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My Soul to Save

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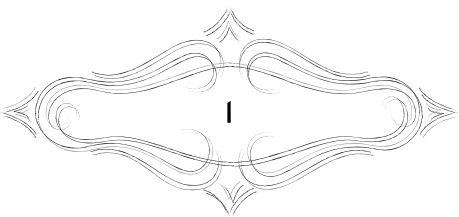
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my SOUL to Save

RACHEL VINCENT





1

Addison Page had the world at her feet. She had the face, the body, the voice, the moves, and the money. Let's not forget the money. But advantages like that come with a price. I should have known it was all too good to be true….

"What?" I yelled, my throat already raw from shouting over the roar of the crowd and the music blasting from dozens of huge speakers. Around us, thousands of bodies bobbed in time to the beat, hands in the air, lips forming the words, shouting the lyrics along with the beautiful, glittery girl strutting across the stage, seen close-up on a pair of giant digital screens.

Nash and I had great seats, thanks to his brother, Tod, but no one was sitting. Excitement bounced off every solid surface, fed by the crowd and growing with each passing second until the auditorium seemed to swell with the communal high. Energy buzzed through me, setting my nerve endings on fire with enough kick to keep me pinging off the walls through high school and well into college.

I didn't want to know how Tod had scored seats a mere fifteen rows from the stage, but even my darkest suspicion hadn't kept me at home. I couldn't pass up a chance to see Eden live in concert, even though it meant giving up a Saturday night alone with Nash, during my dad's extra shift at work.

And this was only Eden's opening act….

Nash pulled me closer, one hand on my hip, and shouted into my ear. "I said, Tod used to date her!"

I rode the wave of adrenaline through my veins as I inhaled his scent. Six weeks together, and I still smiled every time he looked at me, and flushed every time he *really* looked at me. My lips brushed his ear as I spoke. "Tod used to date who?" There were several thousand possible suspects dancing all around us.

"Her!" Nash shouted back, nodding over the sea of concertgoers toward the main attraction, his spiky, de-

liberately messy brown hair momentarily highlighted by a roaming spotlight.

Addison Page, Eden's opening act, strutted across the stage in slim black boots; low-cut, ripped jeans; a tight white halter; and a sparkly silver belt, wailing a bitter yet up-tempo lament about the one who got away. The glittery blue streak in her straight, white-blond hair sparkled beneath the lights and fanned out behind her when she whirled to face the audience from center stage, her voice rising easily into the clear, res-onant notes she was famous for.

I stared, suddenly still while everyone around me swayed along with the crescendo. I couldn't help it.

"Tod dated Addison Page?"

Nash couldn't have heard me. *I* barely heard me. But he nodded and leaned into me again, and I wrapped my arm around him for balance as the cowboy on my other side swung one eager, pumping fist dangerously close to my shoulder. "Three years ago. She's local, you know."

Like us, the hometown crowd had turned out as much for Texas's own rising star as for the headliner. "She's from Hurst, right?" Less than twenty minutes from my own Arlington address.

"Yeah. Addy and I were freshmen together, before

we moved back to Arlington. She and Tod dated for most of that year. He was a sophomore."

"So what happened?" I asked as the music faded and the lighting changed for the second song.

I pressed closer to Nash as he spoke into my ear, though he didn't really have to at that point; the new song was a melodic, angsty tune of regret. "Addy got cast in a pilot for the HOT network. The show took off and she moved to L.A." He shrugged. "Long distance is hard enough when you're fifteen, and impossible when your girlfriend's famous."

"So why didn't he come tonight?" I wouldn't have been able to resist watching a celebrity ex strut on stage, and hopefully fall on his face, assuming I was the dumpee.

"He's here somewhere." Nash glanced around at the crowd as it settled a bit for the softer song. "But it's not like he needs a ticket." As a grim reaper, Tod could choose whether or not he wanted to be seen or heard, and by whom. Which meant he could be standing on stage right next to Addison Page, and we'd never know it.

And knowing Tod, that's exactly where he was.

After Addison's set, there was a brief, loud intermission while the stage was set for the headliner. I expected

Tod to show up during the break, but there was still no sign of him when the stadium suddenly went black.

For a moment, there was only dark silence, emphasized by surprised whispers, and glowing wristbands and cell-phone screens. Then a dark blue glow came from the stage and the crowd erupted into frenzied cheers. Another light flared to life, illuminating a new platform in the middle of the stage. Two bursts of red flames exploded near the wings. When they faded, but for the imprint behind my eyelids, *she* appeared center stage, as if she'd been there all along.

Eden.

She wore a white tailored jacket open over a pink leather bra and a short pink-fringed skirt that exaggerated every twitch of her famous hips. Her long, dark hair swung with each toss of her head, and the fevered screaming of the crowed buzzed in my head as Eden dropped into a crouch, microphone in hand.

She rose slowly, hips swaying with the rhythm of her own song. Her voice was low and throaty, a moan set to music, and no one was immune to the siren song of sex she sold.

Eden was hypnotic. Spellbinding. Her voice flowed like honey, sweet and sticky. To hear it was to crave it, whether you wanted to or not.

The sound wound through me like blood in my

veins, and I knew that hours from then, when I lay awake in my bed, Eden would still sing in my mind, and that when I closed my eyes, I would still see her.

It was even stronger for Nash; I could see that at a glance. He couldn't tear his gaze from her, and we were so close to the stage that his view was virtually uninterrupted. His eyes swirled with emotion—with need—but not for me.

A violent, irrational surge of jealousy spiked in me as fresh sweat dampened his forehead. He clenched his hands at his sides, the long, tight muscles in his arms bulging beneath his sleeves. As if he were concentrating. Oblivious to everything else.

I had to pry his fingers open to lace them with mine. He turned to grin at me and squeezed my hand, beautiful hazel eyes settling into a slower churn as his gaze met mine. The yearning was still there—for me this time—but was both deeper and more coherent. What he wanted from me went beyond mindless lust, though that was there, too, thank goodness.

I'd broken the spell. For the moment. I didn't know whether to thank Tod for the tickets or ream him.

Onstage, soft lights illuminated dancers strutting out to join Eden as the huge screen tracked her every movement. The dancers closed in on her, writhing in sync, hands gliding lightly over her arms, shoulders,

and bare stomach. Then they paired off so she could strut down the catwalk stretching several rows into the crowd.

Suddenly I was glad we didn't have front-row seats. I'd have had to scrape a puddle of Nash goo into a jar just to get him home.

Warm breath puffed against my neck an instant before the sound hit my ear. "Hey, Kaylee!"

I jumped, so badly startled I nearly fell into my chair. Tod stood on my right, and when the cowboy's swinging arm went *through* him, I knew the reaper was there for my viewing pleasure only.

"Don't do that!" I snapped beneath my breath. He probably couldn't hear me, but I wasn't going to raise my voice and risk the guy next to me thinking I was talking to myself. Or worse, to *him*.

"Grab Nash and come on!" From the front pocket of his baggy, faded jeans, Tod pulled two plastic-coated, official-looking cards attached to lanyards. His mischievous grin could do nothing to darken the cherubic features he'd inherited from his mother, and I had to remind myself that no matter how innocent he looked, Tod was trouble. Always.

"What's that?" I asked, and the cowboy frowned at me in question. I ignored him—so much for not look-

ing crazy—and elbowed Nash. "Tod," I mouthed when he raised both brows at me.

Nash rolled his eyes and glanced past me, but I could tell from his roving stare that he couldn't see his brother. And that, as always, he was pissed that Tod had appeared to me, but not to him.

"Backstage passes." Tod reached through the cowboy to grab my hand, and if I hadn't jerked back from the reaper's grasp, I'd have gotten a very intimate feel of one of Eden's rudest fans.

I stood on my toes to reach Nash's ear. "He has backstage passes."

Nash's scowl made an irritated mask of his entire face, while on stage, Eden shed her jacket, now clad only in a bikini top and short skirt. "Where did he get them?"

"Do you really want to know?" Reapers weren't paid in money—at least, not the human kind—so he certainly hadn't bought the passes. Or the tickets.

"No," Nash grumbled. But he followed me, anyway.

Keeping up with Tod was a lost cause. He didn't have to edge past row after row of ecstatic fans, or stop and apologize when he stepped on one girl's foot or spilled her date's drink. He just walked right through seats and concertgoers alike, as if they didn't exist in his world.

They probably didn't.

Like all reapers, Tod's natural state of existence—if it could even be called natural—was somewhere between our world, where humans and the occasional *bean sidhe* reside in relative peace, and the Netherworld, where most things dark and dangerous dwell. He could exist completely in either one, if he chose, but he rarely did, because when he was corporeal, he typically forgot to avoid obstacles like chairs, tables, and doors. And people.

Of course, he could easily become visible to both me and Nash, but it was evidently much more fun to mess with his brother. I'd never met a set of siblings with less in common than Nash and Tod. They weren't even the same species; at least, not anymore.

The Hudson brothers were both born *bean sidhes*—that was the correct spelling, though most people knew us as banshees—from normal *bean sidhe* parents. As was I. But Tod had died two years earlier, when he was seventeen, and that's when things got weird, even for *bean sidhes*. Tod was recruited by the grim reapers.

As a reaper, Tod would live on in his own unaging body. In exchange, he worked a twelve-hour shift every day, collecting souls from humans whose time had come to die. He didn't have to eat or sleep, so he got pretty bored for those other twelve hours of

each day. And since Nash and I were among the few who knew about him, he typically took that boredom out on us.

Which was how we'd gotten kicked out of a mall, a skating rink, and a bowling alley, all in the past month. And as I bumped my way through the crowd after Tod, I had a feeling the concert would be next on the list.

One glance at the irritation glowing in Nash's cheeks told me he still couldn't see his brother, so I pulled him along as I tracked the headful of blond curls now several rows ahead of us, heading toward a side door beneath a red exit sign.

Eden's first song ended in a huge flash of purple light, reflected on the thousands of faces around me, then the lights went out.

I stopped, unwilling to move in the dark for fear that I'd trip over someone and land in an unidentified puddle. Or a lap.

Seconds later, the stage exploded with swirling, pulsing light, and Eden now swayed to the new beat in a different but equally skimpy costume. I glanced at her, then back at Tod, but caught only a fleeting glimpse of his curls disappearing through the closed side door.

Nash and I rushed after him, stepping on a series of toes and vaulting over a half-empty bottle of Coke someone had smuggled in. We were out of breath when

we reached the door, so I glanced one last time at the stage, then shoved the door, grateful when it actually opened. Doors Tod walks through usually turn out to be locked.

Tod stood in the hall beyond, grinning, both backstage passes looped over one arm. "What'd you do, crawl all the way here?"

The door closed behind us, and I was surprised to realize I could barely hear the music, though it had been loud enough to drown out my thoughts in the auditorium. But I could still feel the thump of the bass, pulsing up through my feet from the floor.

Nash let go of my hand and glared at his brother. "Some of us are bound by the laws of physics."

"Not my problem." Tod waved the passes, then tossed one to each of us. "Snoozin', loozin', and all that crap."

I slipped the nylon lanyard over my neck and pulled my long brown hair over it. Now that I wore the pass, it would be seen by anyone who saw me; everything Tod holds is only as visible as he is at the time.

The reaper went fully corporeal then, his sneakers squeaking on the floor as he led us down a series of wide white hallways and through several doors, until we hit one that was locked. Tod shot us a mischievous

grin, then walked through the door and pushed it open from the other side.

"Thanks." I brushed past him into the new hall, and the sudden upsurge of music warned that we were getting close to the stage. In spite of the questionable source of our backstage passes, my pulse jumped with excitement when we rounded the next corner and the building opened into a long, wide hall with a cavernous ceiling. Equipment was stacked against the walls—soundboards, speakers, instruments, and lights. People milled everywhere, carrying clothes, food, and clipboards. They spoke into two-way radios and headset microphones, and most wore badges similar to ours, though theirs read "Crew" in bold black letters.

Security guards in black tees and matching hats loitered, thick arms crossed over their chests. Background dancers raced across the open space in all stages of the next costume change, while a woman with a clipboard pointed and rushed them along.

No one noticed me and Nash, and I could tell Tod had gone non-corporeal again by the silence of his steps. We headed slowly toward the stage, where light pulsed and music thumped, much too loud for any of the backstage racket to be heard out front. I touched nothing, irrationally afraid that sneaking a cookie from

the snack table would finally expose us as backstage-pass thieves.

In the wings of the stage, a small crowd had gathered to watch the show. Everyone wore badges similar to ours, and several people held equipment or props, most notably a small monkey, wearing a collar and a funny, brightly colored hat.

I laughed out loud, wondering what on earth America's reigning pop queen would do on stage with a monkey.

From our vantage point, we saw Eden in profile, now grinding in skintight white leather pants and a matching half top. The new song was gritty, with a crunchy guitar riff, and her dancing had changed to suit it; she popped each pose hard, and her hair swung out behind her. Guys in jeans and tight, dark shirts danced around and behind her, each taking her hand in turn, and lifting her on occasion.

Eden gave it her all, even several songs into the performance. The magazines and news stories hyped her hard work and dedication to her career, and the hours and hours a day she trained, rehearsed, and planned. And it showed. No one put on a show like Eden. She was the entertainment industry's golden girl, rolling in money and fame. Rumor had it she'd signed on for the

lead in her first film, to begin shooting after the conclusion of her sold-out tour.

Everything Eden touched turned to gold.

We watched her, enthralled by each pose she struck, mesmerized by each note. We were under such a spell that at first no one noticed when something went wrong. During the guitar solo, Eden's arms fell to her side and she stopped dancing.

I thought it was another dramatic transition to the next song, so when her head fell forward, I assumed she was counting silently, ready to look up with those hypnotic, piercing black eyes and captivate her fans all over again.

But then the other dancers noticed, and several stopped moving. Then several more. And when the guitar solo ended, Eden still stood there, silent, a virtual vacuum sucking life from the background music.

Her chest heaved. Her shoulders shook. The microphone fell from her hand and crashed to the stage.

Feedback squealed across the auditorium, and the drummer stopped drumming. The guitarists—both lead and bass—turned toward Eden and stopped playing when they saw her.

Eden collapsed, legs bent, long, dark hair spilling around her on the floor.

Someone screamed from behind me in the sudden

hush, and I jumped, startled. A woman raced past me and onto the stage, followed by several large men. My hair blew back in the draft created by the sudden rush, but I barely noticed. My gaze was glued to Eden who lay unmoving on the floor.

People bent over her, and I recognized the woman as her mother, the most famous stage parent/manager in the country. Eden's mom was crying, trying to shake her daughter awake as a member of security tried to pull her away. "She's not breathing!" the mother shouted, and we all heard her clearly, because the crowd of thousands had gone silent with shock. "Somebody help her, she's not breathing!"

And suddenly neither was I.

My hand clenched Nash's, and my heart raced in dreadful anticipation of the keening that would rip its way from my throat as the pop star's soul left her body. A *bean sidhe*'s wail can shatter not just glass, but eardrums. The frequency resonates painfully in the human brain, so that the sound seems to rattle from both outside and within.

"Breathe, Kaylee," Nash whispered into my ear, wrapping both arms around me as his voice cocooned my heart, his Influence soothing, comforting. A male *bean sidhe*'s voice is like an audio-sedative, without the side effects of the chemical version. Nash could make

the screaming stop, or at least lower its volume and intensity. "Just breathe through it." So I did. I watched the stage over his shoulder and breathed, waiting for Eden to die.

Waiting for the scream to build deep inside me.

But the scream didn't come.

Onstage, someone's foot hit Eden's microphone, and it rolled across the floor and into the pit. No one noticed, because Eden still wasn't breathing. But I wasn't wailing, either.

Slowly, I loosened my grip on Nash and felt relief settle through me as logic prevailed over my dread. Eden wasn't wearing a death shroud—a translucent black haze surrounding the soon-to-be-dead, visible only to female *bean sidhes*. "She's fine." I smiled in spite of the horrified expressions surrounding me. "She's gonna be fine." Because if she were going to die, I'd already be screaming.

I'm a female *bean sidhe*. That's what we do.

"No, she isn't," Tod said softly, and we turned to find him still staring at the stage. The reaper pointed, and I followed his finger until my gaze found Eden again, surrounded by her mother, bodyguards, and odd members of the crew, one of whom was now giving her mouth-to-mouth. And as I watched, a foggy, ethereal

substance began to rise slowly from the star's body like a snake from its charmer's basket.

Rather than floating toward the ceiling, as a soul should, Eden's seemed *heavy,* like it might sink to the ground around her instead. It was thick, yet colorless. And undulating through it were ribbons of darkness, swirling as if stirred by an unfelt breeze.

My breath caught in my throat, but I let it go almost immediately, because though I had no idea what that substance was, I knew without a doubt what it *wasn't.*

Eden had no soul.

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