospital is in my zone," he said, gesturing to the red brick and white stone building behind us. I didn't get it at first. Why would just that hospital be his zone. It didn't look any different from any other hospital. I was getting ready to turn around and question him more when I saw it. "Children's Healthcare" was carved just below the hospital sign. Heat rose to my face as I turned back to him.

"How? These northern states are all my zone," I snarled.

"Not this hospital. And not others like it," he said calmly but definitively.

"And why is that?" Bitterness entered my voice. Like I said, I thought I had been doing well.

"Because, Samael, after our first meeting, I wasn't sure that you'd be able to handle this job, not that you have a choice, but still I am worried that you don't possess the right kind of spirit for it," he said flatly.

"I'm not as bad as the guy before me! I let people go! I free them or release them or whatever! I've gotten better!"

"You have gotten better with people you know are beyond help," Michael said softly like a parent patronizing to a child. "But you linger, and you hold onto life when you feel it has a

chance. When a soul pulls you towards it, it wants to be released, but you just haven't seemed to accept that. Until you can, you're not ready for some of these more *challenging* releases."

"Why do you accept it?! How do you know what the soul wants?! The soul doesn't even know what it wants, or we wouldn't be here would we?!"

Michael just looked at me with a sad, stern expression. He looked like he was etched out of marble, created by the gods just to undermine and belittle me. It was infuriating.

"This is my zone," he said again with his voice still flat and even. "You have no jurisdiction in my zone. When I think that you are ready, you can have it."

"Who in this hell made you the boss?" I snarled.

He sighed and walked past me to the front doors of the hospital.

"Michael, wait."

He stopped, but he did not turn to look at me.

"Who is it? Is it that little girl?" I asked suddenly desperate. I had known the girl for two minutes, and I was already too invested in her story, proving Michael right.

Michael chose to ignore me started walking toward the door again.

"Michael!" I shouted running after him. He turned sharply just before the entrance, forcing me to stop in my tracks.

"You aren't ready. Go, Samael. Someone else needs you."

As soon as he said it, I felt the pull of another soul. I glared at him for a moment longer before allowing myself to be whisked away.

Soon, I found myself wondering around every children's hospital in my zone looking to pick another fight with Michael. I couldn't accept that I wasn't ready, even though I knew he was probably right. But when I didn't run into him again, I just went back to my usual routine.

You see, when you have nothing to do but observe the living, you often find yourself following those who interest you. I did all the time. I followed people on dates, people going on adventures, and even people doing something as common as reading. Sometimes I read over their shoulders if I could. I had almost forgotten about the little ballerina until I ran into her again.

I was walking around aimlessly one day until I suddenly felt the pull of a soul. I allowed it to pull me away, and I found myself on a street corner where seemingly nothing was wrong. I was in a popular shopping center, and people were scurrying around carrying brightly colored shopping bags. No one was in any immediate danger or dying, so I thought it might have just been another false alarm. Those happened sometimes when someone thought they were going to die or actually almost died. Maybe they held their breath underwater for too long or they nearly got hit by a car. I've actually been unintentionally following around this guy who's allergic to peanuts. It seems like every time he has to eat somewhere that isn't his home, he thinks he's going to die. In his case, I just have to show up and wait for him to take a bite and realize that there aren't any hidden peanuts in his food before I can go about my business.

Anyway, this shopping center didn't seem to have anyone around that needed me, but I couldn't leave. I was rooted to the spot staring at some unsuspecting street corner, waiting for tragedy to strike when suddenly there she was. She was golden and gliding her way down the street. Her parents trailed behind her, holding shopping bags of their own. Amelie wasn't looking at anyone or anything. She just focused on her movements.

I watched on as she leapt off the sidewalk. I smelt the burning rubber. I heard her parents' screams and the thundering of their shoes. And I felt Amelie's bones shatter.

I knew her parents couldn't help her, but I thought for the briefest moment that maybe I could.

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I didn't release Amelie that day on the side of the street. Perhaps I should have, but I couldn't or wouldn't. Instead, I waited. And waited. Until finally she was stabilized by the surgeons at the children's hospital. But even when she was stable, I couldn't leave. Her condition was still critical, but I could breathe again, and the pain wasn't so bad anymore. Eventually, I moved Amelie out of the ICU and into recovery, so there I stayed waiting to hear what fate awaited the little golden girl.

Amelie was asleep in her hospital room, and her parents were sitting by her bedside, waiting. Louise had brought Amelie's recital dress with her and was sewing extra beads on to the bodice. Jonathan was pacing and periodically looking from his watch to the clock on the wall.

"How long will they have us wait," he barked after his fourth lap around the room.

"Quiet Jonathan, you're going to wake up Amelie," Louise said as she pulled the thin pink thread through another bead and secured it onto the dress.

"Not with all the pain medication they have her on," he said reflexively.

"Jonathan! Don't joke about our daughter's condition!" Louise sputtered, holding the needle so tightly her fingertips turned white.

"I'm sorry, Louise. I didn't—"

"Oh, this is all my fault, Jonathan," she cried.

"No, Louise—"

"You were always telling her to be more careful, and I... I teased you... Said you worried too much. She never took it seriously...And now look..."

“Louise, don’t do that,” he said as he tried to comfort her. “It’s going to be all right. She’s going to get better.”

Johnathan placed his hand on his wife’s shoulder, but she shrugged him off and hunched back over the recital dress.

“You don’t know that,” she said after threading another bead on the needle.

“I—” Jonathan started, but he was interrupted by the sudden appearance of Amelie’s doctor, Dr. Roberts. His face looked as if it was roughly carved from stone. Lines were deeply and haphazardly etched across his forehead, under his cheeks, and below his eyes. His posture wasn’t any better. He was bent and still as if he had spent years carrying too much weight on his back. I had seen that stone face and stance before. I think I’ve even wore it myself sometimes. I could imagine just how helpless he felt.

I didn’t want to stay and hear the bad news that was written all over his face, but I did.

The doctor’s eyes darted from the dance leotard to Louise’s swollen eyes and his pen tapped anxiously against the clipboard. Finally, he stilled the pen and began to speak.

“First, I want to say that it’s remarkable she survived the initial impact of the car and that she’s still fighting. That’s a really encouraging sign.”

“Thank you, doctor,” Louise said.

“But,” Jonathan interjected.

“But, I have some hard news,” he said.

“What is it? Is she going to be all right?”

“When the car hit Amelie and the way she was standing, balancing on one leg, well that leg took nearly the full force of the collision. The bones there shattered causing a significant amount of damage to the surrounding tissue, arteries, and blood vessels.”

“What does that mean?” Louise choked. Her hands were now shaking too hard to continue stitching, so the doctor had her full attention.

“It means her leg isn’t getting the nutrients it needs.”

“Okay, but what can we do?”

“To put it plainly, we need to amputate her leg.”

“No!” Louise said abruptly.

“No?” responded Dr. Roberts softly.

“No. You can’t do that. You can’t amputate her leg. She needs it. She’s a dancer,” Louise stuttered. She tried to return to her stitches, but she couldn’t hold the needle still. Beads rolled off her lap and scattered all around her feet. She tried to gather them together with her feet, but it was pointless.

“If we don’t amputate her leg, infection could set in and cause much more serious issues,” Dr. Roberts said, looking down at his clipboard though it was obvious he wasn’t really reading anything off it.

“More serious than amputating her leg!” Jonathan shouted. His chair clattered backward as he resumed pacing around the room. In the corners of my vision, I saw the blankets ripple with slow movements. Amelie’s father saw them too. He stopped pacing, and he lowered his voice before he spoke again.

“You’re sure this is the best course of action? You can’t just fix her leg?” he asked desperately.

“I’m sorry, Sir,” Dr. Roberts said with no change in volume. “The damage is beyond repair. This is the best course of action.”

“No,” Louise said again, more firmly this time. “There has to be another way. I’d like to get a second opinion.”

“You can certainly get a second opinion, but they’ll tell you the same thing. And the time you spend waiting on more results could potentially cause more damage.”

“Still. We want to be absolutely sure before we do anything drastic.”

“I understand. I’ll start filling out the paperwork.”

Her parents’ eyes followed the doctor as he turned to leave, but I was still looking at the pile of blankets that covered Amelie. She was still moving under them, and her breathing had gotten faster. Finally, she pushed the blankets off her and looked around the room. She rubbed her eyes with palms of her hands, and then she stretched her arms over her head. The doctor waited to be spotted.

“What’s going on?” she asked as she blinked the sleep from her eyes.

“Nothing sweetie,” Louise answered quickly. “Your father and I are just talking to the doctor to see about how to make you better.”

“But what did Dad just say? ‘You can’t just fix her leg’? You can’t fix it?”

“Oh no, sweetie. He didn’t mean that. We’re just discussing what we’re gonna do. We’re going to fix you. Don’t worry,” he said through a forced smile. He looked to the doctor and continued, “Let’s discuss this in the hall.”

“No, wait! I wanna know what’s going on!” Amelie shouted. “What’s happening with my leg.”

“Amelie, the bones in your leg were crushed when the car hit you,” said Dr. Roberts.

“Crushed?”

“Right, it’s not a clean break. The bones broke into many pieces.”

“Oh?”

“Dr. Roberts, stop. Let’s discuss this outside.”

“No!” Amelie shouted trying to find out more.

“Amelie, we’re going to do everything we can to make you better. Another doctor will examine your x-rays. Then, when you and your parents have decided what you want to do, we’ll move on to the next steps of your treatment.”

“What are the next steps?” Louise asked.

“Right now, me and many of the doctors I work with think your best chance for a successful recovery is to remove your leg, but we are going to run some more tests to make sure that’s the only option.”

“Remove my leg…” she repeated slowly, not fully understanding what she was saying.

“They don’t know yet that they have to do that, Amelie. They’re going to run some more tests. Don’t worry. It’s going to be okay,” her mother sputtered.

“Okay.”

I couldn’t take any more of the conversation. I left Amelie and her family with the doctor, but right outside the door Michael was waiting for me. He was standing rigid and still with his arms crossed, and his eyebrows slightly arched, reminding me that he disapproved of my methods. But what else was new?

“Bad news?” he asked after glancing around me into the hospital room.

“They have to amputate her leg,” I said trying to match his annoying, flat tone.

Michael exhaled and surveyed me.

“Samael.”

“Michael.”

“What are you doing?”

“Minding my own business. You should try it.”

“First, this is all of our business. Second, I told you this hospital and others like it were my zone.”

“I heard you. I didn’t try to come here. She was hit by a car on a street corner.”

“And you didn’t release her then?” he asked in a tone that didn’t at all sound surprised.

“No. I...”

“So, I’ll ask you again. What are you doing?”

“I’m...” I struggled to come up with the right word. “Observing, I guess.”

“You’re not helping anyone.”

“I still think that depends on your perspective.”

Michael sighed deeply and shook his head.

“Come with me, Samael,” he said sternly.

“Where are we going?” I asked him.

He didn’t answer. I didn’t expect him to. He just turned and walked, and I was expected to follow. I did of course, but more out of curiosity than obligation. We didn’t go far. Just to another room in the hospital.

“Where are we?” I asked him.

“We’re outside a child’s room. We’re here to see if you can handle releasing a child,” he said as if it was nothing.

“You’re not serious,” I said irritably.

“I am, Samael. You want me to mind my own business. Well, if you can handle releasing a child and I can trust you to do your job, then I’ll leave you and your zone alone.”

*Self-righteous prick*, I thought viciously as I glared at him.

“Come on, there is a child who needs you,” Michael said, nodding toward the door with his chin.

I could feel the pull of the young soul, and I glanced through the window. The boy in the room was so young. Younger than Amelie by at least four or five years. He was so small. His body was shaking with cold despite the layers and layers of blankets he was under. He was in there with a fever that would end him, and I was on the other side of the door completely helpless.

“Well, can you release him?” Michael asked already knowing the answer.

I looked at Michael and whatever he saw on my face answered his question. He entered the room. The monitors went flat. Rushing footsteps responded to the sound. I dropped my head and left the hospital.

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I avoided the children’s hospitals after that. I even followed Amelie less. I wasn’t looking for a fight with Michael anymore. He’d won, and I didn’t want to be the only reaper around when Amelie needed to be released. I couldn’t handle it, and now I knew.

I wandered around releasing the souls Michael believed I could handle and spent the rest of my time angry or wallowing in self-pity. I contemplated a way out of my existence but couldn’t find one. I was a soul after all and from what I had seen, souls didn’t die, bodies did. But I couldn’t help feeling like I wasn’t fit for this job, and I came to the conclusion that taking it on was selfish of me. I didn’t think about all the lives I would be affecting. I purely thought about how it would prolong my own existence. Another absurdity. Who was I to believe I was

special enough to live forever and if I had fully understood what it had entailed would I have even wanted to? Of course not.

I tried to cheer myself up by thinking about what I could handle: accidents (not involving children), old people, and really people. That had to be good for something, but for some reason children were different. They were so full of life, and so often they were what people lived for. I just couldn't bring myself to let go of hope that they would make it. I couldn't accept their passing, so they would be stuck if it was up to me to help them move on.

Michael knew. He didn't show up again. I hated him for showing up. I hated him for showing me I was wrong. I hated him for being right. I even hated him for not showing up. I had a lot of irrational anger towards him for being better at this job than I was. I wanted to be good at it. I wanted to be worthy of the predicament I found myself in, but I wasn't, and I knew it and that caused even more anger.

These thoughts floated around my consciousness, and they started to haunt me. Releasing people became harder, which only served to make me angrier. I was in the home of an elderly man surrounded by a loving family when I finally lost it.

The man had been struggling for hours, and I had been there through the whole thing unable to help him pass.

"God damn it!" I shouted to no effect. No one flinched because no one heard me. It was just me alone in a crowd, completely unable to help that man, which happened to be my soul purpose for existing.

"Michael! Hey, Michael! What the hell did you do to me! How do I get over this!? Come spread some of that know-it-all, soul-releasing wisdom, Mr. all-mighty majesty!" I shouted at no

one in particular. I didn't expect a reaction. Hell, I didn't even know if Michael could hear or feel me. I still wasn't really sure how that worked.

If I focused, I could feel every soul in that room, content or struggling. It was like a sonar system or something, but I could never feel Michael before he showed up. One moment he wasn't around, the next he was. That's just how he works.

I turned back to look at the man. He was old and happy with his children and his children's children shuffling around the rooms in his house. They were cooking and cleaning and they all seemed to be preparing for his passing. This old man was ready to die in his sleep, and here I was focusing on how I couldn't get anything right these days.

I screamed, and yes, I mean I actually screamed, out loud, in full volume, fueled completely by frustration. It was loud and long and, if I had required air anymore, I would have needed several deep breaths to meet the needs of this scream.

I tried to convince myself that it would be okay. That the family would move on. That they would all be united again somehow. I tried to believe all the things people tell you when you lose someone you care about, but I couldn't because I just didn't know. I didn't know what was next. I didn't want to know. I wasn't ready.

I just sat there staring at the wood-panel walls waiting for a sign when his oldest daughter glanced in the room and shook her head. She walked on past the door to the living room with a plate full of cookies.

"He's ready," she said. "I don't know what he's waiting for. If he keeps Ma waiting any longer, she'll leave him in the afterlife. Make him wander the underworld alone."

Her and her siblings laughed as they passed around the plate.

I looked at the man again and hoped he really did have someone waiting for him.

“He’s ready,” I repeated.

If he was ready, then he was braver than I was when I reached this moment, and he deserved to go while he was ready. If I waited too long, he might change his mind.

I tried to feel as sure as I could and said, “I release you.”

It didn’t work the first time. Or the second time. Or even the seventh time, but finally, I shouted again, and that was it. The man was gone, and I could leave.

Outside felt remarkably better than inside that home. There was so much space and so few people out with the sun setting.

“Thank god, Samael. I was starting to wonder if I would have to go in there and release him for you.”

It was Michael. Of course, he was here now.

“What do you want?” I snapped.

“Where you not just calling me? Asking me to share some wisdom?”

So, he had heard me.

“I was, and, to no one’s surprise, you weren’t there. I was forced to do it on my own, so you can go now.”

“I knew you could handle it. That’s why I didn’t interfere. I am actually here in regard to another matter,” Michael said evenly.

“And what matter might that be?” I asked without taking a step.

“An important one. Come with me,” he said coolly.

“This is really getting old,” I said.

Michael ignored my comment and strode up the street. I followed. I had nothing else to do, and, let’s face it, I was curious.

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We found ourselves at the children's hospital again.

“No. Not this again. I'm still not ready. I couldn't even release that fulfilled elderly man today. There's absolutely no way that I can release a child. Please, Michael, come on don't make me do this,” I pleaded.

He remained silent and kept walking.

“Where are we going, Michael?” I asked him.

Still nothing. I thought about punching him. We both existed on the same plane, so if I could make physical contact with anyone, I figured it would be him. I went as far as reaching out to see if I could grab his arm, but then I thought better of it and shoved my hands in my pockets. I thought about badgering him more, but I knew it would be pointless. I just followed him until he came to a stop in front of a door. A door that had big colorful letters that spelled out Amelie.

“No,” I said as sternly as I could muster. I turned on my heel and started to walk away.

“Sam!” he stated with enough authority to stop me in my tracks. I turned slowly and fixed him with a dark look.

“No, Michael, I won't! I can't. Not her.”

I was shouting, again. I guess it was just that kind of day. I couldn't help it. It was good, though, that the people around me couldn't hear my outburst.

“She's not dying, Sam, calm down. I brought you here to apologize!” he said with his calm voice that I couldn't handle.

“Apologize? For what Michael? For being right? For knowing that I can't do this job? For attempting to protect me from this half-life I idiotically walked into? You have nothing to apologize for except for bringing me back here to watch this little girl die—”

“I already said that she is not dying,” he said simply. “But she has been hospitalized. You’ve been following her right? Keeping up with her after you didn’t release her? You stopped, and that was my fault for trying to force you to release a child before you were ready.”

He took a deep breath and continued.

“Look, Sam. I have been doing this job for so long I can’t even remember how I felt the first time I had to release a child.”

This was new. Michael had never shared any information about his past with me before. His sacrifice of this information made me calm down slightly.

“I don’t even know if I had guidance or not or even if I chose this existence or was born into it, so I’m sorry for being impatient with you. I’ve been through it all and don’t remember how long it took me to get over my predicament, so I have no way to judge how long it will take you to accept it. Even if I did remember, you’re not me, so it would still be unfair of me to base your progress on my own. I was harsh and impatient, so that is what I’m apologizing for. I’ll continue releasing the children, and when you’re ready, you can take over, but you’ve invested time in this child. Don’t give up on her because of me. You’ll never forgive yourself for not knowing what happened to her if you stay away because you’re angry with me.”

There was something about the way he finished his apology that made me rethink him. He was just another soul trapped in this existence. Doing what needed to be done. How long had he been here that he had become so clinical in his duties? Too long. I wonder if part of him wished that I’d released him instead of that horrible beast who left this world the day I took over his job. Maybe that’s why we didn’t get along.

“Okay,” was all I could manage.

“Okay... Good luck Sam.”

He turned and disappeared into the darkness.

I looked back to the name on the door. Amelie was spelled out in bright pastel letters and there was a cut out of dance slippers next to it. The slippers made me angry. Amelie couldn't be a dancer anymore. Not if they were going to take her leg. I wanted to pull them off the door and throw them away, but I couldn't in my current state, so instead I just glared at them until I finally decided to enter the room.

It was morning now. The clock on the wall told me that it was almost 7:30 am and the sun light crept in through the open curtains. I tried to read her charts to figure out what I had missed, but the information was covered by the folder it was in. I couldn't move the folder, so I looked around the room for clues. She must have been there for a little while. She had decorated. There was, of course, a picture of a dancer on the wall. She had her own quilted, floral-print blanket on the bed. Amelie was asleep under it despite the loud beeping of the machines. She looked the same as the last time I saw her. Same porcelain skin. Same golden-brown curls. Same gold eyes fluttering beneath her eyelids. I thought she might wake up soon, so I decided to stick around and see what I could overhear.

While I was waiting, Amelie's parents arrived with more things to make her room feel homey. Louise woke Amelie up and started changing out the sheets on her pillows. She fluffed each one before stacking them behind her daughter. Then, she pulled a hairbrush out of her purse and started detangling Amelie's hair. Amelie tried to wave her off, but she was unsuccessful.

Jonathan brought pink peonies and a vase to put on Amelie's nightstand. He also brought her a small blue notebook to write in and a picture of her family to put next to the flowers.

Amelie sat up as straight as she could in her bed and she started stretching out her arms.

"Mom, how much longer do I have to stay here? I'm missing so much practice."

“We don’t know, honey. Hopefully, we can get you home soon.”

“But when?”

“We don’t know yet. The doctor will be here any minute to tell us when you can go home,” her father said.

Amelie pounded her fists on the bed and groaned loudly.

“Amelie, calm down,” he father barked.

“Jonathan, don’t yell. That’s not helping,” her mother said.

“This stinks! I want to go home!” Amelie yelled. She grabbed one of the freshly fluffed pillows and tossed it off the bed. Then, she fell back onto the others and used one to cover her face.

“Amelie, I know waiting is frustrating, but there’s nothing else we can do right now,” her mother cooed.

Amelie was about to say something else when the doctor entered her room. He looked just as troubled as the last time I saw him.

“Hello, Amelie. How are you feeling today?” he asked.

“Fine. Can I go home yet?” Amelie answered.

“Hush, Amelie,” he father snapped. “Please, excuse her.”

“Not a problem. Her frustration is completely understandable. So, I have the results from the tests my colleagues ran.”

“And? What are we looking at?” Jonathan asked.

The doctor shifted through several papers, before meeting Jonathan’s eyes. He looked haunted, like he knew he was about to crush their hopes.

“My colleagues also believe that amputation is the best course of action.”

Louise sobbed into her hands. Jonathan put his hand on her back, but she shrugged it off.

“Amputation?”

“It’s when we remove parts of a limb to prevent infection or further damage.”

“Remove. You’re going to remove my leg?”

“Just from the knee down. You will—”

“No, you can’t. Please don’t. I need my leg. I’ll do anything.”

Amelie started to cry, and her words became thick and muddled.

“Amelie, there isn’t another option. We have to remove your leg and we have to act quickly or—”

“Please! I’ll be really good. I promise. I won’t yell, and I’ll always look both ways when I cross the street, and, and, I just wanna be a dancer. Please.”

“Amelie, lots of people walk and run and dance just fine after losing a limb. We’ll get you fitted for an excellent prosthetic and once you’ve gone through rehab you’ll be able to start dancing again in no time,” the doctor said, trying to sound reassuring.

“Mom, please don’t let them take my leg. Please, mom, tell them no.”

Louise went to Amelie’s bedside and gathered Amelie up in her arms. She stroked her hair and kissed the top of her head.

“I can’t, Amelie. They need to do this to make you better, but the doctor said you’ll be able to dance again. Everything’s going to be okay.”

At her mother’s words, Amelie cried harder. She pushed herself out of her mother’s embrace and threw herself on to the pillows.

“No, it’s not!” she cried. “Dancers need legs!”

“What? Amelie, the doctor said—” Jonathan started, but Amelie cut him off.

“No. Dancers need their legs. Both of them. Now, I’ll only have one.”

“Amelie, sweetie. I’m so sorry. We know how hard this is, but we are going to do everything we can—”

“No! Go away! I want everyone to go away!”

“Amelie—”

The doctor looked at the little girl whose dreams he’d just shattered and then back to her parents.

“Perhaps we should continue this conversation in the hallway and give her a minute to process,” he said sympathetically.

Amelie’s parents agreed and after telling her they’d be right outside if she needed anything, they left. Amelie laid back onto her stack of perfectly fluffed pillows and pressed her palms against her eyes in an attempt to block the sobs that racked her body, but she couldn’t. The tears were still seeping their way through the cracks in her thin long fingers.

I thought I should leave, and let her grieve in peace, but as I went to leave the room, I realized I couldn’t. Confused, I looked back at Amelie, and I immediately saw why. Her breaths had turned sharp and shallow, and she was choking on them like they were getting stuck in the back of her throat. She sat up abruptly, trying to fill her lungs, but she couldn’t. She swayed from the sudden motion and only just caught herself by throwing her trembling arms out and grabbing the frame of her bed. I could feel her heart pounding with quick, painful beats, and I could see the true fear behind wide eyes as she struggled to breathe through her panic.

I didn’t know what to do. I quickly scanned the room for a place to hide, thinking how traumatic it would be for Amelie to come face-to-face with death in the midst of a panic attack, but there was nothing. The sun had risen, and the room was bright. The curtains were even drawn

so there weren't any shadows to stand in. I thought for a minute I could hide under her bed, but it was too late. She looked right at me.

"I can't breathe," she said, holding her trembling hands against her chest and fixing me with a look that begged for help.

I froze. I had no idea what to do. Part of me was relieved she wasn't screaming or scared. But another part of me recognized how complicated the situation had just become. Most of the time when people thought they were dying like this, the thought was quick, and they didn't really see me, so we could both just carry on about our business. No harm. No foul. This was different though. Amelie had not only seen me, but she had addressed me directly.

"Help!" she said through another choked breath.

"Uh. Right," I said, thinking back to all the panic attacks I'd witnessed.

"Okay. Um. Hi, Amelie. My name's Sam," I said, trying to sound confident as I sat at the edge of her bed. "Has this ever happened to you before?"

Amelie shook her head from side to side and continued to press her palms against her chest.

"Can't—"

"I know. I know. Don't talk. It's okay, Amelie. You're having what's called a panic attack. Your feelings are very normal, and you're going to be okay. Okay?"

She nodded again, but she continued to shake and choke on her breaths.

"All right, Amelie. Try to take some deep breaths with me," I said.

I inhaled deeply motioning the movements with my hands. She tried, but the breath still caught. She shook her head sharply from side to side, and tears ran down her cheeks.

"Hey. It's okay. Try again. Come on," I said, motioning for her to take another breath.

It took her a few more tries, but eventually she was able to copy me. Together we took several deep breaths until her heart beats slowed down and she stopped trembling.

“Feeling better?” I asked as she finally removed her hands from her chest.

Amelie nodded. Then she pushed some of her gold curls out of her face and looked at me.

“See. I told you you’d be okay,” I said, smiling at her.

She smiled back. “Thanks, Mr. Sam.”

“No problem, Amelie,” I said. Now that her panic had subsided I could leave, but I couldn’t just walk through the door. That might just scare her into another panic attack. I looked around for a way out but couldn’t see any.

“You should lay down. Try to rest,” I said, thinking that if she closed her eyes I could just walk through the wall. She listened, laying back down on her pillows and pulling her quilted blanket up to her chin.

“All right, if you’re all good, I’m going to go,” I said, taking a few steps toward the door.

At my words her eyes snapped open again.

“But wait, Mr. Sam!” she called. “Who are you? Are you one of my doctors?”

*Damn. So close.* I thought. I turned back to face her but didn’t know how to answer her.

“Um. No, Amelie. I’m not a doctor,” I said.

“What are you doing here then?” she asked. Her eyes narrowing with confusion.

“I’m... just here to check on you,” I said, steady and lowering my voice in an attempt to sound authoritative.

“But if you’re not a doctor, why do you need to check on me?” she asked.

“It’s part of my job,” I answered.

She raised her eyebrows, clearly not fooled.

“Your job is to check on people but you’re not a doctor.”

“Right,” I said, knowing fully how insane I sounded. I could sense her heart rate picking up again, and I didn’t blame her. She was faced with a total stranger in her room. I could tell from her eyes darting between me and the door exactly what she was about to do.

“Uh huh... MOM!” she called with all the strength she could muster.

Her parents and the doctor came running back in and looked right through me as I knew they would. Instead, they looked down at Amelie with worry in their eyes.

“What’s the matter, Amelie?” Jonathan asked.

“Who’s this man?” she shouted, pointing right at me. They looked up, and I could see confusion run across their faces.

“What man?” Louise asked.

“That man. Right there!” she said with her finger still pointed at me.

The doctor walked over to me and then through me as he searched the area Amelie around where pointing.

“There is no man here, Amelie. It must have been a dream,” he said.

“Was not! He’s right there. He talked to me. He said his name is Sam,” she was looking at me desperately, as if to ask me to speak again to prove she wasn’t crazy. I obliged.

“They can’t see or hear me, Amelie. Only you can and probably a few other people in this hospital, but they can’t.”

“This is crazy.”

“What’s crazy, Amelie? Dr. Roberts what’s going on?” Jonathan shouted.

“It’s possible the pain medication we have her on caused some disorientation, but she wouldn’t be hallucinating,” he said, studying her.

Amelie's expression slowly changed from confusion to fascination and mild amusement.

"Wait. I think you're right," she said, rubbing her eyes to add to the deception. "It must have been a dream. There's no one there."

Her parents and the doctor looked relieved.

"You're just upset and tired, Amelie. Why don't you try to take a nap?" Louise said.

"Yeah, okay. I think I'm just tired. Can you guys turn off the lights?"

"Sure, sweet girl. You get some rest."

Amelie snuggled deep into the bed, pulling the blankets up to her chin. Her father kissed her on the head, and he, Louise, and the doctor left the room again. The second the door closed, Amelie turned back to me.

"Why can't they see you? What are you?" she asked.

Yet again, I was at a loss for an answer. How do I explain myself to this little girl? Should I even try? Well, she had just seen someone walk right through me, so I figured I didn't have much of a choice. I had to tell her something.

"Who am I? Well, that's a complicated question, Amelie. I think I'll try to answer it with another question. Do you believe in souls?"

"Like the things inside us that go to Heaven when we die? Sure, I think so. But what's that got to do with you? Are you a soul?"

"Um. I think so. But that's not really important. You see Amelie, I help souls. Souls that are weak and hurting. I help them move on."

"So, you're God. You help people get to heaven," she said it like it was a fact, not a question, but I had to correct her.

"No. I'm not a god or God," I said.

“So, you’re an angel then. One of his helpers.”

I didn’t know what I was, but she was a child and she needed an answer, so I nodded.

“What are you doing here?” she asked with a hint of sadness in her voice. Then she looked at me with bright eyes. “Wait! Are you my guardian angel?”

I’m not sure why I did it. I should’ve told her no. That I was there because in her moment of panic she had a real genuine fear of death, and she thought she might actually be dying. But I didn’t say any of those things. Instead, I made one of the greatest mistakes in this existence.

“Yes, I am your guardian angel.”

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It was a lie obviously. I wasn’t a guardian angel. I didn’t have any sort of magical powers. And I couldn’t help her. But I didn’t want to upset her, and I certainly couldn’t tell her that I was a reaper there to release her soul, so I lied. I regretted it almost instantly.

“I have a guardian angel? Can you fix my leg?” she asked, staring at me with bewildered eyes and her head tilted to the side. I walked back over to her bedside and sat on the edge again, regret and pity threatening to swallow me whole.

“I’m really sorry, Amelie,” I said unable to meet her eyes. “I can’t fix your leg. I don’t have that kind of power.”

“But you’re an angel. You have magic, don’t you?” she asked. I could feel her eyes boring into me, and I hated myself for lying. “How can you not be able to fix me?”

“I...um... I can only help people get to, uh, Heaven. I can’t really help people outside of that. It’s...uh...a different kind of magic.”

“Oh,” she said. Her shoulders sagged, and her hope deflated.

“I’m so sorry. If I could fix your leg, I would, Amelie, but that’s not what I do.”

Amelie was quiet. She just stared down at her quilt and traced over the stitched pattern with her finger. She followed the pattern as far as her arm could reach. Then she'd start again tracing over the stitch closest to her.

"It's fine," she said, avoiding looking back at me.

"Amelie—" I started.

"So, what can you do as my guardian angel if you can't fix me?" she asked.

*Nothing*, I thought as I clenched and unclenched my fist. She didn't mean for her words to be harsh, but they cut through me and left me hollow all the same. I took a deep breath and tried to push past my feelings of utter uselessness.

"It's kind of hard to explain," I said evenly. "but I'll try, okay?"

"Okay."

"Well first, I'm not just your guardian angel. I'm kind of the angel for everyone around here. I watch over people, and I come when they need me. So, like earlier when you needed me, and I appeared to help you calm down. I do that for everyone"

"You help people calm down?"

"Well, not just calm down. Usually I help people move on or get to Heaven, but sometimes if I can I help people stay here."

"So, you appear when people need you and you either help them get to heaven or you help them stay here on Earth."

"Yeah, that's pretty much it."

"But how do you know when you're needed?"

"It's a feeling I get. I can just tell when someone needs me."

"So, you get a feeling, and then you go help people?"

“Right,” I said, thinking that was as close to the truth as I could get.

“But how could I call for help? What if I need you when someone else needs you?”

“It doesn’t work like that. I’m sort of in between time.”

“What does that mean?” she asked.

I struggled to find a way to explain it to her and decided I should just show her. I focused in on just Amelie, and the world around us stilled. The dust stopped dancing in the sun beams. The machines stopped humming, and the footsteps outside the door stopped before they could hit the ground.

“If you look around right now, see how everything’s frozen?” I asked her.

Amelie whipped her head around the room slowly at first but then faster when she understood what happened. She looked back at me, stunned.

“The birds aren’t singing, and the clock’s not even ticking. How’d you do that? It wasn’t like that before.”

“Right, so when I first got here I didn’t think you really needed me, so I didn’t stop time. But sometimes I do when I need to help people. So, if you need me and someone else needs me at the same time, I’m still able to get to both of you because times freezes. For me, it would feel longer than it would for you.”

“That’s so cool.”

“Uh, kind of.”

“I think I’m getting it, but one more question. What if I need you and you’re not here? You weren’t here when I got hit by the car.”

“I was actually. You just didn’t see me, but I made sure you survived.”

“You did?”

“I did.”

“How?”

“I just didn’t take you to heaven. I hoped the doctors would be able to save you, so I waited.”

“Oh,” she said with a far-off gaze. I could see the wheels turning behind her eyes. It looked like she was trying to decide if I actually did her a favor by saving her.

“Um, thank you,” she said finally.

“You’re welcome.”

“So, if I need you, like I did today, you’ll come and help me. You promise?”

“Of course,” I said, smiling at her. “But, I only come when people really need me. So, there might be times when you think you need me, but I don’t come because you aren’t really afraid or in danger.”

“But in times like today, and during my surgery you’ll be here.”

“Yes, I promise. But, now I need to go help someone else.”

“Okay. Bye, Mr. Sam.”

“Goodbye, Amelie.”

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I did see Amelie again during her surgery, but not because she needed me. I really just wanted to make sure everything was going okay. I watched as they put her to sleep, and I watched the surgery as they took everything below her knee. It all went well though, and, according to the doctors, she would be in the hospital for another few weeks as she adjusted to her prosthetic and started her rehab sessions.

I checked in on her a few more times during her initial recovery. She was sleeping a lot of the time, but when she wasn't, she was doing her stretches and trying to get used to the prosthetic leg. I'd even seen her trying to do some of her dance positions with it on, and while they weren't as precise as they once were, they would get there with practice. I thought she was adjusting really well, and I was starting to think my first encounter with Amelie was also going to be my last encounter with her. That her moment of panic had been a one-time thing, and that she wouldn't need me again. But I was wrong.

Sometime after Amelie's surgery, I was pulled into a room I initially thought was a gym. One wall was mirrored, and the others were white. There were posters of people stretching different muscles hung around the room. The floor was littered with weights and rubber balls and stretching bands. There were even balancing poles and stationary bikes set up throughout the room. I looked around, not entirely sure what I was doing there, but then I saw her.

Amelie was lying flat on her back next to a balancing pole. Her heart was racing, and she was trembling from head to toe. Her diaphragm was expanding and deflating rapidly. Her eyes found me in a matter of seconds, and, as they did, the world froze around us. The sounds of the machines were muted, and the people stilled mid-step.

I made my way over to Amelie and knelt by her side. Her expression was a cross between relief and fear.

"Hello again, Amelie. You're okay," I said as I reached her. "Deep breaths. Just like last time," I said softly while smiling at her. She smiled back at me and nodded her head as best she could.

We took several deep breaths together again before her heart beats slowed down.

“Good, all right. Now close your eyes and try to think of something peaceful. Somewhere where you’re relaxed.”

She nodded again and closed her eyes. She took several, long deep breaths on her own before opening her eyes again.

“Hi, Mr. Sam,” she said, turning her head towards me. I had to laugh a little.

“Hi, Amelie. So, what happened here? You were doing so well.”

“I was just practicing walking and I fell. And... and... well I don’t really know what happened. I thought I was outside and everything smelled awful like something was burning and it was so loud. And I got really confused, and then, I don’t know...” she said, speaking quickly. She shut her eyes and pressed her palms hard against her forehead.

I shouldn't have asked. Her heartrate spiked, and she had started trembling again.

“Hey, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. It’s all right.”

She nodded but didn’t reopen her eyes or stop shaking.

“Amelie, take some more deep breaths. You’re okay. You’re not outside, you’re inside in a safe place, and you’re going to be fine.”

My words didn’t help. She just continued to shake, and her breathing was getting shorter and shallow again. I searched desperately for a way to calm her down and prove to her that she was safe. Then suddenly, an idea dawned on me.

“Hey, Amelie open your eyes. Let’s play a game. Come on. I’m sure you know it.”

Amelie ran her hands over her face and opened her eyes. She was still trembling, and her breaths were short, but at least I had her attention.

“Do you know the game I Spy?” I asked.

Amelie looked confused but nodded all the same.

“Great!” I said, scanning the room for something well hidden. “Let’s play. I’ll start. I spy with my little eye something... blue.”

Amelie looked away from me and scanned the room, her breathing steadying and her heart rate slowing all the while. Her eyes skipped over the obvious answers like the rubber ball in the corner and the blue badges of the nurses. Finally, she smiled. She pointed triumphantly to the window at the sky.

“Nope, not that,” I said, smirking.

Her eyebrows furrowed as she returned to scanning the room. She pointed at a few more objects: a coffee cup, the lettering on a poster, and the pants of another patient in rehab. She even guessed the ball and the badges when she had run out ideas. I said no to all these other blue things, and she laughed.

“You’re changing it!” she said.

“I’m not.”

“There’s nothing else blue in here.”

“Yes, there is.”

“I give up then.”

“Oh, come on. Try again. Really look around.”

Amelie propped herself up on her elbows and slowly turned her head as she scanned the room. She looked at the ceiling, she looked at the ground, and finally she looked down at herself.

“Oh. It’s me! My leotard is blue!” she said, breaking out into a huge grin.

“Yes! You got it!”

“That was hard. There’s a lot of blue stuff in here.”

“There is. But you got it,” I said, grinning at her.

“I did! I win! Now, it’s my turn.”

“Well, hold on. How are you feeling?”

“Oh,” she said, thinking back to just a few moments before. “Much better. Hey, how did you—? You tricked me!” she said, laughing.

“Glad I could help,” I said.

I stood up to leave but she called back to me.

“Wait! Don’t leave! Stay, and watch my practice. I’m actually getting pretty good at balancing with my fake leg. I’m going to be the first dancer with a prosthetic leg,” she said with a spark in her eye.

“I’d love to stay, but I can’t Amelie. You don’t need me anymore. Plus, in a few seconds, you’re not going to be able to see me anyway.”

“That’s really not fair. I’m not sure I like how this guardian angel thing works.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, chuckling.

“Fine. You can go. Goodbye, Mr. Sam.”

I said goodbye to Amelie again, and I left feeling conflicted. I loved feeling like I was doing something good for this girl, like I was helping her cope with what happened to her and making her feel safe and hopeful, but I also wanted this encounter with her to be my last. I wished so badly for her to move past her accident and become the dancer she wanted to be. But now, after two instances of panic, I wasn’t sure what her future was going to look like, and for some reason I had a bad feeling in my gut.

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A few months had passed since I’d seen Amelie, and the tension I felt when I thought about her progress was starting to dissipate. I, of course, checked in on her a few times, and her

therapy was going really well, and she was gaining confidence with her new leg. Her movements were becoming more precise, and she had even fallen a few times and had minor panic attacks without needing me.

I was even starting to move on. I wasn't worrying about her condition as much or dreading seeing her when I arrived on a new scene. I was actually starting to feel like everything was going to be okay for her, but things never seem to work out like that for me.

It was mid-morning one day, and I had arrived on a street corner. I looked around with a nagging feeling that I had been in that spot before. A quick scan of the area showed shoppers strolling by with shopping bags, and people eating in the patio areas of restaurants. It was a simple little shopping district. Nothing threatening or unsettling about it. I had no idea why it was giving me a sense of dread. I was utterly confused until a car sped through an intersection without even slowing at the crosswalk.

Stunned, I stared at the painted white lines on the black pavement, and the memory of Amelie hitting the ground crashed into me. I looked around wildly, knowing she'd be there. My eyes found her across the street from me. She was standing on her new leg in between her parents, immobilized and petrified. Her world had frozen again. Her parents had stopped mid step, but I'm not sure she even noticed. Her unblinking eyes were fixed on the street corner.

"Amelie!" I called out.

She ripped her eyes away from the white lines and looked up at me. She shook her head no and tried to back away. Her legs trembled beneath her, though, and she fell backwards barely catching herself with her arms.

"No, I can't!" she said, shaking her head so violently I thought she'd give herself whiplash.

I ran across the street and dropped by her side. She pulled her knees up to her chest and hugged them tight with shaking arms.

“Amelie, it’s okay. Breathe. You’re okay,” I said hastily. I wanted to reach out and comfort her, but I couldn’t. My jaw and fists clenched in unison at the reminder of how truly useless I was.

She just continued to shake her head and heave. Her eyes slammed shut. Her heart racing again, her fear of dying very real.

“Amelie, try to do some breathing exercises please! Open your eyes! There’s nothing to be afraid of!”

I knew as I was saying it that my words weren’t going to help. How could I convince her there was nothing to be afraid of in that moment when she had literally almost died in that same spot before?

“Come on Amelie, you’re so strong and you’re doing so well. Just clear your mind and breathe. Try for me, okay?”

Amelie turned to me and searched my face. I’m not sure what she saw, but she looked worried for another reason now.

“What’s wrong?” she asked between gasps.

I almost laughed. She was concerned for me when she was in the middle of a breakdown.

“That feeling I get that calls me, it mimics what your feeling. You hurt, I hurt.”

Her eyes grew wide, and her expression was full of remorse.

“Sorry,” she said through another strained breath.

“It’s okay. Try to slow down your breathing. Everything’s frozen, nothing’s going to hurt you right now.”

Amelie listened and took some slow deep breaths in between coughs. Her heart rate slowed down, but she was still shaking.

“Good, okay. Stretch out now. Don’t stay in a tight ball.”

Amelie nodded and uncoiled herself. She stretched out one leg, then the other. She even pointed her toes and extended her arms towards the foot of her new leg. I could feel her tension releasing as she regained control.

“That’s it. You’re okay.”

Amelie continued to stretch out her muscles. She rolled her neck and pulled her arms across her chest. Then, she shook them out and flexed her fingers. Her fear subsided and the pull towards her weakened.

“Feeling better?”

“Yeah. I’m really sorry I hurt you Mr. Sam.”

“Oh, Amelie, you didn’t hurt me. That’s just how I know when someone needs me. It’s not your fault.”

“Still, I don’t wanna hurt anybody.”

“It’s all right. Don’t worry about it,” I said as I stood up.

Amelie nodded and tried to stand up too. She was still a little shaken, though, and couldn't get her balance. She stumbled again and reached out for me to help her. Instinctively, I threw my arms out to catch her, but she, like everything else, just faded right through me. She crashed to the ground again even with her “angel” standing over her.

“Amelie!” I shouted as I pointlessly reached for her.

I felt her panic return, but it was just a brief moment this time.

“I’m okay,” she said as she picked herself up. She slowly stood, holding her arms out to keep balanced.

I let out a breath. I assumed she’d be upset with me, but she wasn’t. She just rubbed her knee over her new leg and winched.

“Ouch,” she said with a pout.

“You’re okay,” I repeated, reassuring myself more than her.

Amelie smiled and nodded, assuring me she was fine.

“I don’t know why I thought you could catch me,” she said with a laugh. “I’ve seen you walk through walls.”

“Yeah, you’re fine. So, you’re good for me to leave?”

“Actually, um. Would you walk across the street with me?”

“If we walk across the street right now while everything’s still, and, then I leave, you’ll just be back on the other side of the street where you started when time catches up.”

“That’s really not fair either,” she said as her eyes fixated back on the sidewalk.

I didn’t want to leave her, especially not when the hard part wasn’t over. She had to cross the street and return to the spot where she almost died. I thought for a minute for a solution.

“How about this? I stand on the other side of the street, and, even though you won’t see me, I wait until you’ve crossed safely, before I go anywhere.”

“But I wouldn’t be able to tell if you left.”

“I won’t leave.”

“How do I know that?”

“You have my word. I promise.”

“Okay. Fine. If I really can’t cross the street when time is frozen.”

“You really can’t cross when time is frozen.”

Amelie pouted playfully, but she agreed to the terms. I crossed the street and stood on the sidewalk.

“I’m going to stay right here and when you get across, you’ll probably end up walking right through me.”

“Weird.”

“Do you want me to stand to the side?”

“No. Stay there.”

“Okay. You ready?”

Amelie returned to her starting place in between her parents and took a deep breath. She nodded.

“Look both ways before crossing,” I said.

Amelie glared at me, but she was smiling. I stopped concentrating on her, and time resumed without missing a beat. I’m sure Amelie couldn’t see me. She kept her eyes fixed on the spot where I was though.

“Amelie, honey, take my hand,” her father said as he reached out for her.

Amelie took her father’s hand and made a point to dramatically look both ways. Then, she took another deep breath and stepped into the street.

I felt her worry return, but it wasn’t severe enough for me to reappear. A few cars passed, and she flinched and squeezed her father's hand tighter, but she kept moving forward.

“So, honey, what do you think?” Jonathan said, looking at his daughter.

She was so focused she didn’t hear him. He asked his questions again and when that still didn’t get a response, he said her name loudly. At this, she finally looked up at him.

“Huh?” she asked.

“The dance recital, Amelie. We were just asking you if you still wanted to dance in it. Do the simple routine you’ve been practicing.”

“Oh, right. Um...” Amelie said as returned her gaze the street in front of her.

“We know you said ‘no’ last week,” Louise added, “but we really think you’ve been working so hard and a recital would be a great way to celebrate your recovery.”

Amelie still didn’t answer. She was still quiet and focused on the road. After what felt like several painfully long moments where we both flinched at every passing sound, they finished crossing. Amelie looked visibly relieved when her foot touched the sidewalk again. She stopped right in front of where I was standing, and she smiled at the spot where I was waiting. It was such a small thing, crossing a street, but it was still a victory for her, and I swelled with pride.

“Amelie, what do you think?” her father asked again.

“Oh yeah,” she said, looking at her parents. “The recital. When is it again?”

“It’s next weekend,” Jonathan said. “You’ve been working on that routine. We think it’d be lovely if you preformed it as a solo for the studio’s recital.”

“Um. Sure. I can do that,” Amelie said. She looked back to where I was and smiled.

“That’s wonderful! Oh, this is so great! We’ll invite the whole family. Aunt Carol and Uncle Luke.”

Louise rattled off a few more names before Amelie interjected.

“And Mr. Sam,” Amelie said, still looking at where I was.

“Who’s that, Amelie? Mr. Who?” Louise asked.

“Oh no, darling. You mean Mr. Simon? Cassie’s dad? We could invite them if you wanted.”

Amelie grinned and continued to look where I was standing.

“No. That’s not who I was thinking of. Never mind,” she said.

“Okay. We’ll make sure everyone gets an invitation. Don’t worry,” Louise said, already digging through her purse for her file of facts.

Amelie nodded at her mother and let go of her father’s hand. Jonathan looked around and then looked back at his family.

“Great, well let’s keep going. We need to take your dance outfit to be cleaned and pressed then,” he said with pride in his eyes.

Louise and Amelie agreed with him and began walking down the sidewalk again. Before they turned the next corner, though, Amelie looked back to where I was and waved goodbye.

I waved back. I know she couldn’t see me, but it was instinct. At that moment, waving goodbye to her, I thought I would go to her dance recital. I had been invited after all. But the more I thought about it, the more I thought it would be better if I didn’t go. Death looming around a dance recital couldn’t be good for anyone. Also, in that moment, I really believed she was going to be okay, and that she didn’t need me anymore. She could control her panic and she could revisit the place of her accident and she could push through it all. I wanted her to be okay and live a full and happy life, and I came to the conclusion that that didn’t include me hanging around. I had decided to let go of Amelie, and I hoped to never see her again.

But remember, Lily, my stories don’t get happy endings.

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I had made my peace with not going to the recital. I knew I needed to let go, and I figured not going would be the best way to do that. So, the day of the recital came, and I thought I'd just let it pass me by. I hoped that Amelie would grow into the dancer she dreamed of becoming, and she wouldn't need her 'guardian angel' watching over her anymore.

I had been wrong many times in this existence, but this was different. This was shattering. I was just walking around, watching the sun sink beneath the tree line when the wrenching pain I'd become so familiar with pulled me to the house seats section of a theater. People were trickling in and finding seats with good views. Lights flashed in different colors as stage hands tested the Lighting equipment. I turned around the theater looking for the person who needed me, but I didn't see anyone right away. I scanned the audience members, thinking my reason for appearing must be one of them, but instead I found Amelie's parents settling into their seats. They were both finely dressed, and her father was holding a bouquet of sunflowers.

*Oh no. Amelie*, I thought as I turned towards the stage. She would be in the back, stressing over her first performance since the surgery. I don't know why I hadn't considered that. I hurried up the stairs taking them two at a time, and I rushed through the curtains into the chaotic backstage area.

People rushed in every direction moving props, preparing costumes, spraying hairspray over tightly arranged buns. Other dancers were putting on their makeup in the reflections of brightly lit mirrors and lacing up the ballet slippers. Amelie stood out from everyone else backstage because she was the only thing not moving. Instead, she was standing still and staring at her reflection in a mirror. She was wearing the recital dress her mother had been sewing extra beads onto. It was light pink with an embellished bodice, and the tulle skirt floated effortlessly down to her ankle. Her golden hair was pulled up in a tight round, perfect bun.

I thought she might have been scrutinizing her appearance, but, when I got closer to her, I could tell that she was really seeing her reflection in the mirror. Her hands were balled into fists and she was trying to hold them still against her torso. Her legs trembled beneath her, and she was chewing on her inner lip. The nerves were getting to her.

“Hey, Amelie,” I said, trying to keep my voice even and steady.

She looked up, turned away from her reflection, and faced me. She attempted a smile, but it didn’t light up her eyes.

“Hi, Mr. Sam,” she said. “I’m really glad you came.”

“What’s going on?” I asked tucking my hands into my pockets and concentrating on only her, causing time to halt around us.

“I’m really scared, Mr. Sam,” she said, her gold eyes wide and filled with all the possible ways her recital could go wrong.

“I know I’ve danced in front of people before, but there are so many out there, and this is my first time dancing with my new leg. I know everyone out there is waiting and watching for me and that’s really scary. What if I fall again or forget all the steps or my new leg falls off while I’m dancing or—”

“Amelie, take a deep breath. None of those things are going to happen,” I said, shaking my head at her in a teasing way.

“How do you know that?” she asked still trembling.

“Because, I know,” I said simply.

“That’s not good enough,” she whined, placing her trembling fists on her hips.

“Amelie, first, I know you and I know you’re not going to forget the steps to your dance. Second, if you fall, you’ll get back up and keep going like you did in your rehab session and like

you did when you crossed the street. Finally, your new leg is designed to fit you perfectly. The only way it's coming off is with some serious force, and I don't think any of your moves require that you move in a way that you would kick it off," I said.

She calmed slightly at my words, but for some reason, I still couldn't leave.

"Amelie, what else is bothering you? You're nervous about your performance. I completely understand that, but that's not a serious need that would have brought me here," I asked, looking hard at her, searching for signs of trouble.

"It's nothing," she said, quickly tucking her new leg behind her original one. "My leg has been hurting for a little while now, and it's a little swollen, but the doctors say that can happen when going through rehab, so I'm fine."

I wanted to believe her, but my gut was telling me otherwise.

"Amelie," I asked again, adding a more serious tone to my voice. "If your leg's been bothering you, you might want to consider holding off on doing the recital until you're at your best."

"No! I'm fine. I can do it. Really. So many people have been looking forward to this. I can't let them all down. I can do the dance."

"Are you sure?" I asked completely unconvinced.

"I'm sure! Now, go take your seat," she demanded, pointing at the crowd.

"Okay, fine," I said. I turned to leave, but before I reached the door. I looked back at her.

"Are you ready?" I asked.

"I'm beyond ready," she answered with a spark in her eye. I smiled at her and returned to the audience. I found a seat a few rows back and settled in for the show. Amelie was scheduled to go on in the middle of the show. Before Amelie, a few little girls tumbled around the stage. I

thought one was nearly going to tumble off until the teacher ran out and scooped her up in her arms. As the age groups got older, the performances got better. In the last group before Amelie, children leaped and spun in choreographed movements around the stage in brightly colored costumes, and it was actually a very fun show. I clapped when it ended really more for my own benefit than for those around me.

Finally, it was Amelie's turn. She took the stage with confidence, walking more gracefully on her new leg than people do on the legs they've had their whole lives. She stood in the center of the stage and extended her arms overhead. Then her music started, the spotlight hit her, and she was off. She moved seamlessly with the music from her starting position into the next. She danced like she was born doing it, and for a single moment it was miraculous.

Then it all came crashing down.

Amelie landed from a simple jump onto her new leg, but she lost her balance, and her legs gave out beneath her. The entire audience gasped as she hit the ground with thud that rung throughout the theater. Everyone, including me, fell silent waiting to see what happened next. I just stared on in shock. Don't get me wrong, I thought about rushing to her side to see if she was okay. But my own fear and the immediate pain that had drawn me there in the first place kept me rooted in my spot.

I just kept waiting for her to get back up like we talked about, but she never did. People rushed the stage trying to help, and the crowd around her steadily grew until it was nearly 30 people large, and they were all just staring at her shouting about what to do. Finally, someone called an ambulance.

The sirens sounded like they were right outside. Everyone shifted their gaze to the doors, waiting anxiously for them to enter. When they did, there was a new frenzy of motion. Everyone

was trying to explain what happened, what they knew, and what they saw. The paramedics didn't seem to mind the uproar. Perhaps they were used to it. Amidst the chaos, they shouted instructions, and started prepping Amelie for transfer. They put her on a gurney and started wheeling her out of the room. I had to follow them. Her soul was calling out for help.

We got to the ambulance quickly, and the paramedics wheeled her in the back and started hooking her up to an IV. Both of Amelie's parents jumped in after them, and I followed after. Once everyone was in, the ambulance tore off the parkway and sped in the direction of the nearest hospital with the sirens blaring.

In the ambulance, the doctors removed her prosthetic leg to see what could be causing her pain, and I immediately felt ridiculous for letting her go on stage. Her leg was swollen, and her skin was red and splotchy. Deep blue veins protruded from her porcelain skin. Her breathing was short and strained and her skin was turning blue.

"What's happening?" her mother shouted as she stared in horror at her daughter's condition. She gripped Amelie's hand tightly and stroked the top of it.

"We can't be sure without running the proper tests, but from the looks of it, our most educated guess is that a blood clot formed in her leg after surgery. It's gone undiagnosed, and it looks like it or a piece of it may have broken off and traveled," one doctor said.

"Will she be okay? What do we do?"

"Ma'am, I need you so step back and take a seat if you can. We need to prep her for emergency surgery."

"Emergency surgery!" Jonathan said, clenching his fists. He got up like he wanted to pace, but there wasn't enough room with the two medics, the gurney, and Louise all in the back of the ambulance.

“Hey, Dave. I’m losing her heartbeat.”

“What? What’s happening,” Louise cried.

“Ma’am, I need you to back up or sit down,” Dave said as he skirted the gurney to stand at Amelie’s side. He held his fingers against her neck and furrowed his brow.

“Send a message over the radio. Make sure they’re ready for us,” he said.

His partner started gathering supplies and turning things on. The ambulance made a sharp turn and Louise and Jonathan fell back onto the bench. The commotion inside the ambulance was jarring, and Amelie’s soul was screaming. It had been since I saw her backstage. I never should have let her go on. I should have been more forceful. I should have insisted that she go talk to her parents about the pain in her leg. I was a poor ‘guardian angel.’

The pain I felt was getting worse, and I wasn’t going to be able to ignore it for much longer. I looked to the front of the ambulance, trying to see if I could see the hospital, but I couldn’t. The machines were beeping, and my ears were ringing, and it was all I could do to not release her soul. I felt if we made it to the hospital, she’d have a chance.

“Do it, Sam.”

I heard him loud-and-clear even over all the insanity surrounding me. Michael was there. Of course.

“Michael,” I said, seeing him standing in the back of the ambulance with his arms crossed.

“She not going to make it. How much longer are you going to make her suffer?”

“But when we get to the hospital—”

“Sam, don’t do this to her.”

I looked down at Amelie and knew Michael was right. She and I were both suffering, and it was bad enough for Michael to show up.

“Sam, do it or I will,” he said with his jaw set and his arms clenched tightly across his chest.

“I... I...” I couldn’t even finish the sentence. I just shook my head desperately.

I looked at Michael with what only could have been a desperate, pleading look, and he understood. Michael held my gaze for a moment, his eyes full of pity. Then he looked away from me and focused on Amelie. The world froze, and then she was just gone.

The End.

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**EDUCATION:****Kennesaw State University**

Master of Arts, Professional Writing  
 Concentration: Creative Writing  
 Support Area: Composition/Rhetoric  
 GPA: 4.0  
 Anticipated Graduation: July 2018

**Kennesaw State University**

Bachelor of Arts, English  
 Minor: Professional Writing  
 GPA: 3.62  
 Graduation Date: May 2015

**RELEVANT EXPERIENCE:****Kennesaw State University; English Department; Kennesaw, GA**

May 2018 – July 2018

*Graduate Research Assistant*

- Conduct and collect research on cover letter, resume, and writing portfolio best practices
- Create resources for undergraduate English Majors to assist with writing professional documents
- Lead workshops on writing effective professional documents like cover letters and resumes

**Kennesaw State University**

August 2016 – May 2018

*Teaching Assistant*

- Designed and instructed two section of Composition 1101 and two sections of Composition 1102 to classes of 26 students each
- Created, graded, and provided feedback on major and minor course assignments in a timely manner
- Held office hours to discuss course concerns and assignments with students

**Kennesaw State University; Writing Center; Kennesaw, GA**

May 2017 – July 2017

*Graduate Research Assistant*

- Conducted research on areas of writing that first year composition students struggle with
- Created survey and analyzed results to determine what instructional videos would benefit FYC students
- Wrote video scripts on writing conclusions, integrating sources, literature reviews, rhetorical analysis, and thesis statements
- Created 5 instructional videos using Microsoft PowerPoint to meet needs of FYC students

**Kennesaw State University Writing Center**

August 2016 – May 2017

*Writing Tutor*

- Assist undergraduate students with the organization, clarity and correctness of writing projects from all genres
- Communicate revision suggestions and identify areas for improvement based on writing best practices
- Lead workshops on grammar and writing related topics to educate students on writing practices and available resources

**HomeElectrical Electrical Supply**

May 2015 – July 2016

*Content Supervisor*

- Organized content creation and publication including blog posts, product descriptions, and web page content.
- Supervised and managed four-man content team to confirm efficiency, productivity, and quality content creation
- Reviewed and approved of completed product descriptions before uploading the descriptions to the company website
- Copyedited and proofread product category and blog content on company website to ensure updated and accurate information

**HomeElectrical Electrical Supply**

January 2015 – May 2015

*Copy Writer*

- Researched, wrote, and edited product descriptions for consumer use on the company website
- Proofread and copyedited other content team members' writing to ensure accuracy and correctness
- Created accurate product category content along with educational and informative blog posts

**Visionary Artistry Magazine**

January 2015 – July 2015

*Writer (Internship)*

- Composed over 24 articles on topics including lifestyle, music, art, and culture
- Orchestrated research for articles and feature pieces for upcoming magazine issues
- Conducted interviews with artists and other individuals from gallery events and community projects featured in magazine
- Participated in online editorial process for development, copyediting, and publication of articles

**SKILLS:**

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| ▪ Copy Editing & Proofreading           | ▪ Proper Grammar & Usage                |
| ▪ Research & Information Management     | ▪ HTML & SEO Familiarity                |
| ▪ Strong Written & Verbal Communication | ▪ Assimilate & Synthesize Information   |
| ▪ Ability to Write in Different Genres  | ▪ Identify & Summarize Important Points |