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My Soul to Keep

Written by Rachel Vincent

Published by MIRA Books

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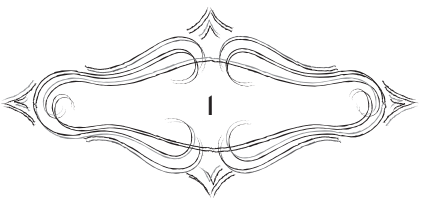
my Soul to Keep

RACHEL VINCENT



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The whole thing started with a wasted jock and a totaled car. Or so I thought. But as usual, the truth was a bit more complicated....

"So, how does it feel to be free again?" Nash leaned against my car, flashing that smile I couldn't resist. The one that made his dimples stand out and his eyes shine, and made me melt like chocolate in the sun, in spite of the mid-December chill.

I sucked in a deep, cold breath. "Like I'm seeing the sun for the first time in a month." I pushed my car door closed and twisted the key in the lock. I didn't like parking on the street; it didn't seem like a very safe place to leave my most valuable possession. Not that my car was expensive, or anything. It was more than a decade old,

and hardly anything to *oooh* over. But it was mine, and it was paid for, and unlike some of my more financially fortunate classmates, I'd never be able to afford another one, should some idiot veer too close to the curb.

But Scott Carter's driveway was full long before we'd arrived, and the street was lined with cars, most much nicer than mine. Of course, they all probably had more than liability coverage....

Fortunately, the party was in a very good section of our little Dallas suburb, where the lawn manicures cost more than my father made in six months.

"Relax, Kaylee." Nash pulled me close as we walked. "You look like you'd rather gouge your own eyes out than hang for a couple of hours with some friends."

"They're your friends, not mine," I insisted as we passed the third convertible on our way to the well-lit house at the end of the cul-de-sac, already thumping with some bass-heavy song I couldn't yet identify.

"They'd be yours if you'd get to know them."

I couldn't help rolling my eyes. "Yeah, I'm sure the glitter-and-gloss throng is waiting for *me* to give *them* a chance."

Nash shrugged. "They know all they need to know about you—you're smart, pretty, and crazy in love with me," he teased, squeezing me tighter.

I laughed. "Who started *that* vicious rumor?" I'd never said it, because as addictive as Nash was—as special as he made me feel—I wasn't going to toss off words like *love*

and *forever* until I was sure. Until I was sure *he* was sure. Forever can be a very long time for *bean sidhes,* and so far his track record looked more like the fifty-yard dash than the Boston marathon. I'd been burned before by guys without much staying power.

When I looked up, I found Nash watching me, his hazel eyes swirling with streaks of green and brown in the orange glow from the streetlights. I almost felt sorry for all the humans who wouldn't be able to see that—to read emotion in another's eyes.

That was a *bean sidhe* thing, and easily my favorite part of my recently discovered heritage.

"All I'm saying is it would be nice to get to hang out with my friends and my girlfriend at the same time."

I rolled my eyes again. "Oh, fine. I'll play nice with the pretty people." At least Emma would be there to keep me company—she'd started going out with one of Nash's teammates while I was grounded. And the truth was that most of Nash's friends weren't that bad. Their girlfriends were another story.

Speaking of bloodthirsty hyenas…

A car door slammed in the driveway ahead and my cousin, Sophie, stood next to Scott Carter's metallic-blue convertible, her huge green eyes shadowed dramatically by the streetlight overhead. "Nash!" She smiled at him, ignoring me in spite of the fact that we'd shared a home for the past thirteen of her fifteen years, until my dad had moved back from Ireland in late September.

Or maybe *because* of that.

"Can you give me a hand?" As we stepped onto the driveway, she rounded the end of her boyfriend's car in a slinky, sleeveless pink top and designer jeans, a case of beer clutched awkwardly to her chest. Two more cases sat at her feet, and I glanced around to see if any of the neighbors were watching my fifteen-year-old cousin show off an armload of alcoholic beverages. But the neighbors were probably all out, spending their Saturday evening at the theater, or the ballet, or in some restaurant I couldn't even afford to park near.

And most of their kids were at Scott's house, waiting for us to come in with the beer.

Nash let go of me to take the case from Sophie, then grabbed another one from the ground. Sophie beamed at him, then shot a haughty sneer at my plain jacket before turning on one wedge-heeled foot to strut after him.

I sighed and picked up the remaining box, then followed them both inside. The front door opened before Nash could pound on it, and a tall, thick senior in a green-and-white-letter jacket slapped Nash's shoulder and took one of the cases from him. Nash twisted with his empty arm extended, clearly ready to wrap it around me, but found Sophie instead. He sidestepped her—ignoring her plump-lipped pout—and took the case from me, then stood back to let me go in first.

"Hudson!" Scott Carter greeted Nash, shouting to be heard over the music. He took one of the cases and led

us toward a large kitchen crowded with bodies, scantily clad and shiny with sweat. In spite of the winter chill outside, it was hot and humid indoors, the hormone level rising with each new song that played.

I took off my jacket, revealing my snug red blouse, and almost immediately wished I could cover myself back up. I didn't have much to show off, but it was all now on display, thanks to the top Emma had picked out for me that afternoon, which suddenly seemed much more daring than it had in the privacy of my own room.

Nash set the remaining case of beer on the counter as Scott slid the first one into the refrigerator. "Kaylee Cavanaugh," Scott said when he stood, having apparently noticed me for the first time. He eyed me up and down while I resisted the urge to cross my arms over my chest. "Lookin' good." He glanced from me to Sophie, then back, while my cousin tried to fry me alive with the heat of her glare. "I'm starting to see the family resemblance."

"All I see is you," Nash said, pulling me close when he realized Sophie and I weren't happy with the comparison.

I smiled and kissed him impulsively, convinced by the slow churn of colors in his irises that he meant what he said.

Scott shoved the last case of beer into the fridge, then slapped a cold can into Nash's hand as I finally pulled away from him, my face flaming. "See? Family

resemblance." Then he headed off into the crowd with Sophie, popping the top on a can of his own. Three steps later they were grinding to the music, one of Scott's hands around his drink, the other splayed across my cousin's lower back.

"Wow, that was…unexpected," Nash said, drawing my gaze from the familiar faces talking, dancing, drinking, and…otherwise engaged. And it took me a moment to realize he meant the kiss.

"Good unexpected, or bad unexpected?"

"Very, very good." He set his can on the counter at my back, then pulled me closer for a repeat performance, one hand sliding up my side. That time I didn't pull away until someone poked my shoulder. I twisted in Nash's arms to find Emma Marshall, my best friend, watching us with an amused half smile.

"Hey." Her grin grew as she glanced from me to Nash, then back. "You're blocking the fridge."

"There's a cooler in the other room." Nash nodded toward the main part of the house.

Emma shrugged. "Yeah, but no one's making out in front of it." She pulled open the fridge, grabbed a beer, then popped the can open as she pushed the door shut with a toss of one shapely hip. It wasn't fair. Emma and her sisters inherited crazy curves—a genetic jackpot—and all I got from my relatives was a really gnarled family tree.

There were times when I would gladly have traded all

my *bean sidhe* "gifts"—did a glass-shattering screech and the ability to travel between the human world and the Netherworld even count as gifts?—for a little more of what she had. But this was not one of those times. Not while Nash's hands were on my waist, his taste still on my lips, and the greens and browns in his eyes swirling languorously with blatant desire. For *me.*

Em drank from her can, and I grabbed the car keys dangling from her hand, then showed them to her before stuffing them into my hip pocket, along with my own. She could stay the night with me, and I'd bring her back for her car in the morning. Emma smiled and nodded, already moving to the music when someone called her name from the living-room doorway.

"Hey, Em!" a voice called over the music, and I turned to see Doug Fuller leaning with one bulging arm on the door frame. "Come dance with me."

Emma smiled, drained her can, then danced into the living room with Doug's hands on her already swaying hips. Nash and I joined them, and he returned greeting after greeting from the glitter crowd writhing around us. But then he was mine. We moved with the music as if the room was empty but for the stereo and the heat we shared.

I had stolen Nash from a room full of his adoring devotees with nothing but the secret connection we shared. A connection no other girl could possibly compete with.

We'd combined our *bean sidhe* abilities to bring my best friend back from the dead and to reclaim a damned soul from the hellion who'd bought it. We'd literally saved lives, fought evil, and almost died together. No mere pretty face could compete with that, no matter how much gloss and mascara she applied.

An hour later, Em tapped my shoulder and pointed toward the kitchen. I shook my head—after a month without him, I could have danced with Nash all night—but after Emma left, Nash kept glancing at the kitchen door like it was going to suddenly slam closed and lock us out.

"Need a break?" I asked, and he smiled in relief.

"Just for a minute." He tugged me through the crowd while my heart still raced to the beat, both of us damp with sweat.

In the kitchen, Emma drank from a fresh can of beer while Doug argued with Brant Williams about a bad call during some basketball game I hadn't seen.

"Here." Nash handed me a cold soda. "I'll be right back." Then he pushed his way through the crowd without a backward glance.

I looked at Emma with both brows raised, but she only shrugged.

I popped open my Coke and noticed that Doug and Brant's argument had become a whispered conversation I couldn't follow, and Emma hadn't even noticed. For

several minutes, she prattled about her sister refusing to lend her a blouse that made Cara look lumpy, anyway.

Before I could decide how to respond, someone called my name, and I looked up to find Brant watching me. "Yeah?" Obviously I'd missed a question.

"I said, 'Where's your boyfriend?'"

"Um…bathroom," I said, unwilling to admit that I wasn't sure.

Brant shook his head slowly. "Hudson's falling down on the job. You wanna dance till he gets back? I won't bite." He held out one large brown hand for mine, and I took it.

Brant Williams was tall, and dark, and always smiling. He was the football team's kicker, a senior, and the friendliest jock I'd ever met, not counting Nash. He was also the only other person in the house I would dance with, other than Emma.

I danced with Brant for two songs, glancing around for Nash the whole time. I was just starting to wonder if he'd gotten sick when I spotted him across the room, standing with Sophie in an arched doorway leading to a dark hall. He brushed a strand of hair from her forehead, then leaned closer to be heard over the music.

My chest ached like I couldn't breathe.

When he saw me looking, he stepped away from Sophie and scowled at my partner, then waved me over. I thanked Brant for the dance, then made my way across the room, dread building inside me like heartburn. Nash

had ditched me at a party, then showed up with Sophie. Deep down, I'd known this day would come. I'd figured he'd eventually look elsewhere for what he hadn't had in the two and a half months we'd been going out. But with Sophie? A flash of anger burned in my cheeks. He may as well have just spit in my face!

Please, please be imagining things, Kaylee....

I stopped five feet away, my heart bruising my chest with each labored beat. Yes, Sophie had a boyfriend, but that didn't mean she wouldn't try to take mine.

Nash took one look at my face, at my eyes, which were surely swirling with pain and anger I couldn't hide, then followed my gaze to Sophie. His eyes widened with comprehension. Then he smiled and grabbed my hand.

"Sophie was just looking for Scott. Right?" But then he tugged me down the dark hall before she could answer, leaving my cousin all alone in the crowd. "We can talk in here," Nash whispered, pressing me into a closed door.

The full body contact was promising, but I couldn't banish doubt. "Were you talking to her the whole time?" I asked around the hitch in my breath as his cheek brushed mine.

"I just went outside to cool off, and when I came back in, she cornered me. That's it." He fumbled for the handle near my hip, and the door swung open, revealing Scott's dad's posh office.

"Swear?"

"Do I really need to?" Nash stepped back so I could see his eyes in the dim light of the desk lamp, and I saw the truth swirling in them. He didn't want Sophie, no matter what she might do that I hadn't.

I felt myself flush. "Sorry. I just thought—"

Nash closed the door and cut my apology off with a kiss. He tasted good. Like mint. We wound up on Mr. Carter's burgundy leather couch, and I had just enough time to think that psychiatrists made *waaaay* too much money before Nash's mouth found mine again, and thinking became impossible.

"You know I'm not interested in Sophie," he whispered. "I wouldn't do that to you or Scott." He leaned down and kissed me again. "There's only you, Kaylee."

My entire body tingled in wave after wave of warm, exhilarating shivers, and I let my lips trail over the rough stubble on his chin, delighting in the coarse texture.

"Oh, blah, blah, *blah,*" a jaded voice said, drenching our privacy with a cold dose of sarcasm. "You love him, he loves you, and we're all one big, happy, sloppy, dorky family."

"*Damn* it, Tod!" Nash stiffened. I closed my eyes and sighed. The couch creaked beneath us as we sat up to see Nash's undead brother—fully corporeal for once—sitting backward in Mr. Carter's desk chair, arms crossed over the top as he watched us in boredom barely softened by the slight upturn of his cherubic lips. "If you don't quit it with the Peeping Tom routine, I'm going to

tell your boss you get off watching other people make out."

"He knows," Tod and I said in unison. I straightened my shirt, scowling at the intruder, though my irritation was already fading.

Unlike Nash, I had trouble staying mad at Tod lately because I considered his recent reappearance a good sign. We hadn't seen him for nearly a month after his ex-girlfriend died in October—without her soul. And when I say we'd *not seen* him, I mean that literally. As a grim reaper, Tod could choose when and where he wanted to be seen, and by whom.

But now he was back, and up to his old tricks. Which seemed to consist entirely of preventing me and Nash from having any quality alone time. He was almost as bad as my dad.

"Shouldn't you be at work?" I ran one hand through my long brown hair to smooth it.

Tod shrugged. "I'm on my lunch break."

I lifted both brows. "You don't eat."

He only shrugged again, and smiled.

"Get out," Nash growled, tossing his head toward the door. Like Tod would actually have to use it. One of the other perks of being dead, technically speaking, was the ability to walk through things. Or simply disappear, then reappear somewhere else. That's right. I got swirling eyes and the capacity to shatter windows with my bare voice. Tod got teleportation and invisibility.

The supernatural world is *so* far from fair.

Tod stood and kicked the chair aside, running one hand through short blond curls that not even the afterlife could tame. "I'm not here to watch you two, anyway."

Great. I scowled at the reaper, my eyes narrowed in true irritation now. "I told you to stay away from her." Emma had met him once, briefly, and we'd made the mistake of telling her what he really was. He'd been watching her covertly before, but after Addison's death and his obvious heartbreak, I'd assumed that had stopped.

Tod mirrored his brother with his arms crossed over his chest. "So you won't let me go near her, but you'll let her get in the car with some drunk jock? That doesn't even kinda make sense."

"Damn it." Nash was off the couch in an instant and I followed, whispering a thank-you to Tod as I passed him. But he'd already blinked out of the office.

I trailed Nash down the hall and through the packed living room, accidentally bumping a beer from a cheerleader's hand on the way. We ran out the front door and I wished I'd stopped to find my jacket when the frigid air raised goose bumps all over my skin.

We paused at the end of the walkway, and I spotted Emma near the mouth of the cul-de-sac, a brief glimpse of long blond hair. "There." I pointed and we took off again. We got there just as Doug pulled his passenger's

side door open. He had Em pressed against the side of the car, his tongue in her mouth, his free hand up her shirt.

Emma was totally into it, and though I didn't think she'd have gone so far in public if not for the beer, that was her business. But getting in the car with a drunk crossed the line from stupid into dangerous.

"Em," I said as Nash slapped one hand on Doug's shoulder and pulled him backward.

"What the hell, man!" Doug slurred as his hand pulled free from Emma's bra hard enough that the elastic slapped her skin.

"Kaylee!" Emma smiled and fell against me, and I glared at Doug. She didn't know what she was doing, and *he* was being a complete asshole.

"Em, you know how it goes." I wrapped one arm around her waist when she stumbled. "Come together, stay together…"

"…leave together," she finished with a wide-eyed, pseudo-serious expression. "But we didn't come together, Kay…"

"I know, but the last part still applies."

"Fuller, she's drunk." Nash angled him so that Doug fell into his own passenger's seat. "And so are you."

"Noooo…" Emma giggled, blowing beer breath at me. "He's not drinking, so he gets to drive."

"Em, he's wasted," Nash insisted, then glanced at

me and tossed his head toward the house. "Take her back in."

I started walking Emma up the sidewalk, trying to keep her quiet as she told me how nice Doug was. She wasn't just drunk, she was *gone.* I should have watched her more closely.

A minute later, Nash caught up to us as I was lowering Emma onto the porch. "Did you get his keys?" I asked, and Nash frowned. Then, as he turned to head back toward Doug's car, an engine growled to life and a sick feeling settled into the pit of my stomach. Nash took off running and I leaned Emma against the top step. "Tod?" I called, glancing around the dark yard, grateful there was no one around to see me talking to myself.

"What?" the reaper said at my back, and I whirled around, wondering why he always appeared behind me.

"Can you sit with her for a minute?"

He scowled and glanced at Emma, who stared up at us, blinking her big blue eyes in intoxicated innocence. "You told me to stay away from her."

"Hey, I remember you," Emma slurred, loud enough to make me wince. "You're dead."

We both ignored Em. "I know. Just watch her for a minute, and don't let her get into any cars. Please." Then I raced after Nash past the entrance to the cul-de-sac, confident Tod would watch Emma. That he'd

probably been doing it all night, though he'd catch hell for missing work.

Ahead, streetlights shone on the glossy surface of Doug's car, gliding past like a slice of the night itself. Then, as I caught up to Nash, Doug leaned suddenly to one side, and his car lurched forward and to the right.

There was a loud pop, followed by the crunch of metal. Then the crash of something more substantial.

"Shit!" Nash took off running again and I followed as that sick feeling in my stomach enveloped the rest of me. "Oh, no, Kaylee…"

I knew before I even saw it. The street was lined with expensive, highly insured cars belonging to people who could easily afford to replace them. But the drunk jock had hit mine. When I got closer, I saw that he'd not only hit it, he'd rammed it up onto the sidewalk and *through* a neighbor's brick mailbox.

My car was *crunched.* The driver's side door was buckled. Bricks and chunks of mortar lay everywhere.

Behind us, Scott's front door squealed opened and voices erupted into the dark behind me. I glanced back to find Tod—now fully corporeal—ushering Emma away from the crowd pouring into the yard. When I was sure she was okay, I turned to my poor, dead car.

Until I noticed that Doug Fuller had yet to emerge from his.

Crap.

"Help me with him," Nash called, and I rounded the

car as he pulled open the completely unscathed driver's side door of the Mustang. Doug's head lolled on his shoulders, and he was mumbling drunk nonsense under his breath. "…with me. Somebody else in my *car,* dude…"

Nash leaned inside to unlatch the seat belt—what kind of drunk remembers to buckle up?—but he couldn't fit between his friend and the steering wheel, which had been shoved way too close to Doug's chest. "Kay, could you get the belt?"

I sighed and crawled across his lap, wedging my torso between the wheel and his chest as I felt around for the button. "Scared the *shit* out of me…" he mumbled into the hair that had fallen over my ear. "He was just *there,* outta nowhere!"

"Shut up, Doug," I snapped, seriously considering leaving him in the car until the cops arrived. "You're drunk." When I had the belt unlatched, I backed out of the linebacker's lap and he exhaled right into my face.

I froze, one hand braced against his thigh, and that sick feeling in my stomach became a full-body cramp. Ice-cold fingers of horror clenched my heart and shot through my veins. Emma was right. Doug hadn't been drinking.

Somehow, Eastlake High School's completely human first-string linebacker had gotten his big, dumb hands on the most dangerous controlled substance in the Netherworld.

Doug Fuller absolutely *reeked* of Demon's Breath.

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Published in Great Britain 2011
MIRA Books, Eton House, 18-24 Paradise Road,
Richmond, Surrey, TW9 1SR

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ISBN 978 0 7783 0410 4

47-0511

Printed in the UK
by CPI MacKays, Chatham, ME5 8TD