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My Soul to Take

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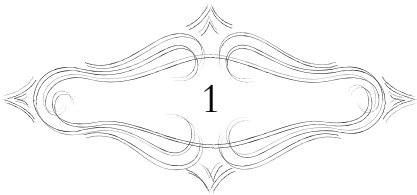
my SOUL to Take

RACHEL VINCENT



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"Come on!" Emma whispered from my right, her words floating from her mouth in a thin white cloud. She glared at the battered steel panel in front of us, as if her own impatience would make the door open. "She forgot, Kaylee. I should have known she would." More white puffs drifted from Emma's perfectly painted mouth as she bounced to stay warm, her curves barely contained in the low-cut shimmery red blouse she'd "borrowed" from one of her sisters.

Yes, I was a little envious; I had few curves and no sister from whom to borrow hot clothes. But I did have the time, and one glance at my cell phone told me it was still four minutes to nine. "She'll be here." I smoothed the front of my own shirt and slid my phone into my pocket as Emma knocked for the third time. "We're early. Just give her a minute."

My own puff of breath had yet to fade when metal creaked and the door swung slowly toward us, leaking rhythmic flashes of smoky light and a low thumping beat into the cold, dark alley. Traci Marshall—Emma's youngest older sister—stood with one palm flat against the door, holding it open. She wore a snug, low-cut black tee, readily displaying the family resemblance, as if the long blond hair wasn't enough.

"'Bout time!" Emma snapped, stepping forward to brush past her sister. But Traci slapped her free hand against the door frame, blocking our entrance.

She returned my smile briefly, then frowned at her sister. "Nice to see you too. Tell me the rules."

Emma rolled wide-set brown eyes and rubbed her bare, goose-pimpled arms—we'd left our jackets in my car. "No alcohol, no chemicals. No fun of any sort." She mumbled that last part, and I stifled a smile.

"What else?" Traci demanded, obviously struggling to maintain a rare scowl.

"Come together, stay together, leave together," I supplied, reciting the same lines we'd repeated each time she snuck us in—only twice before. The rules were lame, but I knew from experience that we wouldn't get in without them.

"And…"

Emma stamped her feet for warmth, chunky heels clacking on the concrete. "If we get caught, we don't know you."

As if anyone would believe that. The Marshall girls were all cast from the same mold: a tall, voluptuous mold that put my own modest curves to shame.

Traci nodded, apparently satisfied, and let her hand fall from the door frame. Emma stepped forward and her sister frowned, pulling her into the light from the hall fixture overhead. "Is that Cara's new shirt?"

Emma scowled and tugged her arm free. "She'll never know it's gone."

Traci laughed and motioned with one arm toward the front of the club, from which light and sound flooded the back rooms and offices. Now that we were all inside, she had to shout to be heard over the music. "Enjoy the rest of your life while it lasts, 'cause she's gonna *bury* you in that shirt."

Unperturbed, Emma danced her way down the hall and into the main room, hands in the air, hips swaying with the pulse of the song. I followed her, keyed up by the energy of the Saturday-night crowd from the moment I saw the first cluster of bodies in motion.

We worked our way into the throng and were swallowed by it, assimilated by the beat, the heat and the casual partners pulling us close. We danced through several songs, together, alone and in random pairs, until I was breathing hard and damp with sweat. I signaled Emma that I was going for a drink, and she nodded, already moving again as I worked my way toward the edge of the crowd.

Behind the bar, Traci worked alongside another bar-

tender, a large, dark man in a snug black tee, both oddly lit by a strip of blue neon overhead. I claimed the first abandoned bar stool, and the man in black propped both broad palms on the bar in front of me.

"I got this one," Traci said, one hand on his arm. He nodded and moved on to the next customer. "What'll it be?" Traci smoothed back a stray strand of pale, blue-tinted hair.

I grinned, leaning with both elbows on the bar. "Jack and Coke?"

She laughed. "I'll give you the Coke." She shot soda into a glass of ice and slid it toward me. I pushed a five across the bar and swiveled on my stool to watch the dance floor, scanning the multitude for Emma. She was sandwiched between two guys in matching UT Dallas fraternity tees and neon, legal-to-drink bracelets, all three grinding in unison.

Emma drew attention like wool draws static.

Still smiling, I drained my soda and set my glass on the bar.

"Kaylee Cavanaugh."

I jumped at the sound of my own name and whirled toward the stool to my left. My gaze settled on the most hypnotic set of hazel eyes I'd ever seen, and for several seconds I could only stare, lost in the most amazing swirls of deep brown and vivid green, which seemed to churn in time with my own heartbeat—though surely they were just reflecting the lights flashing overhead. My focus only

returned when I had to blink, and the momentary loss of contact brought me back to myself.

That's when I realized who I was staring at.

Nash Hudson. Holy crap. I almost looked down to see if ice had anchored my feet to the floor, since hell had surely frozen over. Somehow I'd stepped off the dance floor and into some weird warp zone where irises swam with color and Nash Hudson smiled at me, and me alone.

I picked up my glass, hoping for one last drop to rewet my suddenly dry throat—and wondered fleetingly if Traci *had* spiked my Coke—but discovered it every bit as empty as I'd expected.

"Need a refill?" Nash asked, and that time I made my mouth open. After all, if I was dreaming—or in the Twilight Zone—I had nothing to lose by speaking. Right?

"I'm good. Thanks." I ventured a hesitant smile, and my heart nearly exploded when I saw my grin reflected on his upturned, perfectly formed lips.

"How'd you get in here?" He arched one brow, more in amusement than in real curiosity. "Crawl through the window?"

"Back door," I whispered, feeling my face flush. Of course he knew I was a junior—too young even for an eighteen-and-over club, like Taboo.

"What?" He grinned and leaned closer to hear me above the music. His breath brushed my neck, and my

pulse pounded so hard I felt light-headed. He smelled sooo good.

"Back door," I repeated into his ear. "Emma's sister works here."

"Emma's here?"

I pointed her out on the dance floor—now swaying with three guys at once—and assumed that would be the last I saw of Nash Hudson. But to my near-fatal shock, he dismissed Em at a glance and turned back to me with a mischievous gleam in those amazing eyes.

"Aren't you gonna dance?"

My hand was suddenly sweaty around my empty glass. Did that mean he wanted to dance with me? Or that he wanted the bar stool for his girlfriend?

No, wait. He'd dumped his latest girlfriend the week before, and the sharks were already circling the fresh meat. *Though they're not circling him now…* I saw no one from Nash's usual crowd, either clustered around him or on the dance floor.

"Yeah, I'm gonna dance," I said, and again, his eyes were swirling green melting into brown and back, flashing blue occasionally in the neon glow. I could have stared at his eyes for hours. But he probably would have thought that was weird.

"Let's go!" He took my hand and stood as I slid off the bar stool, and I followed him onto the dance floor. A fresh smile bloomed on my face, and my chest seemed to tighten around my heart in anticipation. I'd known

him for a while—Emma had gone out with a few of his friends—but had never been the sole object of his attention. Had never even considered the possibility.

If Eastlake High School were the universe, I would be one of the moons circling Planet Emma, constantly hidden by her shadow, and glad to be there. Nash Hudson would be one of the stars: too bright to look at, too hot to touch and at the center of his own solar system.

But on the dance floor, I forgot all that. His light was shining directly on me, and it was *sooo warm*.

We wound up only feet from Emma, but with Nash's hands on me, his body pressed into mine, I barely noticed. That first song ended, and we were moving to the next one before I even fully realized the beat had changed.

Several minutes later, I glimpsed Emma over Nash's shoulder. She stood at the bar with one of the guys she'd been grinding with, and as I watched, Traci set a drink in front of each of them. When her sister turned around, Emma grabbed her partner's drink—something dark with a wedge of lime on the rim—and drained it in three gulps. Frat boy smiled, then pulled her back into the crowd.

I made a mental note not to let Emma drive my car—ever—then let my eyes wander back to Nash, where they wanted to be in the first place. But on the way, my gaze was snagged by an unfamiliar sheet of strawberry-blond hair, crowning the head of the only girl in the building to rival Emma in beauty. This girl, too, had her choice of dance partners, and though she couldn't have been more

than eighteen, she'd obviously had much more to drink than Emma.

But despite how pretty and obviously charismatic she was, watching her dance twisted something deep inside my gut and made my chest tighten, as if I couldn't quite get enough air. Something was wrong with her. I wasn't sure how I knew, but I was absolutely certain that something was *not right* with that girl.

"You okay?" Nash shouted, laying one hand on my shoulder, and suddenly I realized I'd gone still, while everyone around me was still writhing to the beat.

"Yeah!" I shook off my discomfort and was relieved to find that looking into Nash's eyes chased away that feeling of *wrongness,* leaving in its place a new calm, eerie in its depth and reach. We danced for several more songs, growing more comfortable with each other with every moment that passed. By the time we stopped for a drink, sweat was gathering on the back of my neck and my arms were damp.

I lifted the bulk of my hair to cool myself and waved to Emma with my free hand as I turned to follow Nash off the dance floor—and nearly collided with that same strawberry blonde. Not that she noticed. But the minute my eyes found her, that feeling was back in spades—that strong discomfort, like a bad taste in my mouth, only all over my body. And this time it was accompanied by an odd sadness. A general melancholy that felt specifically connected to this one person. Whom I'd never met.

"Kaylee?" Nash yelled over the music. He stood at the bar, holding two tall glasses of soda, slick with condensation. I closed the space between us and took the glass he offered, a little frightened to notice that this time, even staring straight into his eyes couldn't completely relax me. Couldn't quite loosen my throat, which threatened to close against the cold drink I so desperately craved.

"What's wrong?" We stood inches apart, thanks to the throng pressing ever closer to the bar, but he still had to lean into me to be heard.

"I don't know. Something about that girl, that redhead over there—" I nodded toward the dancer in question "—bothers me." *Well, crap.* I hadn't meant to admit that. It sounded so pathetic aloud.

But Nash only glanced at the girl, then back at me. "Seems okay to me. Assuming she has a ride home…"

"Yeah, I guess." But then the current song ended, and the girl stumbled—looking somehow graceful, even when obviously intoxicated—off the dance floor and toward the bar. Headed right for us.

My heart beat harder with every step she took. My hand curled around my glass until my knuckles went white. And that familiar sense of melancholy swelled into an overwhelming feeling of grief. Of dark foreboding.

I gasped, startled by a sudden, gruesome certainty.

Not again. Not with Nash Hudson there to watch me completely freak out. My breakdown would be all over

the school on Monday, and I could kiss goodbye what little social standing I'd gained.

Nash set his glass down and peered into my face. "Kaylee? You okay?" But I could only shake my head, incapable of answering. I was *far* from okay, but couldn't articulate the problem in any way resembling coherence. And suddenly the potentially devastating rumors looked like minor blips on my disaster meter compared to the panic growing inside me.

Each breath came faster than the last, and a scream built deep within my chest. I clamped my mouth shut to hold it back, grinding my teeth painfully. The strawberry blonde stepped up to the bar on my left, and only a single stool and its occupant stood between us. The male bartender took her order and she turned sideways to wait for her drink. Her eyes met mine. She smiled briefly, then stared out onto the dance floor.

Horror washed over me in a devastating wave of intuition. My throat closed. I choked on a scream of terror. My glass slipped from my hand and shattered on the floor. The redheaded dancer squealed and jumped back as ice-cold soda splattered her, me, Nash, and the man on the stool to my left. But I barely noticed the frigid liquid, or the people staring at me.

I saw only the girl, and the dark, translucent shadow that had enveloped her.

"Kaylee?" Nash tilted my face up so that our eyes met. His were full of concern, the colors swirling almost out of

control now in the flashing lights. Watching them made me dizzy.

I wanted to tell him…something. Anything. But if I opened my mouth, the scream would rip free, and then anyone who wasn't already looking at me would turn to stare. They'd think I'd lost my mind.

Maybe they'd be right.

"What's wrong?" Nash demanded, stepping closer to me now, heedless of the glass and the wet floor. "Do you have seizures?" But I could only shake my head at him, refusing passage to the wail trying to claw its way out of me, denying the existence of a narrow bed in a sterile white room, awaiting my return.

And suddenly Emma was there. Emma, with her perfect body, beautiful face and heart the size of an elephant's. "She'll be fine." Emma pulled me away from the bar as the male bartender came forward with a mop and bucket. "She just needs some air." She waved off Traci's worried look and frantic hand gestures, then tugged me through the crowd by one arm.

I clamped my free palm over my mouth and shook my head furiously when Nash tried to take that hand in his. I should have been worried about what he would think. That he would want nothing else to do with me now that I'd publicly embarrassed him. But I couldn't concentrate long enough to worry about anything but the redhead at the bar. The one who'd watched us leave through a shadow-shroud only I could see.

Emma led me past the bathrooms and into the back hall, Nash close on my heels. "What's wrong with her?" he asked.

"Nothing." Emma paused to turn and smile at us both, and gratitude broke through my dark terror for just an instant. "It's a panic attack. She just needs some fresh air and time to calm down."

But that's where she was wrong. It wasn't time I needed, so much as space. Distance, between me and the source of the panic. Unfortunately, there wasn't enough room in the whole club to get me far enough away from the girl at the bar. Even with me standing by the back door, the panic was as strong as ever. The unspoken shriek burned my throat, and if I unclenched my jaws—if I lost control—my scream would shatter eardrums all over Taboo. It would put the thumping dance beat to shame, and possibly blow out the speakers—if not the windows.

All because of some redhead I didn't even know.

Just thinking about her sent a fresh wave of devastation through me, and my knees collapsed. My fall caught Emma off guard, and I would have pulled her down if Nash hadn't caught me.

He lifted me completely off the ground, cradling me like a child, and followed Emma out the back door with me secure in his arms. The club had been dim, but the alley was *dark,* and it went quiet once the door thumped shut behind us, Emma's bank card keeping the latch from sliding home. The frigid near-silence should have calmed

me, but the racket in my head had reached its zenith. The scream I refused to release slammed around in my brain, reverberating, echoing, punctuating the grief still thick in my heart.

Nash set me down in the alley, but by then my thoughts had lost all semblance of logic or comprehension. I felt something smooth and dry beneath me, and only later would I realize Emma had found a collapsed box for him to set me on.

My jeans had ridden up on my legs when Nash carried me, and the cardboard was cold and gritty with grime against my calves.

"Kaylee?" Emma knelt in front of me, her face inches from mine, but I couldn't make sense of a word she said after my name. I heard only my own thoughts. Just *one* thought, actually. A paranoid delusion, according to my former therapist, which presented itself with the absolute authority of long-held fact.

Then Emma's face disappeared and I was staring at her knees. Nash said something I couldn't make out. Something about a drink…

Music swelled back to life, then Emma was gone. She'd left me alone with the hottest guy I'd ever danced with—the last person in the world I wanted to witness my total break with reality.

Nash dropped onto his knees and looked into my eyes, the greens and browns in his still churning frantically somehow, though there were no lights overhead now.

I was imagining it. I had to be. I'd seen them dance with the light earlier, and now my traumatized mind had seized upon Nash's eyes as a focal point of my delusion. Just like the strawberry blonde. Right?

But there was no time to think through my theory. I was losing control. Successive waves of grief threatened to flatten me, crushing me into the wall with an invisible pressure, as if Nash weren't even there. I couldn't suck in a deep breath, yet a high-pitched keening leaked from my throat now, even with my lips sealed shut. My vision began to go even darker than the alley—though I wouldn't have thought that possible—like the whole world had been overlaid with an odd gray filter.

Nash frowned, still watching me, then twisted to sit beside me, his back against the wall too. On the edges of my graying vision, something scuttled past soundlessly. A rat, or some other scavenger attracted by the club's garbage bin? *No.* Whatever I'd glimpsed was too big to be a rodent—unless we'd stepped into Buttercup's fire swamp—and too indistinct for my shattered focus to settle on.

Nash took my free hand in his, and I forgot whatever I'd seen. He pushed my hair back from my right ear. I couldn't understand most of what he whispered to me, but I gradually came to realize that his actual words weren't important. What mattered was his proximity. His breath on my neck. His warmth melting into mine. His scent surrounding me. His voice swirling in my head, insulating me from the scream still ricocheting against my skull.

He was calming me with nothing more than his presence, his patience and whispered words of what sounded like a child's rhyme, based on what little I caught.

And it was working. My anxiety gradually faded, and dim, gritty color leaked back into the world. My fingers relaxed around his hand. My lungs expanded fully, and I sucked in a sharp, frigid breath, suddenly freezing as sweat from the club dried on my skin.

The panic was still there, in the shadowed corners of my mind, in the dark spots on the edge of my vision. But I could handle it now. Thanks to Nash.

"You okay?" he asked when I turned my head to face him, the bricks cold and rough against my cheek.

I nodded. And that's when a new horror descended: utter, consuming, inescapable mortification, most awful in its longevity. The panic attack was all but over, but humiliation would last a lifetime.

I'd completely lost it in front of Nash Hudson. My life was over; even my friendship with Emma wouldn't be enough to repair the damage from such a nasty wound.

Nash stretched his legs out. "Wanna talk about it?"

No. I wanted to go hide in a hole, or stick my head in a bag, or change my name and move to Peru.

But then suddenly, I *did* want to talk about it. With Nash's voice still echoing softly in my head, his words whispering faintly over my skin, I wanted to tell him what had happened. It made no sense. After knowing me for eight years and helping me through at least half a dozen

previous panic attacks, Emma still had no idea what caused them. I couldn't tell her. It would scare her. Or worse, finally convince her I really was crazy.

So why did I want to tell Nash? I had no answer for that, but the urge was undeniable.

"…the strawberry blonde." There, I'd said it out loud, and committed myself to some sort of explanation.

Nash's brow furrowed in confusion. "You know her?"

"No." Fortunately. Merely sharing oxygen with her had nearly driven me out of my mind. "But something's wrong with her, Nash. She's…dark."

Kaylee, shut up! If he wasn't already convinced I was certifiable, he would be soon….

"What?" His frown deepened, but rather than bewildered or skeptical, he looked surprised. Then came vague comprehension. Comprehension, and…dread. He might not know exactly what I meant, but he didn't look completely clueless either. "What do you mean, 'dark'?"

I closed my eyes, hesitating at the last second. What if I'd misread him? What if he did think I was crazy?

Worse yet, what if he was right?

But in the end, I opened my eyes and met his gaze frankly, because I had to tell him something, and surely I couldn't damage his opinion of me much more than I already had. Right?

"Okay, this is going to sound weird," I began, "but something's wrong with that girl at the bar. When I looked

at her, she was…shadowed." I hesitated, scrounging up the courage to finish what I'd started. "She's going to die, Nash. That girl is going to die very, very soon."

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