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About 2,000 words

Grave Digger
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Izzie barrels through the door pushing a cardboard box and freezes. Her nose wrinkles and she claps her hand over her mouth. She's new and death hasn't touched her yet. Her eyes slowly scan the limbs that lie scattered like crumbs on a metal table. I touch each one, pick them up and place them into sections.

Her eyes narrow into slits. "Why do you touch them?"

"So they know they are not alone," I say.

She nods. "I see."

"Most people don't."

She comes closer to the table. "Don't what?"

"See life in death."

Her eyes dart to the table and widen. "I see brutality and a life lost."

I pick up a hand, and examine the callused skin, gritty fingernails, and large knuckles. I curl my fingers and place my own inside its palm.

"I see a man that lived, worked, and gave with his hands." I smile.

She says nothing.

I walk back to the table and fist the hair of a severed head. I stare into its frozen gaze. "The human head is a lot heavier than I expected," I say.

"I wouldn't know." Her voice shakes and pulls me out of my trance.

"Hmmm."

She nudges her chin at the cardboard box. "The family of that one is here to witness the cremation."

"I wish more families participated," I say.

"Well, it's not for everyone." She shrugs. "And they have you."

My chest tightens. "I hope I'm enough."

Izzie excuses herself with a sad smile. I finish counting the body parts, and making sure all the numbers match on the identity tags. It amazes me how our lives begin and end with a number, but they are more than a number to me. They are people not corpses. Their bodies their homes. Everybody I've burned or dressed up touch has touched me. Most days I find pieces of them tangled in my

dark strands or clinging to my clothes. I find comfort in knowing I'm carrying them with me.

The hushed whispers and voices tickle my ears and I take a deep breath. This is the best and worst part of the cremation process. Death is hard, and burning a body is not a delicate process. All I can do is explain it and hope they heal.

Izzie pokes her head in. "It's time."

I nod and step towards the small cardboard box. I lift the lid and run my finger along the cold, hard skin of the tiny body curled into a ball. It's as if it never left its mother's womb.

I kiss its hand and breathe in deep.

Izzie gasps. "You shouldn't do that."

"It's a child."

"I know, but—"

"But nothing." I slam the lid shut. "You know nothing."

Her mouth opens and closes.

"I'm ready," I say.

I slide my hand along the jagged edge of the box just as a burly man enters wearing a grim expression and deep dark circles that swallow his haunted eyes. Death has always fascinated me, and even in its finality it never truly stops. It lingers.

A young girl nudges him from behind and slides out from behind him. I wave them in with a warm smile. The older man's lips are held in a hard straight line. His shoulders rise and fall with each ragged breath. They move as one past me to the small cardboard box. I wait a beat to give them a moment to adjust to the room, and so I can sense their emotional state. Her hand trembles as she reaches for him, but he swats it away.

"Please, don't do that." Her voice cracks. "I can't bear it, Daddy."

"Maybe this will teach you to keep your legs closed."

Her cheeks flame red and her pain drips from her eyes onto the floor. She falls onto the box in a sobbing mess and his jaw clenches.

“Get this over with,” he says avoiding my eyes.

“I must explain the process before we begin.”

His eyes harden. “You burn it, what else is there to explain?”

“Daddy!”

His jaw ticks as she begins to hum the tune of the song, “You Are My Sunshine.”

He squeezes his eyes shut.

I touch his arm and he stiffens. “It’s my job,” I pull back my arm. “But some people find it helps with the coping process.”

She wraps her arms around her middle. “I want to know.” Her eyes pool with tears. “I need to know.”

After I go over everything I push the table with the box that holds the dead child in front of the furnace. Together her and I push the child in.

“You can push the button if you want,” I say.

“I can’t watch this.” She backs away from it and trips over her own feet.

He looms over her. “Lilly, pull yourself together.”

“It’s okay, you don’t have to,” I say.

I stare down at her and my heart pounds against my chest. The girl is breaking apart and her father is too caught up in his own emotions to see he’s destroying her. I won’t let this child leave without knowing its mother’s love.

I crouch down beside her and take her hand. “You can sing a tune or say a prayer if you want.” I pull her up.

“No god will touch that child.” He spits and slaps her across the face. “You should be in there with it.”

I run to the phone to call for help, but he rips it out of the wall.

“All you had to do was burn it and get rid of it.” He pulls my hair so hard my teeth crack together. “That was your job!”

Tears sting my eyes as he pushes me against the scolding hot furnace. Fear grips me and my stomach bottoms out when he swings it open. He throws me inside and I scream. I fall face forward into the fire, and it swallows me. I'm burning from the inside out and then something grabs me and shoves me out. I look back just in time to see the face of a small child. But, its eyes are small black empty holes perched on a round angelic face. I try to scream, but when I open my mouth the child swoops inside and laughs. The laugh is so sweet and innocent my heart vibrates with it.

"We need to get help." Lilly looks frantic and runs out the door.

I almost black out when I hear him. "My god..." There's not an ounce of sorrow or empathy in his voice. His face twists in disgust as he stares down at me.

I grab him by the throat and show him how it feels to be burned alive.

"Today it will be your bones and flesh feeding the fire. I will make sure that the fire never stops and your soul rages with it."

Smoke rises out from his lips and he chokes on it. "What are you?"

My face twists and contorts. "I am death."

His face fades into an ashen gray, and the crackling of his skin brings a smile to my face.

It's a slow burn as I inhale the rusty metallic scent of his last breath. I slump to the floor. My body is now a tomb of horrors.

Lilly and Lizzie hurl themselves through the door and gasp at the sight of my face dripping crimson and his lifeless body. Everything goes black.

When I awake again I'm surrounded in white, and the air is so stale it reeks of antiseptic saturating my clothes and clinging to my skin. No one is at my bedside and there's some comfort in that.

A nurse pops her head in and the curl of her lips is hesitant. She checks my vitals. "I'm Maria, and I'll be your nurse this evening." She leans over me.

"How are you feeling?"

"Like I was burned alive."

She swallows. “Stupid question huh?” She walks to the bottom of the bed and I meet her gaze. She looks away. I sigh.

She fiddles with the machine and tells me how lucky I am to be alive. She also says that it’s not as bad as she thinks.

I huff and wince at the gesture.

“I’ll go get the doctor, but let me know if you need anything.”

I never understood why people think words are so important. Silence has much more truth to it. I’ve dealt with death my whole life and I’ve always enjoyed the quiet and solitude that comes with it. But, now I fear death has come for me. I crave human touch and human connection more than ever. Days turn into weeks and I decide that no amount of surgery will fix me. It’s not my face that needs to mending. It’s my soul.

I return to work, but I am no longer allowed to socially engage with the families and the staff no longer invite themselves in. My room is at the very back and even my boss can’t find the courage to lift her head in greeting. Time crawls by and there is no sign of the child that entered me until my third day.

The moon hangs low in a black sky, it’s light drips down the curtains and spills onto the stone floor. A silhouette of a young child sits just beyond it against the wall watching me.

I step closer. “What do you want from me?”

The light pierces the room but never touches him. The shadows cling to him like a second skin.

“I want the same thing you want.”

“How do you know what I want?” I back away.

“Because you are mine and I am yours.”

I shake my head and turn to run. “You gave me life in death and now we are connected.”

“No, I don’t want it.”

“You didn’t just toy with death, but you cheated it. Now, my god is mad and has unleashed all the lost souls to come for you.”

“I’ve dedicated my entire life to the dead.”

“That is why you are the only one that understands us.” One by one they all appear and surround me. “That is why we need you.”

“You need us too.” All of them children with sad smiles and dark empty pits for eyes reaching for me with cold, clammy hands.

“We won’t hurt you.” They speak in unison and their voices are like a gentle caress. They each look to me as if I hold the answers and I haven’t felt the weight of a stare in too long.

“Don’t you have families?” They each look down at their feet.

“Our memories died when we did.”

I take them home with me and show them what a family is like. I dig up more bodies and give them each a companion. The more I give the more I crave and miss my own family. One night I get desperate. I dig up two graves of my parents and bring them home.

The air thickens when I lay their skeletons on the table. They each come and get a closer look.

“Are you replacing us?”

“No, I just miss them.”

They form a circle around me, closing in. “Aren’t we enough?”

“Of course, but I still have my memories.” I swallow hard. “I can’t forget them, and it’s hard to live with them and not be able to touch them.”

An angry teen bursts through the door. “You stole them.”

“But they are mine. I pound my chest. “They belong to me.”

“We’ll see what the cops think about that.”

I lunge and swat it out of his hands. “This is my family, and you won’t take them from me.”

I let the children play with him and they each take turns entering his body. He becomes their new toy.