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My Soul to Steal

Written by Rachel Vincent

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RACHEL VINCENT

my SOUL to Steal



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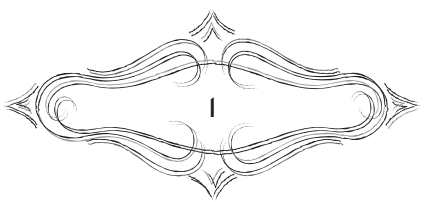
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To all the real life couples, exes, and unrequited romantic interests, tangled up in love and nightmares. Sometimes that frayed knot is the best lifeline in the world. Other times, it works more like a straitjacket…



1

By the time the second semester of my junior year began, I'd already faced down rogue grim reapers, an evil entertainment mogul, and hellions determined to possess my soul. But I never would have guessed that the most infuriating beast of all, I had yet to meet. My boyfriend's ex-girlfriend was a thing of nightmares. Literally.

"I won't bite." Nash looked up at me with a green bean speared on his fork, and I realized I was staring. I'd stopped on the bottom step, surprised to see him at school, and even more surprised to see him sitting alone at lunch, outside in the January cold, where I'd come to get away from the gossip and stares in the cafeteria.

Obviously he'd had the same idea.

I glanced over my shoulder through the window in the cafeteria door, looking for Emma, but she hadn't shown up yet.

Nash frowned when he noticed my hesitation. But I wasn't worried about him. I was worried about me. I was afraid that if I got within touching distance of him—within reach of the arms that had once been my biggest comfort and those gorgeous hazel eyes that could read me at a glance—that I would give in. That I would forgive, even if I couldn't forget, and that would be bad.

I mean, it would *feel* good, but that would be bad.

The past two weeks had been the most difficult of my life. In the past few months alone, I'd survived horrors most sixteen-year-old girls didn't even know existed. But a couple of weeks without Nash—our entire winter vacation—had nearly been enough to break me.

Whoever said it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved was full of crap. If I'd never loved Nash in the first place, I wouldn't know what I was missing now.

"Kaylee?" Nash dropped his fork onto his tray, green bean untouched. "I get it. You're not ready to talk."

I shook my head and set my tray on the table across from his, then sank onto the opposite bench. "No, I just… I didn't think you'd be here." I hadn't gone to see him, because that would have been unfair to us both—being together, when we couldn't really be together. But I knew he'd been very sick from withdrawal, because my father, of all people, had called regularly to check on him.

And based on his brief reports, withdrawal from Demon's Breath—known as frost, in human circles—was hell on earth.

"Are you…okay?" I asked, poking at runny spaghetti sauce with my own fork.

"Better." He shrugged. "Still working toward okay."

"But you're well enough for school?"

Another shrug. "My mom was giving me a sedative made from some weird Netherworld plant for a while, to help with the shakes, but it just made me sleep all the time. Without dreams," he added, when he saw my horrified expression. The hellion whose breath he'd been huffing had communicated with Nash through his dreams sometimes. And through me, the rest of the time. By hijacking my body while I slept.

I'd been willing to work through the addiction with Nash—after all, it was my fault he'd been exposed to Demon's Breath in the first place. But his failure to stop the serial possession of my body—or even tell me it was happening—was the last straw for me. I couldn't be with him until I was sure nothing like that would ever happen again.

Unfortunately, what my head wanted and what my heart wanted were two completely different things.

"I still don't have much appetite, but what I do eat is staying down now." Nash stared at his full tray. He'd lost weight. His face looked…sharper. The flesh under his eyes was dark and puffy, and he hadn't bothered to artfully muss his hair that morning. The bright, charismatic Nash I'd first met had been replaced with this dimmer, somber version I barely recognized. A version I was afraid I didn't know on the inside, either. Not like I'd known *my* Nash, anyway.

"Maybe you should have stayed home a little longer," I suggested, slowly twirling noodles around my plastic fork.

"I wanted to see you."

The fissure in my heart cracked open a little wider, and I looked up to find regret and longing slowly twisting the greens and browns in his irises. Humans wouldn't see that, even if we'd had company. But because Nash and I were both *bean sidhes*—banshees, to the uninformed—we could see the colors swirling in each other's eyes, and with a little practice, I'd learned to interpret what I saw in his. To read his emotions through the windows of his soul—when he let me see them.

"Nash…"

"No pressure," he interrupted, before I could spit out the protest I'd practiced, but hoped not to have to use. "I just wanted to see your face. Hear your voice."

Translation: *You didn't visit me. Or even call.*

I closed my eyes, trying to work through an awkwardness I'd never felt with Nash before. "I wanted to." More than I could possibly express. "But it's just too hard to…"

"To see, but not touch?" he finished for me, and I met his rueful gaze. "Trust me, I know." He sighed and stirred a glob of mass-produced peach cobbler. "So, what now? We're friends?"

Yeah. If friends could be in love, but not together. In sync, but out of touch. Willing to die for each other, but unable to trust.

"I don't think there are words for what we are, Nash." Yet I could think of at least one: *broken.*

Nash and I were like the wreckage of two cars that had hit head-on. We were tangled up in each other so thoroughly that I could no longer tell which parts of us were him and which were me. We could probably never be truly untangled—not after what we'd been through

together—but I had serious doubts we could ever really recapture what we'd had.

"I just… I need some time."

He nodded, and his eyes shone with the first flash of hope I'd seen from him in ages. "Yeah. We have time."

In fact, we had lots and lots of time. *Bean sidhes* age very slowly from puberty on, so while I'd likely be carded until I was forty, if Nash and I actually managed to work things out, we'd have nearly four hundred years together, barring catastrophe.

Although actually barring catastrophe seemed highly unlikely, considering that since the school year began, my life had been defined by a series of disasters, barely held together by the beautifully strong thread of Nash's presence in my life. At least, until recently. But now I was clinging to the wreckage of my existence, holding the pieces together on my own, trying to decide if I would be helping us both or hurting us by letting him back in.

"So, how's Em?" Nash asked, his voice lowered as he glanced at something over my shoulder.

I twisted to see Emma Marshall, my best friend, heading toward us across the nearly deserted quad. Everyone with half a brain—or nothing to hide—was eating inside, where it was warm. Em carried a tray holding a slice of pizza and a Diet Coke, content to eat with us outside, not because she couldn't face the crowd ready to judge her, but because she didn't care what they thought.

"Em's strong. She's dealing." And though she didn't know it, in many ways, Emma was my hero, based on her resilience alone.

Doug Fuller, Em's boyfriend of almost a month, had

died from an overdose of frost two weeks earlier, and though they'd been connected at the crotch, rather than at the heart, she'd been understandably upset by his death. Especially considering that she couldn't comprehend the Netherworld origin of the drug that had killed him.

Nash lowered his voice even further as she walked toward us. "Did you go to the funeral?"

"Yeah." Doug had been one of Eastlake High's starting linebackers. Practically the whole school had shown up at his funeral—except for Nash. He'd been too sick from withdrawal to get out of bed. And Scott, their third musketeer. Scott had survived addiction to frost—but at a devastating price. He'd suffered brain damage and now had a permanent, hardwired mental connection to the hellion whose breath had killed Doug and mortally wounded my relationship with Nash.

"Hey." Emma came to a stop on my right and glanced from me to Nash, then back before taking a seat next to me. "Someone bring me up to speed. Are we making up or breaking up? 'Cause this limbo is kind of driving me nuts." She grinned, and I could have thanked the universe in that moment for the ray of sunshine that was Emma.

"How low can you go?" I asked, then crunched into a French fry.

"Lower than you know…" Nash replied, with a hint of an awkward grin.

Em rolled her eyes. "So…more limbo?"

Nash looked just as ready for my answer as she did. I exhaled heavily. "For now."

He sighed and Emma frowned. Like I was being

unreasonable. But she didn't know the details of our breakup. I couldn't tell her that he'd let a hellion take over my body and play doctor with him—to Nash's credit, he hadn't known it wasn't me that first time—without even telling me I was being worn like a human costume.

I couldn't tell her because the same thing had happened to her, and for her own safety and sense of security, I didn't want her to know that her body had been hijacked by the hellion responsible for her boyfriend's death. Her friendship with me had already put her in more than enough danger.

"Oh, fine. Drag out the melodrama for as long as you want. At least it'll give everyone around here something else to talk about." Something other than Doug and Scott.

If they hadn't already had two weeks to deal with grief and let off steam, the whole school probably would have been reeling from the double loss. The looks and whispers when we passed in the hall were hard enough to deal with as it was.

"So, did you see the new girl?" Emma asked, making a valiant attempt to change the subject as she tore the crust from her triangle of pizza.

"What new girl?" I didn't really care, but the switch in topic gave me a chance to think—or at least talk—about something other than me and Nash, and the fact that there was currently no me and Nash.

"Don't remember her name." Emma dipped her crust into a paper condiment cup full of French dressing. "But she's a senior. Can you imagine? Switching schools the last semester of your senior year?"

"Yeah, that would suck," I agreed, staring at my tray, pretending I didn't notice Nash staring at me. Was it going to be like this from now on? Us sitting across from each other, watching—or pointedly not watching—each other? Sitting in silence or talking about nothing anyone really cared about? *Maybe I should have stayed in the cafeteria. This isn't gonna work….*

"She's in my English class. She looked pretty lonely, so I invited her to sit with us." Emma bit into her crust and chewed while I glanced up at her in surprise.

First of all, Em didn't have other girlfriends. Most girls didn't like Emma for the same reason guys couldn't stay away from her. It had been just the two of us since the seventh grade, when her mouth and her brand-new C-cups intimidated the entire female half of the student body.

Second of all…

"Why is there a senior in your junior English class?" Nash said it before I could.

Emma shrugged while she chewed, then swallowed and dipped her crust again. "She got behind somehow, and they're letting her take two English classes at once, so she can graduate on time. I mean, would you want to be here for a whole 'nother year, just to take one class?"

"No." Nash stabbed another green bean he probably wasn't going to eat. "But I wouldn't want to read *Macbeth* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* at the same time, either."

"Better her than me." Em bit into her crust again, then twisted on the bench as footsteps crunched on the grass behind us. "Hey, here she comes," she said around a full mouth.

I started to turn, but stopped when I noticed Nash staring. And not at me. His wide-eyed gaze was trained over my head, and if his jaw got any looser, he'd have to pick it up off his tray. "Sabine?" he said, his voice soft and stunned.

Emma slapped the table. "*That's* her name!" She twisted and called over her shoulder. "Sabine, over here!" Then she glanced back at Nash. "Wait, you've already met her?"

Nash didn't answer. Instead, he stood, nearly tripping over his own bench seat, and when he rounded the table toward the new girl, I finally turned to look at her. And instantly understood why she wasn't intimidated by Emma.

Sabine was an entirely different kind of gorgeous.

She was a contrast of pale skin and dark hair, where Em was golden. Slim and lithe, where Em was curvy. She swaggered, where Emma glided. And she'd stopped cold, her lunch tray obviously forgotten, and was staring not at me or her new friend Emma, but at *my* boyfriend.

My kind-of boyfriend. Or whatever.

"Sabine?" Nash whispered this time, and his familiar, stunned tone set off alarm bells in my head.

"Nash Hudson. Holy shit, it *is* you!" the new girl said, tossing long dark hair over one shoulder to reveal a mismatched set of hoops in her double-pierced right ear.

Nash rounded the table and walked past me without a glance in my direction. Sabine set her tray on the nearest table and ran at him. He opened his arms, and she flew into them so hard they spun in a tight circle. Together.