

# ❧ Zachary ❧

**I MAY BE HEAVEN-SENT**, but I'm not perfect.

I watch my girl slip the oversize Dallas Cowboys T-shirt over her pink bikini panties and turn in for the night.

That sounds perverted, I know. But I've always watched her dress, undress, shower, and bathe.

Then there was that one blessed weekend last August when the air conditioner broke. She spent a full day in bed buck naked, reading Tolkien under the ceiling fan.

It's not like I *look* look. Not usually.

What's more, it's my job to keep an eye on her 24/7.

I'm Miranda's guardian angel (GA for short). A newbie created after the first atomic blast in 1945.

Miranda is my second assignment and my reason for being. Not that she has clue one. She can't even see me. Nobody can unless I choose to show myself. That's a no-no. We GAs have our limits. Sure, we help out when we can, but not in any way that's clearly detectable . . . or at least traceable (I'm known to push the limits now and then).

Night after night, I watch her sleep. She's restless. Always restless. I'm forever rearranging the sheets so her legs don't get tangled. Otherwise, she'll wake up.

She doesn't get enough rest as it is. She worries about little mistakes. Or what she frets are mistakes. What other people think of her. What will happen next.

All humans do. I wish they could glimpse infinity. It would make glitches like a C in algebra or a nitpicking parent or being ignored by The Guy feel a whole lot less fatal.

I would love to talk to Miranda. To tell her that.

She woke up crying twice last year around the time of her parents' divorce. I don't know what she dreams about. I've heard that older angels can tap into the mind. Sounds tempting, right? But I wouldn't do that. Or at least I can't.

I'm already so here. Miranda deserves her own mental space.

This is her physical space, though. My fave place on terra firma.

Since she's sound asleep, I risk assuming solid form on a denim beanbag chair, taking it in. Four cream-colored walls, two windows, eight-foot ceilings, outdated gold shag. A twin bed, desk set, tall cedar dresser, and hope chest. The blanket her grandma knitted. The stuffed toy penguin from SeaWorld. The poster of the earth that reads: HOME, SWEET HOME.

Here, I can see the little girl she was. The woman she's turning into.

Miranda began wearing bras like the one hanging off the back of her desk chair in fifth grade. She gave up on the third of her fuzzy pink diaries that same year.

One wall is covered by a bookcase. She reads paperbacks mostly. Lots of series titles. One shelf is jammed full of acting and theater books. The library stack on the desk waits to be returned. The college information packet beside it is from the University of North Texas. The cell phone next to her PC hasn't worked since it went through the wash last weekend.

Beside it rest copies of *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Dickens is assigned reading, but Shakespeare is Miranda's ticket to her dream. Today's date is circled in red on the Narnia calendar. Spring-play auditions are this afternoon. My girl is so shy. I'm surprised she signed up.

Mr. Nesbit is taking a drink of water from the bottle attached to his cage. He's good company, for a gerbil.

I dissolve again so I don't have to wiggle up from the

beanbag. It's time to check on Miranda. To breathe in her lemongrass body wash. To study her heart-shaped face. It's something I do almost as often as humans blink.

This time is different. Horrific. I recoil, looking for another explanation. But the ladybug nightlight is still on. The nearly full moon hasn't been eclipsed.

A smoky gray film swirls around Miranda. It clings to her. It twists into long-fingered hands, caressing her cheeks, pawing at her slim neck and shoulders. It lengthens into a translucent sheet, covering her body, sliding up over her head.

It's wrong. It has to be. But I've seen it before.

My girl is sleeping in the shadow of Death.

## ❧ Miranda ❧

EITHER MY HOUSE IS HAUNTED or my beanbag is possessed. Or maybe they're the same thing, haunting and possession. I'll have to ask my best friend, Lucy. She'll know. Whichever it may be, I swear the denim lump changes shape as I sleep. This morning it's definitely mushier in the middle than it was last night.

"Miranda!" Mom calls. "You're going to be late for school."

As if I don't know that. I grab my black mesh backpack and try to sneak through the foyer and living-dining room, past the kitchen, calling, "Bye!" only to be intercepted by Mom in front of the pantry.

She's wrapped in a thick white robe, her dark hair twisted in a knot. By now, she's usually dressed and ready to sell cosmetics. "You're not eating breakfast?"

I can smell the turkey bacon and burnt toast. I remind myself that Mom tries.

"I don't want you stuffing your face with cookies at school," Mom goes on. "You know how chocolate—"

"My skin is fine." Not flawless, but I'm by no means the "before shot" in the acne commercial. I make a show of checking my watch. "I have to pick up Lucy and—"

"This came yesterday." Mom holds up a postcard, cutting me off. "From your father."

I suppress a sigh, unable to resist taking a look. *Greetings from Alaska!* He's on a luxury cruise. It's news to me, but that's no surprise. He quickly became an every-other-holiday dad, not an every-other-holiday-and-every-other-weekend dad. Because of his job. Because he has to travel. Because he's starting over in his new life.

"He didn't write this," I say before realizing I should've kept my mouth shut.

Mom puts her hands on her hips. "It's a woman's handwriting."

She's right. The letters are big and loopy (*Wish you were here*), nothing like Dad's businesslike, slanted scribble. Mom must've stewed over the postcard all night.

They're divorced, my parents. It's been final for a while. He's allowed, I guess, to go out with someone else.

Still, this is new for us. I always assumed Mom would start dating first, that she'd need the attention. Apparently this morning she needs me.

For the first time, I realize we're the same height now, my mother and me. To cheer her up, I share news that I'd intended to keep a secret. "I'm auditioning for the school play today: *Romeo and Juliet*." As her expression predictably transforms from pinched to rapturous, I open the door to the garage. "It's not a big deal."

"That's . . . It's wonderful!" She clasps her hands together. "You see, I knew you didn't need a shrink!"

It takes me a moment to process that. "You were going to send me to a shrink?" Dad mentioned it once during their separation, but more in an in-case-you-need-someone-to-talk-to kind of way. Not like I was some kind of loser/freak.

"It wasn't my idea." Mom reaches to give me one of her stiff half hugs, right arm at a sharp angle, as if she'll break if she pulls me too close. "Your father's an imbecile, but we already knew that. I told him you were just slow to bloom. Any daughter of mine is destined to be a star!"

I pull free and take the step down into the cold, cluttered two-car garage. My Honda is a don't-hate-me-for-leaving gift from Dad.

"After all," Mom calls from the doorway, "I was Little Miss Bay Area."

Starting the car, I silently mouth along with her, “And Miss San Francisco!”

“Anytime you’re ready,” Ms. Esposito says from the first row, her clipboard poised and her smile encouraging. She’s a first-year teacher, beaming with eagerness.

I shift my weight on the stage as thoughts zoom through my head.

The recently redecorated auditorium (it still has that new-car smell) is mostly empty. The first few rows of the theater are occupied by the other people auditioning—the die-hard drama geeks, plus a few out-of-our-league wannabes like me. Then there’s Denise Durant and two of her acolytes. They’re more reality-TV than Globe-Theatre material, but they love being in the spotlight.

I wish Lucy were here, but acting isn’t her thing. Besides, she’s serving an hour of detention right now for accidentally handing in a *Ginger Snaps* fan fic instead of her Government report.

I order myself to breathe. As Grandma Peggy says, life’s short, and besides, I’m almost positive that no one has ever actually died from humiliation.

“Anytime,” Ms. Esposito repeats, prompting giggles from Denise’s row.

I’m reading Juliet, act IV, scene III. We were given an option of doing a monologue (having a shot at a major

role), which is how it's always worked in past years, or this, reading with another actor (for those of us who suffer from "audition anxiety").

The latter was the suggestion of our school counselor, who's anxiety-phobic—if you use the words "test" and "anxiety" in the same sentence, she'll immediately book you for a shiatsu spa treatment.

"What! are you busy, ho? need you my help?"

I do a double take on the "ho" until my brain clicks that Wayne White has given up on my beginning and moved on. Wayne's perched on a stool, his long, bony limbs bent like a hunched scarecrow. He should've whispered my line instead, but he's probably embarrassed at having to read Lady Capulet.

"No, *madam!*" I manage. "We have cull'd such necessities / as are behoveful for our state to-morrow . . ." The words are coming, but my body is frozen in place. "So please you, let me now be left alone . . ." What I wouldn't give to be left alone right now. "And let the nurse this night"—I sound okay, but I look like an android on *pause*—"sit up with you." I take a lurching, Frankenstein-like step to the right.

Ms. Esposito looks like she's worried something's medically wrong with me.

"For, I am sure, you have your hands full all . . ." All . . . All *what?*

I glance at Denise, who's biting her lip to keep from

laughing. Lucy says I shouldn't let her get to me, but ever since kindergarten, whenever Denise is around, it's like a clawed hand is squeezing the blood from my heart.

The Thespians catch my eye. They're nodding along, rooting for me. I've always watched them at school, the way they joke around and color their hair and could care less what anyone thinks of them. Part of the reason I wanted to do this was to become one of them. They're the most alive people here.

I try to relax and fall into my character. I need to be Juliet—romantic, tragic, doomed. "All . . . in—in—in this so sudden business!" I fight not to cringe.

Denise isn't trying to stop herself now, despite Ms. Esposito's fierce, "*Shh!*" She's cackling, her and her friends, their laughter punctuated by a snort that doubles them over.

"Oh, my God!" one exclaims. "She's horrible!"

"'Good-night,'" Wayne reads in a monotone, his chin on his hand. "'Get thee . . .'"

I don't hear the rest. Geoff Calvo has entered the auditorium. Five feet, eleven inches of soccer studly-ness, thundering down the center aisle, drawing every eye except Ms. Esposito's. I would say it's not his looks that I'm attracted to, except that we've never had a conversation. I always tell myself it's because I haven't come up with that great opening line yet. The one that will make him smile and see me as if for the first time and cue the

swelling background music, just like in the movies. That's the fantasy.

The reality: Geoff strolls to Denise and gives her this disgusting, half-lick kiss on the lips. It's stupid, I decide right then, to "like" someone you don't really know.

When did they start going out, anyway?

"'F-farewell!'" I sputter. "'God knows when we shall meet again.'"

"Kill me now," I plead that evening, ducking behind the nearest DVD display as a couple of Thespians swing through the shop, returning rentals. "Or better yet, let's go."

"Relax, they're already gone." Lucy slings an arm around my shoulders, leading me away from the CHICK FLICK section of the brightly lit store. "Besides, they don't like Denise's clique any more than we do."

This afternoon, when Lucy found me crying in the girls' bathroom at school, she was all big hugs and "Who needs 'em?" and "Everything will be all right."

Lucy's never been one for wallowing, though. She's ready to move on. "Now, now, weary traveler," she says. "There is no shame in this journey. Among the dateless, movie night is a time-honored tradition."

"On Valentine's Day?" I ask, as if that hasn't been our plan the past few years running.

We're at Movie Magic the night before V-Day, while there's still some selection. Or at least that's Lucy's theory.

I also suspect my favorite Scream Queen is here hoping to, well, check out the checkout guy. For the last few months, he's been her third favorite topic after Neil Gaiman and whatever she's up- or downloaded most recently on the Internet.

"Oh, woe is Miranda!" she exclaims, forcibly upbeat.

When I don't banter back, she tilts her head, and her expression grows more serious. "You seem . . . Is anything else wrong? Anything really fatal?"

I debate telling Lucy that my dad is in Alaska (or at least floating on a boat around it) with some mysterious woman who's forging his postcards, that my mom is in the midst of one of her trademark needy phases because of it, and that she may sign off on sending me to a shrink after I tell her about today's audition.

"My beanbag is possessed," I reply instead.

"Interesting." At HORROR, Lucy holds up *The Grudge*. "What do you think?"

We've seen it before. That said, I love movies. Lucy and I have been watching films and munching popcorn— with real butter— on her L-shaped sectional almost every weekend for as long as I can remember, and last summer, my job was working concession at the mall multiplex. "I think—"

“Can I help you ladies find something spooky?” It’s Lucy’s crush, “Kurt,” a fact we deduced early on due to the helpful plastic name tag on his red polo-style shirt.

He’s tall, taller than Lucy—which, for her, is key—a sandy blond, and looks a couple of years older than us. Despite the safety pin stuck through his right nostril, he’s remarkably cute for a DVD rental guy.

Lucy decides to take their flirtation to the next level. “I’m Lucy,” she says, extending a hand, “and this is Miranda. I don’t think we’ve officially met.”

He smiles with perfect teeth, shakes her hand and mine. “I know. Your names and addresses are in the computer.”

I blink at that, but Lucy is unfazed. “What we’re looking for tonight,” she says, “is more of a real-life adventure. When do you get off?”

He laughs, my jaw drops, and even the overhead fluorescents seem to dim.

“I get off . . .” He pauses long enough to make the bad joke, but not so long that it’s crude. Almost. “At eleven. But it’s a school night, right?”

“No classes tomorrow,” Lucy explains. “District conferences.”

Kurt frowns briefly at that like he’s never heard of such a thing. “Well then, if y’all are up for it, I have a scary idea.”

Whoa. How did I get dragged into this? "Me?" I say. "I, um, I have curfew at—"

"You're spending the night," Lucy cuts in. She tells Kurt, "My parents trust me, and they're sound sleepers."

"Bitchin'," he replies, taking the movie from her and setting it back on the shelf. "Me and this friend of mine, sometimes we kick back a few brews at that old cemetery by the high school. You know the one I mean?"

We do. Lucy has this freakish fascination with graves. She'll walk around cemeteries with paper and colored pencils and make impressions of the border designs engraved in the tombstones. She'll read the names and dates and try to guess how people died.

"I love the place," she admits. "They say the dead walk there at midnight."

I don't know who "they" are, but that isn't information I appreciate.

Kurt laughs again. "We'll meet you and the dead after work."