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Death Carries a Business Card

Jessica Sharp

The first time I thought I was going to die I was sixteen years old. I was slumped against the outside wall of what was supposed to be an abandoned warehouse, bleeding from a bullet wound, and desperately wishing I hadn't dropped my gun.

The only person who was supposed to be in the warehouse was some drug dealer that ripped Geoffrey off a few weeks ago. Geoff had approached me and said how this was a perfect time to prove my loyalty and commitment. He gave me a vague description of a man, average height, dark hair, and something about always wearing a blue jacket. That simple description was all I had to go on; I had never actually seen him in and yet Geoff handed me a gun, gave me the address, instructions to kill him, and sent me on my merry way. I could still see his beaming face as I hesitantly accepted the firearm.

Despite the fact that I grew up in a neighborhood rife with gun violence and my own personal involvement in organized criminal activity, I had never fired a gun. I carried a knife and cut a couple of people in a fight once, but there was something so much more serious about a gun, something so final. With a blade it took some precision and effort to fatally wound. With a gun all you need was a squeeze of the trigger. I swallowed my nervousness and accepted the order. Killing a man was simply the price to pay to earn trust and move up in the world.

I had showed up at the warehouse and found that the drug dealer had friends. Armed friends. The next thing I knew I was leaning against the metal siding of a warehouse, wounded and defenseless. I had dropped my gun at some point; I don't even remember what happened.

I was dead.

I closed my eyes. So this was it? I should have been more upset than I was. I was going to die. I heard the men yelling not far in the distance. I never had a chance.

"Where'd the little shit go?" The voice sounded as though it was coming from the other side of the wall.

"I dunno. You sure he's with Geoffrey? I ain't ever seen him before."

"Yeah, I'd recognized that skinny shit anywhere." There was a pause in the conversation and I found myself holding my breath. Not as though that was actually going to do me any good.

"I think he went this way."

I let my breath out. Yup. I was sure that was it. I looked down at the small river of blood flowing down my arm and pooling on the cement. I could get up and run. There was nothing seriously wrong with me—but I was winded and dizzy. Even if I managed to get up and run there was nowhere to go. I didn't know the area as well as the men did.

"I have to wonder... Are you really ready to die?"

I looked up at the sound of another voice. It was different from the others I had heard. The voice was male, but softer than the other s. Yet, there was a deep pitch to it that sent chills down my spine. I craned my neck around, trying to find the source but I couldn't see anyone.

“Do you realize everything that dying entails? There are an awful lot of details that are overlooked.” This time the voice was followed by the sound of footsteps that came from down the alley. “Every cell in your body starts choking and dying, neurons become confused, sending erratic last messages, limbs begin to twitch, and of course there is the matter of bowels emptying.” the voice chuckled. “Well, are you as ready to die as you think you are?” One of the men was probably just messing with me; like a cat playing with its food.

“Why does it matter to you?” I croaked; my voice was growing tired. I looked down the alleyway. The footsteps continued until I could make out a figure in the distance. The owner of the voice was a young man; he couldn’t have been much older than me. He was dressed in a neat black suit with a dark red dress shirt. It was too dark in the alley to make out the details of his face, but his skin was so pale he was almost glowing. He came closer to me and I could better make out his face; his features were calm and even, and there was a slight smirk curling on his thin lips.

“If you’re going to kill me just do it,” I spat. He was messing with me. I knew he was.

“Amazingly I am here to do the exact opposite,” he said. He knelt down next to me and I shivered. It was as though he was radiating cold. “I am here to save you.”

“Who are you?” It was the only thing I could think to say.

The men yelling from the other end of the alley drew my attention away from the strange man. The drug dealer and his armed friends had found me and were moving in for their kill. It didn’t matter who killed me at that point. I just knew I was going to die.

“But you’re not,” the man said quietly.

“Not what?” Did he just read my mind? I stared at him, and he nodded slightly before replying.

“Going to die. Now just sit tight here while I take care of this. Then we can have a proper conversation,” he said, turning towards the armed men. I just stared at him. Maybe I was already dead or dying and this was some sort of hallucination. The armed men moved closer; they didn’t seem the least bit concerned with the strange man.

“Who ya talkin’ to? Or ya prayin’ or somthin’? Can’t say that’s a bad idea in your position,” a man barked, earning harsh laughter from the others. Did they not see him, the man in the suit? I looked to the stranger and he only offered me a sardonic grin.

“We’re gonna send a message to Geoffrey and to the rest of ‘um, thinkin’ that they could just go and send some little twerp to take us,” a different man spoke up. I recognized him as the man I had been sent to kill. I think his name was Jamie S...something. Why was I thinking of that now? Why did it matter?

The men started towards me and in a moment of panic I forced myself to my feet, but the blood loss had left me dizzy and I ended up tumbling forward, smacking my face into the ground. I closed my eyes and listened to the footsteps. Any moment now, I would be killed. A pathetic sixteen-year-old kid who got in over his head, dead from a bullet in the skull.

“You’re not dying. Stop being dramatic.” I heard the stranger’s voice chide before five gunshots echoed in the alleyway.

I squeezed my eyes shut, and braced for the sting of bullets that never came. The only thing that followed was silence. Slowly, I lifted my head up.

The stranger was leaning against the wall across from me, arms folded across his chest. He nodded over to where the men had been. They were all dead with five efficient bullets, one to each of their heads. I looked back to the stranger who shrugged.

"I told you this isn't your time to die. Here," he said, and kicked a gun over to me. "It's easier to convince someone that you killed people if you are holding the murder weapon."

"You killed them?" I pulled myself back into a sitting position, and stared at the gun.

"Yes. It's what I do; death is my business." He was smiling, nothing like the smirk he had been wearing before. He offered a hand to help me to my feet, which I accepted.

I recoiled as soon as my hand touched his. He was ice cold. It was chilly out here tonight, sure, but this man's hand felt like nothing short of an ice sculpture. He noticed my reaction and reached out and grabbed my wrist and pulled me the rest of the way to my feet.

"Who are you?"

"Just an individual in the business of death," he replied.

"You already said that. I mean, who *are* you? What are you doing here?"

The man didn't reply. He went down and picked up the gun and held it out to me.

"You'll need this," he said.

Without thinking, I reached out and grabbed the weapon from his hands. The thing felt awkward in my left hand, but my right hand was hanging limply at my side, useless aside from sending a steady wave of pain through my body. I awkwardly aimed the weapon at the stranger's head; I was going to get answers from him, one way or another.

"Who are you? What do you want with me?" I demanded. His only reply was to raise his eyebrows.

"Answer me, damn it!"

"I am just doing business," he said, "and I just wanted to offer you an opportunity to invest in my business."

I bared my teeth; none of these answers were helping ease my suspicions that this man was some sort of enforcer, here just to clean up the whole mess.

"I am not going to kill you," the man said quietly.

"Then tell me who you are? Who are you with?" I weakly waved the gun at him as I spoke.

He sighed, "It is unlikely that you will believe me, but I am Death."

"Bullshit," I spat.

"No, really. I am," he said, and reached in to his back pocket.

As soon as his hand moved, I panicked. The trigger wasn't as heavy as I thought it would be. It moved easily under my finger, the resulting bang was nearly deafening. I watched the bullet fly towards the stranger. My shaky hand wasn't aiming anywhere in particular, but somehow, most likely because we were standing so close to each other, the bullet hit the stranger in the stomach.

Or at least I thought it did.

I saw the bullet race towards the man. I saw it disappear into his body. The man showed no reaction, not even a wince. There wasn't even a hole in his suit jacket. He barely paused in his motion of digging something out of his back pocket.

I dropped the gun. "Who...what *are* you?"

"I told you. I am Death. And, yes, you did shoot me, but as you can imagine, I am rather immune to that sort of thing." He had his wallet in his hand and pulled something out of it. "Now, this is for you." He held out a simple black business card.

Again, I was left to do nothing but stare. My brain didn't know what to do with itself. So much had happened: almost dying, being saved, a stranger claiming he's Death, shooting

said stranger, and now the man was offering me a business card? If it wasn't for the constant pain in my shoulder, I would say that this was a dream.

"Take it," the man said. "It's just a way to contact me in the future."

I reached out and nervously took the card. In neat curling letters it spelled one word: Death, and underneath was a normal looking seven-digit phone number.

"You're Death," I said, still unsure of the reality of the situation, "and you have your own business card?"

"Yes, it's a matter of business. Managing products, shipments of goods, making sure the guys up top are kept happy, you know, it's all business." Death explained with a shrug. "Anyway, this card is for you and if you find yourself in need of assistance feel free to give me a ring any time. I can't grantee I will be there every time, but I will certainly try and be there when I am needed."

Death offered his hand again, asking for a hand shake. Not knowing what else to do, I stuffed the business card in the front pocket of my hoodie before reaching out and accepting his hand. If he really was Death that would certainly explain his ice cold skin.

Death left shortly after handing me the business card. He turned and walked down the alley, but vanished after only a few steps.

I remember that I managed to make it back to a road I knew and to a bus stop before I passed out. When I came to, I was in a hospital bed with Geoffrey standing over me, grinning like a mad man. His normally neatly combed back hair was slightly messy and there was the beginning of a black eye on his face.

"I didn't know you had it in you!"

I gave him a confused look. "What do you mean?"

He leaned down and whispered to me, "Man, Daniel, you didn't just take out that Jamie bastard, you got Carl and Markee, too. You single handedly took out our biggest competitors. Good job!"

"Oh," I said weakly. Those names meant very little to me. I wasn't involved too much in politics. I just followed Geoffrey around and helped him when I could. He was basically my brother.

"Man, Dalton and them have got to let you be official now," he said, ruffling my hair.

I smiled weakly. I didn't care about being officially accepted into the inner circle, so to speak, but it seemed to make Geoff happy so I figured I could play along.

As soon as Geoffrey left, and I was alone in my room, I reached over to the side table where my bloody clothing was folded in a plastic bag and fished out my hoodie. Had I really met Death? Did I just black out and make up everything? The card was the only thing I could hold on to as proof, if, in fact, I still had the card.

I didn't know if I was relived or terrified when I pulled the black business card from the pocket.

Geoff was right about one thing, the incident at the warehouse sent me on the way to becoming "official." The day after I left the hospital, well, more like escaped as no one had any intentions of paying the bill, I decided that I was going to learn how to properly use a gun. Despite the fact that my first experience with a gun had been less than successful, I

found that I actually had a talent for firearms. I used this talent to rise in the ranks until I was the unquestioned person to go to for, as Geoff so delicately put it, clean up. By the time I was nineteen, I had lost count of how many people I had killed. It probably should have bothered me more than it did, but Geoff was so encouraging and it wasn't as though I had much of a talent for anything else, so I went with it.

While I was rising it seemed Geoff was sinking, but it didn't dawn on me exactly how far Geoff had fallen until I received a simple text message one night. It was written in a code only a few people understood, but the message was clear. Apparently Geoff had been caught stealing money and the higher ups decided that it was time to "clean up" the matter. I hadn't seen Geoff in weeks; I had moved out when I was eighteen, and was living rather well on my own. People tended to pay good money to have their messes cleaned up.

I stared at the message for about thirty minutes, unsure of what to do with myself. I had been killing people for three years, but I had never felt this ache in the pit of my stomach before, this sort of hesitation and doubt. Everything I had done before was for Geoff's approval. He was as large part of the reason I was doing so well. Hell, he had practically raised me. How could I possibly turn around and do this?

Still holding the cell phone, I sank down into my couch. How could I suddenly be unsure about killing, when the very couch I was sitting on was paid for with blood money? Without really thinking I pulled my wallet from my back pocket.

I had held on the business card this whole time; it was currently tucked in the back of my wallet. I hadn't looked at it properly since I was in the hospital three years ago, but I couldn't bring myself to throw it away. Despite the time that had passed, the card was still in perfect condition. Pure black cardstock with neat, white letters spelled out 'Death' and under that, 'any questions please call: (545)-446-6691.' I looked at it confused. Had it changed? I hadn't looked at it a while, but I was sure the part about questions wasn't there before. I figured it was just a trick my mind was pulling and I forgot about it.

I dialed the number, not knowing what I was to expect. No sooner had I entered the number and pressed the phone to my ear did I hear Death, only his voice wasn't coming from the phone, but from right behind me.

"You rang?" he said, sounding amused.

I dropped the phone and turned to see Death standing behind the couch, not looking any different than he had the night at the warehouse.

"Yeah..." I trailed off. Why had I called him? It seemed like a good idea. I was conflicted about something that could possibly result in death, so who was better to consult than Death himself?

"You want to know if you should follow the order, like the many you have followed before, and kill your friend," Death said, stealing words straight from my brain. He moved from behind the couch and made himself comfortable in a chair across from me. He sat down delicately, crossing his legs, propping his arm on the side of the chair, and resting his head on his hand lazily.

"Yeah." It seemed I was only capable of one syllable answers this evening.

"Hmm, this is a dilemma, isn't it? Kill the man who basically raised you to be what you are today, or risk losing your creditability in you chosen profession. Tough choice," he paused looking down at his fingernails, as though inspecting them for dirt.

"Geoff. . . he took care of me when no one else did. Even when he was only seventeen and selling dope to my mom, he would always ask how my school work was coming and

bring me treats. I was twelve years old and excited at the aspect of counting a real live gangster as one of my friends. He always called me the brother he never had." I looked over at Death, who looked unimpressed by my emotional recall of my childhood.

"Daniel," he said, and I jumped at the sound of him using my name, "let me share a secret of the world: people are fleeting. In the end you are the only person left who will look out for you. Remember that."

"But how can I just go and shoot him, just like that, and ignore everything he has done for me?" I was becoming frustrated, not because Death wasn't saying what I wanted him to, but because he was saying exactly what I needed to hear.

"Think of it this way," he said, leaning forward in his chair, "Geoffrey wanted you to succeed in life, correct?"

I nodded.

"Then he would not want you to turn down a job this important," he finished, grinning.

"I don't know if I can do this," I muttered, looking down at this discarded cell phone.

"Sure you can! I'll even go with you!" Death said standing up from his chair. "If you think it would help you, remember that, in the end, you are not killing anyone, I am."

I nodded, and just like that I made up my mind to kill the man who raised me.

Death was true to his word. He followed me along the all too familiar path to Geoff's apartment building. It was freezing outside. I was bundled in a thick leather jacket and skin tight leather gloves encased my hands. Under my jacket I could feel the weight of the gun against my hip. It felt like an ice sickle hanging from my belt. Despite the cold air, Death did not seem the least bit phased even though he was still dressed in the same simple suit I had first seen him in.

In no time at all I was standing outside the door to Geoff's apartment, fighting back memories, with Death standing behind me idly whistling. He had assured me that no one could hear or see him except me, which was comforting and awkward at the same time.

I knocked twice and Geoff came to the door. He looked terrible; his blonde hair that was normally kept short and slicked back was a greasy mess hanging down over his face. His eyes had thick, dark circles under them and there were a few fresh cuts to his face.

"Hey, Daniel, man, what brings ya here?" His voice was weak and cracked, but still he seemed glad to see me.

"Can I come in?" I said, smiling slightly. I glanced back at Death, who offered what I could only assume was an encouraging smile.

"Yeah, uh, sure. It's filthy in here, but when hasn't it been?" He laughed weakly and stepped aside, allowing me inside. As soon as I was in he closed and locked the door; I noticed the addition of several more locks. He knew people would be after him.

Death materialized in the apartment and stood behind me. "Do it quickly. Get it over with," he said. It was like the cartoons of devils and angels on people's shoulders who guide their actions, except I was missing my angel.

"I needed to talk to you," I said.

"No you didn't," Death whispered.

"Sure," Geoff said, motioning to the cluttered living room. There were piles of dishes and clothing everywhere along with several half packed suitcases and boxes. He moved over to a set of chairs and began shifting through the mess to clear off a place to sit. As his back

was turned I reached into my coat and wrapped my hands around the gun. There was a heavy silencer attached, making the gun heavier, but it was comfortable in my hand, so unlike the first time I held a gun, yet somehow my hands were shaking.

Geoff's back was to me when I moved closer and took aim. Death was now standing next to me, just in my line of vision.

My finger was positioned on the trigger ready to pull it when Geoff turned around. His eyes went wide. There was a look of complete and utter despair on his face. I felt myself waiver until Death reached out and placed an icy cold hand on my wrist.

"Daniel. . ." Geoff breathed.

"I'm sorry," I said quietly. I wasn't sure if he even heard me, because at the same I squeezed the trigger.

Despite what people think, silencers didn't make guns silent. They quiet them down, but guns are still loud weapons. I didn't have the time to stand around and contemplate what I had just done. Death was smiling as he followed me back to my own apartment. I knew this was his job and everything, but I couldn't figure out what about this situation made him so happy.

Regardless of how I felt after killing Geoff, it had an undeniable positive effect on my career. It made me look heartless, cold, and ruthless, which apparently were traits that were highly valuable in my profession. I found out very quickly that word of mouth was the best business plan anyone could use; and though I kept myself available for my original employers, freelance work was easy to find and very lucrative. Two years after Geoff died, I had enough resources to make myself disappear.

I kept taking jobs because it was the only I knew. I had become completely desensitized to death. On the matter of Death, I still kept the card tucked in the back of my wallet no matter where I went. Interestingly, the card never showed any signs of wear and tear.

Four days before my twenty-fourth-birthday I took possibly the biggest job of my career. I avoided politics like the plague, but I could tell this job was important, and therefore political, simply based on the number of zeroes attached to the payment. It was a sniper job, which I didn't particularly care for, but the amount I was being paid far, far outweighed any personal preference I had.

The worst part about sniper jobs was the waiting. I was glad, at least, for the comfortable weather. Not too warm, but with just enough of a chill to the air to make it pleasant. Being that I was jammed in an awkward corner on an apartment building roof, I took comfort where I could find it. My gun was set up, aiming at the hotel down the street. The target was supposed to be there by eight o'clock, and it was already past seven fifty. I only had the briefest chance for a shot.

A saw the target's entourage turn the corner and I took my position behind the scope. I had no idea which car the target was in, but I aimed somewhere in the middle, hoping I had the time I needed to make the shot.

The car doors opened and I took aim; I was ready. I had to wonder, though, who was this man that was worth so much money. I had heard his name around, but I wasn't sure exactly who he was. I blinked and focused back to the scope before squeezing the trigger. As

soon as I did, I realized that something had gone very wrong. I had been off focus. I had missed the target completely. I must have hit someone because there was chaos in the street. I cursed aloud to myself. This was too large of a job to screw up! I refocused, trying to see if I could still get a shot in, and quickly realized there was no way to do this. I needed to move fast. I didn't have time to fix my mistake.

"You know, day dreaming on the job is a rather bad habit." I twisted around in my hiding place to see Death standing over me. I was tempted to yell at him to get down before I remembered that I was the only one that could see him.

"I didn't call you. Why are you here?" I hissed, beginning to disassemble my gun.

"You don't need a phone to call me," he said, squatting down to be on my eye level. "Anyway, I can help you."

"Why would you do that?"

"No reason," he said, with a smile that said just the opposite. "Stop that," he said, motioning to me as I was detaching the scope. "Just take aim, and I will take care of the rest."

I was about to tell him that there was nothing he could possibly do when he suddenly vanished. I screwed the scope back into place quickly and looked down at the scene. I couldn't make heads or tails of what was going on. I saw a group of dark suited men in a huddle and assumed that to be where the target was. Death had about ten seconds to prove he could do something before I was gone.

Four seconds into my countdown, I watched Death calmly stroll over to the group of men. He lingered outside the huddle for a few seconds before the suits dispersed and I saw the target clearly. He was pushing his guards away from him, and moving more into the open.

I didn't want to miss my second chance, and pulled the trigger once more.

In time with the gunshot, Death reappeared besides me.

"You're welcome, kid," he said.

"How did you do that. . . Why did you do that?"

"I'm Death. I can do a lot. And because I felt like it. Anyway, a heads up, next time I see you I will be asking a favor," Death said, and for the first time since I meet him, his face was void of any sort of smile.

It was three days after the nearly botched job on the roof that I found out who the man I shot was. He was apparently he was some newly elected president of a recently war torn country, and was winning all sorts of human rights awards for ending the war and helping the people of his country. But his death had started yet another war.

I had single handedly started a war. Not only had I started a war, I had killed a man who had done nothing but try and bring peace.

The second time in my life I was convinced I was going to die, I was twenty-six years old. I had found myself back in my home town, which was probably my first mistake. There were a number of bridges I had burned when I disappeared, but still, for some reason, I found myself walking the same streets I had once followed Geoff down.

I got a room in an out-of-the-way motel. I had no idea what I was doing with my life. After the rooftop incident, and inadvertently starting a war, I pulled myself off the radar and took a vacation of sorts. Two years later, I was back at home.

Nothing seemed to have changed. The small diner Geoff and I would go to after his weekly drops was still there and still serving the same chili-cheese fries he and I would split. I ordered a plate of them for dinner, but couldn't manage to eat the whole thing. I wandered around the city blocks for a few hours, taking in the subtle changes. The warehouses where I had almost died and first met Death were no longer abandoned, and the apartment building Geoff had lived in was condemned.

I should have cared more than I did. I just couldn't bring myself to really care about anything. I stared up at the apartment building and realized that I didn't regret killing Geoff. Somehow, I didn't regret anything.

Having enough of nostalgia, I headed back to my hotel, cutting through alley ways and taking back streets. Even after all this time, I knew this city like the back of my hand. As I walked back, I found myself thinking about Death. I was still puzzled about what he said about asking a favor of me, but two years later I had yet to hear from him. I occasionally pulled the card from my wallet and looked at it, considered calling, but never actually following through. I was still curious at how he knew I needed help that day on the roof.

I had stopped thinking about the oddity of having Death's phone number a while ago. I just considered it my special gift, my talent, and the one thing that really set me apart from the rest of the world. I did not question if he was real or not anymore. Occasionally, logic reared its ugly head, but the matter was too tiring to attempt to sort out. Death was a young, average man with dirty blonde hair and simple features, who always wore a dark suit and a smile. That was it.

I was caught up in my thoughts, and since my feet knew the way I wasn't exactly paying attention to my surroundings.

I did notice, however, when I felt the cool metal of a gun barrel pressed against my back. I smiled to myself. I had three different weapons on my person at the moment, and I could tell from where the gun was pressed that the would-be-shooter was more than likely just a kid.

I held up my hands dramatically, before turning around.

"Kid," I said, "this is a bad idea."

"Shut up!" the kid snarled, and I couldn't help but be reminded of myself. He couldn't be more than fifteen years old, and it was obvious that he was in way over his head and completely oblivious. It was easy to look at his short, black hair and instead see my own brown hair, matted and sweaty on my nervous brow. I see his short, pudgy stature and instead see my own awkward lanky stance. It was so surreal, like looking through a one-way mirror into the past.

"Well, is this a robbery? Is that what the guys are asking for now a days to 'get in'?" I asked, adding the quotes with my fingers.

"No," the kid said sharply. "I know who you are. They told me if I killed you, they would forgive my brother." I wasn't surprised. I figured Dalton would have some hurt feelings since I left for bigger and better things.

"Oh, really now. So what exactly did your brother do?" I asked

"None of your damn business, but I have to kill you!" His hands were shaking as he pointed the gun at me.

I took a step back. "Sorry, kid, but I have no intention of dying tonight, so I think we have a problem." I lowered my hands, and the kid tensed. He wasn't going to shoot me. There was no way. I started to reach into my jacket slowly, as the kid stood shaking, gun still trained on my stomach.

"Stop moving!" the kid yelled. I just shook my head.

"Look kid, we both know you aren't going to...," I was interrupted mid sentence by a sharp pain in my gut. I hadn't even registered the gunshot before I was doubled over holding my stomach in shock as blood rushed from my body.

I looked up at the kid. His eyes went wide, terror etched on his face. He tossed the gun away before turning and running away leaving me alone in a back alley bleeding.

My brain was a jumble of pain, but somehow I managed to convince my body to listen to me, and I dug my wallet from my pocket, and fumbled for Death's business card.

The card was barely in my hand before I heard Death's distinctive voice from down the alley.

"This is a familiar sight," he said, his tone painfully cheerful.

"Please," I gasped. "Help."

"The last time something like this happened, you seemed so ready to expire, why have things changed?" he asked. He was now standing over me, smirking.

"I don't want to die," I said. And I didn't. I never wanted to die. I was scared to die. Death was a natural thing for a human to be fearful of.

"Not quite," Death piped in, reminding me of his ability to read my mind, "most humans, when face to face with death, are not fearful. Ten years ago, you were accepting, but now, after ten years of bloodshed and body counts, you are fearful."

"What. . ." I wheezed, my body denying my attempt at speaking.

Death knelt down in front of me. "Daniel, you were a good kid ten years ago, you were a stupid kid following around your hero in a desperate attempt for approval. You were normal." Death paused for a second looking up at the night sky, a considerate look on his face. He looked back to me, grinning, "You want to know a secret? You were supposed to die behind that warehouse ten years ago."

I had figured as much. At this point, I was grateful Death had access to my thoughts because my body had all but given up. One hand was still pressed into the wound on my stomach though it was doing nothing to stop the blood.

"I set you on your path," Death said. "I helped you along when you needed it, and molded you into exactly what I wanted you to be."

'What was that?' I thought, and Death's face lit up.

"To be me." He stood up and shrugged off his suit jacket and I saw at once that the shirt I had always assumed was a dark red, was actually white, and the red was a stain that blossomed out from Death's chest.

"You see," he said, undoing the top button of his shirt, "Death, this form of death anyway, starts as a human that must meet certain requirements, one of those being a body count. That part is easy enough to get, but it's the details that are difficult." He pulled open the top of his shirt and I saw a gaping wound in the center of his chest. "Betrayal," Death said, counting on his fingers, "and killing of peace, and then the absence of guilt." He paused, "Well, and of course, the body count, which, by the way, yours is great. It far out numbers mine and I was killed in war!"

'You died?' I questioned in my head and Death smiled.

“Over four hundred years ago. Just like you, I was groomed to fulfill every aspect of becoming Death.”

I stared at Death, my vision becoming fuzzy. I felt my body shiver and shake. I was dying. This was it. My mind began to panic. But all the same the sensation was like that of falling asleep, and the closer to sleep I got, the less aware of the pain I was. Just as I was drifting into darkness, I felt a violent jerk that pulled me back to reality and the pain.

“Ah, the downside to being Death,” he said, poking at his own wound. “This has been bleeding for centuries, and I still can’t get used to it.” He looked to me. “Death isn’t dead, by the way. You will live in the state you are now, forever, or until you can find someone to replace you.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. This was a dream. It had to be. I would wake up and I would be in my hotel. Or better yet, I would wake up and be sixteen, sleeping on Geoff’s fold away sofa.

“Wishful thinking will get you nowhere, and that is just friendly advice,” Death said. I looked up at him. Somehow my vision was restoring itself, but the pain in my gut was growing sharper.

Death suddenly let out a terrifying laugh and fell to his knees. I watched as his body decay like a video on fast forward. In the span of seconds I watched as his skin bloated and then shrank. His hair grew, became discolored, and fell from his scalp. His bones became visible as skin slid off in chunks before turning to ash and disappearing.

When the man I once knew as Death was nothing more than skeleton, he turned to me.

“I finally can rest, I finally can die, and for once I am not afraid.”

I watched as his bones fell into a pile of dust and at the same moment, I felt all sense of dying disappear. I was no longer tired and my body no longer felt as though it was shutting down. The bullet wound in my stomach still hurt like hell, but I was no longer dying.

I slowly pulled myself to my feet, and realized I still had the business card in my hand. It was now smeared with my blood, and instead of the neat letters spelling out Death, and a phone number there were four words.

Your turn. Have fun.