The Greatest of these is Love

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Chapter One

Death:

I've always enjoyed sunsets. The way the reds, oranges, and yellows find ways to mix with the pinks and the fading blues of the dying day make me stop to think about just how beautiful the world can be, even in the ugliest of times. I try to stop and enjoy sunsets whenever I see them; however, on most occasions I only get a fleeting glimpse, a tiny sliver of those wonderful, shocking colors because duties of another kind end up pulling me away, leaving me with a longing, a yearning, to linger on that vibrancy that is the end of day.

Though I was able to linger at it longer than most, I was still pulled away from this particular sunset since the man sitting next to me continued pondering his life at the edge of the cliff. I sat, legs dangling over the edge of the rocks, eyes looking out at the light reflecting on the still waters. The man to my left, whose name was Todd Wellington, sat deciding if he could muster up the courage to do what he had come here for. His weight shifted from side to side. His fingers tied and untied themselves.

I had followed Todd for a while, and I couldn't say that I was not drawn to him. From a near-death experience when he was younger to his two years of near fatal overdoses, I had grown fond of the man since I was able to examine the human condition a bit more closely than usual. Seeing him again, a couple of years since the last time, I could tell that he had stopped doing drugs, his face and frame filling out to give him the appearance of health. He sat back, putting his arms out behind him for support. I glance backward at them, and the absurd notion of putting my hand on his flashed through my mind. It's not like I could reach out and touch him. He wouldn't feel it. It's not like I could talk him down. It's not like I could make him feel appreciated. It's not like I could make him feel loved. It's not like I could tell him that there is more to life, that even though his heart is full of sorrow there are things that
exist that can still bring him joy. I cannot do any of these things, especially given that most of these ideas are the exact opposite of what I am.

I am Death, plain and simple.

I do not murder. I do not torture. I do not hurt or maim or bruise in any way. I simply collect the souls containing an even amount of good and evil, souls that we refer to as “too balanced” to make the transition to the afterlife on their own. It was my job to collect them, take them back to my office, measure the amount of good or bad within each soul, and take them to the proper afterlife. I could do nothing else to change their fate. Period.

At that moment, Todd seemed unsure which step would be his next, whether it be over the cliff or back to his car. I just know that I was summoned in case he chose the step into the void that opened sharply in front of us, though I desperately hoped that it wouldn't.

I hoped that he would turn around and go home. I truly did. My job was stressful and busy enough without adding more and more souls to my list. Pandemics, wars, bombings, genocides. All of these things make me miserable. I try to carry as many souls as I can quickly take them to the afterlife. I don’t want them to suffer, and I want the transition to be smooth and painless. However, there are times when I feel like I should be loading souls up on a school bus.

A seagull, black against the sun, drew my attention momentarily as it swooped down into its nest among the cliffs, its caws an annoying pin prick in my ears. My gaze shifted from the colors when Todd got to his feet. Everything in my mind grew quiet. All that was left was the surf relentlessly beating against the mass of boulders at the foot of the cliff below and the wind slowly whispering in our ears like it held within it the events that would unfold in the next few moments yet deigned to keep it secret. I looked over to Todd who stood there, feet
anchoring themselves to the ground. He leaned over, ever so slightly, to peer over the edge and see how far it was to the bottom.

See, the thing is, I was almost jealous of those who were willing to die this way. While sure, the ending is dark, morbid, depressing, and finite, the feeling before the impact, the rush of air while one tumbles through it, tethered to nothing, must be the closest thing to true freedom, to living, that anyone can ever experience.

Todd was not one of those who will experience that feeling. While Todd leaned over the edge, I put my hand on his calf. I was almost desperate for him to feel my presence. After a moment what I could only imagine was him analyzing and seeing how his body would break on the boulders below, he closed his eyes, took a deep, deep breath, and turned around. I finally found the courage to look Todd in the face. I couldn’t look at him beforehand. I couldn’t stand to see the hurt. I couldn’t stand to see the pain and agony a person must go through to get to a place like that. I couldn’t figure out what would drive a person to end the one chance they have to make a difference in the world. I made an exception for Todd, though, as he turned around. I watched a tear leak from the edge of his eye, trace a wet path across his cheek, and land, what felt so insignificantly, on my forearm. In almost an instant, my skin absorbed it, and though I know it should be there, my skin was dry when I rubbed my thumb thoughtfully over where it landed.

Todd took a step forward, his leg passing through my hand per the norm for those still living, returning to his broken-down Grand Prix. Sinking into the driver seat, he placed his head on the steering wheel and dissolved into a pool of misery.

I averted my eyes and turned once more to the sunset, trying to sear the beauty of this moment into the back of my brain. I didn’t want to forget times like this: instances that, though they are filled with great sorrow, can contain even a miniscule amount of hope for the future.
My watch dinged, the impatient buzzing vibrating against my wrist. Looking at the little screen, a red triangle with an exclamation point flashed thrice before a warning notification popped onto the screen: “Late to soul pick up. Please click the side button to be transported there immediately.” I rolled my eyes. Fate was always so pushy. If she would just take a moment to slow down, maybe she could see the same beauty I did, but out of the three of us, she was the most uptight.

“Death, you are needed at 1352 Willow Drive outside of a bar called The Broken Slipper. Please give verbal confirmation that you are receiving this message,” Fate said through a small speaker on the side of the watch. I clenched my jaw, taking a beat before clicking a long, smooth button on the right side of the watch face that turned on the communicator.

“I hear you loud and clear. Was just taking a moment with the last job I was on and making sure everything was taken care of properly,” I said, hoping that would get her off my tail.

“I don’t care what you were doing. I care about what you are doing.” Her voice was shrill and agitated.

I ignored her and clicked the round crown on the left side of the face, staring out at the last remains of the darkening sky as I dissolved into nothing and was transported to my next destination.

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Todd:

I woke up to my skin crawling. I swiped at my flesh, desperately trying to send the imaginary bugs scattering. It wasn’t until I had become more conscious that I noticed the five angry, red claw marks littering my arms and my legs. Letting out a deep breath, I tried to remind myself that those feelings were a triumph, victory over my previous addiction. Yet it
didn’t seem like a complete victory when I couldn’t get rid of these crawly feelings, especially when I went to bed stressed. The sun filtered through the white plastic blinds hanging in my window, finding little slats to peek through and creating an obstacle course for my eyes. I had forgotten to draw my blackout curtains before bed, I realized, cursing myself. Letting out an involuntary groan, I rubbed my face with my hands, pushing my cheeks into my eyes before rubbing away the crusty remnants of sleep.

Katy Perry drifted down the hallway, and my best friend Jason desperately tried to hit the same notes. The smell of bacon wafted into my room. I looked over at my alarm clock and saw that it was 8 in the morning, way too early to wake up considering it was the weekend, and sleep was one of the holiest things that anyone working a Monday through Friday nine to five job can receive on such a day. Jason was the only person that could be awake early enough, act this chipper, and have the motivation to make breakfast.

Part of me was upset. Why, oh why, did he think that he got to interrupt my sleeping time? What gave him the right?

But on the other hand, bacon.

Brushing off the final remnants of the creepy crawlies, I forced myself to sit up and open my eyes to take in the sparsely decorated bedroom of my sparsely decorated apartment. The walls were white. The furniture was cheap particle board from Walmart, and I felt just as cheap. With a deep sigh, I hauled myself upright, pulled on pajama pants so that I was not completely indecent, and followed the smell into the hall.

When I walked into the kitchen, Jason was singing into the spatula while he flipped pancakes and pushed eggs, a bit too gingerly for my taste, around a frying pan. Bacon sat on the top of the kitchen bar, glistening in a pile atop a plate that was protected by a swatch of
paper towel. Pausing long enough to wish me a good morning, Jason resumed his kitchen
concert, deftly swatting at my hand when I reached for a piece of bacon.

“Got to wait like everyone else,” Jason said from behind his full, ginger beard. He
pushed a strand of long, red hair back over his undercut with one swoop of his hand. “I didn’t
make all of this just so you could get to the good stuff before I could.”

“Alright, Alright!” I put my hands up in surrender, “Wasn’t trying to crowd you out,
was just trying to do something to feed the rumblies.” Rubbing my hand on my belly was
awarded with at least a small chuckle from the chef.

“You know, most people get a shower in the morning,” Jason taunted.

“Eh, I like living in filth.” I thought briefly that the statement may have been a little too
depressing for the first thing in the morning, but oh well.

Jason gave me a fleeting glance, but I saw the concern hidden behind his cheerful
facade. I knew what he was thinking about. He was worried about me, my depression, and the
ways that I used to try and handle it: worried I would be driven back to my desperate devils
that liked to whisper in the back of my brain. “How did you sleep?”

“Eh, decent. No different than normal,” I said, collapsing onto the couch.

“Really? Nothing you want to talk about?” I could see him looking at me out of the
corner of his eyes, and I knew he wanted to pry information out of me about what I had done
last night. Jason had always been protective of me and my sobriety, so his question didn’t
surprise me, but it was a conversation that I didn’t want to have right now.

“Nope, not really,” I answered.

His lips pursed in his unwillingness to let this go, “You didn’t go anywhere special?”
“Just went for a drive. With the pandemic happening, it is always nice to get out and go for a drive every once and awhile,” I said, hoping that was close enough to the truth for him to close the books on the conversation.

I was wrong.

“Damn it, Todd, don’t lie to me,” he said, throwing the spatula into the eggs, the metal of the pan clanging with the metal of the handle. “I followed you last night to the lookout.”

“You followed me?” I bit my lower lip, unable to keep the irritation out of my voice.

“It was your first time out of the house in almost a year. I know that being cooped up here hasn’t been the easiest on you. I have noticed you spending more and more time by yourself, so when you decided to randomly leave one day, yes. I was concerned, so I followed you. Can you blame me?”

“You may have pulled me out of the gutter, but I don’t need you micromanaging everything that I do. You aren’t my father.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” he mumbled under his breath. I let that one drop.

In the silence that settled over the apartment, the little voices in the back of my head grew louder, my strength to control them waning. You don’t need friends. Friends aren’t always there. Jason is dating Cassandra. He doesn’t need you. In a couple of years, they will be married. Then what are you going to do? You’ll be all alone. No one to comfort you. No one to care.

I looked toward my keys resting on the coffee table; I reminded myself that these voices were only inside my mind. I could fight them. I could conquer them. I just had to be strong enough. Attached to my key ring was a rainbow of keychain tags, one for each interval of sobriety that I had managed to achieve. The most predominant one, black with gold lettering, was the one that I had received at my two-year mark last month. That meant it had been three years since mom had passed, sixteen since dad....
“Were you going to do it?” Jason pulled my attention away from my thoughts.

“Was I going to do what?”

“Were you going to jump? Were you going to end everything that you had worked so hard for?” His eyes glossed over as tears welled up in them.

I wished that I could lie to him about this, but I can’t. The one thing that I could do, though, was avert my eyes so that I didn’t have to see the disappointment, “The thought had crossed my mind while I sat there, but I didn’t do it. Whether it is because I didn’t have the balls or I didn’t want to die, I am not sure. But I am here.”

“Todd, we should take you to Birchwood. Having these kinds of thoughts again-”

“I am not going back to that place,” I said, my words turning into a snarl that I managed to cut short by the end. I paused for a moment, taking a breath to collect myself before continuing, “While it was the nicest of all the looney bins I visited, I don’t need to spend more time there. I would actually kill myself if I had to go through that again.”

“Fine,” he said, feeling backed into a corner. “Then you are coming out with me tonight to the Broken Slipper. We are going to get some of their hot wings, and we are going to enjoy life a bit.”

“Jason, I don’t want to-”

He pointed the reclaimed spatula at me, “Where in that statement did it sound like you have a choice in the matter?” He raises an eyebrow and grins with the right corner of his mouth.

I sighed.

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Fate:
Seriously, how tough is it to look at a job description, see the required actions, and follow it through? Especially if you have had the job for millennia. I swear there are times when I have no clue how I can exist in the same universe as Death, let alone be related to him.

The concept is simple: Our sister Life creates bodies, souls, and births them forth into existence. I study the heavy, leather-bound tome given to me at my birth, determine a person’s lifespan, and cut their lives off at the proper moment, and Death comes in to pick up the souls and carry them on to the afterlife. It is that simple. The three of us even have a whole department of underlings to help us if times got too busy for us to handle on our own. Besides, he only has to get the souls that hadn’t accumulated enough good or evil to determine which afterlife they received. It wasn’t that difficult of a job.

Yet he was five minutes late once again. I barged into my sister’s office. Life, who was far too peppy for my own taste, had decorated her office in a pink that was so obnoxious that it reminded me of living in a bubblegum bubble. The carpet? Pink. The walls? Pink. Desks, chairs, pens, paper, filing cabinets, all a nauseating shade of pastel pink, giving off the impression that she too didn’t take her job seriously. Knowing that I will get nowhere, I still sought her counsel.

“What are we going to do about our brother?” I asked her.

Life exhaled loudly through her nose, pausing whatever notes she was taking in her glittery pink notebook to turn in my direction. “What are you on about now?”

“Our brother!” I said, exasperated at her nonchalance. “He is late picking up another soul. He was too busy dealing with the soul’s near-death experience that he began to completely neglect when the person actually was killed. That makes the fifth soul this week that he has been late for. These occurrences have been happening more and more since this pandemic started.”
She gave me one of her signature, irritating eyerolls and turned toward me in her pink office chair, her fingers traced their way through the pink feathers attached to the end of her pen. “So, what if he is a bit behind schedule? It isn’t like the souls are going anywhere.”

“That’s the point! The point is, it is his job to pick up the souls and take them to the afterlife. If he doesn’t pick them up, the souls stay. If the souls stay for too long, they will find a way to leave the body and roam the Earth! This is how evil spirits form!”

“I don’t see what the issue is. They will get taken care of,” Life replied, turning her back on me.

“The issue is that it is getting worse and worse, happening more and more frequently. There is something wrong with Death, and we need to do something about it.”

At the threat of action, she turned back toward me, one eyebrow raised to her curly black hair, her earthen brown skin folding on her forehead, “And just what are you suggesting could be done?”

My grip on my book tightened, fingers turning a brighter shade of white. I adjusted my stance, straightening my back a bit more so that I felt more in control before I spoke again, “What I am saying is that, if he doesn’t get it together, we are going to have to call an emergency council meeting of the Celestial Beings to determine our proper response. This could lead to disciplinary action.”

“Did you tie your bun too tight this morning?” She tilted her head to the side like she hadn’t heard a word I said.

I scoffed involuntarily before composing myself, “Excuse me?”

“You’re just a bit more uptight and bitchier today. I don’t think that being late a few times calls for an emergency council meeting of the Celestial Beings. You’re more likely to piss them off than anything else.”
"It's not just that!" I continued.

"What else, then? What other issues can you pull out of that tiny little anger suit?" She waved the feathered pen up and down at me.

"He's been experiencing *emotions.*"

"Emotions? How so?"

"I have been watching him while he works, and the way he handles some of these souls, the way he looks at them, the way he treats them, it is almost as if he *cares* for them."

"So let me get this straight. First, you are saying Death isn't doing his job correctly, and now you are saying you are suspicious of him because he has the common decency to have respect for those who die?"

I pulled up short, realizing for the first time that I could be potentially crossing the line, but the fire in my gut kept telling me that there was something wrong. "You just have to see him while he is working. You have to see the things that I see."

"How do *you* see the things that he does?" she countered.

"Well, I-" I ground my toe into the pink carpet, knowing that I shouldn't admit what I was going to say, but there was no getting out of it now. "I have been watching him."

"You've been watching him?" Life leaned forward in her chair and put her elbows on her knees, her pen feathers rubbing back and forth on her chin. Receiving her full attention, I regretted ever walking into her office. "And how has that impacted your duties? Don't you have your own job to do? It seems to me that you are getting a little too concerned about Death and the way that he does his job that you are neglecting to take care of the things required of you in your job. Perhaps, while watching Death work, you have allowed people to live for too long or caused them to die too soon. Maybe you are right. Maybe we should call a
meeting of the Celestial Beings so that they can examine how you have done your work to make sure that you aren’t making any mistakes.”

I paused, unsure of how to move forward. She stared me down, almost threatening me to say another word. Though she may not have been the most professional of the Celestial Beings, she was one of the fiercest. “Fine,” I said, adjusting my gray blazer. “You can have it your way, but I am telling you that something is wrong.”

“We’ll see,” Life replied. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, there is a global pandemic happening on Earth right now, and everyone is forced to isolate in their homes, meaning I am quite busy at the moment, so a bit of privacy would be appreciated.” Without waiting for me to reply, she waved her hand, sending me gliding out of her office, the pink door slamming in my face only half an inch from the tip of my nose.

I went to shout something at her through the door, but I stopped short. It was no use. I was just going to have to get solid evidence to prove my point myself.

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Todd:

“Are you sure you want to drag me out to this pub? I can’t drink or party,” I groaned, attempting to get out of what was bound to be a painful evening.

“Will you just humor me? It is nice to get out of the house once in a while. Ya know, leaving the house with the sole intention of having fun,” he said, voice comical and sharp at the same time. “I will drag you out of this house without any coat or shoes, and I am positive that you don’t want to walk around in the cold and on the dirty public floor without any shoes. Who knows what you could pick up.” We stared each other down for a couple more minutes before I gave in and slid on shoes and a coat.
“Fine, fine, but only for a couple of hours. I don’t want to be out late tonight. Besides, I am not in the mood to play babysitter to a drunken Jason this evening.”

“Fair enough. The goal is fun, not to get shit faced.” He clasped my shoulders and steered me towards the door. As we left the apartment, the little voices in the back of my head taunted me and told me that this wasn’t a good idea, but I pushed them away, knowing that this was probably more important for Jason than it was for me. With everything the guy had done for me, I couldn’t say no when he shoved me into the cab headed downtown.

Our city wasn’t huge. We didn’t live in a sprawling metropolis like Chicago or New York, but we also didn’t live in a desolate hamlet. North Hook would be what most consider a normal city to be: two hundred thousand people, a bunch of fast-food joints, a singular interstate that looped around the west side, and portions of the town that hadn’t been touched since it was founded in the 1950’s standing out like a sore thumb as they sat next to newly remodeled and repurposed buildings. Three blocks could be the difference between poverty and the middle class.

As the cab pulled up outside of The Broken Slipper, I saw that this pub had been one of those recent renovations, the sides freshly painted a deep purple while the sign above the door touted a glass slipper with an impact crack on the heel, spidering up towards the toe. “Interesting name for a pub,” I noted.

“Don’t most places that serve liquor have an interesting name?” Jason asked as he climbed out of the cab behind me. Already I could hear the bass of the songs inside, or perhaps it was one of the sports channels being played on the television, either way my temple began to pulse with the coming migraine as we donned our face masks.

“Are you sure we can’t just go home and order pizza?” I asked, watching the cab longingly as it pulled away from the curb and disappeared into the light fog that was starting
to form as night began to fall. Jason grabbed me by the shoulders, turned me towards the door, and gave me a little shove.

"Go," he commanded. "Just go."

Opening the metal coated door revealed a set of high-top round tables that were ringed by wooden stools. The large, ornately carved bar ran the length of the left side of the building; the mirrors behind it made the room look twice as large as it actually was while multiple flat screens were mounted above windows that had heavy film over them to keep the sun from coming in and blinding everyone.

As we were shown to our seats, Jason sat down, scanned the screens, and turned a little knob on the side of a speaker mounted in the middle of our table so that pop music from the early 1990's came streaming out of it. He started bobbing his head to the music, a large grin spread across his face as we took our masks off.

"Having fun already?"

"It's not hard to have fun when you let yourself loose every once and awhile," Jason chided.

"The last time someone told me to 'cut loose' it had been to do a line of coke."

"You knew what I meant." His mouth started to twist, and his eyes narrowed at the use of my addiction against him. "Besides, you have been clean for two years. It isn’t like you are going to relapse anytime soon."

"There is always a chance for a relapse," I told him, voice getting serious as I fiddled with my fingers, thinking about the voices in my head that had grown bolder today. "In fact, at any time it is within an arm’s reach. I still go to NA meetings once a week. It’s not like the addiction is gone and over with."
His face fell a bit more, “You’re right. I am sorry. I am treating your addiction as if it is only a thing of the past, but I need to remember that it is still something you deal with every day. I apologize for bringing you here, I just needed my best friend this evening. See, I am planning something, something big, and I need your advice on whether or not it is a good idea. I have known you for twelve years, I trust your opinion on what is right and wrong for me, and I want to know what you think.”

“Think about what?” I had a sinking suspicion that I knew where this was going.

“About my girlfriend, Cassandra. I think that it is about time in her and I’s relationship that I ask her to move in.”

“You want her to move in with us? Does she know how big of a slob you are?”

“Yes, well I am not the one who leaves my beard in the sink.” He shot back.

“Hey, I clean that out most days,” I said, trying to defend my own honor, though it wasn’t working as well as I had hoped.

“I am just saying that it is becoming that serious, and I am hoping that she is willing to look at ways that her and I can live together.”

“Are you sure? You would have to deal with each other day after day without any break. That is a large commitment, and she isn’t going to take that lightly. The minute you do this, you can’t go back without there being negative consequences.”

“I know, I know. It’s a big deal. That’s why I asked you out here to talk about it because I knew, if anyone was going to be honest with me about it, it would be you.”

“Well, if you guys have talked about it and you feel that you have reached that point in your relationship where you both agree it is time to move in together, you should do it!” I said as my excitement for him began to bubble over.

“Are you sure?” he asked in a voice lower than he had been speaking.
Confused, I tried to respond, "I mean, the only people that can be sure about this are you and Cassandra. I'm just a bystander."

"Yes, but you are directly impacted by this decision."

"Well yeah, she may be staying in your room and living with us, but it isn't my relationship."

As I finished, Jason's attention slowly drifted to his fingernails and the invisible pieces of dirt he was trying to pick out from underneath them. My stomach sank, slowly coming to the realization that Jason had been avoiding. Finally, he inhaled, paused, and on the exhale, said in a rush, "If her and I are going to be living together, then we may have to find a place together outside of...of the apartment that we are living in now. That means that...that...we may not live together anymore."

I let the words sink in, the speaker changed songs as tables filled with people seeking refuge from the outside weather. "So, you don't want to live with me anymore."

"It's not that I don't want to live with you. It's just that...Cassandra and I...like I said...we're doing really good. And you are at a point where you are doing really good compared to where you were a few years ago. I am just thinking that we both should find a way to take the next steps forward in our own lives, which means that we both can become a bit more...independent of each other."

I bit my bottom lip, unsure what to say next. So this is why he was so concerned about what I had done yesterday. If I was too fragile to be left alone, he wouldn't want to move out. He had to gauge my insanity and make sure he wouldn't be the driving force that threw me into the deep end. Don't get me wrong, I knew this moment would come eventually. Jason and I couldn't live together forever. It's one thing to be best friends and be there for each other. It was another to be codependent on one another to a degree some would consider
toxic. But now there was a twinge of betrayal that fluttered in my gut, making it difficult to focus. I had to force myself to stop thinking and pay attention as he said, “Of course, I am not throwing you out with nowhere to go. You can take as much time as you need to find a place, but I am thinking that we—”

“No, no. I get it,” I interrupted him, my gut lurching as if I were going to be sick. “Us living together was never meant to be a long term, permanent experience. I guess it is time for me to figure out my life.”

I could tell that I was not as good at hiding the hurt in my voice because a semblance of pain flashed across his face, “Todd, I—”

“I am going to the bathroom,” I stated matter-of-factly, getting down off my stool and heading for the bathroom before he could say anything else. I wove through the tables quickly, desperate for the privacy of the bathroom. My chest began to feel heavy, as if water were rushing into my lungs…

No. I told myself. Don’t think about that. You’ll only make it worse.

I reached the bathroom, opened the door, scanned for anyone else in the room, went into the first stall, shut and locked the door, and then slammed my back and the back of my head into the metal door. Closing my eyes, I tried to focus on my breathing, but it was starting to pick up pace. I could already feel my head getting lighter from the lack of oxygen.

The sunlight blinded my eyes as it reflected off the fresh fallen snow. My mother was holding my hand, the new skates still stiff in the ankles as she helped me wobble across the ice with an uncertain balance.

In through my nose. Out through my mouth. I tried to double over and push the memory away. I couldn’t be thinking about that memory in a time like that, but it surged forward anyways.
The ice cracked. The air rushed from my lungs; sound completely muted as my eyes opened to the underwater world in front of me. Underwater plants waved in their suspension while fish floated lazily past. Above me, there was a rough circle of light where I had fallen through, but my arms wouldn’t move in order to take me there. My clothes were soaked, weighing me down. My lungs felt as if they were turning to ice crystals even though they were on fire.

I fished my cell phone out of my pocket, fingers shaking and voice trembling. Staring helplessly at the home screen, I realized that I had no one to call: I had no siblings, my parents and grandparents were dead, and the rest of my family and friends drifted away when I had lost myself without any sign of coming back.

I had no one to turn to.

Gritting my teeth, I bowed to what felt like the inevitable. I needed to find a phone number, one that I hadn’t used in three years. I had always thought that saving the number was a bad idea, but now it felt like a godsend. I opened the Notes app on my phone and scrolled as I attempted to find the contact I had buried there.

As I looked out at the murky depth of the lake bottom, a brown skinned man came out from behind a column of weeds. He was dressed all in black, but none of it appeared to be wet. I waved to him as he approached, causing him to pause, eyes wide.

I closed my eyes again. “No,” I panted to myself, “No, not the man again. I can’t handle that again. He isn’t real. There is no way that he exists.”

You see me? He said inside my mind. I nodded, oddly at peace in his presence. The man was within arm’s reach, and, as he ran his hand along the side of my face, I felt myself become light and my vision go dark. A commotion broke the surface of the water above me. As my vision came back, something gripped me across my chest and under the arms. Brown hair waved into my face, and through it, I watched as he shrank, his piercing blue eyes never leaving mine.
It had been years since I had thought about that man. Countless hours in therapy and psychiatric wards ingrained in my head that the man wasn’t real. He was a figment of my imagination created by my brain as it was slowly being deprived of oxygen.

Yet, why was it that I could never seem to believe that completely?

The little voices from the back of my head began to taunt me even harder. *See, Jason doesn’t want to be around you. You’re psychotic. Why would he want to live with you forever? You aren’t good enough to be around him. Your presence only hurts his relationship with Cassandra. You’re going to be alone. All. Alone.*

I paused my search long enough to scrape the tears that were cascading down my cheeks. The voices were too strong this time. I couldn’t push them back. They reigned free for the first time in years, everything in my body giving way. Every instinct and urge to keep them at bay just wasn’t good enough. It was as if I was being attacked, and I forced myself to realize how woefully ill equipped I was to handle the violent onslaught that was my addiction. I sent the number a quick text: *At Broken Slipper. Need to see you. Bring the usual. Meet me in the alley across the street in 10 minutes.*

The amount of relief and shame that washed over me as the little woosh informed me that the message was delivered was enough to make me want to bend over the toilet and empty everything of worth from inside me. My phone dinged almost instantly: *Already on that side of town. Be there in 5.*

I stood back up, ashamed of what I had done but not enough to keep it from happening. Just once couldn’t hurt. Just once couldn’t ruin 2 years’ worth of work. I was stronger than that. Just once should be fine. I waited out the next five minutes in the bathroom, unsure as to whether I could go back to the table where Jason was waiting and look him in the eyes, lying to him until my dealer arrived.
Instead, I sat on the toilet, lid down, elbows on my knees and my head in my hands feeling both disappointed in myself and excited at what was to come. There is something about the idea of oblivion or total numbness that was so appealing, especially when analyzing the shitty world we were living in. All the pain, suffering, and heartache were just too much for many to carry.

After six minutes, my dealer sent me another text to let me know that he was across the street. I slid my phone into my pocket and left the bathroom. I watched from the entrance until the waitress distracted Jason’s gaze, and I ducked down behind a table of drunken, overly friendly guys and carefully made my way back to the entrance without Jason seeing me.

Flinging open the door, the crisp, cool autumn air filled my nostrils and helped to clear my head a bit. The fog had deepened, leaving only about a thirty-yard dome around you as you walked. It wasn’t enough to make you feel claustrophobic, but it was enough to make you feel isolated and alone. I crammed my hands into my pockets and pinned my arms to my sides to protect from the chill, as I had left my coat at the table when I left to go to the bathroom. I looked around, unable to find the person I was trying to meet, but instead a woman, just at the edge of the fog, leaned down into a car’s passenger window. I watched with baited curiosity as the woman stood up. A man emerged from the driver side door, made his way quickly around the front of the car, and snagged the woman by the wrist just as she started to get away. She let out a high-pitched squeal, followed by a low whimper as he pulled her into him. The man was about my height, wore a business suit, and had long, black hair that had been slicked back against his scalp.

“Hey, asshole. What do you think you are doing?” I shouted to him. The man froze, his dark brown eyes locking onto mine and sending a shiver down my spine. Something about this didn’t feel right or natural. My mouth went dry, but I still took a step forward towards the
man in a business suit. After pausing, the man resumed his efforts to get the woman into the passenger seat of the car, the woman still screaming into the night. I knew that, if I didn’t do anything, he would kidnap this woman, and she would die. With a growl, I took off, tackling the man into the side of his car and slamming the door shut. His grip loosened on the woman enough that she was able to yank her arm free and run towards the entrance to the pub, hopefully to call the police.

I put all my weight on him, trying to make sure that there was no way he could chase after her, but he didn’t try to resist. Instead, his dead eyes stared back into mine as he smiled so large that I was afraid his head was going to crack in half. As the realization of the danger I was putting myself in dawned on me, a cold, sharp, painful feeling sank into my gut, followed by a warmth that ran down the front of me. “Big mistake,” the man said in a raspy voice, his breath reeking of nicotine. “I guess that just means you will have to take her place.”

I felt the unnatural pull as the knife was drawn from my stomach, only for the man to plunge it into my chest. One of his arms wrapped around my shoulders like he was embracing a friend to push me onto the blade as far as he could. In the process, the man’s face moved next to mine so he could whisper in my ear, “Perhaps if you had minded your own fucking business, you wouldn’t be dying.” His hand came forward and pushed me backwards, the knife dislodging from my chest as I fell to the cold asphalt. The man ran back around his car, hopped in the driver seat, and took off just as the first bystanders emerged from the pub.

The last thing that I remembered was lying on the road, chest on fire, yet the only thing I could concentrate on was the loose pea gravel digging into my cheek and the rain that had begun to fall, landing on the side of my head and slowly dribbling into my eyes. I wanted to grab the edge of the asphalt, fluff the curbside pillow, and pull the black blanket across me.
I wanted to blink the water away, but my eyes remained plastered open, transfixed on the pink suede stiletto that lay on its side four feet from my face.

I coughed, blood mixing with the rain at the corner of my mouth. Bodies circled me like I was a blaze in a fire pit. From somewhere far away, I heard Jason hollering my name, but I couldn’t muster the energy to find him. My chest struggled to creep skyward one last time. I knew this was the end. For a split moment, I was terrified that there was going to be nothing on the other side. Just black. An eternal nothingness. Before the panic could set in, a pair of black converse came into view. The man from the bottom of the lake bent down and stared me in the face. He wore black jeans, a black peacoat, and his icy blue eyes peered out from his fallow-colored face. With pursed lips, his hands came toward me. I wanted to believe that he was going to try and help me, to try and stop the bleeding, but I knew there was no chance for me. He didn’t appear panicked though. As my vision faded to black, where his hand touched my chest there was a comforting warmth and lightness as I slipped away...

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Death:

Part of me wished that I had stayed next to Todd on the cliff edge. The moment I arrived at the Broken Slipper, I was met with the usual mosh pit of death. People have this natural tendency to huddle around large things happening, not realizing that this crowd could be the one thing that keeps the person at the epicenter from getting the help that they need.

And the phones.

What the hell is the deal with cell phones?

It is as if every asshole has a need to record whatever is going on around them to be able to post on social media for their fifteen seconds of fame. Would they be okay, though, if
they were the ones with the blood on their hands? Could they sleep at night knowing that the person could have been saved if it weren’t for their own ego?

I pushed through the crowd, none of them acknowledging my existence, and entered the middle circle. A man in a yellow sweater had his back to me, blocking my view of the man sprawling out on the ground. His copper hair was slicked back over his scalp, and he was huddled over the man as he shook him and begged for him to wake up. I heard him croak the name “Todd” before another member of the crowd pulled him away, revealing the man whose soul I had come to collect.

If I had a heart, it would have frozen solid, broken away from my aorta, and dropped into my chest like a bowling ball. Todd Wellington. The same guy I had just been with on the cliff not even a moment ago. Temporary temporal confusion was not uncommon with my job because I don’t live in a linear timeline like humans do, but this one was a massive shock. I had just seen Todd choose to live, and now he lay dying in front of me. What kind of cruel irony was that?

I remembered when I took his father. The young boy, no more than eight years old, stood there crying, face beet red but stoic as he stood next to his mom, attempting to be the “tough little man” that his relatives who had paraded past him informed him he would have to be in order to take care of his mom. That was so much pressure to put on a child, and that isn’t factoring in the “son must take care of the mother now because of archaic gender roles” bullshit. I had felt a need to protect him even then, though I had visited only once before. The fact that he had seen me that day at the bottom of the lake led me to believe that one day, just one day, he would be able to see me again. If that were to happen...

My hands balled into fists and my back teeth slammed together like two cars on an icy road as I realized that that was never going to happen now that he had died. After everything
he had done, after all of the progress he had made, this was still the way his life was going to end? Dying far too soon?

Seeing the stab wounds in his chest filled me with rage. I wanted to hunt down whoever had done this to him and shred every atom of their existence. Taking in the abandoned high heel and the crying woman that was off to the side in the comforting embrace of two other women, I realized that she was missing the same shoe that sat close to Todd’s body. She moaned a phlegm-filled “It should have been me,” allowing me to determine that he died trying to protect her. He died doing something noble, but that still didn’t make up for the fact that his chances at happiness were gone. He had saved her but doomed himself. He had so little to give, but he gave it all.

I hesitated a moment and took in his sandy brown hair and his pointed nose. His head rolled toward mine, eyes glossy. For a moment, they cleared, and we were able to make eye contact. Though I knew he shouldn’t be able to see me, it was one of those rare moments that I swore he could. It was one of those moments where I felt seen. It wasn’t just someone taking in the outer appearance of another person, but rather I felt as if he was staring into my core. It wasn’t seeing, it was being understood. Inside this glance was all of our dreams, desires, joy, pain, and anger.

That was how I had felt that day at the bottom of the lake.

But the moment didn’t last as his eyes glossed over once more and rolled into the back of his head as he closed his eyes for the final time, and his last breath wheezed out of his chest. Not wanting him to suffer any more than he needed to, I quickly stepped forward and placed my hands on his chest, drawing out a golden, ghostly filament that fluttered gracefully in an invisible breeze, his soul. The soul was secured into one of the inside pockets of my black, woolen peacoat. Being a being who wasn’t supposed to experience emotions, it sure felt as if
something inside me was shifting, like a dampener dislodged itself to reveal that the world did not have the same beauty it once had.

Standing there for a moment longer as the ambulance arrived on scene, we took a moment to appreciate the sacrifice Todd had made. I felt bad for having run late. I was sure that he should have died with the first stab wound, but my absence forced him to endure another and become a spectacle to all these people.

Though I would've loved to stay longer, an itch started forming in the back of my brain that I just couldn’t scratch. I should have left already, headed for the next soul that I needed to pick up, but I couldn’t wait to find out what Todd’s fate was. I had to make sure that I balanced his on its own, being certain of the outcome. I tapped on the smartwatch face until I found the small icon with a little scythe design that I had created. Pressing and holding the app, I phased out of existence and reappeared in my office.

Contrary to popular belief, black wasn’t my favorite color. I much preferred the soft shade of lilac purple. Though the Beginning created my office for me, I had moved out anything black and replaced it with either lilac chairs or silver bookcases. Gliding into a silver chair with royal purple, velvet cushions, I tucked my legs under my desk and pulled open the top right drawer. Inside of it was a silver bowl roughly the size of a large watermelon cut in half filled with a clear liquid that cast its own light throughout the room.

I placed it carefully on my desktop and braced myself. I had to know the answer to this question. If it is what I was hoping, I could deal with the crushing defeat that I couldn’t seem to shake. If it turned out otherwise... I opened my peacoat and carefully removed Todd’s soul from where I had placed it. Holding Todd’s soul close to my chest, I felt that this time would be different than the countless times beforehand. I would bring souls by the handful
and place them in this bowl. The ones that would float and turn white, I would take Upstairs to the Overworld, and the ones that sank and turned red I would scoop out and take Downstairs to the Underworld. It was a mindless job, yet this time required my full attention.

With both hands, I dipped the soul into the water where it floated. Carefully, I removed my hands from the water, worried that the slightest disturbance would cause the soul to sink and get him incorrectly placed. The soul laid there for a moment as the good and evil of the soul was measured. I forced myself to inhale and exhale, my jaw unable to pry itself apart. “Float. Come on. Just stay floating. Let his soul turn white. Turn white.”

Todd’s soul sank, the gold soul turning to blood. Furious, I grabbed his soul and tucked it back into my coat before replacing the bowl to its spot in my desk, closing the drawer more forcefully than needed.

A mantra began chanting in the back of my mind. It wasn’t fair. He had been making changes in his life. It wasn’t fair. He had been doing better. It wasn’t fair. He sacrificed himself for someone. It wasn’t fair. He deserved better. It wasn’t fair.

I refused to accept Todd’s fate.
Chapter Two

Life:

There was a knock at my office door. I steeled my nerves as I waited for Fate to come bursting back through it, but whoever stood on the other side was at least kind enough to wait for my response. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and unclenched my fists, forcing myself to calm down before I called, “Come in.”

The door swung wide revealing Death, donned in his natural black peacoat and black jeans. One look at him, and I was able to tell that there was something off. His face was wrinkled and contorted in pain as if he had stepped on a nail. He stared off into nowhere before shaking his head, and then he quickly looked around the corridor outside of my office before stepping in and closing the door.

“I need your help,” he told me, and I finally registered the other emotion that had been on his face that I hadn’t been able to place: desperation. Maybe Fate was right. Maybe there was something to be concerned about.

“What is going on?” I asked.

“Before I tell you what I need, you have to promise that you aren’t going to wig out.”

“Okay?” I said skeptically.

“I am serious. I need you to promise that you aren’t going to say anything to anyone. Not even to Fate.”

“Death, you know I have to be careful. I can’t just keep information from people.”

His eyes grew wider. “I don’t think you understand, you are the only person that I can trust with this.”

I contemplated whether or not I should humor him, tapping my pen on my notebook before I finally sighed and gave in. “Okay, Death, fine. Why do you need my help?”
Reaching into his peacoat, he pulled out a long, red filament that wavered in its own invisible breeze. “Why do you need my help with a soul?” I asked.

“I need you to bring it back to life,” he said.

Goosepimplces broke out all over my skin and a cold breeze tickled my spine. “You need me to do what?”

“I need you to bring this soul back to life.”

“Death, you know I can’t do that.”

“It hasn’t been done before. It isn’t the same thing as you being unable to,” he countered.

“No, I mean doing things like that are tricky and potentially dangerous. Each soul is given a specific and expressed period of time that Fate then must carry out. If a soul keeps living past the time they are supposed to, there could be irreversible consequences that could gravely affect not just our world, but Earth and all other worlds as well.”

“This one is different,” Death pleaded. “This person, this soul has been through so much pain that he deserves a chance to live without having to deal with any of that. He died trying to save someone. If that doesn’t prove that he deserves another chance, I don’t know what else would.”

I got up from my chair carefully, realizing that he was a bomb ready to explode. I walked around my desk and placed one hand on his shoulder as he stood there, holding the soul in his cupped hands. “Are you feeling okay, Death? This doesn’t sound like you. Never once have you asked to reanimate a soul, even though you have seen some of the worst acts of terrorism and violence.” The moment those words left my lips, the muscles in his jaw clenched shut, and I knew that I had lost any form of camaraderie that I had with him in that moment.
“You think that I am the problem? You think that I am the one not thinking straight? For millennia now I have been forced to do nothing but show up at the time and place that Fate demands and take souls to the afterlife. I have picked up infants, elders with long, full lives, successful people who have done mounds of philanthropic work. I have picked up liars, cheaters, and killers. I have seen many things, and I feel as if I am the only one out of all the Cosmic Beings that truly knows how unfair, unjust, and unequal the world is. The people who try their hardest still tend to get shortchanged in the end. This is one time. One. Time. If you are telling me that you aren’t going to help me with this, then you are telling me that you are okay with all these atrocities happening, even though you know they are a problem.”

I couldn’t lie. I had heard the things that Fate said that were happening on Earth, and I couldn’t help but be upset that the things that I had created, adored, and loved found ways to become evil. It is like a sculptor watching his work come to life only for him to realize that, in giving it life, he has created something dark and sinister that is willing to harm others. Of course, I did not like hearing about these things or watching these things happen, but that is Fate’s department. I can’t go stepping on her toes. “Death, I want to help you. If what you say is true, then this soul is truly special, and it pains me to see where it is destined. However, you know as well as I that sometimes sacrifices must be made for the greater good, even if it goes against everything we want or hold most dear. If this soul sacrificed himself to save someone, wouldn’t bringing him back to life shortchange the sacrifice he made?” I had been hoping that this new course of action would help him clear his mind, but he had shut down completely as he shoved the soul back into his coat and adjusted it on his shoulders.

“It’s fine. It’s fine,” he said curtly. “It’s whatever. I guess that I don’t get to win.” He brushed past me and grabbed the knob to the door to the office.

“Death, wait!”
“You are my sister,” he said, voice low and refusing to turn around and look at me. He spoke instead to the wooden door. “We were birthed into existence at the same time, and we spent centuries together without anything else. You would create things, they would die, and I would take care of them after that. It wasn’t until mankind was created and had grown into a complex species that the Beginning created Fate. You can’t tell me that this one soul would make a difference. That this one soul would be a problem. But I see where your loyalties lie now, not with the one who was created with you, but with the others.” He turned the knob and disappeared, slamming the door harshly and making me flinch in regret.

_Shit_ I thought, grabbing my notebook and pen, tucking it into a small, pink bag that I had hanging on a coat tree by the door, slinging the bag over my shoulder, and rushing out the door.

I had to find Fate.

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Chapter Ten

Death:

Speaking as someone who has literally been to the Underworld and back, this was far worse than anything I could have ever imagined. The Beginning stood before us, telling us that all of existence was doomed and to be wiped from existence, yet I couldn’t wrap my mind around what that meant for the universe and humanity. The world was going to end, and there was no one to blame for it but myself.

On the news channel in Jason’s apartment, we watched as footage flashed all kinds of amateur footage sent to them. Trees glitched like computer viruses or morphed from a Japanese maple tree to a willow tree, to a pine tree and then back again. The sky turned gray and crackled like static. The ground gained a molten quality as rolling hills literally began to roll like waves. Buildings began collapsing from uneven ground or were swallowed whole in rifts that opened in the ground so deep that even once it consumed two skyscrapers, it was still nothing but a black crevice in the Earth. Literal black holes opened above the Pyramids of Giza and began to suck them into it brick by brick. Rain turned to hail, to soda cans, and finally to droplets of lava. Ghosts and poltergeists ravaged the streets, possessing people and making them jump in front of cars or off cliffs.

It was chaos.

It was the closest thing to an apocalypse that I had ever seen.

Somehow, I couldn’t give up hope. I had created this mess. I had made things so irreversibly bad, I felt it was still my job to reverse it. “Beginning,” I started.

She put her hand up, her wrinkles in her face deepening at the use of her full name. “Please, dear. I told you. The name is Bea.” Her tone was light but conveyed the message that she did not want to be trifled with.
“My apologies, Bea, but you can’t do this.”

“How can any of this be fixed? Time and Space are literally fading from existence!” Bea said, gesturing to where Time and Space sat on the couch, eyes rolled back into their skulls, hands flat on their thighs in front of them, unmoving. The fabric of the couch was beginning to become visible through them. “It would take every ounce of power contained within a Celestial Being, plus a large amount of my power to reverse it, and there is not much left of the Celestial Beings.”

Fate, Life, and I looked at each other. Bea had said that we would be able to start over in the new universe, so the Celestial Beings would be okay. We would still exist and have jobs. It wouldn’t be fair of me to ask them or let them sacrifice themselves for this world. It wouldn’t be worthwhile for them.

“I’ll do it,” I told Bea. Todd grabbed my hand and spun me around towards him.

“Give us one moment, please,” Todd said over my shoulder before lowering his voice and eyebrows at me. “Don’t you dare.”

“I have to,” I explained. “It is the right thing to do. I created this mess. There are billions of innocent people who do not deserve to lose out on their lives because I have been selfish in wanting to be with you.”

“You didn’t create this,” Todd said. “It isn’t your fault that the system has such stern policies or a lack of contingency plans.”

“They never had any contingency plans because there is one fixed rule that no one was supposed to break. I broke it. Now, I have to pay the price to fix it,” I explained.

“Don’t we deserve a chance?” He moaned.

“We do, but I blew it. I went about it the wrong way. It’s not fair, but life isn’t fair sometimes.” I paused at the thought and let out an involuntary chortle. “What is that
expression most humans like to use? ‘Life isn’t fair?’ It’s ironic how often they are talking about Death rather than life, isn’t it?”

Life and Fate moved closer, attempting to join our conversation. “How can you do this? You can’t give yourself up for all of these humans!” Fate said. “Todd, you better not be telling him that this is the right thing to do.”

Todd’s face began to redden, and he went to speak. I put my hand on his chest and stopped him. “Fate, when are you going to learn that there are things more important than ourselves? Sometimes, there is a greater good that we must answer to. We are not gods. We are not things to be revered by humans and considered special. We are just like them. We were born, we exist, we carry out our jobs, and though we don’t die in the end, now is my chance to complete the human cycle. You said it yourself. I am not fit to be Death anymore. I can’t carry this knowledge with me to another universe and pretend that I can start over. It just doesn’t work that way.”

Fate opened her mouth to reply, but for once she wasn’t able to. She stammered a few times as sentences attempted to form themselves at the edge of her lips, but she finally gave up with an exasperated sigh, “That doesn’t mean I have to like this.”

“I know. I know,” I said.

“I can’t watch you die,” Life moaned, throwing her arms around my neck.

“I know you can’t,” I said. “But before all of this started, do you remember what you said to me about Todd?” She shook her head, her hair slapping me in the face as she grieved. I couldn’t help but smile. “When I came to you and asked if you would bring Todd back to life, you told me that it shouldn’t be done. You said to me that ‘sometimes sacrifices must be made for the greater good, even if it goes against everything we want or hold most dear.’ You were right, Life. You said that bringing Todd back to life could invalidate the sacrifice he made.
that led to his death. You were right about that too. Look at what happened when I decided
that I knew better. Todd may have sacrificed himself to save a woman, but my inability to
cope with that and bring him back has caused everything to get worse. I have to fix the wrongs
I have done."

I placed a hand on the side of Todd’s face and rubbed his cheekbone as Life detached
herself from me. “I want you to be happy. I know that you would be happy with me, but I
need you to know that I couldn’t be happy living an eternity with the knowledge of what I had
done and losing you. You would be gone in this new reality. Of the two of us, you are the one
most deserving of more time. I have existed for a long time. I have seen many things and
people. Now is your time to get your chance.” Todd’s hand gripped mine as tears streamed
from his eyes. He went to say something but choked on his words. “Just don’t ever forget
me,” I asked him.

“That would be hard to do,” Todd managed to say.

“You say that now, but after a few decades, memories find a way of fading.” I slipped
one of the purple gemstone rings on my finger and placed it on his. I pulled him in for a hug,
kissing him hard on the lips. My body buckled beneath me. My legs threatened to give way. I
put my arms around Todd for support, focusing on where we connected at the mouth. Tears
dampened my cheeks, but I wasn’t sure if they were his, mine, or a combination of both. I
pulled him in closer to me, not wanting to forget about what his body felt like against me when
I pushed away. It would be one of the only things giving me strength once we let go.

“I could always wipe your memory,” Bea suggested as she cut into our moment
together. “This world is doomed to become a pile of rubbish at some point anyways. Why not
wipe the slate clean now, both for you and the world?”
“But see, that isn’t living either,” I said turning towards her. “If we lose our memories, we essentially lose who we are. All of our joy and pain, all of that would be lost. Who we are, from the happiest moments to the most crippingly sad, the pain, the heartache, and the misery are all part of who we are whether we like it or not. It is our identity. If I lost my memory, it would be tough for me to find new ways to exist.”

“We can remind you of who you are though!” Life said. She was making this so difficult. I clenched my jaw, trying to remind myself that death is always tough to handle, but I couldn’t help but find irony in the fact that she was now the one begging for the fate of something when she had turned me down previously.

“You can remind me of who I was, but that doesn’t mean that that is who I will be. In a way, that is a fate worse than death because I will be constantly living in the shadow of my former self. You may not say anything, but you will always be comparing me to the way that I was, upset when I do things that you don’t believe are true to who I am. That is not a life that I want to live. I also don’t want to be babysat by my two sisters. Fate, you are logic based, sometimes to an extreme. You have got to understand what I am saying here.”

Life turned to her sister expectantly, not wanting to accept the things that I had said. However, I had been watching Fate’s face as I had spoken, and her face was falling ever so slightly with each point that I made. She turned to Life and looked at her in a way that told me that I had made it through to her. “He has a point. He wouldn’t be himself anymore. He would be someone new entirely. I don’t think that it is right that you sacrifice yourself for humans,” she said to me pointedly. “However, I can understand how losing your memories could be worse than dying.”

“Are you saying that you want to fix this?” Bea asked.
I kept one arm wrapped around Todd as I faced her. "I want to do this. I want to fix the things that I have ruined. It is only proper."

"You are absolutely certain? You are positive that you want to give up your one chance to live for an eternity in order to fix this world? ."

"Last I checked I didn't stutter the first time," I said, getting fed up with people trying to make me second guess myself. "It is what any decent person should do."

"See, that's the problem," The Beginning said as she snapped her fingers. On the television behind her, the screen paused. At first, I thought she had only paused our broadcast, however, upon further examination, I noticed that the clock in the bottom right-hand corner had paused, the seconds ceasing to tick by. The furniture was no longer glitching, and the screams of terror from outside abruptly fell to silence. "You say that that is what any normal person would do. You need to remember that you are not a person. You are a Cosmic Being, made up of matter that can allow you to exist for all eternity. You are superior to them in almost every way."

"But I am not," I said. I grabbed Todd's hand in a grip that made him wince so I could garner his strength and take a step closer to Bea. "Think about all of the fantastic human beings who have found a way to continue to exist: authors, philosophers, scientists. While it is true that they may not be alive, their memory or part of them continues to exist on earth because of the impacts that they had. We are no better than the humans. If anything, they are the most superior because they die before they live long enough to see themselves become something like us: infinite but entitled, indecent, inhumane, and corrupt. The only difference between us and humans is that we haven't had the common sense to die before we ruin the good we can create."
“Very well,” Bea said. “If you are dead set on doing this, I suppose that I can’t argue. It isn’t like I am going to be the one losing my life in the process.” With the tip of her toe, Bea flung aside the area rug. “Do you have any paint, dear?” she asked Todd.

“No... We don’t have any paint,” he said, visibly confused.

Bea sighed at length before moving into the kitchen without another word and opened the refrigerator. We all look around at each other wondering what could possibly be inside the fridge that would help us with the end of the world. “What are you doing?” I finally asked. “Making a sandwich?”

Bea removed her head from inside the fridge, glaring at me around the door before she disappeared once more into it, items jostling around in the machine before she finally shut the door and returned to the living room. “Leave it to human beings to not have paint, but to always have a bottle of chocolate syrup,” she said, holding the brown bottle aloft. She walked back to the open space in the living room and began drawing a circle with several sigils in the middle that I had never seen before.

“I don’t even know what half of those mean,” Fate said in a voice that contained a disbelief that there was more knowledge in the universe than she knew.

“Of course you haven’t, dear. These are from my time, a time long before yours.” She corrected a small star by swiping at an overdribble with the side of her finger. “You could have learned them though.”

“How could I have learned them if they were from your era?” Fate asked, taken aback.

“You haven’t studied your book carefully, have you?” The Beginning asked her.

“Of course I have!” Fate replied. “I read it cover to cover multiple times, but there was never any mention of archaic, Celestial sigils.”

“Are you sure?” The Beginning asked.
“Well...I mean...Once the book got digitized, I haven’t been able to keep up with the constant updates...” she admitted.

Walking up to Fate, The Beginning deftly plucked the book out of Fate’s hands and turned the actual pages until she reached the back cover. In ink that was barely visible were rows upon rows of sigils without any key to decipher them. If I wouldn’t have known any better, I would have assumed they were a decorative inside cover.

“How am I supposed to understand what these are?” Fate asked.

“You aren’t. We don’t want just anyone to be able to understand what the original beings wrote, but the Ending does have a key to help translate it. Perhaps if you expanded into the different areas of your job, you would have been able to speak with him more and learn about it,” Bea retorted.

Fate’s face condensed in anger, clearly upset that her intelligence and efficiency had been challenged, so she dropped down on the couch between Time and Space. Squatting down to the floor once more, The Beginning put a few more lines in the circle before snapping the bottle closed and tossing it in the general direction of the kitchen.

“Right then, now that that is all set, are you ready?” she asked me.

How was I supposed to answer that question? Is anyone ever truly ready to die? When heroes in action movies sacrifice themselves for the ones they love, the evil villain never pauses mid-shot and asks the person if they are sure they want to take the bullet instead of letting the intended target get hit. It didn’t seem fair. I shook my head in disbelief. There it was again. “Life isn’t fair.”

I pulled Todd in for another kiss. His hand found its way to my jawline, and I placed mine over it, a warm sensation spreading through my body as my fingers touched the gemstone of the ring I gave him. I didn’t want to let go. I didn’t want to put him through this pain. I
didn’t want him to have to watch me die, but it is what was right. I had to keep telling myself that. This was the right thing to do. I detached from our kiss, knowing I would have to be the first one to let go. I placed my forehead against his, and we looked into each other’s eyes, each other’s souls. My heart fluttered. This is why I had done it. This is what had caused me to risk everything. This sense of being seen and understood. Todd had made me feel things no other human had ever made me feel before, and it seemed only fitting that I be able to bask in this feeling one more time before I died. “I love you,” he told me, voice cracking on the final syllable.

“I love you more,” I said, kissing his forehead so he wouldn’t see the agony that was ripping through my body. I took measured breaths, trying to keep my vision from blurring or passing out. Odd that some of the human ailments seemed most prevalent right now. I disconnected from Todd, feeling as if some integral part of myself had been severed away from me, and turned around towards The Beginning.

“Be careful not to smudge the lines, darling. Wouldn’t want you to go KA-BLEWY before we manage to do anything. We only have one shot at this,” Bea said. Her tone was odd. It was as if she were attempting to be lighthearted but missed the mark and slipped into an uninterested monotone. The Beginning closed her eyes and sat, legs crossed, on the floor at the top of the circle. She began speaking in a language that no one in the room understood, the undertones being that of a human didgeridoo as she spoke words that would have come out of a pipe organ in one of the old churches in Europe.

As her singing reached a crescendo, the chocolate syrup erupted into flames, cutting me off from the rest of the group. I searched around to try and find Todd, momentarily wanting to take back everything and find another way to fix the world, but I couldn’t see him so there was no going back. No time for regret either.
From the squiggles that ran around the perimeter of the circle, long, white tendrils shot out of the floor and wrapped themselves around my wrists, waist, ankles and neck. Where they made contact, my skin crackled with energy, and I felt myself grow tired. This is it, I thought. This is what dying feels like. The Beginning, who sat just inside the inferno, opened her eyes as my vision faded. As the world grew black, she flicked her wrist, and I crumpled to the ground.

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Todd:

He’s gone. That was the only thought that was running through my mind repeatedly. He’s gone. He’s gone. He’s gone. Death’s body lay crumpled in the middle of the circle, white tendrils still attached to him as if he were a fetus still attached to the womb of the universe. The Beginning stood up, eyes a bright, fiery green. Clapping her hands together, satisfied with the work she had done, she looked to the group of us standing huddled together and said, “That ought to do the trick.” She snapped her fingers once more. There was a small delay, and then the room filled with excited voices from news reporters exclaiming about how the world had miraculously found a way to come back from the brink of chaos. Part of me wanted to be relieved that the world will carry on, but I couldn’t help but think about the cost and that no one but me will ever know about the sacrifice he made.

Bea snapped me out of my thoughts though as she looked directly at me and stated, “Right, now we must deal with you.”

My heart dropped from my chest and through the four floors to the lobby below. Had that been her plan all along? She gets rid of Death so that she can get rid of me more easily? “What do you mean ‘deal with me?’”
“Well, dear, you simply know too much. It would be irresponsible of me to save the world only to have it plunge into chaos once more because some human was incapable of keeping his mouth shut about what lies ahead once people die. Think about how radical some groups and religions are now. If there were ever to be hard evidence...well, I think we would just end up right back here where we started, wouldn’t we?”

“Now wait, that isn’t right,” Life said as she moved between The Beginning and I. “Death gave up his life so that Todd could survive. You can’t just destroy Death’s memory like that the minute he passes.”

“Ooohhh,” The Beginning swooned mockingly. “ Aren’t you just the tart little blueberry on the top of the yogurt parfait? And who are you to stop me or my will?”

“But she is right,” Fate said, joining Life as they stood to block me from view. “You took away our brother, and I refuse to let you take away anything else.”

“I haven’t bloody-well killed anyone,” The Beginning said as she waved a hand in our direction and settled into the couch cushion between Time and Space, whose forms were slowly solidifying once more.

“What do you mean? We just watched you suck the energy out of our brother,” Fate interjected.

“Oh, do you mean this energy?” The Beginning said, opening her hand. A small, purple pyre erupted from her palm that contained enough strength and vitality that it wanted to consume her whole hand. “You see this, I haven’t killed anyone. I am The Beginning. I literally created all of this. I don’t need another Celestial Being’s power in order to do anything.”

“So then why did you kill him?” Fate asked.

“Oh, dear, you must learn how to read,” Bea said in exasperation, grabbing her book from the coffee table where it had been placed. She thumbed through the table of contents,
brows furrowed and muttering to herself. “Where is that page? Where is that page? Ah! Here it is!” She flipped the book around to show Fate the chapter title and number before deftly flipping to it and shoving the book back into Fate’s face. Over her shoulder, I was just able to make out the chapter title: “Death and You.”

“Did you read this chapter?” The Beginning asked.

“Of course!” Fate answered. “Of course I read it! I wanted to understand everything that happened between my brother and I.”

“But did you read the footnotes?” Bea asked, pointing at the little asterisk next to the chapter title.

“Who reads the footnotes?” Fate shouted, even more volatile than before. “The most important information should be in the chapter.”

The Beginning turned the page to the end of the chapter and pointed at the footnote. “Read this out loud for us, dearie, if you would be so kind.”

Though she strongly looked as if she wanted to huff in The Beginning’s direction, she turned her eyes to the book and read the first two words before cutting herself off: “Death’s transformation—”

“Transformation?” Life gasped.

“What happened to Death?” Time asked, rising from the couch. The two beings restored to their former glory.

“What the hell is going on?” Space added.

“What does it say?” I asked Fate, trying to get the group on track.

She adjusted the book so that the majority of the weight was placed on her left hand so that she could follow along with her right finger as she read. “Death’s transformation will begin at some point throughout the millennia. Because of his office and close proximity to the
human race while they are at their most vulnerable, he will begin to experience emotions. At that time, the current Death will need to embark upon the five trials of the Underworld to verify that he has succeeded in obtaining the ability to experience the five strongest emotions of the human state. Once he has gone through the five trials, Death will no longer be suitable for his office, and he must be replaced.”

“Replaced?!?” Life squealed.

“Shhh,” Bea commanded. “She is just getting to the good part.”

Fate continued, “To be replaced, the Celestial Beings must convene in the Underworld and have the Ending aide in the ritual for selecting the new Death and bestowing upon him the powers of the office.”

“But what happens to Death after he is no longer Death?” I asked.

“It doesn’t say,” Fate said, flipping to the next page and back, trying to find information that wasn’t there.

“That’s because we were never able to decide upon the proper solution,” The Beginning explained. “We weren’t sure what Death would be like once he gained enough human qualities. That is why I devised this little test.”

“Test?” I ask. “This was all a damn test?”

“Precisely, dear. I had to know what kind of a person Death had turned into. If he was going to be bitter and angry, unable to attempt to try and save this world, then we would let him fade out of existence. However, I had never imagined that he would sacrifice himself in order to save humanity. Owning up to his mistakes and being willing to pay the ultimate price is something that surprises even me. However, I now have to come to a decision about what to do with him.”
My head went light. There was a chance that he could be revived? What did this mean for Death and me? Would Death still remember us once he had been transformed? Would he still be the man I was falling in love with? There were too many questions for my brain to comprehend.

"Will you just get on with it and stop with all of the dramatics?" Fate begged.

The Beginning, looking at her deceptively, motioned with one finger for Fate to come closer. Fate looked to us before taking a step closer to Bea, who impatiently waved her hand, pulling Fate closer as her feet slid on the floor. "I am going to remind you that you are not speaking to someone that you would trifle with, dear." Her accent grew deeper and thicker, The Beginning grabbed Fate’s face with her hand, chin at the crook between her thumb and forefinger, and squeezed ever so slightly. "What is that phrase humans are so fond of? ‘I brought you into this world, and I can take you out of it?’ My solution is a bit more...shall we say...permanent?" She emphasized her point by digging her fingers into Fate’s cheeks.

"I’m sorry," Fate replied, spurred on to speak by the fact that Bea had begun picking her up off the ground.

After her apology, The Beginning dropped her, Fate landing with a small thunk on the floor, before Bea turned back to me. "Let us first consider the replacement. Human spirit. I think that that is what is needed in Death’s position now. Someone needs to be in charge who can understand the human condition and change the office of Death for the better. I suppose that you are not up for the job?"

"No," I said flatly. Then a thought struck me, "Jason could though!"

"Who is Jason?" She asked.

"My roommate, well, former roommate. We both died. He is currently trapped in a cell right now in the Underworld with the Ending and the demon that possessed my body."
“Well, that is a lot to process,” she said, snapping her fingers and causing Jason to materialize next to her. “Jason, would you like to become the new Death?”

“Why am I here? How did I get here?” he asked us. His face was pure shock and trauma. I felt horrible for having left him down there.

“Answer my question, child. I need a new person to take the office of Death, a human spirit, and this human has suggested you to me so that you don’t spend an eternity in the Underworld. Do you accept the job?”

“If I don’t... then I will go back to the pit?” Jason asked, glancing around him as if the Ending were eavesdropping on the conversation.

“Yes, dear.”

“Where do I sign?” Jason asked. The Beginning lifted her hand, a green flame erupting from her palm, and she slammed her hand into his chest, the green flames dissolving into his skin and highlighting his veins as green light shot from his eyes. When the light faded, he stood there panting, trying to get accustomed to the new power within him.

“Right, well. Next time you summon me, please double check the footnotes. I was having such a good nap, and I do desperately need my beauty rest to keep up with how long I have been alive.”

“Wait, you’re leaving?” I panicked. “You never answered my question. If you didn’t kill Death, then what is going to happen to him?”

“You will find out soon enough,” The Beginning said. “Fate, come with me. I need to explain how the universe shall move on from here.” She walked over to Fate, wrapped an arm around her shoulders, and then snapped her finger once more.

My vision spun and went black as I fell to the ground.

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Jason:

I had been Death for one afternoon, and already my mind was spinning. Life had given me a quick crash course in the position: how the watch works, how the souls were measured, and where to take the souls when they were sent one place or another. I had managed to redecorate, swapping out the silver and purple with gold and emerald. I was taking a break, clicking the clock symbol on the watch face so that I could recharge a bit and get used to the way things worked now. As Life had explained, that button had the power to shift my responsibilities to an awaiting minion of mine who worked just beneath me so that I could get some much-needed rest.

A knock came to the door, and I waved it open, Fate entered through the open doorway with her book held to her chest. “Thank you for coming,” I said to her and motioned for her to sit in the seat across from me.

“Of course,” she said, shifting slightly in her seat. You could tell there was a bit of tension in the room. Life filled me in on the tongue-lashing The Beginning had given Fate, and I suspected she had yet to fully recover.

I shifted in my seat as well, trying to formulate the words that are in my head. “I need to know about someone, a person that is still alive on Earth. I don’t want to interfere with her life, but.”

“Cassandra?” Fate asked, reading my mind ahead of schedule. My lips pursed together, slightly embarrassed that I was asking this question. I nodded. Fate put her hands out, palms up, on the table, and I reached out to take them. “Sometimes, we don’t want to know the answers to our deepest questions. Knowing the answers, while they give us closure, can hurt us in permanent ways. You have had to deal with a lot today. I think that we should deal with that another time.”
“Please? I will find her at some point anyways. I just want to make sure that she is fine since I am gone.”

Fate looked at me for a moment longer before opening her book, the projection rising out of the spine as she flipped through the database of all human beings in the world. She waved her hand through the projections until she found Cassandra’s file. The moment her profile picture appeared, Fate closed her book, cutting off the picture and any information I could gather. I went to protest, but she stopped me with her hand. “She will be fine. She will miss you for a while, but she will eventually find happiness and live a long life.” I couldn’t find my voice, unsure that I trusted myself to speak. I was glad that she was going to be okay, but I couldn’t help but feel upset that I couldn’t be there for her anymore.

Fate grabbed my hands again and shoved her book to the side of the desk. “Listen, this job is tough. It can be mentally taxing on its own, let alone the emotions that can come with it. I am not saying that you should forget about her, though my logical brain believes that you should, but I know that isn’t how a human’s mind works. In talking with The Beginning, I have learned some things and had to come to the realization that...well...I don’t always know what is best. Just know that I am going to try better and will be here for you if you need to talk.”

I nodded and came around my desk to give me a hug. After a moment, there was another knock on the door, and Time, Life, and Space burst in, faces expectant. “You’re back! What did you talk to The Beginning about? What happened to Todd and Death?” They all asked in a hodge-podge of voices.

“Why wouldn’t you come find us first thing?” Life asked, insulted that she had to wait. Fate just rolled her eyes and opened her book so that a projection of Todd and Death/Dean filled the top of my desk. Life’s hand went to her chest, her pink fingernails matching her
sequined pink dress. She let out a small, satisfied whimper as Time put an arm around Space’s waist. I stood to her right, grinning from ear to ear at the sight of my friends reuniting. Even Fate, who reached up and let her hair down out of its clip, couldn’t help but smile.

“Do you think that they are going to be okay?” Life asked, obviously still somewhat worried for their future.

Fate looked at her out of the corner of her eye and spoke with a determination and satisfaction that was unaccustomed to her. “I think they are going to be just fine.”

“You seem rather chipper,” Time said, pulling his glasses down his nose and looking over them playfully at her. “Is it safe to assume that there is something you know that we do not?”

Life’s head whipped towards Fate, and Time unwound her arm from Space in anticipation for an answer. “Is it what The Beginning told you?” Time asked.

“I wouldn’t be able to do my job properly if I were not told the proper outcome for their lives given the special circumstances.”

“Well, what is it?” I asked.

“I am not supposed to say anything,” Fate said.

Life smacked her on the arm playfully. “You know that is messed up. You cannot say something like that and then leave us in the dark. I think that all of us deserve to know what is going to happen to them.”

“They are going to be fine!” Fate said, trying to hold on to the confidentiality that her job tended to require. It wasn’t working though. I could see the cracks forming in her armor. I decided to try and pry one of those cracks open a little further.
“Fate, you can’t let me hang here not knowing what is going to happen to my best friend. He got to go back and live life while I didn’t. I think if anyone gets to know, it should be me.”

“Ugh! Fine!” Fate said, throwing up her arms in mock anger. She paused a moment and composed herself. “She told me that, when Death- or Dean now, I suppose- and Todd die, the two halves of a whole will become one, and they will exist together as a new Celestial Being: Love.”

“Love?” Time asked. “We haven’t had a Love before.”

“Exactly,” Fate said, taking in the immensity of the moment and grinning from ear to ear. “The Beginning told me that, in order for anything in the world to change, in order for us to continue to exist in a way that is righteous, just, and harmonious, we are going to need Love. It is the one thing that can transcend all problems and all conflict. However, if we can just learn to Love one another, we can make sure that Earth is always worth saving.”

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Todd:

I sat bolt upright, oxygen mask strapped to my face. Latex covered hands shot forward to force me back down onto the uncomfortable gurney, the world swaying back and forth as sirens cut through the air. The smell of antiseptic made my eyes water. My chest erupted into a bonfire, but I couldn’t seem to get the air or energy to scream. My eyes searched around me frantically. Was I dying? What was going on? My mind felt blank. How long had I been asleep? It felt like I could have been asleep for a long time, or had it been minutes? I couldn’t get my bearings.

“Sir, you were attacked. You must lay down. If you keep fighting, then you are only going to further harm yourself. Lynn, keep him conscious while I change his bandage,” a curt
voice commanded me from a woman whose hair was tied back so tightly she will never need a facelift.

"Sweetie, do you know what your name is?" asked a silky voice as the uptight woman stood to get something from an overhead compartment, and a kind, stout woman took her place. "It’s okay if you can’t answer right now. We will take good care of you."

"How’s he doing, Faith?" a male voice called from the driver’s seat, emotion setting an edge to his voice. "Is he going to make it?"

"We are doing whatever we can, Dean," the uptight EMT growled through clenched teeth as she applied new gauze to one of my stab wounds, sending another nauseating wave of pain through me. As my head flung involuntarily backwards into the foam head support, I saw through the small walkway to the cab of the ambulance a black-haired man sitting behind the steering wheel. Our eyes locked in the mirror, his panicked, blue eyes staring at me for a moment before refocusing on the road. I had seen that face before. Or at least I felt like I have. All of these people were familiar in their own way.

"My name is Todd," I managed to say. My vision swam in front of me, and the medics that were standing over me weren’t in the same uniform. The uptight one was in a charcoal business suit and carried a heavy, leather bound book. The other one had a pink dress and a wire tiara made of gold. "I feel like I know you both," I said as I shook my head, and they became medics once more.

"Sir, are you hallucinating?" Lynn asked me.

"No, I am not hallucinating. Well...yes...kind of...What day is today?" I asked.

"Sedate him," Faith said without looking up from her clipboard.

Before I could object, Lynn took the cap off a syringe she extracted from a nearby drawer and plunged the needle into the IV they had put in my arm.
The world went black once more.

When I finally came to, the light in my hospital room was dim. Forcing my eyes to adjust, I tried to take in what was going on. I survived. As the monitors droned on with their monotonous beeping, I pieced together what had happened. I remembered being at The Broken Slipper with Jason, I remembered Jason telling me that we won’t be living together anymore, and I remembered calling my old dealer. I also remembered leaving the pub and intercepting the man who tried to kidnap a woman, but from the moment I had gotten stabbed to this moment felt like a long, obnoxious blur.

My brain flashed images of a cage held up by chains over a pool of lava, a council of godly beings, and the world being destroyed, but none of that could be possible. Right? Surely there was no such thing as a personified Death...Right? If I was to think rationally, that was just my dying mind playing tricks on me.

If that was the case though, then why did my chest have a gaping hole in the center of it that wasn’t from the stab wound?

A soft snore came from the corner of the room where the blue-eyed EMT sat folded in the chair like an origami swan, his chin resting on his chest. Looking closer, the man, if I remembered right his name was Dean, resembled Death almost exactly. The hole in my chest filled and gave an affectionate squeeze. *I am always watching*, he had said. Trying to quell my hopes, I decided I was going to have to talk with him later to see why he had chosen to remain vigil.

Looking at my bedside table, there was a lot of equipment that I was sure nurses would be using to take care of me. Inside one of the bins was a small, orange cylinder with a white twist cap. On a label plastered across the side, my name and the word “Vicodin” was printed
for the whole world to see. My gut clenched and my mouth went dry. This was how it had all started. I stared at the bottle, wondering how something so small could wield such tremendous power.

I picked the bottle up out of the bin, the weight of the moment settling over me like a barbell being placed on my chest. Why was this even here? There should have been something on my chart that let them know that I had a drug addiction, so having this in my room would get someone in major trouble.

Slowly, I turned the top and shook two tablets into the palm of my hand. Clean, chemical white greeted me like an old friend. My neck and back broke out into a cold sweat. My hands shook slightly as I stared down the barrel of the prescription bottle, hovering in that position before I finally put the pills back in the bottle with a soul cleansing sigh.

I went to close my eyes, but I wanted to make sure I saw this moment, so they stayed pried open. Raising the bottle up so that it hung suspended over the side of the bed, I turned the bottle upside down to let the medicine rain down on the floor, the clatter ringing out into the depths of eternity.

***

Death/Dean

I was not sure what woke me from my sleep, but my body was grateful for getting a reprieve from the uncomfortable chair they placed in the hospital room. As the world came back into focus, the steady beeping sound of the heart monitor registered in my ears. The man I had driven here in the ambulance, Todd Willington, laid in front of me, his body still and calm. His dark brown hair stood in harsh contrast to the bleached pillowcase, and his softly tanned skin wanted to rebel against the machines and tubes anchored in his skin.
Something about this particular person was different. He had tried to protect a woman from being abducted, according to what police had told me yesterday, yet it was more than a heroic duty that drew me to him. Standing next to the bed, hand holding onto the rails, I had the urge to take Todd’s hand in mine. I wanted him to wake up. Unable to control myself, I placed my hand on Todd’s forearm, running a quick thumb across his skin.

As we touched, Todd’s eyelids fluttered open. My lungs froze. How was I going to explain myself? When Todd blinked the light out of his eyes, he scanned the room as if he was getting things set properly in his mind. His gaze found me, and he smiled. Placing his hand on top of mine, he cleared his throat, “You’re that EMT from before.”

“I am. My name is Dean,” I said, unsure whether or not I should remove my hand. His was still firmly on top of mine, so I let it be for the moment.

Todd smiled, “To what do I owe the pleasure of your company?”

I felt my face get warm. “Oh...I...I just wanted to make sure.” I finally pulled my hands from his grip and scratched the back of my neck nervously.

“Wanted to make sure what?” Todd asked me.

What do I say? I thought, What do I say? You royally screwed this one up. You are being a class A creeper. You were holding a sleeping guy’s hand. If that isn’t grounds for a restraining order... “I just came to make sure that you were all right.”

Todd’s eyes narrowed at me disbelievingly.

“What? I...I...”

Todd grabbed my hand again and silenced me before I could try and make any more of a fool of myself. “Did I have a ring on when you found me?” Todd asked.

My eyebrows furrowed. “Ring? I am not sure. The other two EMTs were the ones working on you. They would have a better idea. I can see if it is with your possessions though?”
I walked around his bed to the left-hand side of the room and opened a small wardrobe that was placed there. Inside of the wardrobe was a plastic bag that contained what possessions Todd had left. I handed it to him, and he opened it, dumping the contents out onto his lap. He sifted through it, quickly examining his phone and wallet, but when he moved his keys aside, whatever he had been looking for obviously wasn't found. Watching his face intently, I saw him go from content, to puzzled, to panicked.

“Where is it?” he asked, voice stone cold.

“Where is what?”

“My ring. There is supposed to be a ring with a purple gemstone somewhere in here.”

“All of these things are what were on you when we picked you up,” I said, worried that he may accuse me of theft.

“There is supposed to be a purple ring here somewhere. Where is the purple ring?”

“I don’t know, sir,” I said, feeling the need to be formal, but that only seems to make matters worse as he dropped his keys back onto the white sheet and covered his face. I couldn’t tell if he was crying or desperately trying to hold himself together, but I noticed a small shine on his bed in a spot that hadn’t been there before. “Wait, is that it?” I asked, pointing to the silver band clasping onto a royal purple gemstone the size of a dime. “It must’ve been tangled up in your keychain.”

His hands dropped as if he was unsure of what he trusted himself to see, and found the ring sitting on his bedspread. When he saw it, his chest stopped moving, and the monitors beeped faster. Carefully, as if it would explode if he moved too fast, Todd reached out and picked up the ring. As his skin made contact with the metal, he let out a small sob that contained more joy than sorrow.

“Do you remember this?” He asked me.
“No, sir.”

“Oh, cut the ‘Sir’ crap. You know my name,” he said, anger creeping in now, though I was unsure why, “You are certain you don’t remember this ring?”

“No, sir...I mean...Todd. I don’t.”

“Give me your hand,” Todd commanded me.

“Beg pardon?” I asked.

“Give me your hand.”

“May I ask why?” I said, worried that this sudden firmness is pointing at signs of further brain trauma.

“Just do it. You weren’t afraid to do it before in my sleep. Is it too much to ask to do so when I am awake?”

Fuck. I stuck out my hand palm down expecting him to place the ring in my palm. Instead, with his left hand, he turned my hand over, and then with his other hand he slid the ring onto my right ring finger. Once it rested against my knuckle, a large pulse shot from the stone, traveling up my arm and into my heart. From there it went to my brain, and suddenly a flood of memories rushed back to me, forcing me to close my eyes. Everything about my life as Death, everything that Todd and I had been through, all of it found a way to compress itself into my mind. I put my hands out to brace myself on the bed, Todd’s hands reassuring me of his presence as I struggled to move air in and out of my lungs.

When I was able to find the air, I asked him, “How did you know that was going to work?”

“I didn’t,” he admitted. “I just couldn’t lose hope.”

He gave me a few more moments for the world to stop spinning before he put a hand on the side of my face, just as I had done to him what felt like a lifetime ago. I leaned into his
touch and smiled. It felt like home. When I opened my eyes, he was smiling too, and he said the one thing that makes the entire moment perfect.

"I see you."

Craft Essay

My goal for my thesis project was to write a novel that not only had an exhilarating plot with interesting characters, but to speak to readers about what it means to be human. While there is a romantic relationship at the core of the plot, *The Greatest of these is Death Love* is a novel about what it means to be human. Humanity has flaws, but these flaws do not have to be demonized simply because they are not on the immediate path to perfection. These flaws also allow for the building of relationships, whether they be romantic or otherwise, if people are willing to embrace their own flaws, the flaws of others, and are willing to work toward correcting them together. It is in this way that we can truly see each other as people. As a teacher, I attempt to make my students feel seen every chance that I get, allowing them to understand that failure does not mean their self-worth has been diminished in any way. To allow readers to understand this theme, I not only wrote about a human suffering with the feelings of not being seen, but the personified form of Death as well. In humanizing Death, it was my goal to show people that even those who have the largest amounts of power can still err and feel worthless. As I built this new world and the rules that accompanied it, I have found a way to express my thoughts on these ideas, build upon the concepts of world building, character development, and craft refinement (that I had originally brought up in my proposal) while strengthening these elements by studying the works of other writers I have come to admire.

Character development was one thing I was very concerned about when it came to this project because I have always felt that my protagonists in other novels had only been an extension of myself, creating flat, boring, and uninteresting characters. In *Save the Cat! Writes a Novel*, Jessica Brody establishes that each character needs to have “a
problem (or flaw that needs fixing), a want (a goal that the hero is pursuing), and a need (or life lesson to be learned)” (10). I had never thought about the want and need being two separate entities for my characters, and identifying those distinctions. For instance, Todd has a problem in chapter one: Jason is telling him that they probably won’t be living together anymore. Todd, who is already in a fragile state because of the pandemic and is made even more vulnerable when he learns that his roommate wants to move out, suddenly wants to go back to his addiction. He feels like going back to something that he knows in order to resolve the situation. However, finding a healthier way to cope, and establishing a healthy sense of self, is what the character truly needs. This allows me to separate himself from myself. He has different wants, needs, ambitions, and concerns. By the end of the novel, Todd has found a way to not only feel as if his life is worth living, but that it is worth doing so sober, a feat he is incapable of performing at the beginning of the novel. Todd essentially embodies the idea that, while we are all human and make mistakes, there is always time to try and turn things around. This is what will drive him forward throughout the novel.

The character of Death, being the personification of an idea, was also going to need to be carefully constructed, as he is not a typical human being that can be easily devised and written into a plot line. Before I began thinking about his wants or needs, I would have to construct who he is in a way that allowed a reader to not only connect with him personally but establish how he exists within the new realm/reality that I was creating. To build this character, I relied heavily on two novels (On a Pale Horse by Piers Anthony and The Book Thief by Markus Zusak) that use Death as the established narrator in order to think about not only the logistics of the job, but what the mental state
an entity like this would have. *On a Pale Horse* by Piers Anthony is where I gathered a lot of material for my novel, as his character of Death started as a human being and rose to perform the duties of Death, while my character would transition in the other direction. In order to fulfill the duties of Death, Zane (the man who became Death in Anthony’s novel) must use the white steed and a collection of gems to figure out where the next soul to die is, how long until they die, and so on. To modernize my novel, I gave Death a smartwatch that can do some of the same functions: transport him to the scene of the next death, stop time, and various other things that would allow him to reach all of the people that he would need to in a logical manner. That was one of the biggest questions raised during the proposal meeting: the capability of Death to be present at every death and near-death experience. To answer this question, I again turned to Anthony. His Death character showed up to the people whose lives were in balance and couldn’t figure out what afterlife to move on to on its own. It was part of Death’s job to weigh the amount of good or evil in each soul and then take it to the afterlife it corresponds with. I thought that this was a good way to cut down on the sheer number of souls my character of Death would need to attend to. I also mentioned a few times that Death is now in charge of a small department of people who have the same capabilities to retrieve the dying souls and ease that burden as well. The one thing that I did not keep from Anthony’s novel, however, was that Death actually killed the people. I wanted my Death to be in a position where he felt powerless to do anything to truly help, exacerbating the issue that I took from Zusak of Death being tired of his job. In *The Book Thief*, Death states, “The trouble is, who could ever replace me? Who could step in while I take a break in your stock-standard resort-style vacation destination, whether it be tropical or of the ski trip variety?
The answer, of course, is nobody” (5). There is some form of desperation here. Death, in Zusak’s novel, has a desire to get out of the job, a want, but he needs to find a way to deal with his internal struggle, his hatred of the world around him. When he meets Liesel and examines her life, he is able to begin that internal process. In fact, by the end of the novel, he still isn’t sure how to respond to his issue, as he is “haunted by humans” (550). He cannot figure out how to make himself better or change his situation. I didn’t want my Death to have that sort of an ending. While yes, it shows that there is still growth that needs to happen, I wanted my Death to be able to find a sense of peace by the time I was finished with him.

In order for Death to find that sense of peace, I returned to Brody’s ideas of the want and need. At the beginning of the novel, my Death possesses a strong want to fix the world, right the wrongs, and bring a sense of fairness and balance. I wanted his want to be something relatable, one that most humans have felt at one point in their life. I did this so the reader can connect to a character that may be considered too outlandish to be relatable. In doing this, Death becomes too tunnel visioned. After going through the 5 trials in the Underworld, Death begins to understand that what he needs is to find some form of internal peace and acceptance of his actions, which he accomplished through his self-sacrifice. By the time I had begun to flesh out my characters and moved on to world building, I realized that all of this was helping me create my own voice, the one thing I feared I did not have.

When starting with world building, I tried to take Stephen King’s advice on description to heart. He says in his book On Writing, “Thin description leaves the reader feeling bewildered and nearsighted. Overdescription buries him or her in details and
images. The trick is to find a happy medium...For me, good description usually consists
of a few well-chosen details that will stand out for everyone else” (King 174-175).
Knowing that there would have to be many instances in the novel in which the setting
would not be on Earth, I tried to make sure that the scenes that were based in reality
allowed for more reader inference. For instance, when Todd wakes up in the first chapter,
he mentions that his room is sparsely decorated, and that much of the furniture is made
out of cheap particleboard. This would allow my reader to feel grounded in the world I
have created, as it is something they can connect to by mentally adding their own,
personal details. Then, when writing about the Celestial plane outside of reality, I chose
to focus on the singular place for the scene to give the reader a chance to explore this new
realm without feeling overwhelmed. For example, I gave Life a bubblegum pink office. I
kept the descriptions small, only alluding to what her desk setup looked like, to allow
readers to create their own vision of the rest of her office. In doing this, I created a
conduit for readers to connect to the story, even when the setting felt foreign to them.

After writing the first draft of my manuscript, I realized that one of my greater
issues was lack of refinement in my writing skills, both in creating an enticing plot and
proper writing mechanics. Save the Cat! aided in helping me create depth in my plot and
connection from the beginning to the end of my novel through the addition of themes.
One of the things that Brody mentions is, “Whatever life lesson your hero has to learn,
whatever epic transformation your hero has to make, it should be subtly mentioned within
the first 10% of your story” (31). With this in mind, I was able to reflect on the
conversation that Death and Life have when he is begging Life to bring Todd back. In
revision, I manipulated the dialogue so that she makes a comment that pertains to the
transformation Death must make. Life tells Death that “sometimes sacrifices must be made for the greater good, even if it goes against everything we want or hold most dear.” This links to the transformative end of my manuscript when Death must give up his chance to be with Todd in order to fix the mistakes he has created since the beginning of the novel. I was really happy with that connection, as it allowed me to see the character grow from start to finish, even if I hadn’t written his journey yet.

Another way that I built themes into my novel was through my reflection on the fictional texts I read, specifically They Both Die at the End by Adam Silvera. Throughout Silvera’s novel, Rufus and Mateo become friends on the last day that they have to be alive. By the end of the novel, Rufus has drug Mateo out of his shell, and Mateo has torn down a good portion of Rufus’s walls, leading to the comforting, if not depressing, end in which both of them perish. This is the kind of dynamic that I want in my novel. Yes, Death is the more walled off of the two, and Todd is the basket-case that can’t seem to keep his life together, but there is more to it than that. In working with each other, regardless which pair of characters we discuss, there is an overarching statement on the human condition that speaks to who I am as a person: Embracing the humanity in others with kindness and empathy can allow us to grow into our true and fullest selves. The issue with establishing this theme, however, was not knowing which character it could best be portrayed through.

Because the story is told from the point-of-view of two main characters, I had to determine which of them my story was going to focus on the most. While Todd and Death are both technically the main characters, I wasn’t sure which one should be deemed the main hero of my story. Brody states that the last two events of Act One are a
Catalyst and a Debate that the main character must go through. The catalyst is something that spurs a need for change and disrupts the character’s ordinary life, and the debate is when the character must make a conscious decision to do something about the outcome of the catalyst so that they are no longer stuck in their everyday life (38-41). In examining which of my two characters had these components, I found that Death would be deemed the story’s hero. For Death, the **catalyst** is Todd’s death and the **debate** being his inability to accept Todd’s fate in going to the Underworld. After making this decision, I could shift my focus on these two plot points, strengthening the foundation of my novel’s plot and bolstering the plot with conflict and movement among the characters. I was able to insert moments of interiority like at the end of chapter one when Death repeats to himself that Todd dying wasn’t fair and that he had to do something about it.

I had multiple writing demons that came out through this project: verb tense, overuse of the word “as,” and adverbs. When writing the first portion of the manuscript, I wrote completely in present tense, but then the last chapter was in past tense. I chose to write in past tense, since I am more comfortable with the use of the word “said” over “says” in dialogue tags, and it felt more natural for me as a writer. When Prof. Ervick and I held revision meetings, she pointed out that I gravitated towards using the word “as” too often in my writing. I did a search for “as” and found that it showed up 154 times throughout the manuscript. Getting rid of many instances allowed for clarity in the story and a greater sense of character voice. Finally, in the same vein as the word “as,” Prof Ervick commented on my use of adverbs towards the end of my manuscript, something I had not noticed, with a quote from one of the texts I read. Stephen King mentions adverbs in his novel *On Writing* when he says:
I believe the road to hell is paved with adverbs, and I will shout it from the rooftops. To put it another way, they’re like dandelions. If you have one on your lawn, it looks pretty and unique. If you fail to root it out, however, you find five the next day . . . fifty the day after that . . . and then... your lawn is totally, completely, and profligately covered with dandelions. By then you see them for the weeds they really are, but by then it’s—GASP!!—too late. (King 125)

While I left some adverbs in (there is a reason that they exist, after all), I tried to get rid of a good portion and replace them with more active language, tending to split up sentences into two to try and allow for a greater sense of place or character insight.

I feel as if I have grown exponentially as a writer this semester. Whether it be through examining other pieces of fiction, other texts on writing, or conversations with Prof Ervick, I have been able to see many of the flaws that I have filled my manuscripts with in the past and can now take an active step toward writing effectively and in a way that many editors or publishers would enjoy. In getting published, I can share my ideas with others. The themes I spoke on earlier, embracing each other’s humanity, can be conversations that people have in small, everyday moments. If we can start there, who is to say it can’t continue to grow? I am not saying that I can change the world, but I now feel as if I have been given the capability to use my voice in a more effective way to try and bridge the ever-growing divide amongst humanity. That is all that matters.
Works Cited


Curriculum Vitae

Education:
2021    M.A. candidate, Indiana University South Bend
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Licensure:
English/Language Arts 5-12, State of Indiana

Academic Positions:
2016-present  English Teacher, Penn High School

Publications:
“The Witch’s Shack,” Analecta 2019
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Courses Taught:
2016-present  Freshmen English, Penn High School

Professional Development:
2016    First Year PD, Penn High School
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