



CATHY CLAMP

FARE THEE WELL

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# Fare Thee Well

*illustration by*

GOÑI MONTES

His hand was cool and damp, with the limp, rubbery texture of a corpse. I don't know what it is about people who work with the dead, but every one I'd met in my fifteen years came to resemble their clients after a few years on the job. I didn't shudder as I shook hands, didn't pull back in revulsion. I kept smiling, and I think it surprised him. "Nice to meet you, Dr. Morgan. I'm Lia Thantos, the new summer intern."

Bright green eyes behind thick glasses sparkled with something approaching amazement. He pulled back his hand and crossed his arms over his white lab coat. "Please, call me Mike since we'll be working together. I have to admit, we don't get a lot of applications for internships here at the morgue. You're sure this is what you want to spend your summer doing?"

I shrugged. "I'm the fourth generation of a family of morticians. Dad decided it would be good for me to learn this side of the business. Thought it would look good on my college application. Frankly, it's no big. When I go home tonight, there'll be dead bodies there too. "

His eyebrows raised and then lowered in confusion. Everyone's did when they found out. It was a little

weird. And a lot creepy. Or so say the few friends I can claim. I inhaled deeply as he considered what to say. The antiseptic smell permeating the room couldn't completely cover the sweet, cloying odor of decaying flesh. It wasn't a bad smell, precisely. But it takes getting used to. He looked me over, from purple-streaked hair to black-and-gray camo pants and leather Frankenstein boots in size five. When he finally spoke, he tried for humor. But the underlying question was disturbing by implication. "So, are the therapy bills racking up in your family? Coffins and kids are... Well, they don't usually mix."

I gave a thin, tight smile. Even among the death workers, as I called them, I'd learned not to reveal how often I'd played in the coffins when I was little. No, they hadn't influenced who I became. They're part of who I am. The padding's so soft and smooth, and when the lid shuts, there's utter silence. Peace. I'd sit in the visitation rooms too, before anyone arrived. Same reason. Just me and the dearly departed and peace. Dad's the same way. Frankly, I think my mom is squicked out by both of us. "Well, other than the fact I haven't been able to get the smell of embalming fluid completely out of my nose since I was six, it isn't bad. After all, death is just another part of life."

Ding, ding, ding. His whole body relaxed when I spoke the proper phrase. All death workers say it. It's the secret handshake, the whispered password at the darkened doorway. It's the mantra that justifies their existence, and probably what keeps them sane. And it had the advantage of being true. He nodded. "Okay

then, Lia. Let me show you around.”

He handed me a clipboard and white jacket from a hook on the wall, and we walked through the swinging doors. It wasn't a big place. Rolling up the sleeves of the oversized coat took longer than the tour. I already knew what exam tables looked like and recognized most of the equipment used for autopsies. My dad and granddad collected tools from different eras as a hobby. I pointed toward the refrigerated drawers lining both sides of the cold room. There were twenty. Ten on each side of the room. “You have a lot of drawers for a county this size. Is there a high mortality rate?”

He leaned against one of said drawers, comfortable in gum-soled shoes and elastic-waisted hospital pants. “There was a long time ago, when the building was built. The Spanish flu hit this area hard a century ago. There used to be a crematorium right next door, where the parking lot is now. One-stop shopping for the doctors. We've updated the drawers, but most of the room is just the same as it was then. And, oddly enough, we're full up at the moment.” His hand reached out to pat one of the doors. “Let's talk about the drawers for a second. The county coroner has very particular guidelines about how bodies are accepted into the facility.” So, my boss's boss. I knew the coroner was an elected position in Brazer County but didn't know much about what he did. Dad said the coroner was really good at his job and I was supposed to pay close attention to anything he told me.

Mike pointed toward the clipboard. “You'll need to write this down.” I already had my pen raised. He

gestured with an arm toward the doorway we'd entered. "Bodies are delivered there by the hospital, EMTs, or police. For now, you won't have to worry about handling bodies on your own, though I'll want your help with one later. You'll mostly be answering phones and doing the paperwork to file with the state."

"No big," I commented as I jotted notes. It really wasn't. "I've hefted corpses before with Dad. I can't lift one alone, but I'm stronger than I look." I flexed a bicep to prove my point. I might only be 115 sopping wet, but most of it's muscle. "Just let me have the head. Dead people's feet *reek*. Never have figured out why."

He smiled and looked impressed as he nodded his head. "No argument. Okay then. Maybe you can take on some additional responsibilities during your time here. It'd help us out a lot. So, the bodies come in there. We inspect them and check the tag against the report. That's very important."

An abrupt laugh escaped me. "Oh yeah. I so know about that. We had a funeral once where the lid of the coffin was opened and people who expected to see their sweet old Uncle Bob found some derelict from under a bridge instead. It wasn't our fault, but it was still an ugly scene at the dinner table that night."

He winced, as I expected him too. I still did when I thought about it. "Did you ever find Uncle Bob?"

I nodded. "Luckily. He was still at the hospital in the basement with the wrong toe tag. So yeah. Verify identity. Check."

"Good. Now, this next part is really, *really*

important, so circle, star, and underline it.” He spoke slowly and carefully. His finger bobbed in the air with each word as though it were a bouncing ball without the music soundtrack. “When the body is wheeled in this room, we remove a body from one of these ten drawers and put the new body in. Then we take the removed body and put it in the bank of drawers behind you. *No exceptions.*”

My pen paused, and I felt my eyebrows drop until the hair tickled my eyelashes. I moved my pen until the clicker pointed at the door to his right. “But you told me during the tour that all of these drawers are full and all of the ones behind me are empty. Why not just put the new bodies in the empty drawers until they’re all full? Don’t they refrigerate completely?”

He shook his head firmly. “That’s not the way it works. Breaking that rule will get you fired and possibly me as well. So...no. Just do it the way I tell you and everything’ll be fine.”

Stupidest rule I’d ever heard in my life. No wonder people burned out of government jobs. “Okaaay. Got it. What’s ne—” My cell phone cheeped to tell me I had a text message. I automatically reached for it, but then it occurred to me personal calls might not be allowed. I froze and looked at Mike.

He lifted his wrist and peered at his watch, then shrugged. “It’s lunchtime anyway, so go ahead and take it. But normally you’ll need to turn it off during work hours. I’m actually surprised you have a signal. I hardly ever get one down here.” The phone cheeped again as he pushed away from the wall. “We take an

hour lunch, so I'll meet you back here at one. The hospital called earlier and said a new delivery was coming in. We'll do a walk-through of accepting a new body, and then I'll show you how to do the forms to the state to order death certificates. How does that sound?"

"Sounds great and also sounds like this is going to be a pretty easy summer job."

The chuckle that escaped him had dark undertones, which surprised me. "You might not say that by the end of the day. But I do like optimism."

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"Well, I suppose I'd better get back downstairs. Thanks for having lunch with me, Dani." I wiped the last bit of ketchup from my lips and stood up.

My best friend flipped her wrist to peer at a neon pink watch that was probably visible from space. Hurts my eyes to stare at it too long. "You've still got ten minutes. Are you really that excited to get back to a sunless concrete bunker filled with corpses?"

I knew I shouldn't be. Really. But the smile escaped me anyway. "Yeah. I am. So sue me for thinking this summer is going to seriously rock."

Dani rolled her big brown eyes. She'd known me since first grade when I snuck an embalmed hand from dad's collection into school for show-and-tell. She'd been the only one not to scream or throw up...including the teacher. We were destined to be BFFs. "You are so weird, Lia. You're really

determined to take over the mortuary when your dad retires? You want to do this for your whole *life*? No traveling to Monte Carlo to lie on the beach or singing for your supper on a cruise ship? You could, you know. You've got a really good voice." She stood with me because I didn't sit back down.

I let out an abrupt laugh before picking up the burger wrappings and crumpling them to put them in the trash. "Could you really see me singing in some sappy musical on a Disney cruise? I love you, but you're completely brain damaged. I'd do to Rogers and Hammerstein what Tim Burton would do to *Sesame Street*." I grabbed my white jacket from the booth behind us and slid into it. Dani had complained the lingering smell of antiseptic was making her queasy.

Wuss.

"And besides," I continued as we walked out of the beating sun to the cool shade of the building overhang, "Peaceful Grove Funeral Home is an institution around here. We get clients from three counties and overflow from the city. Why would I want to go out into the world and struggle to find the very same thing my dad and granddad have worked their whole lives for and are ready to hand to me for the asking? I mean, if I'd wanted to be a lawyer or a musician, that would be one thing. But I *want* to be a mortician."

Same old argument, different day. She didn't think I understood what I wanted. I knew I did and also knew she would never get where my head was. We stared at each other for long moments with raised

brows and wide, unblinking eyes until we finally burst out laughing. She bumped my hip with her purse like she did every time we agreed to disagree. “Girlfriend, you are a *nut*. Go play in the morgue. But I swear, if you start wearing goth makeup and walking like your freaky uncle Theo, I’m calling your sister to put you in a rubber room.”

My sister Sophie was a doctor at the hospital in the psych ward. Gee, I wonder how she gravitated toward *that* career after growing up in our family? Because, yeah...my uncle Theo, also an undertaker, was seriously freaky and did walk a lot like Lurch on *The Addams Family*.

“If I start walking like that...*please* lock me away.”

I gave her a hug as she laughed, and we strolled back across the grass to the low-slung concrete building arm in arm. Moments later, I was alone in the cool shade, watching her walk toward her bright red sports car. She turned when she reached it and raised an arm, her skin the color of rich cocoa, to wave good-bye. I returned the wave and then looked out over the parking lot. I didn’t see Mike’s car yet in the space he’d said was his—he drove a big, bruising sedan that’d been made at least a decade before I was born. Frankly, it surprised me. It was straight up one o’clock, and Dad had said he was a really punctual guy. But hey, what do I know?

Thirty minutes later, I realized I didn’t know much. Still no boss and a locked door. If this was some sort of test to see if I had staying power...well, I didn’t have a ride home until Dad came to get me, so I was

here for the long haul. Dani was six months older than me, and every time I saw her behind the wheel, I started counting down the days until I could get my permanent driver's license. Of course, my family still didn't have the sort of money as the Underhills, so I probably wouldn't see a car other than my parent's until I bought my own.

I was sitting cross-legged on the floor next to the locked door when squeaking wheels made me look up to see a guy in uniform walking down the hall. I recognized the symbol on the jacket pocket as the same hospital where Sophie worked. The gurney he was pushing was covered with a blanket, the body underneath tied down with thick leather straps. I didn't bother to get up when he looked down at me. In fact, I patted the tile next to my leg. He wasn't all that cute but seemed like he would be good to talk with to kill time. "Hi. I'm Lia. Might as well pull up a piece of floor. Nobody's here and I don't have a key."

He reached into his pocket and extracted a ring of keys. He selected one and turned toward the doorknob. "I'm Larry, and I know who you are. You're Sophie's sister. We got the memo you'd be working here." He opened the door.

"They give you guys keys to the morgue?"

He laughed, and it made him look younger. Not young *enough*, mind you. But probably in his twenties instead of his thirties. "Hardly. I barely have keys to my own locker. No, these are Mike's keys, and they come with a message."

I pushed myself to my feet, using the wall as a

brace, then followed the gurney inside. I held open the door so it didn't hit the deceased and then let it close behind me. Larry dangled the key ring until I took it, then spoke. "Your boss was hit by a bus over lunch."

My mouth opened wide. Whoa. I mean, people always say that jokingly when they talk about burial plans and making a will, but how often does it really happen? "Oh my God. Is he dead?"

He shook his head, making strands of curly red hair fall over his eyes. "No, but he's pretty banged up. Broken ribs, a fractured jaw, and a shattered femur. He's in surgery right now, having pins put in the ribs so they don't puncture his lungs."

Ouch. See, this is why I don't work in a hospital. Other than for the death certificate and any police investigation, what damage there is to the corpse is irrelevant. And they're not in pain. I don't like pain. I think my sister is just as weird as she thinks I am, for wanting to be surrounded by people who hurt. "So what now? Am I supposed to go home and wait for someone to call me?"

He pulled the blanket off the dead body. Well, actually it *wasn't* a body. Not per se. It was a not-quite-clear zippered bag, and the scent that wafted up from the movement of air told me *why* it was in a bag. Eww...it was a floater. There's no worse smell in the world than flesh that's ripened underwater. "Not that anyone told me. We've got a call into the coroner to tell him what happened. He should be here shortly. But no, we can't close the county morgue. It messes up the whole process, and there's no way I'm putting this

thing back in my van. It's all yours. Give me a hand here and we'll get him onto a cart. I've got to get back."

Bodies have their own momentum when being moved. I've gotten the hang of lifting and swinging a corpse so the body does part of the work. But the bag...the center of gravity was all wrong, like there was a big ball of pus located dead center that rolled and shook like jelly when moved. I was terrified that if I swung it like a regular body, it would move faster than I could control and rip right through the bag. Yeah, they're strong bags, but fear isn't logical.

Larry seemed to have a similar fear, because he lifted the plastic gingerly and we sort of slid it from Larry's gurney to one of the morgue's. I couldn't help but shudder. We seldom got floaters at home. They were either cremated or handled with a closed casket. Dad had never actually let me see a floater. Said it would give even me nightmares.

I believed him.

Larry handed me the clipboard, and I matched the name on the bag tag to the report, then signed and initialed where he told me. "Any chance you can help me get him into a drawer? Apparently, I have to move one of the bodies in those drawers and replace it with this guy."

He shook his head and almost looked sad about it. "No can do. I've got this job because the guy before me did just that. I know it sounds stupid, but I have to presume there's a reason. The rule goes back better than a hundred years."

Wow. Multiple generations of stupid. Not much to be done about it, then. “Okay. I’ll deal with it. Thanks for the keys.”

He waved as he left, and then it was time to earn my pay. Oh wait. I wasn’t being paid. Lucky me.

I reached for the handle for the nearest drawer and pulled.

Nothing happened.

I tried again, but the latch remained against the door as though welded. It was *locked*?

The next handle was the same. No amount of tugging or prying could move the handle. I did try prying, with the metal push broom handle. But no such luck.

One by one I tried the doors. It wasn’t until I reached the last door, the top right, that the handle moved. Hallelujah! I opened the drawer and pulled out the rolling table. It took just about every bit of strength I had to do it, too. The guy on the slab must have weighed three hundred pounds. I tentatively tugged on his arm, but he wasn’t going anywhere without at least two other people. There’s no weight like dead weight.

Well, hell. I looked over at the new dead guy. He could stay at room temperature for a bit, but not long. I could only hope the coroner came soon.

\* \* \*

He didn’t. Big shock. Hour after hour rolled by while I sat and answered the phones. I checked in at the hospital twice to find out how Dr. Morgan was.

According to Sophie, they had him in a drug-induced coma so a machine could breathe for him while the ribs healed. So, no help there. I'd already called Dad to let him know what was happening. He told me to sit tight until five and then he'd come to help with the body if nobody had come before then. He had two funerals today, and neither he nor Gramps could get away before that. Mom and Grandma were shopping in the city. So, that was that.

The problem was that the guy had started to smell. And I mean *really* smell. The body must have been sitting for a while before they found him, and by three o'clock, it'd gotten so bad I wanted to get him in a drawer just so I could air out the room enough to breathe. Dad had told me the drawers here had fans and vents to funnel the expansive decomposition gases. I knew I could lift him, at least enough to drag him onto a slab. Then, Dad could help me move him from one bank of drawers to the other before anybody knew.

Even still, it took me the better part of a half hour to manage it. I'd have to stop every couple of minutes to go into the next room to let out the breath I was holding and take another gulp of air. But it wasn't just the smell. It was hard not to stare at the body. The flesh was spongy and bluish white with patches of orange and black—colors humans should never be able to achieve. Granddad had told me when I decided to do this that the flesh could tear if I wasn't careful. He said he'd seen that once, the flesh ripped and what used to be muscle underneath just sort of burst out like

pus. He'd lost his lunch.

And my granddad was a tough guy.

So I was careful.

Finally, it was done, and the moment the door closed on him the air in the room lightened a little. It'd still take some serious spraying and probably a few candles to get it back to normal, but that was okay.

I sat down in the office chair and took off my nitrile gloves—the same purple as my hair. Frankly, I was proud of myself. I'd been confronted with a problem and had risen to the occasion. Under the circumstances that had to count for something.

Needing to tell someone about it, I called Dani. This was too big for texting. She picked up on the first ring, and I proceeded to tell her the whole weird tale.

“Wow. Go you, Lia!” She really did sound proud of me, and I couldn't help but beam.

“So you don't think Dr. Morgan will be mad I put the body in the wrong drawer?”

She let out a noise approaching a raspberry. “Nah. Like you said, you'll move the body as soon as you can. But you can't have it rotting right there in the room, can you?” I was just starting to answer when an odd sound came from the next room. It sounded almost like a person moaning. Apparently, Dani could hear it too. “What's that weird noise? Is that on your end?”

“Yeah. I don't know.” I stood up and kept the cell phone to my ear as I went into the cooler. The connection crackled a little but held. I held the phone away from my head while I tried to locate the sound. It seemed to come from everywhere—almost as if it was

coming from inside the walls. Or the *drawers*.

The closer I got to the drawer I'd just put the floater in, there was no mistaking that the noise was coming from inside. "Uh, Dani? The noise is coming from inside the drawer I just put the new body in."

"Oh...*snap*. Is the fan broken or something?"

It didn't sound like a broken fan, but that was the only logical answer. I pulled on the handle and the door opened.

There was a pause, as though the whole universe was holding its breath. Silence deep enough to drown in. Dani's voice in my ear made me let out a small yelp. "Hey, the sound stop—"

As if on cue, a shriek of abject terror and pain exploded into the room, literally knocking me over. My ears registered the wave of energy as pain, and I recoiled from the strength of it. I hit the edge of the examination table, and the phone flew from my hand, landing on the tiled floor across the room.

The anguish in the wailing was so intense it made my chest hurt and tears come to my eyes. My hands went over my ears. It was torture, fear, panic, and grief—all rolled into a single sound that burned in my veins. My more sensible legs struggled to move away from it, but my oddly wired brain was excited by the noise and forced my feet forward, toward the body on the slab.

"Lia? Are you there?" Dani's voice was barely a squeak a thousand miles away, unable to compete in my head with the wretched wailing. "What's happening?"

I gingerly took my hands down and reached for the metal table on rollers. I pulled hard, yanking it from the wall as though the force would make the sound stop. The screams continued.

I stared down at the remains inside the bag—the mouth was now open in an eerie imitation of a scream, even though most of the face had dissolved away. Empty eye sockets stared up blankly, and the teeth on one side gleamed in the light. There was no rising and falling of the chest, even though there was no mistaking the sound came from inside the bag. I hesitantly placed an open palm on the chest of the corpse and then pulled it away with a jerk. No movement. I hadn't expected any, of course. But I hadn't expected the sound, either.

My heart pounded with fear even though I seemed to have a freakish fascination with the bubble of plastic that had appeared in the bag, as though it was being pushed up by the force of the scream. It seemed wrong on so many levels.

I turned away from the body and went to retrieve the phone. "Dani? Are you still there?" I had to shout to be sure that she would hear me.

She had to likewise scream to be heard over the din. "Duh! Where else would I be? What's going on there?"

I felt oddly detached from myself as I responded. My voice had become calm and quiet, which meant she probably couldn't hear me very well. "The corpse is screaming. I should probably call Sophie to find out why. Can I call you back?"

“The hell with that, girlfriend. I’m coming to pick you up. Let someone else handle this. You’re just an intern.”

The line went dead in my ear. I continued to stare at the inflated plastic bag as I speed-dialed my sister’s cell. As it rang, I walked back and tried pushing the table inside the wall, but the mechanism had apparently jammed when I’d yanked it out. I put my hand on the plastic over the mouth and pushed down. There was pressure against my palm, but it did dim the noise a bit and gave me an idea.

Sophie’s voice mail picked up just as I extracted the roll of duct tape I’d found in the bottom drawer of the desk while exploring. I hung up and dialed again. I knew she’d pick up eventually. She really needs to set her phone for a longer ring period.

Two short and two long strips of tape were enough to put an “X” over the lips and press the plastic against the corpse’s mouth. Securing it to the table was just an added bonus, in case he suddenly got wanderlust and tried to leave. Yeah, I know. But again...dead guy...screaming.

The ringing stopped just as the wailing dimmed a bit. “Dr. Thantos.” Her voice started all business, but she knows the sound of pain, and her next words were filled with controlled panic. “Who is this? Can you speak? Have you dialed nine-one-one yet?”

“Sophie?” My breath was starting to come faster, and that worried me. “I’ve got a problem.”

“*Lia*? Oh my Lord, sweetie. Has there been an accident? Where are you?”

I spoke again in that calm, detached voice that, combined with the hyperventilating, told me I was probably hysterical. It didn't feel as bad as I thought it would. "No, I'm fine. I'm still at the morgue. Can you think of a reason why a corpse would scream?"

Now she sounded confused. "If it's a *corpse*, it's not screaming. By definition, a corpse is...dead."

I felt my head nod. "I know. That's why I'm asking. But it's definitely a corpse—the floater delivered by that guy you work with, Larry. Not a chance he's alive." I waved toward the table like Vanna White, even though I knew she couldn't see it. "And he's most definitely screaming."

"Okay . . ." There was a pause that held my attention, because it wasn't from confusion; it was that brand of thoughtful silence that always meant Sophie had an idea. When she finally spoke, her voice was careful—the same voice she'd once used to tell me there was a rattlesnake coiled by my leg. "Lia, where *exactly* in the morgue is this corpse, and where exactly are *you* standing?" It was such an odd question that it sort of brought me to my senses. My breathing calmed, and my head felt clearer. I told her our exact positions, and there was another long pause. "Okay, you need to not move. And I mean *not move*. There's not much time left. I'm calling Dad and coming straight over there. Don't touch the corpse. Don't call anyone else or move one foot past the exam table."

She hung up even as my mouth opened to ask why. Not much time left? For what?

But I trusted my sister. She knew a lot of things, some

sensible...some really weird. She slew everyone in Trivial Pursuit when we were kids, and was nearly savant about death and dying stuff.

So I waited. I didn't move, although I did finally resort to stuffing my pinkies in my ears to ease the ache that was pounding my temples. I'd never had a headache before. Not one. I suddenly had sympathy for my English teacher, Mrs. Grisham, who got migraines. If they were as bad as this, she lived through hell.

I don't really know how long I stayed like that. It was at least until my shoulders started to ache and my lips started cracking. "Lia? Where are you?" The sound barely registered in my brain, but I looked up as Sophie burst into the room. I'd actually expected Dani, but she lives way across town, while the hospital is only a mile away. I supposed it made sense.

I started toward her, but she held out a hand to stop me. I froze and watched as she went over to examine the screaming corpse. She pulled out her penlight but then put it away when she realized it had no eyes to check for pupil dilation. I thought that the tape over the mouth and her stethoscope on his bloated, dissolving chest looked sort of funny, and a high-pitched giggle erupted from me before I used both of my hands to cover my mouth. She turned and raised her brows but then smiled just a bit. Mortician humor. Most people don't get it.

Finally, she wrapped the scope around her neck and heaved a breath. "Okay, give me the exact series of events. Did you, at any point, move this body to where

you're standing? Or anywhere on that side of the table?"

I shook my head and told her what happened. As I was finishing, an odd rumble began to vibrate under my feet and the lights started to flicker. I pointed behind Sophie and called out over the screaming, "Is that smoke coming from the vents, or dust? Are we having an earthquake?"

My sister came across the room and wrapped her arms around me—panic seeping from every pore. "Worse, Lia. Much, much worse. Kharon has just realized he's missing a passenger."

\* \* \*

Who was Karen, and why was that bad? Sophie was trembling, sweating enough to stink, her heart pounding so hard I could feel it through my shirt as she held me tight against her. My sister, raised in a mortuary and surrounded by pain and death every day, was *afraid*? It instantly sobered me, and I started to watch the room with a wary eye. The cool white fluorescent light was warming to burnished copper as I stared. The light was getting richer, more orange and red than blue and white. The walls were changing too. White painted drywall was dissolving to become rich earth studded with stone.

"He's coming." Her voice was a whisper in my wounded ears, and it held equal parts of respect and horror. "I'll do everything I can to protect you, Lia. I swore to Daddy I'd keep you safe. It was just a

mistake, after all. You didn't mean to hurt him."

Protect me? "Hurt who? Sophie, you're confusing me."

She grabbed me by the shoulders, hard enough that her nails cut through my jacket into my skin. "It's real, Lia. All the stories Granddad told us. The ones about the river and the boat and the ferryman of—"

"Souls...in torment. Who is responsible for this?" The voice was a deep bass, so low it vibrated my eardrums. I turned around to what should have been a wall of polished metal doors. But instead the room had expanded outward in all directions. I was staring at a dock next to a river and a long, low-slung boat packed with people who were all staring vacantly across the water.

A line of people stood on an ancient wooden pier—nine men and women looking as empty and silent as those on the boat.

And if none of that was enough to freak me out, I could see right through the people on the dock and the boat. They were...ghosts. My voice had a bit of a strangled tone to it when I was finally able to speak. "Jesus H. Ch—"

Sophie hissed in my ear. "Watch what you swear here. We're not in the same religion anymore. It'll only make him madder."

A heavily muscled man with a coarse, tangled beard was wearing a tall hat and what looked like a filthy toga. He stepped off the boat onto the rocks, using a long wooden staff to keep his balance. He started toward us but stopped and turned toward the

people on the dock. “Onto the boat! Go!” The staff became a weapon, and as the men and women cowered, cried out, and tried to run, he repeatedly hit them until...I grabbed the staff to stop the next blow.

I swear I don’t remember leaving Sophie’s side. The moment when I’d had enough and couldn’t stand to see those poor people in misery anymore had come upon me so suddenly it wasn’t a conscious thought. “Quit hitting them!”

His head turned, and his eyes locked on mine. They weren’t a color I could describe, even if I tried. The pupils shifted from red to black and a million shades of blue—all in the space of a heartbeat. “Who dares to deny a god’s duty?” The words were a dangerous sound, like a dog’s growl, and the staff began to heat until I had to let it go. The pain in my palm was immediate, and I clutched it to my chest as Sophie grabbed at my arm to pull me backward.

“Please forgive her, Kharon. Lia’s only a child. She knows no better.”

Wait. Kharon, not Karen? *The* Kharon? The ferryman of souls across the river to the underworld? Whoa. He was my favorite character in the old myths. Little known, curmudgeonly, and usually given a short shrift by the other gods. But very cool. Still, I couldn’t help but voice my shock. “Those are just *stories*, Sophie. Ancient mythology.” I realized I was whispering to myself, trying not to look at the man who had grown in height. When I finally turned, he towered over us, his calves the size of tree trunks, his breath fetid and hot on our hair.

Eww.

“You are the bringer of death?” His voice was the rumble underfoot now, drowning out even the scream in the background. He sounded seriously ticked off. “The new conveyor of souls, who has left this soul in torment?”

The bringer of death? I had to look then. His face showed a god’s fury. “Um. No, I don’t kill people. I just work at a morgue. And I’m not really a child. I’m fifteen.”

“Of course you are not a child. Children may not convey souls. But you *are* the bringer of death. It is your given name. Evangalia Thanatos...bringer of truth, and death. It is your birthright...the reason your petition was accepted. Why have you denied this soul entry across the river? Why have you disturbed my schedule? Where is his coin?”

I felt my eyes open wide with a sort of revulsion. My parents actually *speak* Greek. Our family had an Ellis Island change of spelling of our last name, but Mom actually let Dad name me *bringer of death*? What sort of sick joke was that?! Wait. Coin? “What sort of coin?”

Sophie grabbed my forearm. “You don’t *know*? Oh Lia! Dr. Morgan was supposed to explain all this to you the very first thing. The morgue was built over the Acheron River. Not the Styx, the Acheron. It flows right down the center of the room. There were so many deaths so suddenly during the influenza epidemic. They had to build the morgue so the souls would move quickly across the river. But they couldn’t rebuild the

whole building, so only ten are on the right side of the river.”

“Only the drawers on one side of the room.” *That’s why she asked if I’d moved the floater past the exam table. That must be where the river runs. There are nine bodies, and nine drawers were locked. Or is that just coincidence?* I was staring at the rocks, listening to the water lap against the dock, breathing in the stench Kharon was filling the room with, and everything suddenly made sense. Not just the job...but *everything*. My whole life. All the dreams, all the twitching sensations when I saw dead bodies before the funeral. But then a few days later, it would all be better. They were...peaceful. They’d crossed the river. The river must run under the cooler at home too.

Cool.

The voice above us turned cold and angry. “You had no right to deny the soul entry. He is in torment, and now you must pay his price to enter the fields.”

I just had classical mythology in social studies last term and struggled to think back to the lecture from the college professor who guest spoke. Kharon or Charon was the ferryman, formerly a demon in the service of Hades who gained demigod status. He wasn’t mentioned much in literature except as an aside. About the only time he got much play was in a version of the myth of Hercules, where Athena got the better of him, allowing Hercules to gain passage even though he wasn’t dead. But the one thing Kharon was known for was getting his due. A coin under the tongue was the *only* entry across the river. “But I have no coins of

bronze or gold. *Nobody* does. They're not used as currency anymore."

"That is not my concern. Either you must pay the fee or forfeit your body for the soul's use. Look upon your mistake, woman. See what you have wrought."

I found myself turning, even though I wasn't doing it. I looked up, because the whole rest of the room had elevated until it was at the top of a steep hill. The body on the slab was still just a body. But the bubble pressing up the plastic wasn't due to the scream. It was the soul trying to get out. It couldn't move forward or back, stuck in the jaws of a trap. Trapped and in such horrible agony.

I tried to turn away, to shift my gaze, as tears ran down my cheeks and I sobbed, just like Sophie was sobbing. But I couldn't turn. He wouldn't let me, and it hurt me—physically *hurt* to see that sort of pain. Eternal, never-ending, and it was my fault. Just because I was too lazy to do one simple thing.

"I brought a coin, Lord Kharon." I looked over to see Sophie detaching a gold coin from her keychain and holding it up. The coin glinted in the light, and I realized I recognized it. Dad always kept one just like it on his dresser. Said it was a "get out of jail free" card. How come Sophie had one? Maybe I'd live long enough to ask her. "Please accept this man's soul onto your ferry."

I looked up hopefully, breathlessly. But Kharon just shook his head. "It was not your mistake, and it is not her coin. She must give a coin belonging to her. No other. Or give up her body. You have but ten minutes

to make your choice.”

Why ten minutes? But then I looked at my watch. It was ten to five. The underworld works on the freaking *clock*?

There was nothing I could do in ten minutes. There was no way to fix what was wrong and nobody I could call to help.

Or...was there?

Maybe I *could* call somebody. But it was the riskiest thing I'd ever considered doing. I was terrified he'd strike me down on the spot. Still, it was all I had.

I looked up to the ceiling and shouted for all I was worth. “Oh great Athena! We require your wisdom to settle a dispute. Please, I beseech thee. Come to my aid!”

Sophie gasped, and Kharon roared in fury. He lifted up his staff and brought it down hard and fast. The blow caught me in the side. I can't remember ever hurting that bad. I couldn't draw in breath and was pretty sure he'd broken several ribs. I was swept off my feet to land in a heap halfway in the river, spots of light filling my vision. “How *dare* you, human!” Sophie was at my side instantly, even though I tried to wave her off. We both screamed as he raised the stick again. He was about to bring it down on our heads when it...stopped. In midair.

“Stay your hand, daemon.”

I couldn't decide whether to cry or laugh, but the pain in my chest made the decision for me, and salty tears dripped down into the water. Athena looked different than what I would have expected. She was

always portrayed in a toga, often with an owl on her shoulder. But she was dressed in a simple pair of jeans and leather vest, her long auburn hair held back in a seriously cool French braid. Now that she'd materialized, I could see that she was gripping the end of Kharon's staff

"This is not your concern, goddess." He tried to yank his staff away.

Athena raised one eyebrow but didn't remove her hand. "My name was invoked and an honest dispute exists. Does it not?"

"It does!" I shouted to be heard, and it felt like fire was burning in my lungs. The goddess turned to me, and her eyes were the same weird shifting color as Kharon's. Those eyes. They compelled me to talk, and even the pain didn't matter. "I messed up. I know that. But I didn't understand! Doesn't that mean anything? And we have a coin. My sister has it right here. Can't we just make this stop and get the guy on the boat?"

She sighed and began to shrink until she was a regular-sized person and was standing next to me. She didn't touch me, but I got the feeling she wanted to help. "Unfortunately, it isn't that easy, Lia, and you know it." My eyes must have widened at her knowing my name, because she smiled. "Goddess of wisdom. I already gathered most of the information before I arrived. Yes, you're right about the drawers. Once the body is inside and a coin placed in the mouth, the door locks until the soul crosses. No force on earth can open or destroy the drawers until the ferryman arrives. But you're wrong that you didn't understand. You *did* .

You were told to circle, star and underline it...were you not?"

I closed my eyes and felt a hot blush come to my cheeks. Sophie stopped gently touching my ribs and hit me on the shoulder. "Damn it, Lia. Why don't you ever *listen*? Can't you just once do what you're told?" She paused, and I suddenly realized she was crying, angry tears that matched the words she spit at me. "Now I'm going to lose you because, once again, you decided you knew better. And I won't have a sister anymore, and Mom and Dad will be the ones who'll have to bury you!"

Crap. "Sophie, I'm...I'm *sorry*." I couldn't even express how bad I felt. I didn't want her to hurt, and Dad must be totally freaking out, waiting to hear. And if I died . . .

I looked up at Athena. "Isn't there anything I can do? Anything at all?"

She let out a slow breath. "The rules are very clear, and they're not mine to change. An item of sufficient value or a body to end the torment of the dead. Those are the only choices. And yes, it must be yours to give." She stepped back and increased in size until she was slightly larger than Kharon. "I once did you wrong, daemon. I forced you to accept a soul onto your boat and you had no choice but to obey. I believe this time, I have the duty to right that wrong."

Crap. She was going to decide for him. I was going to lose...and die.

She raised a finger thoughtfully. "Lia is an adult in our ancient culture, but a child in this one. Both must

be taken into account. If an adult, she has assets. If a child, she has none because all is owned by her parents.”

“Children cannot convey the dead. Zeus has forbidden it.”

She nodded. “True. But physical age isn’t all that must be considered. She is a woman, and women cannot own property without a male.”

He nodded, grudgingly. “This is true.”

“So if I say she is a child but you claim she is an adult, she is still a woman and therefore unable to offer a coin that is her own to give.”

I was starting to think she had a plan but had no idea where it was going. Sophie was likewise looking at her with interest.

Again Kharon nodded sharply, either unwilling or unable to see the trap being laid. “So her body is all she has to offer.”

“But again,” offered Athena, quite reasonably, “it is not hers to give. She lives in the home of her parents, and until they give her hand in marriage or dismiss her from their protection, she may not offer her own life.”

Now the demigod growled, and all the souls on the boat cringed in fear. That bugged me. He shouldn’t terrify the souls. He was just supposed to ferry them.

*Interesting you should say that.* I heard the voice, but nobody else seemed to. Was she talking into my *mind*? I stared up and could have sworn I saw her wink.

“Right now, in this culture, she is without responsibility—excepting the job she has been

assigned here. She is on...what is it called? Summer vacation?"

I nodded, still not seeing where this was going. "Yes. That's right. I'm on summer break from school."

She beamed a smile, and it lit up the darkness of the cave. The souls reached for the light, not even realizing it was just a smile.

Or maybe they did know.

"Your *time* is your own, which is how you took this job. It belongs to you and cannot be taken away except with your permission. Therefore, it is the decree of Olympus that the price of this soul is your summer, Lia Thantos. The soul is free to cross the river. Kharon, you will be granted the first *vacation* in your existence. I will place you with Dionysus, who will teach you the necessary tools to...relax. And Lia will live up to her birthright. She will be the bringer of truth, and death—an intern demigod ferrywoman of the underground for the next three months. I'm sure we will manage a workable solution that incorporates your status as a child on earth."

The screaming stopped, and the man who had been trapped in the body floated peacefully down the hill to take his place alongside the other souls on the boat. The eyes of the dead looked to me, and hope and joy radiated outward, filled me.

It felt oddly...right. A boat, a river, and souls at peace. No doubt there'd be danger and weird things everywhere. But that would be part of the fun.

My sister's eyes were wide with shock, and I had no doubt her reaction would pale in comparison to

how Mom and Dad were going to react.

But for myself, I could only think again...this summer was going to seriously *rock!*



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