

PROLOGUE

Present

THE ROLLING GREEN of her eyes was dimming fast, losing color and life to the quick click of time that beat out her days and nights, a perpetual circle that was now fading to a close. Light brown hair that had been recently styled into looping curls was limp against the black pillowcase—a metaphor for her wilted spirit, I mused, thinking offhandedly how proud my English professor would be at my thoughtful use of language.

I sighed. I didn't want to be here.

When her eyes met mine, I knew she saw me for who I really was—*what* I really was. She reached out an eager hand to take mine. I didn't want anything to do with it. But it wasn't because her fingers were slick with blood, deep crimson dripping down her arm and fingernails from where she'd so precisely placed a razor blade to her vein and dug deep, thinking she'd be free of her pain. It was because her face reflected back to me all the times I'd felt I'd been given a shitty deal. Current situation: case in point.

"Hi," she whispered, her once pink lips fading with every pump of her life, which was idly dripping away from her to the plush white carpet below. I could smell the newness of it, the fresh aroma of a recently laid floor. *That's going to be a bitch to get clean.*

I looked around her bedroom, at the dance trophies and pictures of smiling friends, and wondered why.

Why me?

"Blake ..." Hearing my mother's warning tone, I looked over at her where she stood in the shadows, overseeing my tutelage.

"Why can't we just call an ambulance? It's not too late. They could save her," I whispered fiercely, staring at the girl's hand stretched out to me as if I were her savior and not her end. "We should save—"

"It's not for us to decide, you know that. We are only here to bring souls over, not save their mortal lives. Take her, she wants to go."

"And will she still feel the same when she's looking down at her body?" I asked, not even bothering to check my mother's expression when she didn't answer. Suicide wasn't a peaceful death. It was pain—that much I knew.

I choked back the tears that wanted to rise in my eyes for this girl, for me ... I turned to her once more and leaned down, brushing a strand of her hair from her graying face. "What's your name?"

Barely blinking, her pale eyes darted to me. "Carly," she said, choking around her words.

"Just hold my hand and I'll help you cross," I said softly, forcing myself to meet her gaze so that someone would witness her ending as they had her beginning.

She smiled slowly, and I saw that in life she had been pretty. When she'd believed. When she'd had hope.

"The light?" Her eyes widened, glittering green for a brief moment in their otherwise colorless depths at the prospect of going somewhere beautiful after this life had been so cold.

I nodded, although I didn't really know where she would go. I was only in training, but I hoped it was someplace good, where her tormented soul could rest.

She had small, feminine hands, I thought, as she laced her slippery fingers around my longer warm ones. She didn't last long, her pulse giving one last flutter before sputtering out.

The room was suffused with the silence left behind in the absence of such a simple thing. The thundering lack of a person's heartbeat had never seemed quite so loud. As life departed Carly's mortal coil, her soul lifted from the body, but unlike some souls I'd seen that were light and buoyant, at peace with the next step in their existence, hers was outlined in darkness, and it rippled, suspended in space like a special effect in a bad horror film. Her gaze turned from her body to me, sorrow coming to settle on the slope of her bowed shoulders and in the recesses of her eyes. Regret was a fickle creature. It always came too late.

"I hope you find what you wanted," I whispered to her soul, waiting to feel the energy that usually infused my body during a crossover. As she blinked out, all air was ripped from my lungs and I was left clutching the bedpost for purchase, grappling for oxygen and drowning on the echo of Carly's anguish. The room spun around me, and my rasping heaves hurt my chest as I struggled to survive the sharp, bitter sting of loss that clung to the drapes and walls and assaulted my nose with its acrid scent.

I inhaled deep breaths when air returned, staring at the pool of red on the floor, thankful the bedspread had been black. She looked like a zombie, gray and without light, her once green eyes staring into a void that held nothing for her now. Without thinking about it, I reached forward and closed her lids with the lightest touch of my fingertips. The hands of Death.

"Blake," my mother warned again, a chastising edge to the velvety lilt of her voice. I turned to look at her and sighed, feeling the darkness in the girl's room overwhelm me, irritation surging inside me at my mother's emotionless manner.

"Don't you care?" I asked.

She stepped forward from the shadows, her shroud of black hair sweeping around the marble pallor of her face.

"Of course," she said. But I had a hard time believing her when her features remained composed in an expression of sculpted apathy. "But it is what it is, Blake."

"This was the worst."

"I've seen much worse," she said, her voice lacking the deep resonance of human compassion. It was flat, a monotone observer in a world colored by grief and heartbreak.

"Gee, thanks, way to make me feel better about this whole gig."

"That wasn't really my intent. This is who you are. You will have to deal with tragedies that far surpass this. Tragedies far more encompassing. This was one girl. Be grateful it wasn't thousands."

I could barely look at her, nauseated by the way she acted as if one girl hadn't been everything to someone. I opened my mouth to retort with something equally nasty, my body tensed to storm past her for the last time, but I was caught in mid-motion by a soft knock at the door.

My head swiveled.

"Carly?" A soft voice came from the other side, concern coating the lightness of her tone.

Oh god, I absolutely could not stick around to watch Carly's parents find their daughter dead from suicide on her comforter.

Turning quickly, I pulled a fleecy black blanket, folded so carefully before, up over the girl's chest, trying to make the scene look less gruesome before I headed to the window.

"I'm outta here," I told my mother. To her credit, she didn't try to stop me with more inane platitudes.

"You could just flicker out," she said dryly. The doorknob was turning, and I shook my head. I'd tried her way of traveling through realms to no avail. If I was going to make an exit, it was going to have to be the human way.

I hurled myself through the open window onto the tree outside without thought of my physical safety, only glancing back once to see that my mom had already disappeared.

Sliding down the tree, I hit the ground with a grunt, my sneaker-clad feet stinging from the impact. I didn't pause, pumping my legs to power myself down the sleeping streets as fast as I could to get as much distance as possible from the death scene. But I didn't run fast enough, because her mother's shrieks of agony followed me from two blocks away. *They don't ever think about who they leave behind.*

I blocked my ears and kept running, the late winter air biting at my cheeks with the hope of spring hanging heavy in the wind, even on such a desperate night.

When I got to my own house, I paused at the stoop, sucking in a few breaths and trying to make the images in my head go away. Smoothing back my long, dark hair, so like my mother's, I checked my hands for hints of blood. But just like any normalcy that had previously existed in my life, the blood I'd seen stain my fingers had vanished. Licking my lips, I put my key in the door and pushed it open, stepping into the foyer.

My dad looked up from the living room, where his nose was buried in a book. "Hey, B," he said, taking off his glasses and rubbing tired eyes. "What are you doing here? I thought you were staying at

the dorm tonight." He arched his brows and glanced at the cable box clock that glowed a green 11:15 p.m.

"Yeah, I was going to, but Shelby wanted me to stop by her parents'—you know, it's weekly game night—so I figured that since I was so close, I'd just crash here tonight. I'd better get a little reading in though, so 'night, Dad."

He didn't stop me or question me, which I was thankful for. I bounded up the steps to my room. Movies always made it look so easy, but living a double life was going to be the death of me. Pun intended.

After closing my bedroom door behind me, I sat down on my bed, tossed off my shoes, and quickly headed for the bathroom to shower. My skin felt dirty with the cloak of death, and I wanted to wash it away. Even though I knew it was impossible.

I was struck by my reflection as I closed the door behind me and turned to the medicine cabinet. It was like looking at a younger version of my mother. Only my eyes were a pale crystal blue. Hers were black. I was thankful for the difference.

But what we had in common even more than looks was a legacy. A long one. You might have heard of her before; she's really quite famous, although most stories have gotten it wrong and made her out to be a dude. She goes by the name Grim, but her full name is Grim Reaper. Do you know what that makes my mother? Yep, that's right. She's Death.

So what does that make me? The Reaper's daughter.