

Five Rules of Death by Kayla Hochman

CAST.

DEATH. Adult, well-dressed. Formal and reserved. Can be played by any gender

CHARLIE: Young child. Can be played by any gender.

OLD WOMAN: Harriet

MAN: Mr. Radcliffe, drunk. Aggressive.

YOUNG WOMAN: Sarah Johnson, about 25-30. Wearing hospital scrubs and an engagement ring.

SETTING.

Blank stage in low lighting. This is the middle plane between life and afterlife. It is where the dead wait to be sent either to Heaven or Hell. There is nothing here. Only DEATH and the dead they encounter.

Five Rules of Death

(The stage is completely barren aside from a well dressed figure--DEATH. The lights are low, casting everything in a gray scale. The sound of a heart monitor echoes through silence. It sounds for an almost painfully long time. DEATH waits. Eventually the monitor flatlines. The long beep is deafening. CHARLIE enters, right center.)

DEATH. Charlie? It's time to go.

CHARLIE. Go? Go where? Who are you? Where's my mom?

DEATH.

You have passed away, Charlie. You need to take my hand.

CHARLIE. But Mom promised I'd be okay.. I need to find her!

DEATH. You can't, Charlie. Your mother isn't on this plane.

CHARLIE. I want to go back! I want my mom.

DEATH. You can only go forward. You need to take my hand, Charlie. I promise, you'll be alright.

CHARLIE. No...

DEATH. Charlie, are your grandparents still alive? (CHARLIE nods) And both your parents? You have your mother and your father?

CHARLIE. My dad is gone.

DEATH. Your father passed away? He'll be waiting for you. Just take my hand and you can see your father again.

CHARLIE. He didn't die, he just--I've never seen him. He went away before I was born.

DEATH. Your father left? Do you have any family who's passed away? (CHARLIE *shakes their head, no.*) That's unfortunate, but really, you need to move on. Take my hand.

CHARLIE. Where will I go?

DEATH. Heaven. But past that, I don't know. There are laws this plane operates under. Five rules I enforce and uphold to the highest regard. They can not be broken. Not by me, not by anyone. Rule number five: the middle plane is separate from the living world and the afterlife. Anyone in this plane can neither see, nor interact with the other planes. Since I rule this plane, I know very little of the others.

CHARLIE. That sounds kind of sad.

DEATH. Just take my hand and pass on.

CHARLIE. No.

DEATH. No?

CHARLIE. No.

DEATH. Listen, Charlie. You need to move on. I promise it will be better. Just take my hand. I still have work to do.

CHARLIE (*Stubborn, childish*). No. Why should I believe you?

DEATH. Look, I have another soul to transport. I can't stay here, so you'll either need to take my hand right now, or you'll just need to follow me. No? Then I guess you'll have to come along.

CHARLIE. Or I could just stay here.

DEATH. You could, I suppose. But if a soul in limbo leaves my presence, they'll be sent to a fifth plane. One even worse than Hell.

CHARLIE. You're just making that up.

DEATH. Maybe I am. But are you sure enough to risk it?

(CHARLIE deliberates before following DEATH. DEATH and CHARLIE head up stage left. OLD WOMAN enters.)

DEATH. Harriet, welcome back.

OLD WOMAN. Yes, yes. Let's get on with it.

DEATH. Eager are we? Life that bad this time?

OLD WOMAN. Hardly! But I've been waiting years to see my Joanne. Did you see her? Is she doing alright?

DEATH. Harriet, you know I don't remember mortals once they pass on.

OLD WOMAN. So I'm just that special?

DEATH. Well, I have seen you thirty-three times. Ready to make it thirty-four?

OLD WOMAN. I don't think so. Joanne is the love of all my lives. I've never met anyone like her in these centuries. And she's waiting for me in Heaven. Why should we risk what we have? So many lives, and I finally found something better than living. We found each other, and now we can have eternity.

(OLD WOMAN *takes DEATH's hand.*
Lights shine a blinding white.
OLD WOMAN *exits.*)

DEATH. Goodbye, Harriet.

CHARLIE. What did you mean? Thirty-three times?

DEATH. If a mortal's life earns them a spot in Heaven, they are given the option to be reincarnated and live again. Most don't choose this, but Harriet preferred real life to eternal paradise. She's been living and dying for over a thousand years. She was originally a viking. Probably holds a record for most reincarnations.

CHARLIE. So if I decide to be reincarnated, I can see my mom again?

DEATH. Technically, yes. But you wouldn't know her. Rule number four: while a soul is alive, they have no knowledge of other worlds, nor of their past lives. Only when they die do they regain all their past memories. You could be having a conversation with your mother and wouldn't know her from a complete stranger. Because to you, she would be.

CHARLIE. That sounds horrible.

DEATH. Not really. It isn't as though you'd know enough to think so, at least.

CHARLIE. How do you know all this? If you can't see the other worlds?

DEATH. When I meet a soul, I gain knowledge of their lives. Not much, but enough to know where I'm sending them. Over the years, I've learned from the dead.

CHARLIE. Will you see Harriet again?

DEATH. Most likely not.

CHARLIE. Will you miss her?

DEATH. Not at all.

CHARLIE. Really? But if you've seen her more than anyone else-?

DEATH. Do you always ask so many questions?

CHARLIE. Yep! My mom always says that people who question what they're told have the greatest imaginations and the biggest chance to change the world.

DEATH. Does she now? And what does your mother do?

CHARLIE. She's an accountant.

(DEATH leads CHARLIE towards center stage. DEATH is laughing slightly. There is the sound of a car crash. MAN and YOUNG WOMAN enter. MAN staggers forward, drunk. YOUNG WOMAN stays back. DEATH's demeanor grows instantly cold.)

DEATH. Evening, Mister Radcliffe. Had a little too much to drink tonight?

MAN. The Hell you know my name?

DEATH. I know quite a good deal about you, Mister Radcliffe. And about your wife. About the whiskey you just had to have.

MAN. What are you, a cop? That bitch call the cops on me?

DEATH. Oh, Mister Radcliffe. You should be so lucky.

(MAN tries to punch DEATH. DEATH grabs his fist and squeezes.)

Lights strobe. MAN screams and DEATH laughs, cold, cruel. MAN exits in the chaos.)

CHARLIE. You just... What did you do to him?

DEATH. I sent him where he belongs.

CHARLIE. But... he was in so much pain.

DEATH. A fraction of what he'll get where he is now, I'm sure.

CHARLIE. Will it hurt me like that?

DEATH. No. And I can't touch you until you're ready. You're going to Heaven, so you have free will, power over me. But rule three is that those going to Hell get no mercy. They are not considered people and I am able to force them to go, enacting a little bit of justice myself.

CHARLIE. But can't they get a second chance?

DEATH. Jackson Radcliffe got so many second chances, Charlie. He'd get drunk, then hit his wife. And she always gave him second chances. Today, he came home drunk so his wife poured out the rest of his whisky. He got in his car to get more and lost control. And he killed her.

(DEATH looks at YOUNG WOMAN and approaches her. CHARLIE doesn't.)

DEATH. Sarah Johnson?

YOUNG WOMAN. Stay away from me! Don't!

DEATH. This was your first life, isn't it? You don't need to be afraid, Sarah. You're not going where he did.

YOUNG WOMAN. How do you know my name? Don't come closer!

DEATH. Because you are dead. But you're going to Heaven. You were a good person.

YOUNG WOMAN. How do you know anything about me?

DEATH. I know you're engaged. I know you're a nurse. I know you work at a hospital in the cancer ward. You were crying on your way home from work because one of your patients passed away. A young child with leukemia...

CHARLIE. Me.

YOUNG WOMAN. Charlie? How? You were...

CHARLIE. Because you're dead too, Miss Johnson. Just like me.

YOUNG WOMAN. But... I'm so sorry, Charlie.

CHARLIE. It's okay. You worked very hard to make me better. And I know you helped my mom a lot. You did so much for us.

DEATH. You do have to go.

YOUNG WOMAN. But, I-

CHARLIE. I know it's not fair. Sickness isn't fair. Death isn't fair. It doesn't care who was young and who was good. But you've done more good than most people do their whole lives. There's no way to make it not terrible and I'm sorry. There's no way to make life fair. But I think *they* are fair. And I think, if you take their hand, they'll make sure you go somewhere good.

(YOUNG WOMAN finally takes DEATH's hand. The lights shine a blinding white. DEATH leads YOUNG WOMAN to the edge of the stage. YOUNG WOMAN steps off the stage and exits through the house.)

DEATH. Charlie, that was incredible. How did you come up with that?

CHARLIE. I've been sick since I was four. Which means I knew there was a good chance I'd die for almost half my life. I had friends in the cancer ward. Some got better. Some didn't. I've been thinking about death for a long time. Trying to make sense of it. Understand why all that was happening to me. But there was no reason why it was happening to me, or any of my friends. It just wasn't fair.

DEATH. I'm sorry, Charlie.

CHARLIE. It's just how things go sometimes, I think. So I came up with my own sort of rules to get through it.

DEATH. You're very mature for your age, you know.

CHARLIE. I didn't have a choice. *(Beat)* How long have you been doing this?

DEATH. I don't know. Hundreds of years? Millennium? Time is relative. Very different from what you know in the mortal plane when the future is eternity. You'll see.

CHARLIE. Does anyone else live on this plane? Permanently?

DEATH. No. As far as I can tell, there is only me.

CHARLIE. You don't have any friends?

DEATH. I'm not human, Charlie. I don't need friends the way you do.

CHARLIE. So you really don't get lonely?

DEATH. I've never known any different than this. I was simply here, with my job to do. *(beat)* Are you ready to go now?

CHARLIE. But what if you could have a friend? Then you wouldn't have to be lonely.

DEATH. I didn't say I was lonely.

CHARLIE. I think you are. Even if you don't realize you are.

DEATH. What exactly are you getting at, Charlie?

CHARLIE. Well, it's just that I don't want to leave you here all alone.

DEATH. You don't have a choice in the matter.

CHARLIE. But what if I never took your hand? I don't have to move on if you don't want me to. I could stay here with you and be your friend and help you convince people to move on like I did with Miss Johnson.

DEATH. No, Charlie.

CHARLIE. But you've never had a friend.. And I've never been alone.

DEATH. You can't stay here, Charlie.

CHARLIE. But why not?

DEATH. Because that's rule two. All mortals must pass on.

CHARLIE. Well, why can't you just break your stupid rule number two?

DEATH. Because I already broke rule number one.

CHARLIE. And what's that?

DEATH. Never get attached to a human. I want you to stay, Charlie.

CHARLIE. I can.

DEATH. No. It wouldn't be fair to let you stay, Charlie. You're meant to go to Heaven. You can see Miss Johnson and your friends from the cancer ward and one day, you'll be able to see your mother. And if you choose to, you should be able to live a human life all over again and get to do all the things you wouldn't get to do if you stay here.

CHARLIE. But what about you?

DEATH. My existence is just one of those things that isn't fair. There's nothing to be done about it. And that's okay, because I'm doing an important job. I see how scary this is for people, but I can help ease their transition. Like you did for Miss Johnson. And I get to help good people go to Heaven, where they can be happy with their loved ones forever.

CHARLIE. I can help you do all that, though.

DEATH. No, you can't. Because if I let you stay, you wouldn't get to experience forever with your family. And I would have failed at my job. It's time for you to go.

CHARLIE. But don't you want to have a family? Don't you want to be with people who care about you forever, too?

DEATH. It doesn't matter what I want. What matters is that I do the job I exist to do. Alone.

CHARLIE. I'll miss you.

DEATH. I'll miss you too, Charlie. Thank you.

(DEATH kneels, holding out his hand. Instead, CHARLIE jumps to hug DEATH. DEATH hesitates, then hugs CHARLIE. Fade to blackout. End of play.)