

## Collecting Leanne

‘Leanne Symonds.’ I drift to the corner and hover under the cornice. Pale lime-green emerges from the haze. Wall. I turn and face the room. Hospital bed covered with heavy white linen under a wooden board dotted with power points, oxygen nozzles and a name plaque. ‘Symonds.’

I check the manifest. Definitely in the correct place and at the appointed time. Where is she? Everything needs to go smoothly with this one; last collection of the day, last collection to complete my apprenticeship but only an hour and forty-two minutes until sunset before she belongs to the night collector. I glide to the items spread out on the moveable tray – tissues, water jug, plastic cup – standard with the room. No personal touches.

Five minutes gone and no Leanne Symonds. I apparate to the corridor, the nurse’s station, the waiting room. No mention of her name, no white aura beaming out to show me I’ve locked onto the correct target. Ten minutes gone.

This hasn’t happened before. The previous seventy-six collections taught me that smooth and easy is far more pleasant and comfortable than rushed and chaotic. One hour and thirty-two minutes left, too short a time to allow for everything humans wish their death to be. I widen my search: the elevator, the emergency department, the operating theatre. Drifting haphazardly, seeking Leanne ignoring all else. Rooms, walls, people pass by in a blur as I focus on locating her white aura.

Nothing. I return to the hospital room listed on my manifest. Waiting in the corner, watching the minutes tick by. Information provided in previous collections has always been accurate, should I doubt it now? One hour and fourteen minutes until sunset.

“Soul missing?” A voice from nowhere.

I glance around. A spirit drifts along the ceiling. The belt of seven interwoven colours catches my eye. I bow, “Your eminence.” I straighten and look directly at him. “Yes, my soul is nowhere to be found. The manifest states it should be here at this time. Maybe there’s been a mistake?”

“In seven hundred and thirty-one years of spiriting I’ve never seen or heard of them making a mistake.” He chuckled. “Be patient, it’ll turn up.”

I check the timer. “I only have about an hour, then it belongs to the night collector. Any advice?”

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“Wait. After all, patience is a virtue.” He turns as he reaches the far wall. “There’s always tomorrow.”

“Not for me. Seven years of apprenticeship finishes today. This is soul seventy-seven.”

He looks me up and down, nodding when he notices I don’t have a belt. “You’re moving onto Level One? Congratulations. Trust in the plan.” He gives a slight wave and disappears through the wall.

A hollow thud against the door and it unsteadily eases open, another thud and the footplate of a wheelchair scrapes along the bottom of the wooden door, opening it wide. About time, only fifty-one minutes remain. The young man pushes the wheelchair to the edge of the bed. He pats the shoulder of the seated woman, then unclips both footplates. She is younger than I expected. I peer intently at her face. She doesn’t appear to be unwell. Maybe a mistake has been made.

Her eyes screw up, she bites down on her lip, then opens her mouth to release a tortured groan. The man grips her hand and leans in close, panting in her face. Why doesn’t he call for help? She is in so much pain. She pants along with him for a minute or so and then relaxes back in the chair. A weary grin flashes across her face and he eases his hand from hers.

“Let’s get you more comfortable.” He places a hand under her elbow and assists her to stand. “I’m so proud of how you’ve handled this.”

The loose floral-patterned dress settles around her, pulling taut as she slides to the middle of the bed, outlining her extended belly. She lovingly strokes the bump, a blissful smile crossing her face. “We’re ready for you little one.”

It doesn’t seem fair that this young mother will be taken from her child so soon. I wish it could be different, but this must fit into the master plan. I don’t know why or choose who or when. I hope the man with her is ready to be a single-father. He lays his hand over hers, joining her in the circular rubbing motion.

All three of us turn to look at the door when a soft knock breaks the silence. Dark hair pulled back over a plump face appears in the crack. “Hi, I’m your nurse Julie. Is it alright to come in?”

The young man turns and waves her in. “Of course, come in.” He steps away from the bed but leaves his hand on her belly.

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The nurse smiles at two of them. She crosses the room to pull gloves from the wall dispenser. “We’ll just see how far along you are.” She pushes her fingers into the latex gloves and sits on the edge of the bed. “If you can relax your legs out to the side, I’ll be able to...”

The young woman on the bed shakes her head and grits her teeth. She reaches her hand out to her partner, clasping hold when he takes it.

“We’ll wait until this contraction is over.” Julie pats the woman’s leg. Calmly her eyes flick from face, to belly and back to face again, taking in the pained expression and tightening midsection. “You’re doing so well.”

Breathing slows, tension eases.

“Do you know what you’re having?” The nurse slides her hand under the dress.

“A little girl.” A slight grimace and the young woman shifts position. “We’re naming her after my grandmother – Leanne.”

What? No! That can’t be right.

I hover over the nurse, watching as she records the patient information. Name – Josephine Symonds. There must have been a mistake. I recheck the manifest. ‘Leanne Symonds’. White noise surrounds me and pushes me down through the floor. No resistance, I let the heaviness take me.

The wishes, dreams, prayers and pleads from the millions of humans who brought me into existence could not have wanted this. Although they didn’t actively create me, their faith in a better life and future combined to draw me forth from the darkness of the universe. Starting off with simple tasks, such as comforting a crying child, led to preventing crimes being committed, led to guiding the mentally ill through the darkest times. Once I’d proven myself in these areas I was assigned the most difficult task we face – soul collecting. Never easy. Always confusion, anger, regret, despair – from both the soul and those who remain behind. Not pleasant work, but a rite of passage to gain true spiritual status, necessary to complete the apprenticeship. Everything must have a place in the master plan but how can taking this soul benefit anyone?

Saving lives, making the world a better place, giving hope to those to who need support is my destiny. I feel it, I know it and I’ve been told by those who create the master plan that this

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is what I'm heading towards. How can I destroy lives and leave these young parents in mourning? This is not what I've been created for. Not my purpose.

I force myself to rise back through the different levels of the hospital and return to the room where Leanne is.

"You're progressing nicely. About nine centimetres. It won't be too long now until she comes along." Julie washes her hands and throws a paper towel in the bin as she leaves the room.

The young woman, Josephine, strains as another contraction grips her. I glide to the end of the hospital bed. A faint white aura dimly glows from around her waist. The correct place and time. No doubts. This is the soul I'm to collect.

I waver, hovering near the young couple. Hoping they'll pick up on my presence and know what's coming. No response from either of them. More belly rubbing, a gentle kiss on the lips from him. I can't break this loving family apart.

Without conscious thought, I float to the ceiling, through the wall and then through the next. The aimless wandering to remove myself from the room turns to a hunt for the experienced spirit I encountered earlier. I retrace my steps – emergency department, operating theatre, admissions. No sign there of him or any of his comrades.

I find him in the geriatric ward, lolling about in the corridor outside the room belonging to Ruth, a frail, elderly woman.

"Excuse me your eminence." I bow as I approach. "Could I trouble you for some advice?"

He nods. "What are you doing here? I thought you were under a time constraint. Surely this can wait."

"Actually, no it can't." I shake my head and move closer. "I've discovered the soul I'm scheduled to collect is that of a baby about to be born. Taking her will destroy her parents. It goes against all I plan to do in my spirit life."

"You've taken other souls. Not all of them would have been happy to go with you. How is this different?"

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“Not all of them accepted their fate easily, but they’d experienced life. Knew it wasn’t always fair.” I shrugged my shoulders. “Leanne won’t get a taste of life. It’s just not right. Not to her or to her family.”

“Take it from me,” he pointed at his chest, “Rabel. There is always a reason behind the plan. We don’t necessarily see it. You really have no choice in the situation.”

“What if I don’t collect the soul?”

“A hard truth to learn my young friend. Um, your name is?”

“Magzek,” I copy his action and point to my chest.

“Well Magzek, the truth is, if you don’t collect the soul, you fail your apprenticeship. If you fail, you will fade back into the darkness of the universe and return to nothingness.” Rabel reaches out and pats me on the shoulder. “They always give you the hardest one last so you can prove you’re up to the job.”

“I don’t think I am up to the job if this is what is required. Her parents will always feel her loss and taking her will tear apart the fabric of their life.”

“People are resilient. More so than we give them credit for.” Rabel sighed. “We worry about how the humans will cope with the hand they’re dealt, and they continue to surprise us. Besides, we don’t always know how our actions fit into the master plan.”

“I can’t see this having a place in the master plan. Such a mean and callous action.” I shake my head and pull away from Rabel.

“Before you go, come and join me in my next collection. It might give you some insight.” Rabel crooks his middle finger and beckons me.

I hesitate, thirty-seven minutes remain until sunset. What does it matter if I’m not going to collect the soul? I nod, I might as well be doing something in the time I have left.

Although she can’t see us, Ruth knows we are here. She cocks her head to one side, leans in closer and squints. A slight raise of her gaze and I feel her eyes on me. Ruth’s mouth relaxes into a serene smile. She lifts a frail hand to brush grey curls off her forehead then settles deeper into the mattress, arms folded. Waiting.

A very young woman, probably still a teenager, clad in a pink uniform enters the dim room on tiptoes, silent as she approaches the bed. She smiles and pulls a gilded silver-backed

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hair brush from the top drawer of the bedside table. “It’s me, Darcy. I expected you to be napping already,” Darcy pulls the soft bristles through Ruth’s thinning hair. “You usually are by this time.”

Ruth reaches up and stops the brush’s movement. “Can you stay?” She grips Darcy’s hand between her own two hands. “It won’t be too long.”

Darcy uses her free hand to pat Ruth’s hands entwined with hers. “I’ll stay until you fall asleep.”

“I won’t be sleeping. This is my time to leave.” Ruth tightens her grip around Darcy’s hand. “I know they’ve come for me.”

Rabel smiles as Darcy looks from corner to corner around the room. She is too young, too naïve, too inexperienced to sense our presence. In time, if she sticks with her nursing training, she will become familiar with our faint presence and the sense of disturbed air.

Darcy extricates her hand and continues brushing Ruth’s hair with long, gentle, rhythmic strokes. “I’m sure that’s not true. What makes you feel like that?”

One side of Ruth’s lip rises to a half-grin. “There are some things you just know. You’ll understand it better when you’re older. For now, you’ll just have to indulge an old lady.” She tugs the brush away from Darcy and places it beside her on the crocheted blanket covering the bed. “Just lower the side and sit here holding my hand. I don’t want to be alone.”

“Would you like me to ring one of your sons?” Darcy releases the safety mechanism on the bed rails and pulls a chair closer. “I can give him a call if you don’t want to be here alone.” She eases into the chair, watching Ruth’s face closely for a reaction.

Ruth shakes her head, hair matting against the pillow. “They’re waiting now. No time for my boys to get here.” Her hand searches across the stiff white sheets for Darcy’s. “We knew this day was coming and we’ve said our goodbyes. The boys, their wives and my grandbabies came to visit on the weekend. No unfinished business there.”

A glean of unshed tears wells in Darcy’s eyes and her chin wobbles. She takes a deep breath and exhales slowly. “I’m here.” She reaches out for Ruth’s hand and holds it, patting the loose, wrinkled skin that covers brittle bones. Eyes fixed on their interwoven fingers.

Rabel turns away from them. “For days I have frequented Ruth’s room knowing her time was coming to an end. Leaving is a frightening proposition for many and makes the process

more difficult. Although there are situations where people are suddenly pulled from the Earth to join us, I prefer to pick my circumstances when the timing is more flexible. Having watched the gentle interaction between this elderly lady and the student nurse gives me hope that my decision to take her today will ease some of the stress of leaving. For Ruth at least. And, hopefully, Darcy will come to understand.”

I nod in agreement. I pivot towards Rabel preparing to ask what he would do in my situation, but he has already turned his attention back to the room.

“Are you afraid?” Darcy keeps her eyes averted from Ruth’s. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

Ruth closes her eyes and pulls their interlocked hands to her chest. “No. Just being here is enough. I don’t want to die alone. I came into this world with others and that’s how I’d like to leave it.” Tears leak from the corners of her eyes and drip down onto the pillow. “I’ll get to see my girls again.” A weak smile tugs at her lips.

“I didn’t know you had daughters,” Darcy’s voice drops to a whisper. “I’ve only heard you talk about your boys.”

A slight nod of the head. “I actually had two baby girls.” Ruth bumps her hands against her chest twice to emphasise the point. “Born a year apart. So perfect in every way. Delicate little fingers, pouting lips, chubby arms and legs. But no life in them.” She takes a juddering breath, followed by another, and gasps.

Rabel shakes his head slowly. “I remember those little darlings. I was there when they made their way into the world and I took them. The cruellest part of my job. Such joy and excitement so quickly turned to shock and sorrow. No explanation, no reason given to the parents. Matron told Ruth she thought it was the twilight gas and Ruth refused it for the next two deliveries. Both healthy baby boys. For many years she blamed herself for the decision to use the gas. I’ll have to set Ruth straight about her daughters, that it wasn’t anything she did.”

The change in Ruth’s breathing pattern takes Darcy by surprise. She watches the uneven rise and fall of Ruth’s chest. Feels the weak, wobbling heartbeat. Darcy leans back, angles away and tries to capture the attention of anyone walking past. The hallway is empty. She watches three more struggling breaths, debating what to do. She glances at Ruth’s face, serene despite the effort her body is making to keep her alive. Darcy reaches over and pushes the nurse call button with her free hand.

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A minute later a registered nurse for this ward of the hospital appears. Too late.

Ruth, Rabel and I watch as she checks for breathing, for a pulse, for any movement. Nothing. Ruth reaches out to give Darcy a comforting pat, but there is no awareness.

We fade away as Darcy receives instructions on how to prepare the death kit. Rabel takes Ruth's hand and they disappear, her white aura dimming. Checking the timer; twenty-three minutes until sunset, I apparate back to Leanne.

The room is crowded with people in blue scrubs. A band attached to Josephine's waist leads to a machine with a faint alarm sounding every few seconds. Leanne's aura shines brightly, casting an eerie light across room. No one notices as they rush around checking IVs, reading monitors and preparing the bed to move.

Nurse Julie leans in close to Josephine. "I know this all looks scary. But try to stay calm. The baby is finding the delivery hard and it looks like she is becoming stressed." She takes one of the young mother's hands between her own two and gently runs. "The doctor wants to get her out as quickly as possible, before she has any more difficulty."

Josephine nods. She licks her lips and looks at her husband before turning back to the nurse. "Do what ever necessary to keep her safe."

"You need to understand that because you haven't already had an epidural, we can't wait for that to take effect now. You'll be put under general anaesthetic." Julie waits for her to nod in agreement. "The anaesthetist will explain the procedure and risks to you on the way to the operating theatre. You'll wake up and be able to see your beautiful baby. Just try to relax."

Julie eases away and motions to the husband. He places a kiss on his wife's forehead, leans in to whisper to her and then steps away from the bed. Tears fall down his cheeks and he quickly turns away from his wife. Immediately four people in blue scrubs work in tandem to move the bed and the attached monitors out of the room. Julie holds him back for a moment.

She turns to look at him. "I know this doesn't look good and it's not what the two of you had planned for the birth, but it's the safest thing we can do now. The baby is in distress and they need to deliver her as soon as possible."

"Just as long as they are both OK. That's all that matters." He shuffles to the door, following the bed and trail of staff.

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“Wait.” Julie rushes and grabs at his arm. “I’m really sorry, but you can’t be in there with her. Not with the general anaesthetic. I’ll show you to the waiting room.”

I watch them head down the corridor for a moment. Julie walking beside a shrunken, slightly stumbling young man. Already broken by this emergency. How will he cope when the plan follows through? I shake my head. Not my concern. Hopefully a spirit will be there to support him through this. I leave.

In the operating theatre, Josephine is unconscious, laid out on a small bed, draped with blue cloths, a tube down her throat. Additional monitors have been attached.

The surgeon picks up a scalpel. “Beginning the operation at eighteen-twelve.” His hand invisible as he approaches the belly, white light blazes out, enveloping the whole area. Skin cut, membranes torn, pulling and manoeuvring.

Another doctor rushes in. She picks up the lifeless infant. “Baby isn’t breathing.” She lays Leanne in a humidicrib and places a stethoscope on her chest. The doctor shakes her head and looks at the nurse standing by. The nurse hands the doctor a small, flexible plastic tube.

I know the outcome. If I don’t gather up Leanne now, she’ll be taken by the night collector. Nine and half minutes. Not a long time in the scheme of everything in the universe. But too long a time for futile actions. No more trauma, no more distress, no more torment. I reach in and draw her soul to me. She snuggles in close.

We disappear into the unending universe, Leanne’s white aura dimming as she finds her eternal place.