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Keepers

By Liza Stanaland

I couldn't wait to just be with him. To look him in the eyes and relish that instant of calming warmth amidst chaos, knowing that the lifetime of wearing plate armor, guard up, head down is a thing of the past... that our souls can spin patterns that defy logic while holding explanation just far enough out of reach so wonder can always prevail. I would stay for him. It was my turn to make a sacrifice. Even if it would get me killed in the process.

I'd lived my life for everyone else for so long. We spent our lives saving human souls as Keepers. Nothing we ever did was for ourselves. It's the reason we were created. From the beginning of time, we spent each and every life protecting humans. No one ever protected us. Now we were in the midst of a war. Snatchers were killing off our kind. I didn't realize how important a role I would play when this all began. But as I came closer to fading from this life to the next, I found myself wishing I'd spent more time loving the important ones.

I lived with my brother, Jacob. He was also a Keeper. My best friend, Serenitee, was a Serene. The Serene helped us

process our emotions. They were with the same Keepers in every lifetime. Serenitee gave us wisdom and strength, while helping us relax and keep our heads together. This would normally be done while sleeping, but we worked while we were dreaming. Keepers existed to jump dreams searching for Snatchers, who up until recently, only stole human souls to replenish their numbers. Now they were killing Keepers and they were coming after me.

Serenitee and Jacob had been researching the history of our kind. None of us knew why I had more powers than I'd had in my previous lives. They had gone all over the subconscious creation looking answers. I was foreseen along with the love of my life, London, and his brother Angel to stop the Snatchers completely. London and Angel, along with their older brother, Ferran, were stolen from their parents as children. They were Keepers, but the top bitch queen of the Snatchers, Natasha, took them and raised them as her own. Ferran was the only one to stay with her. London and Angel were twins and were mentally connected. They hated taking souls because they felt each other's pain. They didn't understand it because they didn't know they were actually Keepers.

Natasha sent London to kill me and that's when he found me in my black room. I created this after my parents died. I would

go there in my sleep and hide or cry or just sit there. I didn't realize I wasn't healing myself, only making the pain worse.

In that black room, there were no walls or ceiling. It was black as far as the eye could see. I sat with my head in my hands feeling as empty as this room and my heart just as cold and dark. This beautiful man would sit by me every night. No words were said in the beginning. He just sat there radiating strength and love. He was like the sun shining on the dark side of the moon. One day I decided to speak.

"Hi," I said. "I'm Jules."

"I know who you are," London said. "I was sent to find you months ago."

"By whom?"

"My mother, but you probably know her as Natasha."

My jaw dropped and I stood up in one quick pop, ready for a fight.

London held his hands up in surrender and said, "Wait, I'm not going to hurt you. If I wanted to, I'd have done it a long time ago. You haven't exactly had your guard up here other than making this ridiculously hard to find. I'm impressed."

I gathered my composure, but kept alert. "Then why the hell are you here?"

"To keep you protected," he said. "When I found you that first night and saw the state you were in, I just couldn't kill

you. You were so sad and broken, but so beautiful. You were everything that was good in this world."

I sat back down, but kept my distance. There's no telling what he would do since he was Natasha's *son*. The only thing I could think to do was keep him talking. I needed to find out as much about Natasha's plan as I could.

"Why would she want to kill me?" I asked.

"She sees you as a threat. You're different than other Keepers. She wouldn't tell me everything, just that you needed to die."

"But I'm just one person. I'm nothing special."

"Well she thinks you are. She's terrified of you."

I woke up to my alarm screaming at me. It had been going off for a while, I guess, because when I opened my eyes, Jacob was standing next to my bed and reaching to silence it.

"What did you see?" Jacob asked.

"I saw a guy. London. He was sent by Natasha to kill me."

"I see he didn't get the chance."

"No, but he could have. He didn't want to. He found me in the black room. I don't know how. It took you a whole month of tapping into my subconscious before you found me and you're my blood."

Jacob smiled and ripped the covers off me. "Come with me. We've found something."

I followed my brother into the living room and cuddled up under my mom's favorite fleece blanket. I always had it when there was a serious conversation coming. It was like having a piece of her there with me.

The powers I had were different from other Keepers. They'd just recently begun to show.

"You didn't have these powers in your past lives," Serenitee said. "You only had Projection. Premonitions and Expulsion are new, and Expulsion is a Snatcher's power."

Projection was this nifty, little trick I had where I could make my opponent feel their victims' pain, or mine. I could take it one step further. I could combine a lifetime of pain from every victim, or myself, and project that as well. It was a defensive power. I could use it long enough to distract him or her so that I could save the human and hide them from the Snatcher.

"Expulsion doesn't just kill Keepers, but also Snatchers. This is not an easy thing to do and there are very few Snatchers that actually have the ability to handle it. It doesn't just kill the opponent for one life, Expulsion kills the soul," Serenitee said.

"That's one that you haven't quite tapped into yet, right?" asked Jacob.

"Yup. It feels too dark. It scares me," I said.

"Well, you're going to need to get past that, Jules. It, along with a few other borrowed powers, will save us all," Serenitee said.

"What borrowed powers?" I asked.

"We'll talk about that later," she said. "I've spoken to another Serene. One of her charges has been kept on earth longer than any other Keeper in history. Everett is old. Walking with a cane and no teeth old. He was there when Loretta, his Serene, saw your future. Our future. We need to go speak to them, but you need to get London and his twin here first."

"Whoa, now, Serenitee. You didn't tell me that part," Jacob said. "What if they try to kill us? What if they try to kill Jules?"

"They won't. I think London has already proven he can't kill Jules. His brother won't be able to do it either. This involves both of them as well. Trust me."

Serenitee grabbed Jacob's hand and squeezed. The way they looked at each other for that split second told a tale as old as the earth. Love.

"Wait," I glanced back and forth from Jacob to Serenitee. "What's going on between you two?"

Jacob snatched his hand from Serenitee's and looked away.

"Nothing. What are you talking about?" he asked.

It was a rhetorical question. He knew I had just seen the beginning of something huge between them. I let it go because there was an elephant in the room the size of Asia and it had to be dealt with. Natasha had to be dealt with.

"What do I do?" I asked.

"Lie down and concentrate. You don't need to be fully asleep," Serenitee said. She put pillows on the opposite side of the couch and patted them gently. "Come on. We don't have much time."

I complied and pulled my mom's blanket up to my nose and smelled it as I closed my eyes. "Hi mom."

"Close your eyes and concentrate on your breathing. Deep breaths in and out. Listen to your heartbeat. Search for him. Focus on finding London. Look at the images in your mind. It's sort of like you're having a premonition, but you're going to send one to him."

"Huh?" I asked. "How am I - "

"Shhh. Don't talk. Just do what I say."

I focused on him. His body was tall and muscled. He had long brown hair. I was enamored by all of his Native American glory.

"You have him?" Serenitee asked.

I nodded my head.

"Show him where you are. Show him how to get here. He'll know what to do, but make sure you show his twin being here, too."

I did as I was told and then I was jolted awake. I sat straight up almost hyperventilating. I couldn't see my brother and Serenitee. I was having my own premonition.

It was Natasha. She was running and her long silver hair was blowing behind her. There was a formidable scream coming from her mouth. She'd figured out the twins were gone. Then a man, almost as tall as London and with the same skin tone, Ferran maybe, was running to catch up with her. He was fierce and had fire in his eyes. He was no Keeper. Ferran was power hungry. He craved the kill.

All these emotions exhausted me. When I opened my eyes, I was standing up on my toes. I'd balled my fists up so hard blood was dripping from my palms because I'd dug my fingernails into them.

"I, she knows," I said and promptly passed out.

When I opened my eyes, I was in my black room. Ferran knelt down beside me and stroked his fingers through my hair. When he spoke, his voice was soft like a lullaby. It was comforting, and I wanted to let go of all the fear, but I knew that would be his advantage. Maybe that's why Natasha used him. People were drawn to him without even understanding why or being able to stop it.

He would be her shepherd, gathering as many sheep as the already growing flock would allow.

"They'll be here soon," he said and gently patted my cheek. I was bait and had no energy. Forcing the premonition on London and immediately getting one, myself, had taken a lot out of me. I heard a low roar behind me and Ferran went rigid. I was scooped up and flying through the air in someone's arms. He threw me to Jacob and turned around to help London.

"Take her away from here, Jacob. We'll follow. Just go now," London said.

I wriggled down from Jacob, but didn't have the energy to keep from being dragged by my older brother.

"Take me back," I said.

Jacob didn't respond. He bear-hugged me and the room started flipping. He was taking us out of there. When we jump from dream to dream it's like looking at a picture reel moving really fast. You learn to deal with it after a while, but without my strength I wasn't able to stop the vertigo, so I closed my eyes.

"Open your eyes, Jules," Jacob said.

I didn't move. I wasn't even sure I was breathing.

"Sweetie," Serenitee said. "It's okay. Open your eyes."

I felt large muscled arms wrap around my back and legs. They picked me up and put me on someone's lap. I opened my eyes

and saw London. He was smiling at me and I noticed he had a dimple on the left side of his cheek.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," I said and then buried my head in his chest.

"You three take a minute. Then we have to go," Jacob said.

"Three?" I asked. I'd completely forgotten about London's brother.

"Jules, Angel. Angel, Jules," London said.

Angel smiled that big beautiful smile just like his twin, but not exactly. The dimple was on the right side of Angel's face. How odd.

"We need to go," London said. "Your brother and Serenitee are taking us to meet Loretta and Everett. They can help us."

"What happened with Ferran?" I asked.

"We got away. He didn't think we would kill him. Once he realized that, we had just enough time to get out before all hell broke loose."

When I stood up, my body felt like it was going to break. I was mentally and physically taxed.

"Whoa. Well, I guess now is as good a time as any," I said and wobbled, grabbing doors and walls to keep my balance as we went to find Jacob.

Jacob and Serenitee were sitting on the couch talking when we walked into the living room. Serenitee caught my eyes and smiled.

"You ready to go?" She asked.

"Ready as we'll ever be," I said.

"Sit down and get comfortable. They're waiting for us."

We all picked a spot and relaxed. As I closed my eyes, I listened to my breathing. When I couldn't hear that anymore, I listened to my heartbeat. Then I was asleep. Serenitee was guiding us to answers and we all held on for the ride. When I opened my eyes, we were standing in a room I'd never seen.

The room had paneled wood on the walls and hardwood floors that creaked a little when we walked. There were old chairs that had wooden arms and soft, fluffy seats and backs, all different patterns than the next. Sitting next to a fireplace was a beautiful young girl and a really old man with no teeth and a big grin.

"Sit, sit," he said. "We have much to discuss."

Loretta and Everett exuded love and care. They were very easy to be around, but that may have been because there were two Serene in the room.

Loretta started to speak and she sounded like a little girl. She didn't look a day over sixteen. The Serene started

their lives over when their charges died, so I was probably pretty dead on about her age.

"Jules, you're connected to London because of fate. London, you are connected to Angel because of the bone between identical twins. It forms a never-ending triangle between the three of you. It's also what will save all of our lives," Loretta said.

"But how do we do that?" I asked.

Everett cleared his throat and sat up straight.

"There were worries that Natasha was trying to steal souls. She was rooting up a plan to get a few of ours. Of course, everyone went into overdrive to keep it from happening, but you know fate. It does what it wants whether we want it to or not. That's when she got you two and your older brother," he said pointing to London and Angel. "We were thinking she'd try to get souls that hadn't been reborn yet and put them in a taker's body, but we were wrong. She knew it would be a hell of a lot easier to just steal all of you."

"But didn't she know who she was stealing?" London asked.

"Yes and no," Everett said. "By the time you two were old enough to display your powers, she thought you would be loyal to her. What she didn't count on was the connection between twins." His toothless grin was gone.

"So how do we prepare for this?" I asked. "How do we save everyone without losing each other in the process?"

Everyone was quiet and the old man was a little uncomfortable in his fluffy chair. Leaning from his left hip to his right and uncrossing his legs, he put his short, arthritic finger to his temple and closed his eyes for a minute.

"I think the decision is already made. You just have to accept it," he said.

London and I looked at each other, not sure what to say next. I knew what would have to happen. We would have to sacrifice ourselves to save our world. It was one hell of a weight to put on someone's shoulders, but luckily, I had two strong men to share the load. We said our goodbyes and closed our eyes to jump back to our subconscious and go back home. When we opened them again we were in my black room.

"What the hell are we doing here?" Jacob asked.

Everyone looked at me curiously.

"I didn't do it," I said.

"I did," a voice said from the dense darkness.

Ferran came into view with Natasha following right behind him.

"Well, hello there," Natasha said.

I looked at my brother. There was fear and rage in his eyes. That bitch killed our parents and he wanted revenge.

I wanted to go somewhere safe, away from all of this, but there was no escaping it. We could go as far away as the other

side of the world, but our minds would always come with us and that's where the war really was. So, we would fight. We'd fight for the beginning of the end and then for a new beginning. It was the way our world worked. One door closes, another opens. Death was never really death, only rebirth. A fresh start. And we were about to dive in head first.