

## Chapter 1

“Good morning, Mr. Reynolds.” I used my best sing-song voice. “Are you ready to die today?”

“I don’t think we should stand so close to him,” Ally said, pulling me away from the bed. “And don’t talk with your mouth full.”

Mr. Reynolds still didn’t respond when I turned on the bedside lamp, illuminating his bedroom in a butter-yellow glow. I nudged him. “Good morning.”

His eyes flew open as he jolted upright and pressed his back against the wooden headboard. Crushing the comforter to his chest, he fumbled an earplug from each ear. His darting eyes searched our faces. “Who the hell are you?” he asked.

His graying brown hair was disheveled and thinning in front. His blue eyes squinted against the onslaught of light. He was an enormous man, six feet tall and nearly 300 pounds according to our profile.

I flashed Ally a look. Beside me, my personal assistant was taller by a few inches, making her 5’8” or so. We’d taken the stairs and Reynolds’s apartment was warm. She unbuttoned her red A-line coat, revealing her off-white ruffled blouse and dress pants underneath. Her straightened blond hair, chocolate-eyes and tiny diamond nose stud, caught and held the soft light of Reynolds’s lamp.

She flashed the photo attached to the front of the file folder at me, and then nodded twice. We were in the right place on the right day.

Of course, I could still have fun with this.

“Burglars,” I said with my mouth full of muffin, chewing. “If you could just strip those pillowcases off and fill them with your valuables, we’ll be on our way.”

His eyes fixed on the half-devoured sugar bomb in my hand. “Is that mine?”

I slowed my chewing, thinking of how best to answer this inquiry. “Could be. It was on your kitchen counter.”

“So you took it?” He pushed the comforter off his chest. The disorientation of sleep was wearing off.

“Mr. Reynolds.” Ally leaned toward him, pushing her hair behind her ear as it fell forward. Her tone was professional and kind. She was good at dealing with clients. Me? Not so much. “We’re here about your death-replacement.”

His face remained pinched. One of the problems with letting hospitals orchestrate death-replacements was that clients didn’t meet their agents until their actual death-day.

“At the hospital, remember? Your physician helped you schedule a replacement last April,” Ally continued. “This is Ms. Jesse Sullivan. She’ll be your agent today.”

He turned his narrowing eyes to me. “She’s the zombie?”

Was it my job to remind him “zombie” was a derogatory term? No, but I did it anyway.

“Necronite,” I corrected. I tossed the muffin wrapper into the bedside trashcan. “I’m the necronite here to die so you can keep on *a-livin’*.”

I said that last part in the twangy, country music tone our fair city of Nashville was known for. He looked me over head to toe. What did he expect a necronite to look like? Probably not this young or wearing nothing more than jeans and a T-shirt beneath my hoodie.

“How did you get in?”

“Doorman,” I answered. “Look—”

Ally cut in, afraid to let my snark go unchecked. “It’s important Jesse stays close to you until the incident occurs. As the doctor probably explained during your consultation, she needs to shadow you for the entire day.”

Mr. Reynolds turned to the bedside clock. “It’s only midnight.”

“That’s generally when the day starts,” I said, stretching my cramped neck to one side. “Your death-day is September 18<sup>th</sup> and that’s today, right?”

“Yes.” He didn’t sound so sure.

“Ta-da,” I said, throwing my arms wide. “Here I am.”

Startled, he leaned out of my reach.

Ally elbowed me and I jerked my arms in to protect my ribs. She forced another smile at Reynolds. “We called you earlier, but you didn’t answer. We rang the doorbell and knocked, but you still didn’t answer.”

I folded my arms over my chest, tired of standing over him. “We thought you already died.”

He uncurled a beefy fist to show his earplugs. “I wear these when I sleep. I guess I didn’t hear you.”

“We were concerned, that’s all. It’s our job to keep you safe,” Ally added. Oh, her smile was really shining now. “We apologize for entering your home without permission.”

She nudged me with her elbow again. “Yeah, sorry,” I grumbled.

His shoulders slumped and he seemed more relaxed the longer Ally smiled at him. It was her gift, I guess, the ability to put people at ease. It certainly wasn’t a trait I possessed.

“Sir, if you can just act normal today, follow your usual routine, we’ll be here and ready for anything,” Ally grinned. Her weight shifted. She was tired of standing, too. “Please, go back to sleep. We’ll remain close in case you need us.”

I gave him credit. He did try to go back to sleep, though he left the earplugs out, probably suspicious of us. I guess I wouldn’t be able to sleep with two weirdos leaning against my bedroom wall watching me, especially one as fidgety as myself.

Thirty minutes into this babysitting guard duty from which I derived an income, I was *so* bored. But waiting for death to show up was a normal part of the replacement process.

At 7:45 a.m. Reynolds was finally dressed and ready for work. He swore he usually walked to work, so walk we did. Franklin Street was busy, the honking horns conveying that not everyone was happy to be alive on this fine Monday. The morning air held a characteristically September chill to it, so I zipped my dark hoodie up to my chin and warmed my cold hands in my back pockets.

Ally could look as professional as she liked but my clothes would be destroyed by the end of the day—one way or another. Sure I had nicer clothes at home, but when I worked a replacement job, I couldn’t wear those. Doctors really liked to cut my clothes off. I mean, they saw my dying body and it was like “Nurse! The scissors, *please*.”

The time I was hit and killed by a bus, they cut my clothes off and I was wearing my favorite *Three Stiffs with Picks* T-shirt. The local band’s members were necronites like me—which meant we had the same neurological disorder—but they weren’t death-replacement agents and had no government employment contract like I did.

Man, *every* time I think about that shirt, I get pissed all over again. They’d signed it, for goodness sake. The hospital ruined it more than the bus did. I could’ve kept it, damn them. Blood on a rock T-shirt is cool.

Anyway, that was the last straw, so now I only own a plethora of dark jeans and hoodies. Sometimes Ally was able to intervene and save my clothes, but most body fluids stain, so I still went through an entire wardrobe quickly—shoes too. I didn’t know how I lost my shoes when I died.

At home, I have a whole basket of shoes I only have one of and I refuse to buy more. They *work*. Like today, I was wearing one red Nike sneaker and one blue Reebok sneaker, each one tied with floppy laces. Maybe that’s why Reynolds kept staring at my feet as we walked.

We’d only made it two blocks down the road, pushing through the swarming crowds, past opening shops and businesses, and then the conversation took an inevitable turn.

Mr. Reynolds turned to Ally and flashed what I suspected was a well-rehearsed smile. His voice shifted to a carefully inflected tone. “Are you a zombie too?”

“Necronite,” I said, correcting him again. If I wanted to playfully call myself a zombie that was one thing. I was trying to reclaim the word. But people can’t just go equating my lifestyle to mindless, brain-eating corpses. “The politically correct term is necronite. You don’t call black people the n-word.”

“Necronite, got it,” he blurted, embarrassed by the fact that I was speaking at full volume. His eyes nervously scanned the passing crowd. He turned to Ally again. “Do you...reanimate also?”

“Ooo, *reanimate*. Breaking out the big words,” I said. “No, Ally doesn’t die. She is one hundred percent mortal.”

I’ve seen the ‘Let’s get to know the cute assistant’ bit. I don’t blame him. Ally is gorgeous. I’ve made a play for her myself because gorgeous is *gorgeous*. I’m just lucky that Ally likes women or I probably would have looked as ridiculous as Mr. Reynolds here.

“I’m just the hired help,” Ally said with a polite smile, which was a permanent fixture when mediating between me and my clients. Maybe it was her round cheeks or tiny cute nose that made people like her. She just looked like a nice person—unless you pissed her off, of course. “Jesse’s schedule is hectic, and it’s my job to keep her sane.”

“You must have your work cut out for you,” he said.

Did he just insult me?

I could play. “You’re not her type. You need breasts, *bigger* ones.”

His jaw set tight. “Is she always this... charming?”

I opened my mouth to show him how charming I could be. Ally shot me a pleading look behind his back. Brinkley, my government-assigned handler, popped into my head. *One more bad review, Jesse, and I’ll kill you. A couple of times.* If Mr. Reynolds thought I was a challenge, he should try dealing with Brinkley.

I rolled my eyes at Ally and gave my rehearsed speech.

“Dear Sir or Madam, I am sorry for this inconvenience. In the light of your impending death, this must be a stressful time for you. Please accept my apologies for this situation and let me offer my reassurance that no matter what happens, you can count on me to save your *ass*.”

Brinkley made me memorize this verbatim, and to be spiteful, I haven’t changed a word. Not even the Sir or Madam part. Okay, maybe I changed *save you* to *save your ass*, but what’s the difference really?

Reynolds blinked twice and stared. Appearing to reach some conclusion, he opened the door to his building and entered without saying another word.

The South Tower where Mr. Reynolds worked was huge, stretching far up into the overcast sky. The building looked like a cat to me, with a pointy radio antenna on each side of its roof. We followed him and his swinging briefcase through the revolving glass doors into the building, which smelled like women’s perfume and floor polish. Once we had our plastic visitor badges attached, we took the elevator up to Reynolds’s office on the fifteenth floor. His office was the coolest, strangest thing I’d ever seen.

It was laid out like a bi-level, encased in glass. The entrance was two glass doors that pushed open. The outer wall was a full window overlooking downtown Nashville. The floor was pale hardwood, shining in the slanted autumn light. A spiraling staircase with see-through steps coiled off to the right, very modern. The lower level held only his secretary’s desk and a clear view of the city. Reynolds’s desk was located on the upper, loft-like part suspended in the air.

Good thing he wasn’t into dresses or the poor secretary would’ve had more than a downtown view through the clear floor suspended above her desk. Of course, it went both ways. I was sure that he spent his work days enjoying all the sunshine with a side of cleavage.

His desk and bookcase were as transparent as the window behind him. I gave Ally a weary look. She got it.

“We need your blood type,” she said, as Reynolds put his briefcase on his desk.

“O-positive, why?”

“This is a lot of glass.” I leaned over the metal rail encircling the loft area to see the secretary’s desk and floor below. I know people dig the sleek, modern look, but all I saw was an accident waiting to happen. “We might have a problem.”

Reynolds looked confused. “The doctor told me any type of death was replaceable.”

No reputable doctor would tell him that. I can only do so much for a body. Most of my clients require post-replacement medical care. Point-blank gunshot wounds to the head, for example, are not replaceable. What did he expect me to do? Pick up his brain chunks and stuff his skull?

Ally sat her purse in one of the four bright red chairs opposite Reynolds’s desk, the only splash of color in the whole place apart from the hanging fern with its greedy outstretched tendrils.

“Jesse can die for you, but she can’t heal your body. If you get cut, you’ll need blood.”

I surveyed the titles on his bookcase and found not an ounce of pleasure reading, a real bore, this guy. I was looking for a personality, common interests, anything that would make me want to save Reynolds. Nada.

Ally pulled a survey packet and clipboard from her oversized purse, before fishing for a pen. Then she extended the ballpoint with a click, and settled into the chair. “While you set up your computer, I wonder if I can ask you a few questions about your replacement experience?”

Unraveling his laptop cord, Reynolds paused in his unpacking. “She hasn’t done anything.”

“No, not yet,” Ally said, flashing her work-with-me grin. “You’ll receive your post-replacement survey in the mail in a week or two. Hopefully, you’ll fill it out and return it in the postage-paid envelope. These questions pertain to the enrollment process.”

Reynolds bent down and plugged the cord into the surge protector under his desk. “All right, Ms. Gallagher, if it makes your job easier.”

She tucked her hair behind her ear and tried to look sweet. “It does, thank you.”

Ally might be a lesbian, but she knew how to charm the pants off any man. I rolled my eyes. The two were making me nauseous. She readied her pen. “Did you intentionally plan your death-screening or did your physician recommend it?”

He settled into his seat and turned on the computer. “I went to get my blood-pressure checked and the doctor recommended it. He explained my insurance rates would drop if I pre-screened.”

“How much time passed between the physician’s referral and your meeting with the A.M.P.?”

“A.M.P.?”

“Analyst of necro-Magnetic Phenomenon.”

“Oh, the psychic,” he said, his eyes lighting with recognition. “I met her two days later.”

“Psychic is another derogatory term, Mr. Reynolds,” I said. Not to mention an inaccurate way to describe the ex-military, medically-altered analysts. My favorite A.M.P. was Gloria. She hated the term psychic and you’ve got to defend your friends when they aren’t around to defend themselves. “We talked about derogatory terms, didn’t we?”

The public wasn’t supposed to think of them as psychics anyway. Somehow that dirty little secret leaked. PR tried to push A.M.P.s as nothing more than gifted statisticians, brainiacs who could take all the factors of a person’s life and guess when they’d die within a twenty-four-hour window, up to one year in advance. Use the word “psychic”, or “guess” for that matter, and no one would have invested in the replacement industry because the modern mind only believes in science and money. Of course Lane, my sometimes beau, argued that telling people A.M.P.s were guinea pig soldiers tortured into becoming drug-dependent psychics wouldn’t incite much faith either. He had a point.

The Death-Management Industry, including the whole screening through replacement process had a 95 percent success rate. That's almost as good as birth control. No one wanted to be surprised by death and now they didn't have to be. People liked the security. The federal government liked the fact that every aspect of the process was taxable. *Hello*, revenue. And the military liked that they were putting a positive spin on their greatest screw-up of this decade.

Mainstreaming the Death-Management Industry created jobs, fattened pockets and basically pulled all our heads above the waters of a recession. Hell, even China and Japan have launched their own industries in the last few months. Death-screening commercials now outnumbered breast-cancer commercials two to one. However, not everyone accepted the industry.

The Church launched their anti-Death Management campaign not long after the industry was established. But it wasn't until lately, when the conservative party took office, that their power was really felt. Less people were screening. Those fat pockets were thinning. I was looking at the possibility of unemployment in a year or two. Frankly, I was okay with that—but for other reasons.

"Your A.M.P.'s name and how long it took for her to complete your evaluation?" Ally asked.

"Gildroy, Godfrey, or..." his voice trailed. His eyes glanced down, unfocused. "I can't remember. The doctor called early the following week and asked me to come back in to discuss my options."

"How did you feel when you first learned the news?"

He leaned back in his chair, running his thick fingers through his hair. "You mean, when the doctor told me some psychic—sorry, A.M.P.—said I was going to die? It's not the conversation one professional has with another. I didn't believe it at first."

Ally kept scrawling on the page, nodding. "When the doctor informed you of the analyst's results, did he make your options clear?"

He scratched his chin. "Either I took my chances and hoped the day passed without incident or I took precautions."

"Was it a difficult decision?" Ally asked, looking up from the page.

"Not really," he answered. "I get the money back if nothing happens. I'd say my life is worth more than a mere fifty grand."

"That's right," Ally said.

I'd also have to return the fee if I screwed up and he died. I could die myself and wouldn't even get to keep my 20% cut. Since he'd be dead, I guess that didn't matter to him.

"Last question. Would you recommend death-replacement to a family member or friend?"

"Ask me that one at the end of the day," he said. "Once I see what happens."

Behind one of the books I found a little panda, the kind you squeeze and its eyes bulge out of its head. When you squeezed the panda, it squeaked. I pointed it at Reynolds and gave it a squeeze. "What do you *do* here?"

He came around the desk and took the panda from me the way one might seize their mother's urn from a child's grubby and unreliable fingers.

"I'm a marketing and media consultant," he said. "We do advertising for local businesses, night clubs, and popular consumer products."

I'd bet he was one of our very own PR guys. Otherwise, I wasn't quite sure why Brinkley put his file in my bin. Not that Brinkley would tell me if I asked. Boss Brinkley was pretty tight-lipped unless he was giving direct orders.

The secretary went home at 5:00 p.m. and I'd been working seventeen hours straight, so I decided to dig through her desk to ward off sleepiness.

In addition to an impressive array of writing utensils, her desk had several pictures of her kids and a coffee cup that said, "Procrastinate and you tempt fate!" A real go-getter. I played with her

label maker, placing labels that read “Zombie touched this. Eek!” on everything: her chair, her cup, her computer. I spared the kids’ pictures.

Ready to surf the internet, I pressed the power button and was startled by a loud *pop*. Deep inside the computer tower something fizzled and a wisp of smoke wafted through the vent holes.

*Shit.*

I thumped my forehead against the desktop. Second computer this week. It was like I short-circuited electronics by my touch alone.

I didn’t even have time to come up with an excuse for exploding the secretary’s computer when a familiar sinking sensation washed over me. My grip tightened on the edge of the desk.

“Ally,” I said, calling her name as loud as I could manage as my throat tightened around the words.

Mr. Reynolds froze in mid-motion. Ally spoke to him, but too softly for me to hear.

Reynolds hesitated. Clients often freeze up when I start to react. No one wants to die. To the clients, in this moment before it happens, it seems as if any movement could be the wrong one. He stared at me through the glass floor.

Sensing death was like a panic attack. I tried to breathe against the pressure in my chest. Nothing was actually wrong with me, except that some part of me knew what was coming, and that part of me panicked. My body flooded with adrenaline and was ready for anything. Here in this bright office, it seemed unlikely I was going to get hit by a bus, stabbed, crushed or shot, right?

*Wrong.*

I closed my eyes and tried to quell this sick feeling. Before I opened them again, something heavy came crashing right through the desk, knocking me backwards out of the chair. I hit the back of my head on the window-wall with a thump and my ears rang on impact. Shards of glass from the secretary’s desk sprayed my face like water. I tried to shield myself with my open hand and swore like crazy.

“Who designs this shit.” I pulled a large sliver of glass out of my left forearm. It had gone straight through my arm. Blood spurted out of the wound, ruining my jeans. *Again.*

Ally came down the stairs, taking the steps one at a time, carefully holding onto the rail. Good girl. Death-replacement was a one-on-one exchange. I couldn’t die for two people at once.

“Mr. Reynolds?” It was his body that had fallen on top of me, lying now in the mess of the secretary’s shattered desk. I kicked a chunk of desk off of me and I pulled myself out from under him, dragging my burning arm through broken glass.

“Mr. Reynolds, can you hear me?” I checked his pulse and it was faint, slowing.

I opened his suit jacket and pressed my hands to his chest as Ally’s voice echoed through the room. She gave the address and situation to the emergency operators on the phone. The tiny glass chunks in my arms and legs burned like hell as they worked their way in deeper into my skin. I saved the freaking out until after she hung up.

“What the hell did you say to him? We don’t do suicides.” I was talking too fast. Okay, so having a body drop on me unexpectedly caught me off guard. At least I couldn’t be blamed for the broken computer now. “And what the hell is it with fat men falling on me? That’s two this week. I’m like one hundred twenty pounds, assholes.”

It became a race to see who could speak the fastest with the widest eyes.

“I didn’t make him jump, *thank you*. I told him when you get pale like this it means it’s about to happen. So instead of paying attention to his own two feet, he watched you. He tripped on the laptop cord and rolled right over that damn rail.” She pointed up, looking freaked too.

“You have to stop telling them they’re about to die,” I said. I leaned close to his ear and shouted, “And you have to get *wooden* desks.”

As if reacting to the thunder of my own voice, my vision gave over completely, switching from dizzying spottiness to full-blown waves of color.

The room was a shifting aurora borealis of heat and light. Even weird shit can be comforting, when you expect it.

I really wished Ally could see it.

“Jesse, he isn’t looking so good.”

I focused on the man still partially in my lap. Reynolds was no longer a warm red-orange tinged with yellow like Ally. He was green, edging his way into the dormant blue-gray of the floor, the desk, and the walls. It was my job to keep the blue from overtaking him.

I couldn’t explain what I do exactly.

Death was the transformation of energy. I admit I was guessing. When someone was about to die, a tiny black hole was created inside them. Like a black hole in space, it looked like an empty swirling vortex. This vortex was what sucked all the warm, living colors out of a person, leaving nothing behind that could survive.

My job as a replacement agent was to convince the fleeting red of Mr. Reynolds, so ready to burn up its little flame and become a dormant blue, it really didn’t want to go into that swirling drain after all. Somehow I did this by *willing* it.

My colors have never matched Ally’s, Brinkley’s, or anyone who’d accompanied me in the room during a replacement. Lane too, I imagine, would be a more vibrant hue if I ever got a good look at him. The point was I seemed a welcome home for blue flame since I was *always* blue flame. Not the cold blue of furniture or buildings, more like a sparkly blue. Electric blue.

With Reynolds’s flame drawn into my own, it gave his red-warm fire room enough to burn. But there was a special spark I was looking for, and I had to find it inside him and keep it from being washed away.

The elevator opening and Ally shouting to the paramedics seemed like sounds underwater, as I focused harder on Reynolds.

“Hurry, Jesse,” she whispered.

A hot-cold chill settled into the muscles in my back and coiled around my navel like an invisible snake as I pushed my own flame further into Reynolds.

*There*—a spark where our flames danced around each other. Reynolds’s chest rose suddenly, jerking as he gasped, like gasoline thrown on the blaze.

But even though I scooped Reynolds’s precious spark out of danger’s way, the vortex didn’t simply close. Somebody had to go through that death drain. Unfortunately, that somebody had to be me.

So I exhaled one last breath and gave myself completely to the waiting darkness.