REAPERS, INC.-BRIGIT’S CROSS

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By

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“For True Love, I’ll wait forever…” - Edmund J. Polly
Prologue:
Where it Ended, Where it Began

He entered the café quietly and scanned the room. The usual inhabitants were there: doing the same things they would do until they decided it was time to go. Some of them were relatively new to the scene while others had haunted the joint since its demise in arson back in 1939. His ice blue gaze met the jovial eyes of Giuseppe Cincotta, the unfortunate soul that had also met his demise in the arson. Giuseppe nodded and turned to begin preparing his regular patron’s customary cup of tea.

Slowly, John Blackwick’s gaze moved to the left and came to rest on the reason he had arrived so early in the afternoon. ‘The Old Man’, as John called him affectionately, was waiting patiently – his own gaze deep into the glass of red wine before him. Silently, John approached him and slid onto the stool beside his mentor.

“You called for me, Araxius?” John asked as Giuseppe slid the cup of steaming tea before him. John nodded his thanks before picking it up and blowing gently across the surface.

“I did, John. Thank you for making haste,” Araxius replied solemnly. John sipped from his tea while waiting for an explanation. Araxius would take his time with it and the lack of expression on his sunken features did not surprise John at all. Over the last fifty years, he had become overly accustomed to the fact that Araxius – one of the founding members of the firm – lacked any sense of emotion or expression. After all, Araxius was one of the original Grim Reapers. He had a reputation to uphold.

“The time has come, John,” Araxius sighed as he circled the rim of his wineglass with an extremely long and boney forefinger. The Grim Reaper’s eyes remained sunken into the depths of the red wine he had loved so dearly as a mortal man so very long ago.

“Time for what? Am I being fired?” John asked evenly. He had learned, since joining the firm, to control his emotions as well as Araxius could; but the occasional urge to witnesse could still rise up in him.

“No, not at all,” Araxius countered. “In fact, I would consider it a promotion of sorts.” A slight smile tugged at the corners of the old man’s mouth, but was not allowed full exposure.

“Oh?” John swiveled on his stool to face his mentor. This was a surprise indeed.

“I’m retiring, John. I’ve had enough. I no longer wish to reap souls. I’m turning the reins of the firm over to you.”

For the first time in fifty years, John Blackwick felt a sudden surge of panic within his gut. Although he was sure the expression was not visible on his face, he was sure he must have paled even more than his normal complexion. A slight icy smile finally surfaced on Araxius’ thin lips.

“We’ve all decided to retire,” The Grim Reaper added. “Everything is yours.” Araxius finally turned his head and leveled his icy gaze on his companion as if to further the gravity of the situation.

“Why me? Wait, what do you mean by ‘all’ of you?” John swallowed hard as his thoughts began to give in to the panic rising fast from his gut.

“You’re the last to know because someone must continue on with the work, and someone must open the door for me. The other continental offices have already closed their doors. All the files have been relocated here for you to complete. I dare say I do apologize for such a late notice to your rise in rank; but it has been a decision we’ve all been considering for quite some time,” Araxius explained.

“What about the field agents? Are none of them more qualified than I am to carry on the firm’s work? And what about the Bailey? Has he retired as well?” John could feel his palms beginning to sweat; but he knew that was merely a phantom sensation. The dead didn’t sweat. That had been a fact to him since day one.

“They’ve all gone, John. They were given their options this morning. The Bailey, I’m afraid to admit, is
unreachable – off on one of his little sojourns, I suspect. It will be up to you to find him and give him his options.”

“Oh, I see,” John managed to say as the reality of the moment sank in on his mind like a cement block dropped from the top of a skyscraper. John watched Araxius slowly pick up his wineglass. He lifted it in a silent salute to Giuseppe before downing the contents in one long swallow. The Old Man sighed in deep and final satisfaction as he set the glass back to the counter and stood from his seat. John watched his mentor reach inside his black robe and withdraw a familiar long black folder. It was Araxius’ own file.

“You’re leaving now?” John asked as Araxius extended the folder out to him.

“This is my file, John,” Araxius said quietly – ignoring his apprentice’s question. “I’m ready to face my fate,” he announced. A genuine smile finally came to his face as he stared at the dark haired man before him. Araxius could see the shock (or was it fear?) on the young man’s face as he stared at the black folder being held out to him.

Slowly, John managed to raise his hand and take the folder from Araxius. In silence, he opened it and read the contents as he stood. From the corner of his eye, John saw the door appear to his left. Araxius turned to face the door, taking a deep breath in anticipation. It was to the left of the Reaper who stood before him. Better than he had hoped for after all this time. Perhaps there was some redemption to be found between the crossings after all….

John grasped the handle of the door in his hand and gently pulled it open before looking his mentor fully in the eye.

“Araxius Herodotus, may you find eternal peace,” he cited with a solemn gentleness that suggested he cared for the soul about to cross the threshold. Araxius lay a boney hand on John’s shoulder. It was the last rite before passing. John had learned it beautifully.

“Well said, my boy. Good luck and thank you.”

John Blackwick could only nod his reply before Araxius stepped through the door to accept his final judgment. Softly, John pushed the door shut and stared blankly at the floor as he tucked the now blank folder of Araxius Herodotus, former Grim Reaper and original founding member of Reapers, Inc., deep into the inner pocket of his black suit coat. A new era of reaping was about to begin. John Blackwick suddenly had no idea where to start.
1: The Day the Sky Fell

October 31 – Halloween

Brigit shifted the cell phone to her left hand as she reached out with her right to push open the door leading into Mr. Al’s Cleaning & More. She flashed a smile at Mrs. Al as she approached the counter while listening to Maggie remind her how important it was that they be on time to the Halloween party at the Women’s Center. They had promised Mama Dee months ago that they would participate in the festivities. Brigit’s gaze fell to the long black velvet coat Mrs. Al was taking down from the conveyer belt that snaked the length of the room. The clear plastic hanging over the coat added an extra glimmer to the black sequins decorating the lapels and cuffs of the antique coat.

“I know, sweetheart,” Brigit replied when Maggie stopped long enough to take a breath, “but it will only be for a few minutes. Rachel just wants to show off her decorating skills – that’s all.”

“Have you picked up your coat from Mr. Al’s yet? That’s the most important piece of your costume,” Maggie pointed out.

“I’m picking it up now,” Brigit said as she dug through her briefcase for her wallet. “Say ‘hello’, Mrs. Al,” Brigit said as she extended the cell phone toward the small Asian woman on the other side of the counter.

“Halloo, Miss Maggiieee,” Mrs. Al sang out as she took the money Brigit was handing her.

“Do you see?” Brigit asked as she returned the cell phone to her ear and began stuffing the contents of her briefcase back inside. She paused before putting her wallet back. Instead, she tucked it into the back pocket of her jeans before reaching for the long black coat Mrs. Al had laid across the counter.

“I hate it when you do that,” Maggie sighed. Brigit smiled as she pictured her partner’s face. The vision held an expression Brigit was fond of. It meant that she had Maggie’s attention and a moment to speak.

“Listen, Mags, it will just be for a few minutes. I won’t even have a drink,” Brigit promised.

“That’s good. I’d hate to see what Mama Dee would do to you if you showed up with alcohol on your breath,” Maggie warned.

“Okay, okay. I’ll see you in a bit,” Brigit promised.

“Be careful, Bree” Maggie warned. Brigit smiled at the use of the nickname. Maggie only used it on special occasions – or when she especially wanted Brigit to pay attention. Brigit had always hung on every word that came from Maggie’s lips, but the use of the nickname seemed to make a difference in remembering things that might otherwise seem mundane.

“I will, sweetheart.”

“Seriously, Bree,” Maggie pleaded. “Tonight especially. It’s Halloween and it’s getting dark too early this year.”

“Sweetheart, don’t worry. I’ll be home by seven-thirty. I promise.” There was a brief pause on the other end of the line and Brigit knew she had won the conversation for now. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Bree.”

As she left Mrs. Al with a wish for a safe and happy Halloween, Brigit smiled and turned left. Usually, she would have gone to the right and caught the 6:50 uptown bus for home; but she had promised Rachel that she would make an appearance at her fiancée’s new bar. They had been working on it for months and Rachel had pleaded incessantly that her colleague come and check it out before business wore off the excitement of its being new.
The Black Cat Club was at the dead end of an alley between A and B streets. As Brigit walked past the neighborhood’s denizens, she heard the life inside the tenement buildings spilling out into the street through the windows left open to the cool evening breezes of a punctual autumn. The chill of this October evening’s breeze blowing gently from the north nipped at her nose and cheeks as it rustled the orange and yellow leaves that had fallen from the young sycamores that lined the street. The city had planted them earlier that spring in an effort to beautify the neighborhood. This evening, they served as the visual reminder that autumn had arrived for sure and winter would be close on its heels. For Brigit, it signified the change in the air. It was the beginning of her favorite time of the year. The first sight of orange in the trees always excited her to the depths of her soul.

Brigit smiled to herself as she checked her watch. She had to hurry or she’d never be home at the promised time. Maggie would be mad about that and, tonight, Brigit didn’t want that. Tomorrow was their anniversary. Brigit had made plans for a wonderful day to show her appreciation for her partner of ten years.

She stopped at the head of the alleyway and suddenly frowned. It was lined with dumpsters and shadows. Her stomach clenched momentarily in uneasiness.

“Of course it would be the scariest alley in the whole city,” she mumbled to herself.

Slowly, Brigit readjusted her grip on the hanger still holding the coat over her shoulder. Involuntarily, her grip tightened on the briefcase handle she held in the other hand. Her eyes would adjust, she told herself as she focused on the blue light bulb burning over the door at the end of the alley. Rachel had said to knock twice so they would know it was Brigit on the other side. The girl hadn’t said what Brigit should do if she were attacked during the walk to the door.

Brigit shook that idea out of her head. She would know what to do if she were attacked. Seven years of Kung Fu training would take over if it were actually to happen. It would be the first time she would use it outside a competitive tournament, but she was confident it would be an automatic response.

The breeze picked up again, this time blowing from the east. A few strands of Brigit’s black hair blew free from the ponytail she wore on Fridays. She shivered as a chill from the breeze slid across the back of her neck. She made a quick note to herself to politely decline the next invitation to visit the bar, no matter what season it came in.

Fighting the urge to look from side to side, Brigit lengthened her stride until she stood before the door with the silhouette of a cat painted in black on it. Raising her hand holding the briefcase, she knocked twice and waited. Another chill found its way down her spine and this time she turned to look down the alley behind her. The feeling of invisible eyes had settled on her, watching her intently enough to cause her to stiffen in the unconscious preparation for a fight.

“You’re here!”

Brigit turned and found Rachel standing in the doorway. Her costume’s bright orange head dress was waving wildly in the gentle evening breeze.

“What are you supposed to be?” Brigit asked as she eyed the fluffy tower of feathers that demanded the smaller woman to move slowly lest she lose her balance.

“A Las Vegas show girl,” Rachel replied as she slowly waved her arms and swiveled her hips. “It was Scott’s idea. I wanted to be a beer wench, but he said that the customers might confuse me with the real wait staff. Where’s your costume?” She looked Brigit over, realizing that the other woman in black jeans and motorcycle boots was dressed normally for a casual Friday at the office.

“Right here,” Brigit replied, cocking her head toward the long black coat she carried over her shoulder. “Are you going to let me in? It's a little creepy out here,” she pointed out.
“Oh, sure, sorry. You can set your briefcase on the bar. Bobby will watch it,” Rachel promised, motioning to the corner. Brigit looked to her right and saw a shadow move. Two white orbs materialized from the darkness and Brigit took a step back. Bobby was a black man as broad as he was tall. There was barely a line of distinction between his skin and the cuff of the neck of the black turtleneck he had managed to squeeze over his torso.

“I’ll watch it,” Bobby promised. His voice was a low growl that had the potential to rival Barry White.

“Thank you,” Brigit said as she set the case on the bar.

“Bobby’s going to be our doorman. He’ll be outside mostly unless the weather’s bad. Are you cold?” Rachel asked as Brigit pulled the black coat from the plastic bag and shrugged it on over the black button down she had chosen to wear that morning. She laid the wire hanger and the wadded up bag on the bar beside her briefcase.

“A little,” Brigit admitted even though she knew the chill she was experiencing was from the feeling that had overwhelmed her in the alleyway. “It’s going to be a cool night,” she predicted as an excuse.

“So, what are you supposed to be?” Rachel asked as she leaned in to examine the beadwork on the lapel of Brigit’s coat.

“Maggie calls it my ‘pirate coat’. I just think she has a secret fetish for swashbucklers,” Brigit laughed.

“It’s missing something,” Rachel determined. She reached over the bar with her left hand while raising her right to balance the tower of feathers on her head. “Here, tie this around your head. Then, you’ll be dashing,” Rachel giggled as she passed a crimson silk scarf to her companion. “All swashbucklers wear red somewhere.”

“Whose is this?”

It’s Scott’s,” Rachel said as she watched Brigit tie the red scarf across her forehead and then pull out the rubber band that held her long black hair back from her face. The dark tresses fell easily about her shoulders.

“What’s he supposed to be tonight?”

“Mick Jagger circa 1978,” the smaller woman sighed with a roll of her eyes. She stepped away from the bar and motioned for Brigit to follow.

“Scott’s bald,” Brigit pointed out as she began to follow her friend through the empty bar.

“You should see the wig. He looks more like John Travolta circa 1978 than Mick Jagger.” The two women broke out into laughter and continued the tour.

7:10 P.M.

“This is a nice place, Rach, but I need to get going. I promised Maggie I’d be home by seven-thirty,” Brigit explained as they descended the stairs from the VIP floor. She slid the borrowed red scarf from her brow and passed it to Rachel as they walked across the main floor toward the door. Brigit’s dark hair fell even further onto her shoulders, framing her face in rich ebony.

“I understand,” Rachel sighed. “Thank you for coming by. Maybe next time you’ll see us with some business. Call me. I’ll be sure your name is on the VIP list,” she promised.

“Maybe,” Brigit laughed, “but I’m usually getting ready for bed by nine. Have a great first night,” she wished her friend as they hugged. Rachel suddenly reached for the towering head dress as it began to sway dangerously, causing them both to start laughing again.

Brigit was still laughing as she let herself out and glanced at her watch. She knew she’d be lucky if she were able to catch a cab in the next five minutes. Perhaps it would save her from too harsh a lecture from Maggie as she readied herself for the carnival. Luck was rarely on her side though…
The street was empty from her viewpoint at the end of the alley. Darkness had firmly settled over the city and Brigit shivered once more before striding down the alley. It still felt as if she were being watched by the invisible eyes; but she didn’t have the time to thoroughly process that thought now. She had to get home. She had to keep her promise to Maggie.

Half way down the alley, she stopped suddenly and looked at her hands. She had forgotten her briefcase. She didn’t remember seeing Bobby at the bar when she left; but then, she hadn’t seen him sitting there when she had entered either.

“Shit,” she cursed as she spun on her heel and began the path back to the door with the black cat painted on it.

She was ten feet away when she heard the whoosh of the air over her head. Before she could raise her eyes to view the source, she felt the weight strike the top of her head. The stress knot Maggie had been trying to work out of her neck for a week suddenly popped like a rubber band snapping. The pain of it dropped Brigit to her knees and she felt herself fighting to control the urge to puke. She closed her eyes against the white lights beginning to flash behind them in rapid sequence. The broken glass scattered across the cement was biting into her palms as she pressed against the ground to maintain an upright position. Slowly, Brigit leaned forward and rested her forehead against the cement, gasping hard for breath…

7:12 P.M.

Rachel scanned the empty room around her and smiled. They had been preparing for this night for months. Halloween Night, she thought, was the best night they could have hoped for. Fliers had been passed out all over town. If she hadn’t given her notice earlier that morning, she was sure she would have been fired for using the company’s resources to pursue personal endeavors. The rest of the staff was due to arrive at any moment. It was going to be a good night…

The door opened to the left and Bobby’s huge frame blocked the stark light that burned from within the room.

“Bathroom okay, Bob?” she asked jokingly.

“A little small if you ask me,” Bobby replied. “Where’s your friend?”

“She left.”

“Did she get her briefcase?”

Rachel glanced over her shoulder and cursed. The case was still sitting where Brigit had left it, along with the wadded plastic bag and hanger she had taken her coat from. Her head dress toppled off its perch to the floor as she quickly reached for the black leather case and ran for the door.

7:13 P.M.

“Brigit, open your eyes, darling…”

Slowly, Brigit let out her breath and began to focus on the gentle voice that seemed close to her ear. Her eyes opened, but she could only see the cement before her. The pain had subsided, but the nausea was still present.

“That’s a good girl,” the voice cooed as she slowly began to lift her head from the cement. “The sickness will pass,” the voice assured her.

It was a man’s voice that spoke to her. A man with an accent. British? Irish? Scottish? She couldn’t tell at the moment. She didn’t really care though. Slowly, she flexed her neck, rolling it from side to side. The stress knot was definitely gone. She’d have to remember to tell Maggie to just knock her head off next time.

“What the hell did you hit me with?” She asked as she turned to look for the source of the voice. Her vision
was taking its time in focusing.

“I didn’t hit you,” he replied softly.

“Where are you?” Brigit questioned as she finished loosening up her neck and tried to hurry the focus of her gaze.

“Beside you,” the voice replied.

Slowly, Brigit turned her head to the left and saw him leaning against the brick wall. His arms were folded patiently across his chest.

“Hello, darling,” he greeted with a faint smile. He wore a black suit over a white button down shirt. His thin tie, neatly knotted, was as black as his suit. Brigit looked him over for a half a second, trying to remember if she should know him.

“Who are you?” she finally asked as she tried to stand. Another wave of nausea began to churn in her stomach. “Oh,” she groaned before reaching out to steady herself against the wall to her right.

“You might take it easy there, love,” the man in black advised. “That was quite a blow you took.” His accent had a lilt to it, she noted; but she was still not immediately concerned with his origin. At the moment, she was more concerned with losing the late lunch she had finally found the time to eat.

“I’m surprised it didn’t kill me. What the hell hit me?”

“That.

The man pointed with a long, slender finger to an object laying a couple of feet away. It was manhole cover. Brigit was aware how heavy those could be.

“Where the hell did that come from?”

The man pointed up and instinctively, Brigit’s eyes followed. Standing on the rooftop, six stories up, she saw a bald man peering over the edge. His face was a deathly shade of white, as if he were looking at a sight so horrible it would damn his soul forever. Something about him, though, caused Brigit to think he was anything but a man. The black robes fluttering in the evening breeze only lent more weight to her last thought as she gazed up at him.

“By the way, love,” the man leaning against the wall cut in through her thoughts, “it did kill you.”

Brigit spun to face him just as she saw the door to The Black Cat open from the corner of her eye. Rachel emerged; Brigit’s briefcase was in her hand. Brigit turned quickly and watched as her friend stopped short. Then, the screaming began.

“Why is she screaming?” Brigit asked.

“I think it might be best if we go somewhere else to talk,” the man suggested as he pushed himself away from the wall. He took a second to button his suit coat before offering his arm to Brigit.

“WHO ARE YOU?” Brigit demanded as she jumped back from his reach.

“My name is John Blackwick. Please, I think it would be best if we left this place,” he suggested again.

“No, I have to let her know I’m all right,” Brigit argued. Rachel’s sobs were reaching through to her brain now. She turned to go to her friend and tripped, falling to the cement once more. She turned her head to look at what had caused her to fall and caught her breath up short. She could feel the glass shards cutting new slits into her palms. Brigit pushed past the pain as her eyes focused on the grisly sight now gripping her attention.

“Darling, I hate to point out this small fact; but, you are most definitely not all right,” John said firmly.
“This is a bad dream,” Brigit decided out loud as she scrambled to her feet. Quickly, she turned and began to walk down the alley toward the street. She had to get out of there. Maggie was waiting for her. They had a date tonight, all-be-it, handing out candy to children harbored at the women’s shelter. Tomorrow was a celebration. She had to get home to Maggie.

“Where are you going?” John called after her.

“Home, to my wife,” Brigit replied as she looked at her watch. It was only twelve minutes past seven. She still had time to meet Maggie at the apartment before they were due at the shelter. If she was lucky enough to catch a cab, she would be spared Maggie’s ire.

“Really? How do you expect to do that Brigit Malone?” John called. She detected the note of sarcasm in his voice, but she refused to answer him. Three empty taxis were coming her way. Desperately, Brigit threw her arm in the air to signal her need. Behind them, she could see the flashing lights of an ambulance flying down the avenue. Brigit waved frantically at the approaching taxis. The wail of the siren was growing louder, piercing her ears, hurting her head. She looked over her shoulder at the scene in the alley behind her.

Rachel was on her knees, clutching the black briefcase against her breast and sobbing over the crumpled form that Brigit refused to acknowledge as her own body. Bobby was pacing back and forth barking orders into his cell phone. Scott had joined the scene as well, trying to pull Rachel away from the body. John, the man in the black suit, was standing in the foreground of it all, his hands helplessly shoved into his trouser pockets. His ice blue gaze was focused on Brigit as she waited for a taxi to stop.

When the taxis rushed by her, Brigit looked at her watch again. It was still twelve past seven. If she ran, she wouldn’t be that late. Glancing at John again, she noticed him reaching into the waist pocket of his coat.

“I’ll be at the café on Bleecker Street if you decide to talk,” she heard him say gently as the ambulance came to a screeching halt beside her. Brigit jumped out of the way and took off running north. Maggie was going to be beyond angry.
2: Things Broken

She ran until her legs began to feel as though they would cramp. As her feet pounded against the sidewalk, Brigit was sure that the thundering of her heartbeat in her ears was the reason she couldn’t hear the sound of her boots hitting the cement.

A light was burning in the front window of the apartment. Brigit paused long enough to determine that Maggie was still home and most likely pissed off to no end. Quickly, Brigit rushed up the stoop and through the opened door, taking the stairs two at a time to the second floor. She skidded to a stop in front of their door and began to pat herself for her keys. A desperate fear began to rise up in her as she realized they weren’t in her pockets. They were in the briefcase. Rachel had the briefcase. Brigit cursed loudly and kicked the door.

“Mags, honey, let me in. I know I’m late,” Brigit pleaded as she pressed her forehead against the door. “I’ve lost my keys. Please, Mags….”

Her hand fell to the door knob and, on a whim, she turned it. Slowly, the door opened. Hesitant, Brigit stepped in and scanned the room. It was empty. The lamp next to Maggie’s reading chair by the bay window had been left on. A note lay on top of the book Maggie had been reading the weekend before.

“Bree,

We’ve gone to the shelter. Come as soon as you can. Yes, you are in trouble.

Maggie”

Brigit sighed heavily and looked around again. The clock on the wall read eight-thirty. She was an hour late. Even if she left now, she would get to the shelter just as the festivities would be wrapping up. By then, the adult celebrants of the neighborhood would fill the streets in costumes more imaginative and risqué than children should see. That was life in the city, though.

Slowly, Brigit sank into Maggie’s reading chair. She had to think of a good explanation. Maggie would expect the truth, but, would she believe it? Brigit’s gaze fell on to the picture frame resting against the small lamp on the table.

It was an old picture, taken during the first year they were together. It was a day at the beach, their smiles revealing their happiness at finding each other and being together. They had met by chance, having mutual friends of friends. Their connection had been immediate, their chemistry enigmatic and their passion all-consuming. Brigit smiled at that last thought. The fire between them had barely died down during the last ten years. They had never spent a night apart. They had never slept in separate beds. It was only during the day, when they were fulfilling their required hours at work that they were ever not in the same room. Maggie was her one and only and Brigit couldn’t imagine ever being without her.

Her life prior to the moment of meeting Maggie Devon had been such a patchwork of scenes. Her earliest memories of her childhood were fragments overshadowed by dramatic moments involving her mother and the various men that had been brought into Brigit’s life. Brigit couldn’t remember her father. He had left the scene long before his only daughter could form any kind of attachment to him aside from bearing his last name. She had once rescued a shredded image of him from the trash can after her mother had gone through one of her ‘purifying’ episodes. Carefully, Brigit had pieced the photograph together as best she could with glue and paper; but it was never right. The image remained broken and, eventually, Brigit lost it after leaving her broken childhood behind. Her life had been like that picture, pieced together as best she could until the moment she had met Maggie. After that, Brigit had found herself suddenly whole and the past was nothing more than a hazy memory hidden in the furthest shadows of her mind.

Her gaze focused on Maggie’s face in the photo. Her sandy brown hair had been cropped short that fall – a
mistake Maggie admitted to when the first cold day set in and she found herself purchasing a knit cap to keep her head warm. Maggie let it grow out again, revealing a head of natural curls that Brigit loved to bury her face in as they were falling asleep at night. A light shined in Maggie’s dark brown eyes as they looked into the camera. That light was always present, even when she was mad. That light was part of what made Brigit feel complete.

Brigit looked at her watch again. It still read twelve past seven and she realized it was broken. She frowned and shook her head in sadness. It had run perfectly for ten years. It had been a gift from Maggie after discovering that Brigit lacked the ability to be on time for anything. It was a basic watch on a basic black leather band, but Brigit loved it. It was from Maggie. It meant something.

A knock on the door brought Brigit from her thoughts. She stood to go answer it but stopped short when she saw the deadbolt. It was turned. The door was locked tight and she knew she had not touched it when she closed the door. The knock came again. She held her breath as she slowly crept to the door and peered through the peep hole. Two uniformed policemen stood on the other side.

“She must be out,” Brigit heard one of them say as she pulled away from the door.

“Should we wait?”

“Nah, we’ll come back,” the first officer decided out loud with a sigh. “I hate these calls. They’re so depressing.”

Brigit went back to Maggie’s chair and sat down. Maggie would be home soon and everything would be fine. None of this was really happening. It couldn’t be and Maggie would reassure her of that as soon as she came home.

She sighed heavily and crossed her legs. From Maggie’s chair, she could see the street below. She’d be able to see Maggie coming home. Her gaze slowly rested on the picture again. Her mind had stopped racing, but it was still grinding over the events of the evening.

It was a bad dream. That man – John Blackwick – he had to be wrong. She was alive. She was fine, no matter what she had seen after getting to her feet in the alleyway. He had called her by her full name. How did he know her? Brigit knew Maggie would help her make sense of it. If only she would hurry up and come home…

Brigit bit her lip to quell the emotions that were beginning to rise from the pit of her stomach. She couldn’t be dead. She had picked herself up from the pavement. She had seen John standing against the wall, heard his voice telling her what happened. She had seen the crumpled body wearing her coat. She had seen the pool of blood growing over the cement. Yet, she had picked herself up and ran full tilt form the alley up 8th Avenue to their apartment on 68th Street. While it was a distance she had traveled by foot before, it was not one she had ever traveled in less than two hours.

As if to reassure herself, she looked at her palms. They were smooth and pink. Her mind began to revolt again as she peered at them in disbelief. She had felt the glass cutting into them when she had caught herself on the cement. Yet, there were no cuts, no blood – there was nothing…

She couldn’t be dead. She had a promise to keep – a promise she had made to Maggie.

They had stood on the beach where they had first met, on the one year anniversary of their meeting. It was the first of November and a crisp breeze had blown off the ocean all day, but they had ignored it. They were bundled in their favorite sweaters and their enigmatic love for one another. As the light of the day faded, the stars became crystal clear against the sky that was the deepest shade of blue. The small fire Brigit had built burned steadily and a bottle of wine sat opened on the blanket where they had spent the afternoon watching the horizon slowly, ever so slowly, give birth to the full moon. As they stood at the water’s edge watching the moon reach it’s zenith, Brigit had held Maggie’s hand and gazed deep into her eyes and promised a long life together until the last breath.

Brigit had been so sure that she would be the last one to go, that she would outlast Maggie by at least a day. She had never imagined that she would ever leave Maggie alone. She had made the promise that she never would and now, she had broken it.
Maggie forced a smile as she handed another miniature goblin a handful of candy. Mama Dee was declaring how scary the pint sized ghost behind the goblin seemed as tiny hands peeked out from under the flora-print sheet the child’s mother had decided to use as a last minute costume. Despite the cheerfulness of the crowd, Maggie couldn’t help but think that the nagging feeling at the back of her mind would only go away at the sight of Brigit striding through the crowd. The world could completely dissolve and everything would still be fine in Maggie’s mind so long as Brigit was beside her.

Mama Dee turned to face her companion. Despite the smile on the young woman’s face, Mama Dee could see the worry deep behind her dark eyes. Like Maggie, she too had a nagging feeling that would only go away at the sight of Brigit coming toward them. It was a feeling Mama Dee had come to know too well in her sixty plus years of walking the earth. She prayed tonight was just a false feeling brought on by the holiday that so often played on her superstitions and senses…

“She still ain’t called?”

“No,” Maggie sighed. “I’ve called her cell phone three times. The voice mail keeps picking up. Something is wrong.”

“Maybe she laid her phone down somewhere. You know how she misplaces things sometimes,” Mama Dee suggested, remembering how she had spent an hour helping the girls look for Brigit’s keys just yesterday morning.

“I know,” Maggie said as she passed another handful of candy to twin princesses. “She’d misplace her head if it wasn’t attached to her body. Most days, I have to give her a pat down list before she leaves for work,” Maggie said as a little boy without a costume came to stand in front of her.

“I know, I’ve heard you,” Mama Dee laughed as her eyes fell on the little boy. “Sweetheart, what are you supposed to be?” she asked the child.

“I’m a little boy,” the child replied. Mama Dee and Maggie exchanged glances. It wasn’t a little boy standing before them, but rather, a little girl in boy’s clothes. Mama Dee gave the child a handful of candy.

“They’re getting started earlier and earlier these days,” Maggie muttered under her breath. Mama Dee shook her head and sighed in amusement.

“Maybe you should go on home and wait for her,” Mama Dee suggested. “We’re about done here anyway.”

“Are you sure, Mama?”

“Yeah, go on home, honey. Just give me a call when she gets in so I don’t spend the evening worrying too,” Mama Dee replied with a wave of her plump hand.

“I will,” Maggie replied as she turned and snatched up her purse and sweater.

Maggie glanced over her shoulder at Mama Dee as she exited the shelter. The small black woman had fully returned her attention to the line of children parading before her, their pillow cases held wide open to receive their treats. For a moment, Maggie found herself smiling. Mama Dee loved children, but the little old woman had never been able to have any of her own. Instead, she doted on those who needed some love the most. Everyone in the neighborhood knew Mama Dee. Everyone could always feel the love.

During the walk home, Maggie called Brigit’s cell phone three more times. Each time, she only heard Brigit’s voicemail message… Hi, this is Brigit, sorry I missed your call… Each time, Maggie would disconnect the call before she heard Brigit’s instruction to leave a message. It wasn’t like Brigit to not contact her. Even if she had misplaced her cell phone, Maggie knew Brigit would have found a way to call and explain the situation.

Yet, no call was coming.

As Maggie climbed the stairs to their apartment, a sinking sensation was forming in the pit of her stomach. Something was definitely wrong. Everything was too quiet in the building and her intuition told her it had nothing to
do with the holiday.

Glancing over her shoulder as she put her key in the lock, Maggie had the feeling something dark was moving in the air behind her. Quickly, she turned the key and stepped inside the apartment. With her back against the door, she let go her breath and tried to shake the feeling she had just experienced in the hall. The eeriness refused to go away, though. It was as though the darkness was had come to lurk just outside the door.

“Brigit, are you home?” Maggie called out, not moving from her spot at the door. When silence answered her, the sandy haired woman allowed her brown eyes to scan the room. Her gaze went quickly to where she had left the note for her partner. It had not been touched. “Brigit?” she called again. Still no sound could be heard.

Slowly, Maggie eased off the door and walked to her favorite reading chair. Every nerve was on edge and her hands were beginning to shake as she dug her cell phone out from the pocket of the sweater that had done little to block the chills now running rampant over her skin. Glancing over her shoulder as she waited for Mama Dee to answer her call, Maggie glanced at the windows to see if one had been left open. They hadn’t. All three were closed, yet, the chill in the room was growing by the second.

“Hello, Maggie,” Mama Dee’s voice finally sounded in Maggie’s ear and the young woman returned her attention to the call. She could tell by the labored sound of breathing that Mama Dee had already begun her walk towards home.

“Mama, she’s not home. She hasn’t called you, has she?”

“No, she sure hasn’t. Did you try to call her again?”

“Three times, no answer. Mama, something isn’t…”

Maggie’s attention was yanked to the door by the sound of heavy footsteps climbing the stairs. She remembered Brigit walking out that morning with her boots on.

“What’s the matter?” Maggie heard Mama Dee ask.

“Hang on. Someone’s coming up the stairs,” Maggie answered as she rose from her chair and hurried to the door. She pressed her eye to the peep hole and frowned at the sight of two uniformed policemen on the other side. “Mama, it’s the police.”

“What do they want?”

A loud knock caused Maggie to jerk her head back from where she peered out at the two very serious looking men. Slowly, she opened the door with her free hand. Mama Dee was still on the phone, Maggie knew, but the sense that these men had bad news caused the woman to forget her previous conversation.

“Maggie Devon?” The first officer spoke, perhaps more sternly than Maggie cared for.

“Yes? Is there a problem?”

“Do you know a Brigit Malone?” he asked in reply to her question.

“Yes. Is she in trouble?” Maggie asked quickly. The sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach returned with such a force that caused her head to start spinning.

“I’m afraid we have some bad news…” was all Mama Dee heard over the phone before the screaming started.

Maggie hit her knees in the agony that ripped through her gut. Her worst fear had broken free.
3: Stalked

Brigit had tried to stop Maggie from going to the door when the policemen had returned to deliver the news of ‘the accident’. As soon as she had walked through the door, Brigit had jumped to her feet and began the useless rant about what had happened to cause her delay. It was only when Maggie had called Mama Dee that Brigit grasped the fact that Maggie could not see or hear her.

As the realization sank in, Brigit had gone to the window and looked out. She could see him – John Blackwick – standing on the sidewalk across the street. He was leaning against the wall of the building with his hands in his trouser pockets. Even from the second floor through the heavy darkness, Brigit could feel his ice blue eyes boring into her. Anger began to well up from her gut as she returned his stare. It was only when she saw the police car pull up to the curb in front of her building that she broke her gaze and her attention snapped back to Maggie.

Mama Dee had arrived as quickly as she could. Brigit had watched helplessly as one of the policemen noticed the cell phone in Maggie’s fist. Gently, he took it from her and handed it to his partner as he tried to coax Maggie from where she had crumpled to the floor to the sofa. His partner, noticing that there was a call still active, quickly began instructing the person on the other end to please come at once. When the call was ended, Brigit watched him place the phone on the table where they normally tossed their keys and assist his partner in helping the hysterical woman from the floor over to the sofa. It was only when Mama Dee arrived that the policemen took their leave after giving her some final instructions regarding identifying Brigit’s body.

Brigit never felt so helpless in her life as she watched her partner falling apart and their dearest friend trying to comfort her while grieving as well. Finally, Brigit turned away again and returned to the window. The sobbing of the two women who had loved her most pierced her brain. The sound branded itself in her ears as she looked out at the darkness that had completely shrouded the street below.

He was still there. He had moved from leaning against the wall to leaning against the post of the street light that blazed brightly against the darkness of the night. Their gazes locked again and Brigit wondered momentarily why he was stalking her. As they stared each other down, she searched her memory thoroughly for any hint of a John Blackwick in it.

After what seemed like hours, she finally came to the conclusion that they had never crossed paths before. By the time she found this conclusion, Maggie had fallen asleep and Mama Dee could be heard shuffling around in the kitchen. An occasional sniffle indicated her tears were still falling as she washed that morning’s breakfast dishes the girls had left in the sink.

Brigit finally ceded her position at the window and stood over Maggie as she slept on the sofa. Mama Dee had covered her with the plaid throw they kept over the back of the sofa. They had spent many a cool evening snuggled beneath it as they watched T.V. It wasn’t a heavy blanket, but it was warm enough to create a sense of coziness when shared with the one she loved.

Brigit reached out to smooth back a curl from Maggie’s brow. She was startled to find that it would not move. Her fingers passed through it, sending a shiver down Maggie’s features. Brigit felt her lip begin to quiver as she raised her hand to look at it again. She still appeared solid. She had felt the warmth of Maggie’s skin as she had brushed her forehead. Yet, it confused her that she was unable to feel anything else. As she turned away from her sleeping partner, she could feel her heart beginning to ache with the thought she would never again be able to touch Maggie with the familiarity that she had known before this evening’s event.

The funeral was on a Wednesday. Despite the crisp chill that was in the air, the sun was shining and the sky was clear. It seemed such a contrast to the feeling that seemed to prevail in the energy surrounding the services and the subsequent funeral procession through the cemetery to the site where Brigit’s body was to be interred.

Brigit stood beside Maggie, unable to cease her irritated stare at the row of faces on the other side of the dark brown casket that held her body. Maggie should have been the one sitting there – not the one standing through her
grief; but then, if Maggie had remained in charge, none of this scene would have been happening in the first place, Brigit mused. The party would have already started.

She had come to accept the fact that she was indeed dead during the course of the last week, but none of this was part of her final wishes. She had had the conversation a few times with Maggie regarding the disposal of her remains should anything happen. They had made the agreement to cremation. Their final instructions were to combine their ashes and then throw them from the highest peak their friends could find. Even in death, they had mapped out the intent to always be together. Brigit stared hard at the casket containing her body and frowned. The map had been shredded, torn from Maggie’s hands before she could even realize it. Brigit had suspected it would happen as soon as Maggie had made the phone call to the woman she had never met.

Her eyes rested on the woman sitting directly in the middle of the family row. She wondered why her mother had bothered to show. She wondered how, after so many years, Liana Evans could suddenly have a care about any part of Brigit’s life – or death.

Actually, she didn’t wonder. She knew.

Liana was hoping to snag the spotlight. She would be the grieving mother who had lost her only child in a bizarre accident. She would rue her actions as a homophobic mother that had shunned her daughter for being an embarrassment. She would lament her grief at never knowing how happy her daughter had been, how strong she had been to make a choice that went against all the rules of her conservative upbringing just to be happy with someone who had filled her heart with so much love. Liana Evans, though, would never admit that Brigit had truly been happy though. She would eventually find some way to belittle the life Brigit had shared with Maggie.

Brigit imagined Liana at the dinner after the funeral. What she imagined made her smile. Her friends – their friends – would easily see through Liana. They had all lived through their own hardships with the lives they had been born into, with the paths they had walked to find their own peace and happiness with their place in the world. Brigit smiled because she knew that, standing behind her, were some bigger drama queens than Liana Evans could ever imagine being.

Brigit eyed her mother with amusement. Liana was dressed well, meaning to draw attention to herself; but the drama queens in the crowd behind her were in drag. Their glitz and glamour having gone all out to show their celebration and admiration for their friend lost too early. The sequins and feather boas, the lipstick and beehive wigs, the broad rimmed ladies’ hats brought more attention and festivity to the service than Brigit could have hoped for. Today, they had Liana beat hands down.

Brigit turned to her right and smiled faintly as Mama Dee brought a handkerchief to her eye. She watched the older woman dab away the tear and sniff lightly as the preacher droned on the final words of the burial rite. Behind her, she could hear the quiet sniffles of the people who had been her and Maggie’s friends. In Brigit’s opinion, they should all be standing on the family side – not the people who were sitting there.

A movement in the trees behind the family row caught Brigit’s attention and she stiffened. He was there, looking the same as he had every day since their meeting in the alley leading to The Black Cat Club. His hands were shoved in his trousers and he had that infuriatingly patient look on his face as he locked eyes with her. Brigit suddenly felt her anger spark as the final words from the preacher reached through to her brain: ashes to ashes, dust to dust…

Quickly, Brigit left the group surrounding the grave and strode across the lawn toward John Blackwick. She could feel her anger sparking in an effort to ignite as she approached him. He made no effort to move despite the obvious look of intent on her face. Instead, a gentle smile came to his face as he waited for her to confront him.

“What the hell do you want?” Brigit demanded when she was within earshot of him.

“A conversation, Brigit Malone, that’s all,” he replied.

Brigit stopped three feet from him, her hands clenched into fists at her side. She wanted so badly to strike out at him physically. She had the feeling, however, that it would not wipe the smile from his face.
“You’ve been stalking me all week. What could we possibly have to talk about?”

“I have a proposition for you.” John Blackwick revealed.

“Regarding what?” Brigit demanded. Her voice was shaking. Her anger was rising. She hated being pushed to the point where her anger would take control of her. It had always been such a draining emotion and Brigit had often been able to avoid it easily. Today, at the sight of John Blackwick, her anger suddenly seemed too near the surface and she didn’t care.

“I have a job offer.”

“A job offer? I’m dead, Mr. Blackwick, as you so eloquently pointed out last week. What kind of job can a ghost do?” He wasn’t making any sense to her and it seemed to only urge her anger to rise all the quicker.

“There is a point, Brigit, where phantoms have the potential to become something more. You possess skills that I am most interested in and it is obvious to me that you have no intention of letting go of the life you had. I have a way to maintain some level of connection to it, if that is your true intention. It’s a choice you have to make, darling.”

“You’re not making any sense,” Brigit snapped at him. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about an opportunity to remain. Are you interested?”

Brigit glared hard at him. The urge to raise her fist and punch him square in the nose was still riding through her mind even though a tiny spark of interest was beginning to form behind the urge. She kept her silence as he reached inside his breast pocket and withdrew a small business card before extending it out to her.

“If you think about it, meet me at the Bleecker Street Café tomorrow and I’ll explain your options. Otherwise, I’ll have no choice but to carry out my assignment in regard to you, Brigit Malone.” There was a suddenly a serious tone to his words and Brigit felt a small shiver run down her spine. Something about the seemingly serene man before her suddenly felt very menacing.

“Is that a threat?” She asked, her own tone matching the seriousness of his.

“No, love, it’s a promise.”

Brigit snapped the card quickly from John Blackwick’s extended hand and spun on her heel, turning her back on him. As she strode away, she heard his voice in her head.

“Enjoy the celebration of your memory, Brigit. Soon, their lives will move on and you will still be here. Make your choice wisely, love…”
4: Someone to Watch Over

Brigit had gone home along with the crowd that had attended her funeral. Once there, the food was brought out and the wine began to flow. Her friends had spared no expense in honoring her memory. They had hired caterers and ordered Brigit’s favorite wine by the case. Glass upon glass was filled as stories were told about their various experiences with Brigit Malone and Maggie Devon. Accolades were posthumously lain out for all to see and agree and exalt as the autumn sun passed quickly through the sky and began to descend to his resting place on the other side of the world. Brigit watched the face of each person as they spoke, sometimes through tears, sometimes through laughter and she found herself tapping into the emotions swirling inside them. With the amount of bodies crowded into the main room of their apartment, feeling the energy was easy for Brigit. They had never entertained such a large gathering before.

The only person unable to speak was Brigit’s mother, Liana. What could she say after so much adoration for her daughter – the woman she had never allowed herself to know – had been displayed?

When the crowd began to disperse, she was touched by each friend’s offer to be there for Maggie as they bid good-byes. Brigit watched her partner as she accepted the offers with a forced smile, a nod and a hug. Even in her grief, Maggie was still beautiful to her. They had been together ten years minus one day. Brigit had hoped it would have been a full life spent with Maggie. She had hoped they would have been old and grey before they no longer looked at each other every day.

Brigit had watched her every night since the accident. She had stood over her lover watching her sleep, noting when she dreamed, noting when she grieved. In her sleep, Maggie had cried and then, at other times, she had smiled. Brigit felt herself mirroring her lover’s emotions, wishing she could reach out and wipe away the tears or caress the smile that had spread across her lips. She refrained, however, knowing that if she reached out, she would not feel anything but Maggie’s warm energy under her fingertips. That thought was some consolation; but it was not the same as being able to touch Maggie and really feel her.

“Where are Brigit’s papers?”

It was Liana’s voice that snapped Brigit from her thoughts. She had wondered how long it would be before her mother would begin snooping through her life with Maggie. A sly smile came to Brigit’s face as she watched Maggie square her shoulders and look Liana Evans in the eye.

“They’re in the office. Why?” Maggie asked. Mama Dee had come from the kitchen and was standing at the entrance to the hall in silent witness to the exchange going on. Her presence blocked the path to the office where Maggie and Brigit hid the business side of their life together.

“I want to see them. Surely, my daughter meant for her family to handle her affairs in the event of her death. Now that-that has happened, her family will do so,” Liana stated matter-of-factly.

Maggie and Mama Dee exchanged a brief glance. Carefully, Maggie set her wine glass on the small table next to her and returned her gaze to the woman attempting to trump her with the ties of blood. Brigit watched intently as her partner took a deep breath. Maggie had been drinking all afternoon and Brigit knew better than anyone that Maggie was a force to be reckoned with when her temper was ignited while intoxicated. Liana Evans was in for the storm of her life if she didn’t listen carefully and heed the warning that Maggie would give her before firing all canons.

“Brigit did mean for her family to handle her affairs,” Maggie began. Her voice was calm and level. Brigit knew her temper was standing ready at the door to be loosed on the woman that had abandoned her daughter for being a lesbian. “Her family has done just as she wished with the exception of being buried. As for her papers,” Maggie paused. Brigit and Maggie had set everything legally in order when they had bought the apartment together. Right of Survivorship was a wonderful thing at this moment. “They have nothing to do with you.”

“That’s impossible. I don’t believe you. I’m her mother,” Liana spat vehemently.
“Who disowned her when she decided to follow her heart,” Maggie pointed out. The intonation of her voice had risen. Brigit saw the fire spark in her partner’s dark brown eyes.

“Brigit made her family of all the people you saw here today. You did her a favor by shunning her. She was free to choose wonderful, loving people to call her family. You shut the door on the blood lines, Liana. Brigit made sure that the people who truly loved her would be taken care of. So if there’s anything you’re looking to take away from me, you can go to hell because Brigit made sure she would always take care of me. The house is mine, the accounts are mine, her memory is mine,” Maggie explained. “I think you need to leave now.”

Brigit watched her mother square her shoulders in offense that she would be asked to leave anywhere. Brigit could tell that Liana was considering pushing the issue further. The idea would do no good and Brigit saw that fact register on her mother’s face as she stared into the dark eyes of Maggie Devon. Mama Dee made a slight movement towards Maggie, as if to reinforce the fact that it was time for Liana Evans to leave. Finally, Liana picked up her purse and started for the door.

“My lawyer will be calling you,” she warned as she opened the door. Maggie made no reply as the door was slammed shut. Instead, she picked up her wine glass and drained the contents in one quick swallow.

“Hard to believe that Brigit came from that,” Mama Dee sighed as she reached out and took Maggie’s empty wine glass and disappeared back to the kitchen.

Brigit watched as Maggie walked over to the sofa and sank down on it. It had been a rough day for her even though she had kept a brave face and, on occasion, forced a smile to show everyone that she was doing all right. Brigit had left her side only once to confront John Blackwick at the cemetery. Even though she was dead, she was not about to let Maggie go through all this by herself.

Maggie ran a tired hand through her hair and sighed heavily. Her anger was keeping her from breaking down again. Brigit watched as her partner’s eyes roved around the room. Everything that had been theirs as a couple was now solely Maggie’s. She had told the truth to Liana. Brigit had made sure that Maggie would always be taken care of. It was a decision she had been made the day they had first met, when their souls had recognized one another and realized they were immediately whole.

It had been a warm day despite the fact that fall had already made its announcement of arrival. Brigit had accepted an invitation from her friend, Parker James, to hit the beach for the last party of the season. Usually, Brigit avoided the beach parties. She preferred to spend her weekends hiking or cycling through the mountains surrounding the small college she had spent the last four years at. They were more accessible to her than the beach, which was a two hour train ride away.

Parker had been adamant, however. They were best friends and Brigit had used up all the declining passes to a beach party. Soon, Parker had pointed out, they would be going their separate ways and though their friendship would always remain, time spent together would become a rarity. Hoping to avoid any more of the guilt trip, Brigit gave in and packed her beach towel and flip-flops for a day by the ocean.

Maggie Devon had been a regular at the beach parties. She had seen her share of bonfires and hook-ups between the campus lesbians that were exploring their sexualities now that they were free from the confines of their upbringings and the watchful eyes of strict parents. She had managed to refrain from becoming involved. None of the group moved her to the idea that they might be ‘the one’. Instead, she had become the group counselor, the group mediator when a fight broke out and the occasional matchmaker. She had never thought she would find her soul mate on the beach.

Yet, there they were. Brigit had followed Parker across the sand, wondering if it had been such a good idea to come after all. Parker was filling her brain with all the drama that had been going on lately, warning her who to avoid and giving her tips on who it was okay to talk to with no strings attached. Brigit was getting lost in all the names.

Then, she saw her.
She was walking toward them with a slight bounce to her step. The ocean breeze was blowing the ends of her sarong away from her tanned legs. Her close cropped sandy brown hair gave her face a pixie’s appearance as she smiled at the two women who were approaching her. Brigit was stunned into silence as she something deep inside her began wanting to rush to the beautiful woman.

“Hey you guys!” Maggie had called to them with a wave of her arm. “They’re setting up around the cliff. There’s supposed to be bigger winds when the sun goes down,” she said. Her smile seemed to freeze as she stopped walking and looked into Brigit’s dark brown eyes.

“Maggie Devon, this is my friend Brigit Malone,” Parker introduced when the silence became too much. “Bree, this is Maggie.”

“Hello,” Brigit managed to say, hoping there was some confidence in her voice as she extended her hand. Maggie gently slipped her own hand into Brigit’s and they both acknowledged the energy that began to run between their palms by locking gazes again.

“Where are you headed?” Parker asked, hoping to break the mushiness of the moment she was witnessing. Maggie glanced briefly at Parker before returning her gaze to the dark woman who was still holding her hand softly. She suddenly wondered how she and Brigit had managed to never cross paths before this moment in time.

“Oh, I, uh, I left a few things in the car. I was just headed back to get them,” Maggie answered.

“Do you need a hand?” Brigit asked, suddenly not wanting to leave the smaller woman’s side ever.

“Oh, I, no, I think I can manage it. It won’t take long,” Maggie promised. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“Okay, then,” Parker said quickly. She was getting bored with the moment. “Bree, give Maggie her hand back,” she instructed, punching her best friend in the shoulder. Reluctantly, she released Maggie’s hand.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” Maggie promised. She hadn’t wanted the dark woman to let her hand go; but she was on an errand and she was suddenly sure it was somewhat awkward for Parker to be in the middle of a meeting of souls.

“We’ll see you then,” Parker interjected before Brigit could say anything. She pulled on Brigit’s arm, but Brigit remained where she stood. Instead, Brigit turned to watch Maggie Devon continue on her way, a devilish smile coming to her face.

“What’s so funny?” Parker asked when she finally noticed Brigit’s smile.

“That’s the woman I’m going to grow old with,” Brigit announced.

Parker looked down the beach at the retreating form of Maggie Devon. She had hung out with Maggie on many occasions and she had seen nothing special about her; but then, Parker had a certain taste in women and Maggie Devon had never fit that criteria.

“What ever you say, pal,” Parker said. She clapped Brigit on the shoulder and pulled her toward the party that was waiting to begin on the other side of the cliff.

They had never been apart since that day. Maggie had returned as quickly as she had promised and found her place beside Brigit. Before the night was done, they had kissed and known for sure where their hearts belonged. Before the week was out, their passions had been ignited and their love unleashed. Before the month was over, they were living together happily knowing they would outlast any of the relationships that had been formed that year. They had been right in their thinking for ten years minus one day.

Brigit had made a promise to always take care of Maggie. She had kept that promise.
As she sat watching Maggie, Brigit’s thoughts turned to her brief conversation with John Blackwick. What had he said? He had a job offer. What kind of job could a ghost do? And, what was an opportunity to remain? Brigit couldn’t imagine leaving Maggie’s side. She was a ghost now. She could stay with Maggie every minute of every day if she wanted to – and she did. What other option could there be?

“Everything is all cleaned up.”

Maggie and Brigit looked to the hall and saw Mama Dee emerging. There was a weary look on her aged face. Brigit thought she had never seen the woman suddenly looking her age of sixty-three. Mama Dee had been with Maggie almost every minute for the last week. Her grief over the loss had etched itself into her black eyes and the dark circles underneath looked purple on her black skin. She had lost one of her babies, one of the children she was proud to claim.

“Thank you, Mama,” Maggie sighed.

“You want me to stay with you tonight?” Mama Dee offered.

“No, that’s okay. I’ll be okay,” Maggie replied as she stood. She wrapped her arms around the little old woman that had been her rock during the last week. “I think we both need to get some rest.”

“Okay then,” Mama Dee said as she patted the younger woman’s back. “You holler if you need anything.”

“I will,” Maggie promised. She opened the door for her friend and watched as the woman shuffled out.

“I’m proud of you, Maggie,” Mama Dee said suddenly when she was out in the hall.

“Why?” Maggie asked, confused by the comment.

“You were Brigit’s family. That woman had no business even showing up today; but you showed her kindness and patience. I just hope she recognizes that somewhere down the road. I’m proud of you for keeping your claim on Brigit.”

“Thank you, Mama,” Maggie said quietly. She watched Mama Dee continue her shuffle across the hall to her own apartment and open the door. The little old woman didn’t look back as she entered and closed the door behind her.

Maggie returned to the sofa and sighed again. The apartment was still filled with Brigit’s energy. Everything in it contained some piece of her essence and Maggie found it to be a double-edged sword. She was alone with it. Part of it comforted her and the other part broke her heart even more. She hoped that eventually, she would come to terms with both sides of it and be able to breathe again.

Brigit watched as Maggie turned and lifted her feet up onto the sofa. She had been sleeping there all week. It was a defense against the memories that flooded their bedroom during the darkness of night. Brigit didn’t blame her. She didn’t think she could return there so soon either. She had refrained from entering that room herself since the accident. She knew there were just as many memories there for her as there were for Maggie. She would wait for Maggie to go there and they would face those memories together, just as they had faced everything in their life together.

Her thoughts turned once more to John Blackwick. He said he wanted to have a conversation. She was still wondering what he had meant by an opportunity to remain. He had instructed her to meet him at the Bleecker Street Café tomorrow. As far as she knew, there wasn’t such a place; but he had given her a card. Upon remembering it, Brigit quickly pulled it from the pocket of her coat. She turned it over to read:

REAPERS, INC.

EST. 34 A.D.
It was a simple card. Black ink written on white stock paper. Brigit held it between her finger tips as she looked over at Maggie. Her eyes were closed and the depth of her breath indicated that she was close to sleep.

Brigit’s eyes snapped back to the card she held and she thought of what John had said about choices. She had received no choice in when her life had ended, yet, she had made the choice to remain by Maggie’s side even though she was a ghost. He had mentioned having a choice in carrying out his assignment in regard to her. Brigit began to wonder what exactly that meant. *Reapers, Inc.*, her eyes read again. She was beginning to have the sense that she might not really have a choice in staying with Maggie if she didn’t hear him out.

Her curiosity was sparked. She slowly placed the card back into her coat pocket and let her gaze rest on Maggie. She decided she would meet him tomorrow and hear what he had to offer. She would see what her options were in the after life. Whatever they were, she would take the one that would allow her to stay with Maggie. She would do whatever it took to watch over her lover. She had made that promise to Maggie and she would do whatever it took to keep it.
It was a macabre feeling standing outside the café. At least, Brigit imagined it could be described as ‘macabre’. She could see the people patronizing the establishment and she wondered briefly whether they could see her as well. The feeling unnerved her because just two weeks ago, she knew this address to have been nothing more than an empty lot littered with garbage and the homeless. She was on the other side of life now and she knew that the building she stood before now was as much of a ghost as she was.

The café was relatively quiet when she entered. Brigit noted the old man sitting by the window to her right. There was a longing look in his old eyes as he gazed through the glass at the movement of life on the sidewalk outside. His fingers rested lightly on the ear of the teacup before him. The sense of deep sadness that emanated from his direction reached out to Brigit with invisible arms looking to embrace her. She took a step back and let her eyes continue to roam the room until they rested on the profile of the man she had come to talk to.

John Blackwick was sitting at the counter, studying the pages of a thin black book. There was a solemn expression on his face as he read. Brigit eyed him steadily as she slowed her approach of him. To her, he looked like a man resigned to his fate – as if it didn’t matter one way or the other to him what would happen in the next minute of his existence.

“So, you’ve decided to come,” John said without looking up from his book. “Please, have a seat,” he offered.

“How did you know it was me?” Brigit asked as she unbuttoned her coat and slid onto the stool beside him.

“You have a certain energy, Brigit. You also smell faintly of French Lavender,” John pointed out as he softly closed the black book and forced a faint smile to his face. Brigit met his gaze and noted that his eyes were not smiling. In fact, there was no expression at all in them and it bothered her. It suddenly occurred to her that during each of their stare downs over the last week and a half, there had never been an expression of any kind in his ice blue eyes.

“Maggie loves the smell of French lavender,” Brigit said quietly, forcing her self to ignore the thought that John Blackwick’s gaze could probably pierce a stone wall if he stared at it long enough. “You said you have a proposition for me,” she reminded. She wanted to get to the point behind his stalking of her. “I’m listening.”

“Excellent! Would you like some coffee while we talk?” John offered. As if it were his cue, a waiter appeared from the kitchen and smiled as if he were seeing long lost friends sitting at the bar. Confused, Brigit looked back and forth from the waiter to John.

“Are you kidding?” The confusion was mounting by the second at the idea of being a ghost and drinking a warm cup of coffee. It had been almost two weeks. She hadn’t realized that her only addiction was suddenly no longer a part of her daily existence until the second the word had escaped from John’s mouth. In response to the suggestion, a sudden craving for a cup of her favorite drink awoke within her.

“That depends on your decision,” John answered. Brigit glanced at him and saw the faint smile still on his face, yet, the blank expression was still in his eyes.

“My decision regarding what?”
“The opportunity I’m about to offer you. Thank you, Giuseppe,” John said as Brigit’s coffee cup was slid before her. Brigit looked down at the beverage and frowned. Noticing her expression, John asked: “Is there a problem?”

“I’m dead, right?”

“That’s correct,” John answered.

“Then, how can I be able to drink coffee? Aren’t I doomed for all eternity to thirst and hunger because of my life?” she questioned. Images of fire and damnation arose in her mind as the sweet aroma wafted across her sense of smell and deepened the craving of the brew.

“That’s the rumor,” John replied. “Let me assure you, Brigit, that everything you were ever told during your life may or may not be true. One never really knows the truth of it all until they pass over. Even then, perception remains an influence on the truth that is discovered. However, there is the occasional opportunity to stave off the result of the judgment of our days as mortals. At least, that is, until we decide it’s time to walk through that door.”

Brigit watched as John lifted his cup and sipped carefully, as if the steaming contents might actually harm him. When he set the cup back to its saucer, Brigit identified it as tea.

“I thought judgment of our lives would be one specific day – like some massive cult ceremony,” Brigit said as she finally reached for the coffee. John sighed and shook his head.

“Again, another rumor,” he revealed. “We were being held in judgment from the very first moment we drew breath. Unfortunately, it is taught almost world wide that there will be a specific judgment day and most of those who believe that think that they always have time to balance the books before they die. They are unaware that every second counts and an abrupt about-face at the eleventh hour does little to help the end result.”

“And what about those who have tried to be good their whole life yet their choice for love is considered the worst sin of all?” Brigit asked after the sip of coffee she had taken had slid warmly down her throat. She was suddenly aware of how much she had missed her morning coffee.

“Is love a sin?”

“It depends on who you share it with, according to majority’s thought,” Brigit answered.

“Indeed? Who, may I ask, is harmed by the love shared privately between two people?”

“Only those who aren’t involved in that love, I think,” Brigit joked. “Or those who might be jealous of it.”

“Ah, I see. Well, you know, jealousy is a sin. Love, however, is not,” John sighed. He reached for his tea cup again. “Now, to the business we really need to discuss.”

“Go ahead,” Brigit encouraged. She was finding herself a little more relaxed in John Blackwick’s company. He seemed to have answers to her questions. She wondered if he would have a true answer to the biggest question of her new existence.

“I have an opportunity that I hope you will seriously consider,” John began. “I have a position within my firm that needs immediate filling. The work load has piled up and without assistance; I see no end to the work if I continue to do it by myself.” John paused and smiled as if he had made a joke only he had caught. “Actually, there will never be an end to the work load, but right now, it’s quite a chore.”

“Your firm?” Brigit asked as she raised her coffee cup to drink. “What kind of position?”

“I would like to offer you the position of Assistant Reaper.”

Brigit covered her mouth to keep from spewing her coffee across the counter. Quickly she swallowed and looked at her companion in a mixture of surprised amusement and confusion. The business card he had given her
had read: Reapers, Inc. She had conjured an idea as she passed through the night watching Maggie as to what that title might have meant; but now that idea was beginning to take a firm shape.

“Reaper? As in ‘the Grim Reaper’?”

“As in,” John replied seriously.

“Aren’t you missing something?” Brigit asked, trying to keep herself from laughing hysterically at the images running wildly through her head.

“I don’t know what you mean,” John revealed as he searched her face for the source of her amusement.

“You’re The Grim Reaper?” Brigit pressed. “Where’s the black robe and the scythe? And aren’t you supposed to be a skeleton or something?” Brigit was laughing by now, bordering hysterically. John watched her for a moment before allowing himself to see the amusement of her point. The images she described had belonged to Araxius, his mentor. The scythe was stored securely in the arsenal room at the office. John knew it would most likely never be used again. When she finally composed herself, she leveled her dark eyes on him and asked: “Why me?”

“Because love,” he began, “you’re not ready to cross over yet. You’ve made a commitment that you seem determined to keep. I find that admirable and I believe this offer would provide you the way to honor your promise to Maggie.” John spoke quietly, as if what he was saying really did mean something to him. A seriousness filled Brigit’s eyes and he knew he had her full attention.

“How do you know about my promise to Maggie?”

John reached inside his suit coat and withdrew the long black book she had seen him reading when she had entered the café. In the dim light over their heads, she saw her name embossed in gold across the cover.

“This is your portfolio – your file, if you will. Every second of your mortal life is recorded on its pages. Your promise to Maggie, to be there until the last breath, is written here. I know everything about you and I know that you have no intention of leaving her,” he replied.

“So how will being a Reaper help me with that promise?”

“The agreement I offer you is this: you’ll reap during the day, when Maggie is awake and going on with her life. Then, when night falls, you can go home to her – just as you would if you were still alive. Unfortunately, I can only afford to give you a few days of training; but,” John reached into his coat again and laid another black book on the counter. It was as thin as the first book he had pulled out, but the shape of it was different. It was more of a square than a rectangle, as if it were meant to be carried in one’s hip pocket. Brigit glanced at it briefly before returning her attention to John. “This book will be your guide. Then, you’ll receive the weapon of your choice and we can get down to business.”

“Wait, why would I need a weapon?” Brigit asked, concerned that her new job would require the need for a weapon.

“Not every soul is innocent; Brigit, and on occasion, they will not go peacefully. So, what do you say? Will you take the position?”

“I need to talk to Maggie,” Brigit said automatically.

She caught herself as the words came out. If she were still alive, she would discuss the idea of changing jobs with Maggie to be sure she was making the right decision. Maggie’s opinions had never steered her wrong. Now, Brigit suddenly realized, she was alone in this decision. She had to make up her own mind this time.

“What happens if I decline?” Brigit asked.

“Then,” John picked up her portfolio as if to add the emphasis to what he was about to say, “You will need to prepare yourself for your judgment. I will have to come for you eventually. Your promise to Maggie will be
broken.”

“I see,” Brigit sighed. Her mind was quickly wrapping itself around the proposition and seeing the sense in taking the job. If she wanted to keep her promise – her oath – to Maggie, she had no choice really. Maggie was her life, the center of her universe. She would do anything to keep a hold of that. If John Blackwick was truly capable of delivering on his claim that he would send Brigit on to her fate, there was no other option than to agree to his offer. “Okay, I’ll do it.”

“Fantastic!” John proclaimed as he hurriedly began stuffing her portfolio back inside his suit coat. “Take the field guide and read it tonight. It will go over topics I really won’t have time for during your training. Be at the office first thing in the morning and we’ll begin your training immediately,” he instructed as he slid from his stool and began buttoning his coat. “I’m so grateful you’ve made such a positive decision. I simply can’t bear the thought of never catching up. I’ll see you in the morning.”

With that, John the Reaper turned and exited the café. Brigit looked at the square black book left on the counter for her. Slowly, she reached over and slid it before her. Suddenly, she had so many more questions about everything. She wondered if the book would answer any of it.
Maggie was already asleep when Brigit returned to their apartment. Though it was no longer necessary, Brigit was quiet as she moved through the living room to the bedroom.

Maggie had finally forced herself to return to sleeping there the night of the funeral. She had lain on the sofa for only a few hours before getting up and walking slowly to the bedroom. Brigit had immediately jumped to her feet and followed. As Brigit had thought they might, the memories of their private times together there flooded them as soon as they passed through the door. She knew, though, that Maggie had gone there to be enveloped in those memories and to find some comfort in them. Brigit had followed her so that she too could be enveloped in them and hopefully comfort her partner as she cried the final tears over her loss.

As she stood beside their bed, watching Maggie sleep peacefully, Brigit wondered if Maggie might be dreaming of her. The serene look on her face gave no indication one way or the other. Brigit sighed heavily and reached out her hand to caress Maggie’s cheek. A slight shiver followed the path of her fingertips on Maggie’s face and Brigit frowned. Maggie’s warmth under her touch was a reminder that she was no longer warm herself.

She had thought about everything John Blackwick had said during her walk home. She knew he was right. The position he had offered her would provide her the chance to keep her promise to Maggie. She would be able to watch over her during the night, to be by her side until that last breath finally came. The only problem was that Maggie would never know Brigit had kept her promise until that day came and only God knew when that would happen.

Silently, Brigit turned and left the bedroom. She had homework to get to if she was to start her new job with some sense of preparedness. Maggie had left the lamp next to her reading chair on. Brigit had noted that Maggie had left it burning every night since the accident. She wondered if it was Maggie’s subconscious effort to keep a light on for the lover that was never coming home, or if it was a reaction to the fear of being alone in the dark after so many years of having someone by her side.

Brigit set the book John had given her on the small table by the chair and slowly pulled off her coat. The book wasn’t very thick. It wouldn’t take her long to get through it, she was sure. When she was finally comfortable in Maggie’s reading chair, she picked up the book and opened the cover. Energy emanated from the pages within and Brigit closed her eyes. She had never been one to really believe in magic, but she had the instinct that this book – despite its purpose – was indeed filled with a magic she would never be able to define. Finally, she opened her eyes again and steadied herself against the silliness her imagination was threatening to begin with the thought of magic being real. It was best to get this over with so she could return to Maggie’s side. Her eyes skimmed the handwritten title: The Rules to Reaping Souls, by: Araxius Herodotus, Reaper.

Slowly, Brigit turned to the first page.

Rule #1: The Purpose of a Reaper:

The purpose of a Reaper is to collect the souls of the deceased. Such souls are to be escorted to their judgments without delay. We are not the judge, merely the messenger and/or escort. A Reaper is firm and collected and can not be swayed from the assigned task of assisting the soul to the door to their fate. A soul’s fate is determined by the events of their lives from the first moment breath was drawn on the mortal plane. A good life will be rewarded with the appearance of a door to the Reaper’s left side. Evil shall be rewarded with the appearance of the door to the right. Only the Reaper assigned to the task can open these doors. In the event that the soul refuses to enter and face their fate, it is the Reaper’s duty to complete their journey by any and all necessary means. It is required that all Reapers wish the soul ‘eternal peace’ before passing them through the door.

Brigit read the words carefully, letting them sink in as she turned to the second page.
Rule #2: A Reaper Shall Not Subscribe to Any Ideology

As a Reaper, any ideology subscribed to will not be tolerated. We are messengers for a power greater than ourselves and we can not allow any one name or tenet to be placed on that which is beyond our true understanding. All belief systems must be shed and an open mind must be kept in carrying out the task assigned to you. In the effort to reduce offence to those souls still maintaining the belief they had during their mortal days, it is in the best interest of the firm to not have any belief at all. No matter the faith the assigned soul claimed to during their mortal existence, the requirement to wish them ‘eternal peace’ must be carried out before passing the soul through the door that is their reward.

Brigit could see the sense in that rule. It would be an easy one to follow as she had never really subscribed to any faith to begin with. She had always agreed that there was a power out there greater than her self. It was just easier to accept that notion than all the rules and regulations that no one, in her opinion, seemed to follow anyway. Finally, she turned to the third page.

Rule #3: A Reaper Shall Not Pass Their Own

It is in strict accordance to this rule that a Reaper must abide. Under no circumstances may a Reaper open the door for one of their own blood or endearment. This includes: wives, husbands, lovers, children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, nieces, nephews, aunts, uncles, grandparents, parents or any relative that can be listed on a family tree. A Reaper unrelated must be assigned the task of passing any relatives to their reward. In the event that an unrelated Reaper is unavailable, the task must be put on hold until such a time that it can be completed by said unrelated Reaper. There will be no exceptions to this rule – ever.

Brigit reread the rule again as she felt a spasm of fear begin to roil in her gut. She couldn’t fathom not being present when Maggie’s time came. Surely there had to be an exception – a loophole—somewhere. She looked up from the book in her hands down the hall to the darkness where Maggie was sleeping. If this particular rule was set in stone, Maggie would definitely never know that Brigit had kept her promise. A panic began to rise in Brigit’s gut. She had to find the loophole, no matter what the consequences of it might be.

Pushing her panic aside, Brigit turned the page and continued reading.

Traveling to the Reapee

Once you have fully understood your role as a Reaper, you will be allowed to begin completing your assignments as they are assigned. Portfolios will be handed out at the beginning of each work week. Under ideal conditions, the work load will be evenly dispersed amongst all field agents for completion. Since Death is a constant force in the mortal plane, there will always be an assignment to be completed.

The portfolio is the history of the soul that is to be passed. In it, every second of their mortal existence will be recorded. Read the portfolio carefully before traveling to the Reapee. This will expedite the process of passage once you have arrived at their locale.

To travel to the Reapee, look to see where they drew last breath. There, you will find them waiting their fate. From the main office, simply state the location before stepping outside. On the other side of the door will be the place you have been assigned to complete your task. Main doorways maybe used as portals to the next assignment to be completed or to return to the main office at any given time. Any and all questions regarding this topic should be directed to your mentor immediately.

Slowly, she closed the book and returned it to the table beside the chair. The rules were simple, if not agreeable. Travel to assignments seemed easy to understand. There were three more pages to read, but Brigit was done for now. John would show her the rest of what she needed to know. The third rule was still echoing in her mind.
in a voice that she didn’t like.

Silently, she stood and slowly returned to the bedroom. Maggie was still sleeping peacefully. Carefully, Brigit lay on the bed and curled herself around Maggie. She could feel Maggie’s warmth against her body and she focused on it to quiet the voice that was repeating rule number three over and over in her mind. Though she was sure it was more out of habit than actually feeling Brigit’s presence behind her, Maggie sighed deeply and pushed herself in closer to Brigit. There was no sign of a shiver that so often ran through Maggie when Brigit touched her. In fact, the warmth between them seemed to intensify as Brigit carefully wrapped an arm around Maggie’s waist and held her tight. Every reason to find the loophole to rule number three was curled against her and Brigit became determined to find it – no matter what the cost.
7: Training Day

Brigit arrived at 666 ½ Bleecker Street shortly after sunrise. Maggie had left the apartment early to make sure she made it to her first day back to work on time. Mama Dee had tried to persuade Maggie to wait another week; but Maggie had resisted the notion with the argument that it was only for a week. Thanksgiving Break was the following week and she would have a few days to rest up before enduring another month of teaching before the Christmas Break came around. Brigit had followed her partner out of the apartment and once they hit the sidewalk, they went their separate ways for the day.

666 ½ Bleecker Street was a thin door nestled between 666 and 668 Bleecker Street. As Brigit stood in front of it, she searched her memory in an effort to see whether it had been there before her accident. She couldn’t remember seeing it at all. Yet, Bleecker Street was not a neighborhood that she had really frequented during her life. Any memory, if it existed, would have been brief and most likely forgotten.

A small plaque was mounted next to the thin door. She only had to glance at it briefly to know it read: Reapers, Inc., Est. 34 A.D. As she opened the door, she wondered where the original office had been once upon a time. New York City was only a couple of centuries old. There were no buildings on this particular spot in 34 A.D... Surely, this office was a relocation of the original.

Doors with frosted paned glass lined the hall behind the main door. Her footsteps echoed off the dark wood paneled walls as she walked slowly down the wood paneled floor. A door was opened at the end of the hall and Brigit could see a dim light burning within the room beyond it. Glancing to the ceiling, she was amused to see the faces of gargoyles peering down at her as she passed beneath them. Gargoyles, she knew, were protectors from evil. It amused her that the offices of the Grim Reaper would be decorated with such emblems of superstition.

“You’re here,”

Brigit’s attention was pulled from the grotesque faces lining the ceiling to the opened door before her. John Blackwick was standing in the doorway, his short frame blocking the dim light behind him.

“You had your doubts?” Brigit asked as she continued the short distance to his office.

“No at all,” John replied. “Come in.”

Brigit entered the office and glanced around. The room was larger than she had thought it would be. Bookshelves lined the walls, standing as tall as the ceiling. Black bound books without titles were crammed into the shelves. To the right of the room, Brigit took note of the wall of boxes that had been stacked in front of the bookshelves lining the real wall. John’s desk was spacious, she imagined, when it was clean. At the moment, it was covered in hundreds – if not thousands – of portfolios stacked neatly. A small space was clear, revealing the dark mahogany wood that supported the work load he had lain out for himself.

“Did you read the guide?” John asked as he walked around the desk and resumed his seat behind it.

“The bulk of it, yes,” Brigit replied.

“Good. Are you ready to begin, then?” He asked. He began sorting through a short stack of portfolios before him.

“No time like the present,” Brigit answered as John stood again and picked up three of the portfolios that he had separated from the pile. She watched him stuff them inside his suit coat pocket and then look at her.

“Take a walk with me,” he instructed. “Unfortunately, we have no time for proper training. Per the handbook, you’re supposed to wait until we are sure you understand your role as a Reaper before being turned loose in the field. Since we are the only Reapers in the world at this time, you’ll have to do on-the-job-training I’m afraid. Ask any questions that come to mind as they come. I’ll do my best to answer them,” he promised as he walked to the
door of his office.

Brigit watched him pause long enough to pull a long black walking stick from the bronze umbrella holder sitting against the only bare space on the wall. There were a couple of others there that looked as if they had seen better days. Brigit wondered what John could have done with them to beat them up so badly. A question came to mind as they began walking down the hall towards the door that had let her in.

“What do you mean we’re the only Reapers in the world?” she asked.

“They all retired about six months ago. I’ve been doing this on my own since then. When the Bailey caused your accident, I saw an opportunity to start re-growing the firm, especially after I finally received your file. Per your portfolio, you’re an assistant extraordinaire. I have the need for such a qualification. With your help, I believe we can rebuild the firm and re-open the other continental offices once we have the appropriate staff. Shield your eyes,” John instructed gently before opening the door and allowing Brigit to pass by him. Before she had time to register what he had told her to do, the intensity of the light just outside the door blinded her.

“Oh, god damn!” she gasped as she covered her eyes with her hands, as if the intensity might actually melt her eyeballs directly out of the sockets.

When the light stopped pulsating, she slowly lowered her hands and looked around her. They were standing in the empty hall of a hospital. Brigit knew it was a hospital simply by the smell and the eeriness that she had associated with such a building since her grandfather’s passing when she was a little girl.

“Where are we?” Brigit whispered.

“We’re at St. Clare’s Hospital in Oklahoma City. We have three assignments to complete here and then we’ll be on our way back to the office. Here,” he withdrew a portfolio from his coat pocket and passed it to her. Slowly, Brigit opened the folder and began to read.

“Sarah McDowell, April 3rd, 1982,” she read out loud. “What’s the date?”

“Her passing date,” he replied.

“You’ve kept her waiting sixteen years?”

John shrugged somewhat apologetically.

“The Reaper assigned to her was somewhat of a lazy bum. He liked to take his time in getting to his assignments. Sadly, I’ve been a somewhat backlogged these last six months, I’m sure you can understand…”

“Let’s hope Sarah McDowell will understand,” Brigit retorted. John shrugged sheepishly again and began walking slowly down the hall. Brigit knew she had no choice but to follow him.

She was waiting for them by the window, staring out across the city skyline bathed in the bright sunlight. There was a peaceful look on her face as she watched the horizon. Brigit noted that the expression did not alter as Sarah McDowell turned to face her visitors. She studied them both, dressed head to toe in black. Sarah McDowell seemed not to be bothered by the loss of her golden years. Instead, a sense of patience emanated from her – even after all this time of waiting.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” she said sweetly. Brigit guessed the woman to have been in her mid-fifties. Her children were finally grown, her husband almost ready to retire. Sarah McDowell seemed not to be bothered by the loss of her golden years. Instead, a sense of patience emanated from her – even after all this time of waiting.

“I apologize for the delay, Sarah. Are you ready to go?” John asked. A pleasant smile came to the waiting woman’s face.

“Yes, it’s time,” she said.

Brigit studied the other woman’s smile as she moved away from the window and approached them. She was
unsure whether the smile was one of relief or one of true happiness that the wait was over. As they entered the hall together, Sarah looked up at Brigit. There was an inquisitive expression in her green eyes.

“Will you be crossing as well, dear?” she asked.

“No ma’am,” Brigit replied. “It’s my first day on the job.”

“Oh, I see. You’ll do fine, I’m sure,” Sarah said kindly.

“Thank you, ma’am.”

They turned down a glass corridor that connected one section of the building to another. Half way down, a wooden door had been mounted. It was a plain door that refused to look normal against the glass and the scenery outside. Brigit wondered why anyone would put such a design error in this type of building. As her confusion continued to grow, John stopped in front of the door and turned to face Sarah McDowell.

“Is this the place?” Sarah asked, stopping as well before the door.

“It is. Sarah McDowell,” John’s voice took on a solemn, almost priestly, tone. “May you find eternal peace,” he wished her. Slowly, he extended his left hand and opened the door for her. Sarah nodded and winked at Brigit.

“Better late than never,” she sighed.

As Sarah stepped through the opened door, Brigit detected the scent of flowers wafting from the other side. They accosted her senses so quickly that she was unable to discern each individual fragrance. It was sweet and warm – like rich honey. Brigit closed her eyes momentarily to savor the smell and its affect on her mind. There was a peace felt within the affect unlike any she had ever known with the exception of being in Maggie’s arms. When she opened her eyes again, the door was gone and John was staring at her with a slight look of amused patience.

“Where did the door go?” Brigit asked.

“Sarah has passed through. There’s no further need for it.”

“Where did it lead to? How did you know to bring her here to the hall?”

“The hall seemed more picturesque, don’t you think? As for where it lead, it was to my left; so, it lead to Heaven, the Summer Land, eternal peace – whatever you want to call it.” John explained as they began walking along the corridor again.

“Was that your decision?” Brigit asked as she opened the little black folder to see if a judgment had been previously issued and recorded there. Her brows knitted together upon the sight of a blank page where Sarah McDowell’s life had been just minutes before. All that remained were the woman’s name and her passing date.

“We are not judges, Brigit, merely the deliverers of a soul to their fate. Come, we have more work here to be done,” John said without looking at her. Brigit lengthened her stride to keep up with him while her mind continued to race with questions.

“How do I know where they go? Do they always have a door to go through?”

“They do.”

“How do I know which one to send them through?”

“Did you really read the guide, darling, or just skim it as if preparing for an early morning quiz?” John asked patiently. He didn’t wait for an answer. “You will have one of two options when dealing with a Reapee. A door will always appear either to your right or your left. Do you believe in Heaven?”

“I don’t know,” Brigit replied honestly. She had never subscribed to any particular faith’s belief in the after life
and as a consequence, had never given the afterlife much real thought.

“Heaven will be the door to your left. Hell is the door to your right. Only one door will appear for each soul.”

“What if both doors appear?” Brigit asked as they turned the corner. In the distance, she could hear the cries of a baby. It sounded agitated.

“They won’t,” John replied.

“Are you sure?”

“In the time that I have been a Reaper, I have never witnessed both doors appearing. Our predecessors never mentioned any such incident occurring. I will venture on to say that if it’s not mentioned in your field guide, it won’t happen,” John surmised.

Brigit frowned as they approached a room sealed off again by a wall of glass. Behind the glass, Brigit saw the rows of baby basinettes. Most of them were occupied with little bodies covered in the obligatory pink or blue blankets.

Except for one…

Brigit’s gaze fell on the uncovered baby. Its tiny arms were flailing over its tiny head trying to communicate its irritation. This was the baby she had heard as they were walking down the hall. She wondered why this baby wouldn’t receive the same attention the other babies were getting. She wondered why it had been left uncovered and unidentified by pink or blue.

“Baby Girl Riley,” John said quietly. “Hold this please,” he requested, passing the long black walking stick to Brigit. She took it in silence and held it gently by her side.

Together, they approached the wailing child and stood over her. Her bright blue eyes glistened with the tears that she had been summoning to no avail. John gently lifted the baby from its crib and held her close to his chest as he cooed soothing words to her. Brigit watched in silence. His expression had changed. It had a softer look, one of a sad joy as he held the baby girl in his arms.

She watched as John carried the child to a door and waited for him to open it; but his reach never extended toward the handle. Instead, it opened from the inside and Brigit saw a small woman in a white robe emerge. There was a gentle smile on her face as she gazed at the whimpering child cradled in the Grim Reaper’s arms.

Carefully, John kissed the baby on the forehead and passed her to the small woman. Brigit remained silent as she watched the other woman receive the infant and began to sing softly to her. It was a soothing sound and Brigit couldn’t help but to let her gaze stay on the other woman. She noted the woman’s lips never moved and that the words were in a language she had never heard. The woman and the child passed back through the door and it was gone again. John remained where he stood for a few seconds, as if trying to regain his composure.

“Who was that?” Brigit asked when he turned to face her again.

“Her name is Mary. She receives the children on the other side.”

“That song she was singing? What was it?” Brigit asked as he reached inside his coat and withdrew the third black portfolio.

“It’s a lullaby. Don’t ask me what language it is in, though. It’s a tongue that hasn’t been spoken since God was a child,” he sighed as he read the contents of the file in his hand. Brigit felt herself smiling at the slight joke. “Well, one more for this morning and we’re done here. My stick please?”

Together, they left the nursery. After a long silent walk, they found themselves in the basement. Brigit shivered from the sinister eeriness of the room. Something was not right here. Ever hair of her body told her as much. Instinctively, she slowed her breathing and tensed her muscles in preparation for an attack.
“Demetrius Rudikov, show yourself,” John commanded. She looked at him, surprised by the sudden forcefulness in his voice. He was gripping his walking stick like a club, as if he too were ready for a fight. “Demetrius Rudikov,"

“GO AWAY!”

Brigit stepped back just as a force of wind flew past her and hit the supply shelf next to her. Boxes of bandages toppled from the shelf where they had been sitting to the floor at her feet. She looked to John and was alarmed to find him in the death hold of the monster he had called out. By the stench that filled her nostrils as they wrestled, she easily guessed which door this one would be going through once they had him under control.

Quickly, Brigit sprang into action. Her boot to the monster’s backside caused him to release John and turn on her. He was snarling, like a rabid animal that had been cornered. His stench mounted with his fury as he hunkered down to leap on her. Despite the distraction of his skin peeling from his face, Brigit never let her attention leave the yellow eyes that were assessing her.

“John, where’s the door?” she asked as she took a step back from the approaching monster.

“To your right,” John gasped from where he had fallen when the monster had released him.

“Open the damn thing already,” Brigit instructed as the monster launched itself like a missile across the space between them.

Instinctively, she punched at it, her fist sinking deep into its face where its nose appeared to be. If it had been human, she was sure she would have heard the sound of breaking bones and cartilage. Her adrenaline hit maximum capacity as she felt its claws sinking deep into her shoulder. She noted briefly that there was a sensation where Demetrius had a hold of her, but she knew it wasn’t pain she was feeling. It was something more akin to sudden nausea – the same feeling she had felt at the scene of her accident.

Together they fell to the floor. Brigit heard a sound like a sucker coming off a pane of glass as she yanked her fist free. She looked up in time to see sharp yellow teeth glistening beneath the cavity her fist had created in the middle of the monster’s face. Quickly, she turned her head away and felt the monster’s weight suddenly lifted from her.

Then she heard a door slam.

Gasping, Brigit lay on the floor for a moment before turning her head to look at John. Casually, he brushed the sleeves of his suit coat and smoothed his black hair before extending a hand out to Brigit.

“I hate when they start a fight,” he remarked as he helped her to her feet.

Slowly, he turned her and pressed his fingers against the place where the monster’s claws had marked her. The punctures had gone just below the skin’s surface, barely touching the muscles below. Brigit had been saved by the padding of her coat. John sighed in relief. Everything would be mended by the time they were through the portal. Only the memory of the attack would remain.

“It doesn’t hurt,” Brigit assured him.

“Of course it doesn’t. We’d have a problem if it did,” he retorted.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because, love, it would mean that you’re still alive,” John explained. “We’re done here today. How about a beverage before we return to the office? We have a few more things to discuss before you start fulfilling your assignments,” he suggested. Brigit nodded silently and followed him from the basement.
The coffee shop patrons had not changed since the visit the day before. The old man with the sad blue eyes remained in the booth by the window and the waiter behind the bar stood ready to serve them beverages as soon as they walked through the door. As they took their seats at the counter where Giuseppe had served them in the same smiling silence he had done the day before, Brigit’s thoughts were beyond the perfectly prepared cup of coffee sitting on the bar before her.

“You seem pensive,” John commented as he stirred his tea.

“I suppose I am,” she admitted. “Could Demetrius Rudikov have killed me?” She heard John sigh gently as he balanced his teaspoon on the rim of the saucer under the teacup.

“Darling, you’re already dead,” he reminded. “No, he could not have killed you. However, had he managed to maul you any more than he did, you would have been dastardly ill for quite some time. Unfortunately, it’s not something we can simply shake off. When a dark spirit manages to do some serious harm, the effects are more like a poisonous infection. Eventually, it runs its course and we return to normal with only the memory of the event. The length of time one is out of commission depends on the severity of the injury,” John explained as he picked up his tea and blew gently across the surface. Brigit knew it was out of habit that he did this. After all, he was just as dead as she was.

“Has anyone ever not survived the injury?” Brigit pressed further. John pursed his lips in thought. He wouldn’t lie to her. She had to have answers to her questions if she was to evolve.

“There have been a few that have met their final demise without knowing their true fates. The incidences are far and few between, however.”

“Where did their souls go?”

John shrugged as he sipped from his tea. He had only heard the tales from the Reapers that had been present. The souls that had met their ends without passing through a door had merely disappeared on the winds of Limbo, carried away to that place where there was no beginning and no end for all eternity. The shrug seemed to satisfy Brigit’s curiosity for the moment.

“So, tell me about the assignments,” Brigit said as she finally picked up her own coffee and blew across the surface. It was a habit as well, of course.

“Right now, everything is a bloody mess,” John said. Brigit heard the note of frustration in his voice. “Nothing is as organized as it used to be and they keep adding up everyday. Especially with the wars that have been going on. It’s senseless, all this fighting, if you ask me; but, I’m not here to offer opinions – am I?”

It was rhetorical question, Brigit knew. She kept her silence and waited for the rest of the explanation.

“Anyway,” he continued, “it’s not as if we’re on a time schedule to accomplish the work. We have all of eternity. It’s always been a matter of kind consideration that we work in a timely manner. It is a principle I’ve always supported. It’s just that, right now, I’m so back logged…”

“The Sarah McDowell’s of the world happen too often,” Brigit interrupted.

“Exactly,”

“So, what is the plan to fix this?” Her mind was beginning to work, searching for the plan to clean up the mess. Being adept at organization was one of her many fortes, after all. It was what had made her such a successful assistant to her employers when she was alive.

“I think, logically speaking, it would be wise to organize the files currently waiting.”
“What about the ones coming in daily? I assume they do come daily…”

“They do. One of the problems to that particular issue is The Bailey,” John sighed.

“What is The Bailey?” Brigit asked. She remembered John mentioning the name before.

“The Bailey is the actual entity that delivers the mortal to the moment of their passing, separating the soul from the body, if you will. He was present the day you died,” John explained. “Right now, he is on the loose and burdening my workload even more. He is unaware that the firm has restructured, and he is continuing on with his duties without instruction. I was trying to collar him the day we met because I really need for him to start reporting in for daily briefings. He’s part of the reason I didn’t cross you that day. I didn’t have your file. I didn’t know your fate. I only knew your name because I heard him chanting it like some kind of mantra until he completed his task. I’d been chasing him for days at that point,” John explained. The frustration seemed to mount in his voice as he spoke. “If it weren’t for the Bailey, people would go on living forever. At the rate some people continue to produce offspring, there would eventually be no room left on Earth if it weren’t for the Bailey. He ensures the continuous cycles of life and death.”

Brigit searched her memory of the day she had died. She had remembered looking up to the top of the building and seeing the pale, bald man in black robes peering down at her. She had thought that he was seeing a sight so horrendous that his soul might be damned forever. She now realized that he was only making sure he had completed his unassigned assignment. Brigit shook the image from her head and refocused her attention on John Blackwick.

“Beyond that, what are our options?”

“Well,” John began, setting his teacup in its place on the saucer. “We have two options. We can go and reap immediately the files that come in, or we can put them to the bottom of the pile and make them wait until we can get to them. Considering the pace that they are delivered to my desk, we would be constantly be reaping the fresh souls. We’d never get to the overdue.”

“Who delivers the files?”

“Unseen hands. All I know so far is that they are placed on my desk every morning whether I’m present or not. I just look up and they’re there. I suspect it is the Bailey, but I’m not completely sure.”

“How many reapings can we do in a day’s time?” Brigit asked, wondering how many she could fit into the hours that Maggie was awake. Today had been a training day, she knew. By her internal clock, they had only been out for a few hours. John simply shrugged his shoulders in reply to her answer.

“There are too many facets to consider that makes it hard to calculate an average. Until six months ago, there were thousands of Reapers in the firm. Work loads were not measured and we had no quotas to meet, no deadlines. Today, there are only the two of us to do the work of thousands,” John pointed out. Brigit detected the note of bitterness in his voice but decided not to dig to the source of it. “Besides, I’m not a mathematician. It would take me years to provide you with even a decent estimate.”

“So, maybe,” Brigit’s fingers began to drum on the counter top as her mind began to churn quickly. “Our first step is to organize the files by priority.”

“And the second step?” John asked as Giuseppe stepped up and whisked away the Grim Reaper’s empty teacup.

“The second step would be to recruit some help.” John shook his head against the idea.

“We don’t have the time to interview for every position,” he pointed out.

“How did you come to the decision to offer me a position?”

“Three reasons, really,” John sighed as Giuseppe returned the teacup with a fresh brew steaming from within. “First of all, I knew there was something special about you when I met you. Once I read your file, I discovered that
you are an accomplished assistant. You’re highly organized, logical in thought and process. Thirdly, there was the fact that you had not fulfilled your oath to Maggie. You had not completed your reason for living before you died. The Bailey took you before you had fulfilled your vow. I believe in love, Brigit, and I could tell that you were determined to fulfill your purpose even in death. I’d rather have you working by my side than spending my time in a stalemate with you until Maggie’s time comes.”

Brigit stifled a smile as she listened to his explanation. He was right. She was determined to fulfill her promise to Maggie. His efforts to pass her would have ended in a long running stalemate until Maggie was ready to go as well.

“I have an idea,” Brigit finally said. “As we organize the files, we should peruse them as we would resumes. If we find the right candidates, we can offer them the opportunity to join the firm,” she suggested.

“That’s bloody brilliant,” John said. He looked pleased by her suggestion. “I don’t know why I didn’t think of that myself.”

“You’ve got a lot on your plate,” Brigit offered as an excuse.

“You’re right,” John agreed. “If you’re ready, let’s go back to the office and see what headway we can make on the files.”

“Sounds good. Can I take my coffee?”

Giuseppe the smiling waiter moved from his place and immediately set to preparing her a fresh beverage in a paper cup. The sight of his actions made her wonder momentarily whether paper cups could actually exist in the spirit world or if this, like everything else she had encountered so far, was just a twist on what she used to know as reality. There was so much she was still getting used to, still attempting to take in as a form of the new reality she now faced. As she took some new facet of the spirit world, there was something of her mortal life she had to morph into fitting or totally let go as no longer relevant. It had only been two weeks since her passing. She could only imagine what her reality would be like as time continued to pass.

Brigit hoped that, one day, she would be as knowledgeable as John appeared to be. She hoped that she would gain his patience but not his sense of humor. From what she had observed of him, he seemed to lack a sense of humor. She had loved to be able to laugh about things – especially with Maggie. Laughter healed her soul. She couldn’t lose that, especially since she only lived within her soul now.

Brigit nodded her thanks to Giuseppe and slid from her seat at the counter to follow John. A silent smile was all she received aside from the coffee to-go. The paper cup containing the coffee was warm in the palm of her hand as she walked to the door. It was a feeling that caused her to think of Maggie momentarily and she smiled. Her sight settled briefly on the old man with the sad blue eyes as she passed toward the door. Somewhere, Brigit guessed, he had lost his reason to laugh and heal his soul.
9: Organizing the Organization

Brigit followed John back to the office in silence. She waited patiently as he unlocked the main door and opened it, wondering why he would even need to lock the door to begin with. The address was a phantom address. She was sure there was no chance of someone entering the building by accident. As they entered the main entrance, she said as much.

“Actually, you’re wrong,” John told her. “There have been a few occasions in the past where a ‘gifted’ mortal has found the place and entered. Araxius considered it a security breach and, after the third ‘incident’, demanded that the main entrance be locked when there were no Reapers present to ensure the safety of the firm’s data.”

“What do you mean by ‘gifted’?” Brigit asked as John walked a few paces ahead of her and stopped at a door to his left. He searched the key ring still in his hand for the key that fit that particular lock.

“Clairvoyants, Witches, people who easily and naturally walk between the two realms. Contrary to popular belief, such mortals do exist. Aleister Crowley once entered the offices in Britain and I heard tale that Araxius had a devil of a time getting him to leave. After a week of his lurking on the sidewalk, Araxius had to close the office in London and relocate it to Dublin. That’s where I came on,” John explained. Brigit noted there was a note of amusement in the telling of the story. Perhaps John Blackwick did possess a sense of humor after all.

“So, you’re Irish?”

“Aye, lass,” John replied as he fit the last key on the ring into the lock and turned it. He looked at Brigit and smiled. There was a gleam in his eye that Brigit had not yet seen since making his acquaintance. He had relaxed his accent and she could tell without further doubt that he was indeed from the Emerald Isle. “Come; let’s choose your weapon before we start with the paperwork.” John said as he pushed open the door.

The arsenal room was not much bigger than John’s office. Its walls, however, were covered in every type of weapon Brigit could ever have imagined existing.

“Which would you recommend?” Brigit asked as she eyed the assortment of clubs, staves, and walking sticks lain out across a wide table to the left of the room. On the wall above that, there were mourning glories, spikes, and some very dangerous looking hammers hanging from hooks affixed to the dark wood. She noticed the collection of knives and swords on a table directly in front of her, and, the large scythe hanging on the wall behind it.

“Any of these will do,” John replied quietly. “It’s dependent on what you are most comfortable with.”

Brigit looked to the third table and found an odd assortment of items. They were items she would never have really considered a weapon, but as she eyed them carefully, she imagined that, in a spot, anything could be a weapon if one had the presence of mind to use it as such. There was a black umbrella, a lead ball on a thick chain, a chain by itself and an assortment of hatpins displayed into an ornate fan. John went to the table holding the clubs and walking sticks. He lifted an ebony walking stick very similar to the one he still carried under his arm and eyed it fondly.

“This is usually my first choice,” he said, holding it gently between his opened hands. His ice blue eyes slowly traveled the length of it, looking for any flaws that might appear along its ebony finish.

Brigit studied each of the implements on the tables. The clubs looked almost prehistoric, and very uninteresting. It seemed to scream ‘ogre hunting’ at its finest. There was another walking stick, almost identical to the one John favored; but Brigit had never been one to copy the fashion of another. The collection of staves held her eye for a moment. She had done well with the bow staff during her Kung-Fu weapons training, but she had been better with the sword. She glanced over her shoulder with that thought.

“What about a sword?” she asked quietly as she eyed a samurai sword mounted carefully on a short wooden stand.
“I would be careful about that choice, love. You could condemn a soul to eternal limbo,” John replied. He was still studying the walking stick. He was sure he had nicked his present one in the last scuffle. It wasn’t enough to warrant replacing it, although he did so love the look of an unblemished walking stick.

“So, I would become a judge at that point?”

“Yes, and, no,” John replied evenly.

“Let’s not be specific, John,” Brigit quipped as she brought her eyes back to the table with the odd assortment of instruments least likely to condemn a soul.

“Sorry, love,” John snapped from his study of the walking stick. “It can be complicated. It’s best to consult your field guide regarding that question.”

“I’ve read the field guide. There’s no mention of using a sword,” Brigit pointed out as she picked up the black umbrella and began twirling it by the curved mahogany handle. It was a simple black umbrella, similar to the one she and Maggie used to walk under when it would rain. It was long but lightweight; its presence was familiar in her hand.

“Did you read the last page?” John inquired as he watched his protégé handling the umbrella as if it were indeed a sword.

“The last page is blank,” Brigit said quietly as she tried to decide if perhaps the umbrella wasn’t for her. It seemed almost absurd in her mind—to be a Reaper carrying an umbrella. She wasn’t a flying English nanny, after all. “What do you think of this?”

“Ask the field guide,” John instructed.

Brigit ceased twirling the umbrella and fished the field guide from the hip pocket of her long black coat. He was being silly, she thought as she began thumbing through the thin square book.

“There’s nothing about an umbrella,” she mumbled.

“Are you sure? Check the last page,” he insisted. Brigit glanced up at him. No smile played near his lips or in his eyes. He was serious, she realized. She looked down as she turned to the last page and froze. In simple black text, she read:

**Take the Umbrella.**

“I guess that settles it,” Brigit said as she slowly closed the field guide and returned it to its new home in her coat pocket. The idea that had come to hear the night before regarding the book and its possible magical energy had just been verified in that instant. It was yet another thing to accept into her new reality…

“Any time you have a question, consult the last page. Suggestions will appear as you need them.” John revealed as he replaced the walking stick to its place on the table. He would wait until he actually had a good reason to replace his current stick to retrieve this one. A little nick was not yet a good excuse. “Shall we get busy, then?”

Brigit nodded and followed him from the arsenal room. Together, they walked the remaining stretch of the hall to his office. John sighed heavily at the sight of the boxes of files lining the room and dropped his walking stick back into the bronze umbrella stand that he had taken it from before their field trip. There mere sight of so much work sent his mind into a tailspin.

“Where should we begin?” he asked quietly as Brigit looked over the wall of boxes.

“How are they organized so far?” she asked in reply.

“To my knowledge, they are not organized. The retirement of the world’s Reapers was quite sudden, so the files were simply dumped into the boxes and brought here. I’ve made very little headway, as you can tell,” he
sighed, waving toward the pile of files on his desk.

“What do you do with the completed assignments,” Brigit asked, remembering that the contents of the portfolio went blank as soon as the soul had been escorted to their door.

“I’ve been filing them in the box under my desk,” John revealed. Brigit walked around his desk and pulled the box out. There were a handful of files there. Not much for six months of work. She looked up at John only to see him shrug.

“I’ve been procrastinating a little,” he admitted. “We’re supposed to log names in the black bound tomes after we’ve completed assignments.” Brigit’s eyes followed his pointed finger to the black leather books filling the bookcases. There were no titles on the spines.

“Those hold the names of every person who has ever died?” she asked.

“They do,” John confirmed. “All the way back to 34 A.D.”

“Okay,” Brigit sighed. “Here’s what we’re going to do first…”

As Brigit began to explain that it was best to divide the duties of organizing, John removed his suit coat and began to roll up the sleeves of his white shirt. He nodded in agreement as she explained her plan to dump the boxes and start filing assignments due by age. With in that organization system, they would create separate categories for children and adults. With in the adult category, they would separate the good from the bad. Beyond that, they had to remember to look for new candidates for the open positions within the firm.

As John lifted the lid from the nearest box and dumped its contents on the hard wood floor under his feet, he felt a huge weight lifted from his shoulders. He was no longer alone in this endeavor to continue the natural procession for souls. Even though there were only the two of them at the present, John had the presence of mind to think that eventually, the firm would be back to its utmost operating capacity.

Brigit watched as John dumped another box on to the floor. She shrugged out of her own coat and began to rifle through the files on his desk. It would most likely take them days to go through the files. Once they had a good start, though, she knew keeping up with the daily influx would be easy. John emptied two more boxes before sitting in the floor, his legs sprawled out as he began his sorting. Brigit thought the sight of him sitting there gave him the appearance of a toddler playing on the floor. She pressed her lips firmly together to keep from laughing at the sight.

“I have to be home by sundown,” she said quietly as she sank into the leather chair behind the desk. She was opening portfolios, glancing at the assigned soul’s age and passing date before setting it in its new place.

“I know. We’ll accomplish what we can together and then I’ll continue sorting after you’re gone,” John decided. He too was glancing at ages and passing dates. Occasionally, he would scan the contents a little further for information that might lead to a new recruit. If nothing suited his requirements, he tossed the file into the appropriate box designated. Children were out of the question for recruitment.

“What was your easiest assignment?” Brigit asked as she scanned the contents of the portfolio for a Sister Mary Kate DeMarcus. She closed the portfolio after remembering the second rule in the Reaper’s Field Guide. A nun was probably the least likely candidate to shed their religious beliefs in light of a new occupation as a Reaper.

“The elderly and the children are usually the easiest. The elderly have accepted that their time has come and the children, well, they are just grateful to be led out of their confusion,” John replied.

“What was your hardest assignment?” Brigit asked next. She heard a slight snort and looked up from the file of Leopold Gryzynzki.

“That one is a long story, love.”

“Humor me,” Brigit said. She was intrigued by the bittersweet expression on John’s face as he mulled over the topic in his memory.
“Have you found any new candidates?” John asked instead.

“Not yet. Tell me the story,” she pressed.

He looked up at her, his expression was very serious. He understood by the look on his new assistant’s face that he wasn’t going to escape the question in the long run; but, today was not the day he wished to delve into that particular memory. Finally, he shook his head and returned his attention to the pile of black portfolios before him.

“Another day, love,” he promised. “We have too much ahead of us at the moment.”

Brigit returned her attention to the pile on the desk and continued to sort. There was something that had affected him by her question. She wondered how bad the assignment could have been that John would not talk about it easily. A silence settled between them as they continued to organize the files. Once in awhile, John would make a small noise when he found a potential candidate for recruitment. Aside from that, neither Reaper spoke out loud for hours.

When sundown finally leveled its weight on Brigit’s internal clock, she pushed herself back from John’s desk and stretched. Even though she knew it was not possible anymore, her muscles felt cramped and knotted from the hours of repetitive movement involved with the reading and sorting of the thin black portfolios. She stretched her arms high over her head before rolling her head in a circle to break up the imagined knots in her neck and shoulders.

“Heading out?” John asked, glancing up from the new pile he had created on the floor. He had already made it through a dozen boxes from the wall. It had created a sizeable dent in the façade.

“I am. Maggie will be home soon,” Brigit answered as she stood and began to pull on her coat. “Will you work all night?”

“It’s not as if I have anything else to do,” John remarked. Brigit glanced at him to see if he was attempting to be funny, but his attention was affixed to the task before him.

“I’ll be back first thing in the morning,” she promised.

“I’ll be here,” he remarked.

With that, Brigit exited the office and walked the long hall way to the main entrance. Something was bothering her about his remark. A touch of sadness for John Blackwick settled on her mind as she opened the main door and stepped out onto the sidewalk. He had no one to watch over, no love to hold him like she did. She felt sorry for him.

John sighed heavily as he reached for another portfolio and opened the cover. He had not expected Brigit Malone’s idle curiosity to put him in such a mood. He had hoped he could bury that particular memory forever now that there was no one around to remember all that had happened. Yet, she had asked a simple question and it had brought the bittersweet memory -- and its consequences -- back to the forefront of his mind.

As he perused each portfolio and filed it accordingly, he felt himself feeling somewhat envious of her.

She could still feel love. She possessed a desire within her. Her lover was still present to receive that emotion, whether Maggie Devon realized it or not.

John envied them both. It was a feeling he had never thought he would experience ever again and it troubled him deeply.
10: The Queen That Never Was

It had taken them a week to go through the past due files. John worked every night reading portfolios as if they were resumes after Brigit had gone home. When she would return in the morning, he would hand her a pile to go through as well, asking for her opinion in his choices. If she agreed, the portfolios were slipped into the top right drawer. If she disagreed, the portfolios were returned to the assignment due box. When the last portfolio had been read and categorized, John had looked at her with a triumphant gleam in his ice blue eyes.

“We’re done sorting,” he announced.

“Really?” Brigit looked up from the foremost box of assignments due.

“We are,” he confirmed. “We’ve only lost a week. Thank you.”

“Why are you thanking me?” she asked.

“I don’t think I could have gone through this all without some sort of direction. So, thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Brigit replied. “So what’s next?”

John looked at the four separate stacks of boxes. They had categorized the boxes by: Most Immediate Assignments, Children, Adults and Potential Problems. Neither Reaper was in any great hurry to begin the assignments contained within the last stack of boxes.

“You feel that you’re ready to take on some solo work?” he asked.

“Sure, if you think I’m ready,” Brigit answered. John nodded his answer as he reached around her and withdrew a couple of portfolios from the Most Immediate Assignments box and extended them to her. He had observed the ease with which she wore her new duties during her training. Eventually, John knew, Brigit would be a first class Reaper; but for now, he would start her out with some light solo flights.

“Try these and then return to the office. They should be relatively easy to accomplish. You can give me a briefing and we’ll discuss what you could have done differently if they turn out not to be so easy,” he instructed. Brigit took the portfolios and slipped them into the hip pocket of her coat. “If we were operating at full capacity, I would accompany you to observe, naturally. As the case is, I think I should be in the field as well so we can start to catch up on this.”

He waved an arm toward the stack of Most Immediate Assignments. Unfortunately, this particular stack was twice as tall as the other three. Brigit nodded in silent agreement. She watched as John turned and withdrew a thick pile from the box. As the portfolios were relatively thin in girth, he was able to grab fifty or more at once. He had only given her two to complete for the moment. She hoped that soon she would have the knowledge and ability to accomplish more.

“Take off then,” John instructed. “Be sure to take your umbrella. Good luck, love,” he wished her as she walked to the door of the office.

She thanked him before plucking her umbrella from the stand where John stored his black walking stick. Lightheartedly, she hooked the handle over her arm and began the long walk down the hall to the main entrance of 666 ½ Bleecker Street. She paused at the great door to withdraw the first assignment. Quickly she scanned the location before opening the door and exiting the building.

The assignment was located at 72 St. Marks Place. If memory served her correctly, it was the address of an abandoned cabaret theater. She remembered the article in the neighborhood press regarding its closure. There had been enough incidents involving drugs and death that the owner had finally thrown in the towel and barred the doors forever. She remembered how she and Maggie had expressed their dismay at never seeing one of the shows. Their friends had all raved about the quality of the drag queens that had graced the stage every night of the week and that
Brigit and Maggie had indeed missed out on a good time.

Matthew Swenson was the assignment. His moment of passing had been the result of a drug overdose. Brigit frowned slightly as she scanned the contents of his life. She hoped that all her assignments would not be so sad, or so quick to touch her heartstrings. Sighing, she closed the file and returned it to her coat pocket. It was best to get on with it. Raising her hand to shield her eyes against the bright light of the portal, Brigit stepped out onto the street.

When she finally lowered her hand, she found herself standing in the middle of the empty theater. Dim light from the morning sun forced its way through small dust covered panes of glass high up the wall. Brigit let her eyes adjust to the shadows created by the faintness of light. She could make out the shapes of the tables that had been pushed to one side of the room and the chairs stacked neatly though they would never be used again. Brigit turned slowly, her eyes adjusting even more as she scanned the shadows. She made out the long shape that had been the bar. Bottles still lined the shelves behind it. The layer of dust shrouding them preserved the remaining contents from the faint light.

A movement on the stage caught Brigit's attention. Her grip on the curved handle of her black umbrella involuntarily tightened. It was a spirit, but her instincts told her it was not her current assignment. Bearing that thought in mind, Brigit determined it was time to get on with it.

The sound of her boots echoed as she crossed the wooden floor to the narrow doorway to the left of the stage. The sign posted over the door indicated it was the way to the restrooms, but, she suspected it was also the passage to the dressing room where the nightly entertainment would have prepared for their turn on the small stage. As she walked down the dark, narrow hall, she continued to hear the movement behind her. The spirit that had been moving on the stage was following her, watching her. She knew it was not the subject of her assignment. Yet, she was prepared to fight should she need to.

The restrooms were situated to the left of the hall. Even though the signs posted on the door designated ‘men’s’ and ‘women’s’, Brigit knew they would have been used regardless of the patron’s true gender. She had often visited gay establishments and found herself sharing the facilities with a drag queen. When desperate, she had even found herself in the men’s room. There was rarely surprise expressed in either situation. The call of nature was a force to be heeded and they were all ‘family’ anyway…

Brigit stopped walking as the first note floated through the darkness to her ears. It had originated from the door at the end of the hall, just across from the dust covered payphone hanging from the wall. She listened for more, acutely aware that the spirit behind her had ceased it’s approach as well. The voice was soft and warm sounding as it slowly sang each note of the warm-up scale. At the top note, however, the voice cracked. Brigit found herself smiling. Apparently, some things really did carry over into the afterlife.

Slowly, she opened the door and stepped in. The bulbs surrounding the mirror situated over the make-up table burned brightly. He was seated at the far end of the table, his back straight and his hand steady as he generously applied thick mascara to the already thick false eyelashes. His hair had been plastered to his head with the pressure of a nylon stocking cut and knotted in preparation for the wig he would wear during his routine on stage. Brigit guessed the piece was the platinum beehive carefully mounted on the Styrofoam wig stand beside him.

“Matthew Swenson,” she said out loud, interrupting a new round of the warm-up scale. Bright blue eyes snapped to attention via the reflection of the mirror.

“It’s ‘Matilda’, honey,” he snapped as she shoved the mascara brush forcefully into the tube and quickly screwed it shut.

“My apologies,” Brigit replied. She was unaffected by his attitude. She had seen worse in her time.

“Who are you? A fan? I won’t sign autographs until after the show,” he snapped again.

“I’m not here for an autograph,” Brigit replied quietly. “I’m here to help you pass over.”

A look of annoyance came to the man’s face as he began searching the clutter on the table before him.
“I’ve been waiting ten years for this night and someone has stolen my lipstick,” Matthew growled. Brigit watched as his long, delicate fingers picked up and tossed aside one tube after another. “Some jealous bitch has stolen my lucky red lipstick.”

“Ten years is a long time,” Brigit remarked.

“Tell me about it. I’ve busted my ass to get here, honey. I’ve played every hole-in-the-wall and dive drag bar in this city. This place is every queen’s dream. If I do well, I get a permanent spot without having to do any favors, if you know what I mean,” he looked at her via the mirror again and narrowed his eyes as if to punctuate the innuendo behind the word ‘favors’.

Brigit nodded in understanding. Matthew Swenson had died in the mid-eighties. Knowing the reckless habits of the disco era and the drug laced mentality of the clubs during that time, she could well imagine what someone in Matthew’s position would have gone through to reach the pinnacle of their ambitions. Matthew sighed heavily and turned his head to glance at the clock mounted on the wall above the garment rack holding various costumes. To Brigit, the costumes were moth eaten and dust covered. To Matthew, they were freshly cleaned and glittering in the naked light of the bulbs surrounding the mirror. The clock was frozen at ten to eight.

“I have to finish getting ready. Mickey is supposed to come get me in five minutes,” Matthew-Matilda sighed. His blue eyes returned to the clutter on the make-up table before him. The tube of red lipstick was still missing and his irritation flared again.

“Mickey won’t be coming, Matilda,” Brigit said quietly. She had not moved from her position directly behind him.

“Why not? I’m taking the stage at eight sharp,” her assignment pointed out furiously.

“Matilda, you’re no longer amongst the living. It’s time for you to pass over,” Brigit patiently explained.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Get out,” he snapped, flicking his hand at her as if to shoo her out like a fly.

“I will not leave. I have my assignment.”

“Your assignment can kiss my ass,” Matthew-Matilda hissed at her. Their gazes locked in the mirror. Brigit smiled faintly. The angry, thin line Matthew-Matilda’s lips had become grew even thinner. They were headed toward a stalemate. Brigit had to find a way to avoid such a thing on her first assignment.

“Perhaps you should tell me about your first night here,” Brigit suggested.

“I’ve bust my ass to get here,” he reiterated. “Tonight is my night.”

“So, tell me about it,” Brigit urged.

She glanced over her shoulder and spied a dusty stool against the wall behind her. Slowly, she seated herself and returned her attention to his reflection. He had picked up the tube of mascara again and was unscrewing the lid in preparation to apply more of the black goop to his false eyelashes. Brigit waited patiently as the suggestion continued to sink in on his mind. She knew well the penchant drag queens possessed to talk about themselves. At best, it would be a sad story told with some flare. She already knew how it would end and come to the present moment. She felt the need, however, for Matthew “Matilda” Swenson to recognize the ending for what it was and acknowledge that it was time to move on. Brigit watched him intently, measuring the quickness of the suggestion’s settling in on his mind. Finally, he sighed deeply.

“Well, since you’ve asked nicely,” he began. Brigit smiled and crossed her legs at the knee. She would listen to the story patiently. She was sure all realization would sink in eventually on him. Only then, would they be able to continue on with the business that had brought her to him in the first place.

“I was born in what we call ‘a one-horse-town’. That means there was only one horse to ride and if you didn’t
ride it, you were the outcast. My father was the local Baptist preacher, a holy-roller to beat the band. Trust me; those boys on T.V. have nothing on my father. He could preach a rock into believing it was headed to hell for not coming to church and tithing ten percent of the mud it had collected.”

“Was he handsome?” Brigit asked. Matthew-Matilda shrugged in immediate reply as he mulled over the question.

“I guess, if you’re into The Grim Reaper,” he finally voiced. Brigit only smiled. She decided she would reveal the point of his unintentional joke later. “My mother was a stay at home mom. She was a mouse compared to my father. I used to imagine that she once had a will of her own, but as I grew up, I began to suspect that she had always been a sheep. She never went against anything my father said or did.”

“What happened?” Brigit asked, even though she already knew the answer from reading his portfolio.

“I had a habit, you know? I would spend hours playing dress up and singing torch songs in front of the mirror while my dad was at work. My mom would let me bring in the laundry when it had finished drying on the line in the back yard. So, it was easy to put on one of her dresses and while away the time in front of the mirror pretending to be Miss Smith or the royal Miss Holiday…” a faint smile came to Matthew-Matilda’s lips as the memory eased through his mind.

“Anyway, my father came home early one laundry day. I was fifteen. I had been ‘performing’ for years at this point. Naturally, he came home on the day I had stolen some make-up from some girl’s backpack on the school bus. My mother didn’t wear make-up because my father always preached about the whoring Jezebels that painted their faces to tempt a man. It was a temptation every god-fearing man was to resist and every woman should avoid using if their souls were to be heaven bound.

“I had just finished putting on my lipstick, a most lovely shade of burgundy, when my father walked into my room. You should have seen the look on his face! Oh, the horror! Here was his only son dressed in his wife’s plain Sunday dress and a mask of bright make-up slathered on his face!”

By now, Matthew-Matilda was laughing hysterically. His delicate hands were gesturing wildly to animate the tale. Brigit only smiled in response to his self-amusement. Suddenly, the laughter ceased and an expression of ambiguity replaced the smile that had been present only a second before.

“He beat me from one end of the house to the other. I had two broken ribs and a busted nose by the end of it. When I passed out from the pain, he went to town on my mother. I didn’t hear any of it, but I’m sure he condemned her to the furthest regions of hell for not raising me to be a manly-man. When I finally woke up, he was gone and my mother was as much of a mess as I was. She refused to call the police or go to the hospital, or even to take me to the hospital. I could barely see her, my eyes were so swollen…”

“When she finally did speak to me, it only was to tell me to leave and never come back. She gave me a hundred dollars and told me to get out. So, with two broken ribs, two black eyes and a busted nose, I made my way to the bus station. I got a ticket all the way to New York City. The things I had to do to survive… well, I’m not going to relive those memories out loud, honey. Believe me; it wasn’t pretty most of the time.

“I finally got my chance to sing when I was nineteen. My pimp of a boyfriend shoved me on stage one night because he didn’t believe that I could sing. Bastard – I showed him. After that night, after I had a taste of the spotlight and doing what made me happiest – I was determined to be a name everyone would remember. After some of the things I had done just to survive, sucking a few cocks for a chance to sing a few numbers on stage was the least of my worries. I was born to sing, all-be-it dressed in a gown and wearing enough make-up to put any Jezebel to shame. I was born to sing. I do it all…Bessie, Billie, Sandra, Judy, Lena…even a little bit of Miss Eartha if I’ve smoked enough cigarettes before the show. They love me,” Matthew-Matilda mused as he stared at his reflection.

“Tonight is the night. Tonight, I am Miss Matilda Swenson, Chanteuse Extraordinaire. You watch. It’ll be a permanent deal by the time I’ve finished the first show. Betsey LaRue makes five hundred a week in this place. I’ll have her beat by the end of the night. Where is Mickey?” Matthew-Matilda glanced at the clock nervously.

“Mickey isn’t coming, Matilda,” Brigit reminded softly.
A deep silence grew between them as Matthew-Matilda let her words echo through his mind.

“What happened tonight?” Brigit asked.

‘Tonight’ had happened twenty years ago, but, it was obvious that her assignment was stuck in the moment that time. He was on a loop that replayed itself over and over in the minutes before he had died. She had widened that loop slightly by letting him talk about his memories. If he continued telling her the story, she hoped he would realize his fate and break himself loose of the loop. Finally, he would be free and they could move forward.

“I don’t know.”

The answer was just above a whisper. Brigit stared hard at the partially dressed drag queen. She knew that he knew what had happened. He knew that she knew the truth. The defeated and sad look in his blue eyes told her as much.

“My ex, Joey, stopped in to see me,” Matthew-Matilda finally admitted. “He came to wish me luck. He knew how important tonight was to me and that I was a little nervous. He gave me a shot from the kit he always carries. He said it would settle my nerves... that I’d be as calm as the sea on a beautiful day...Joey always knows what to say to calm me down. He’s such a poet.”

“But, he gave you too much, didn’t he?” Brigit said softly. Sadly, Matthew-Matilda nodded.

“I’m not singing tonight, am I?”

“No, dear, you’re not.”

Recognition of his fate was slowly wrapping itself around his thin shoulders. He was finally becoming aware of the prison ten minutes to eight had become for him. Brigit saw a faint glimmer of tears welling in his blue eyes. They would never spill over, but she knew he was finally being released from the loop and there were some emotions left to expire.

“What do I do now?” he asked quietly.

“When you’re ready, you may leave this place. Are you ready?”

“Are you sure Mickey isn’t coming? I thought I heard him in the hall...”

“I’m sure,” Brigit assured him.

“Then, I guess I’m ready. I need my lipstick, though,” he pointed out as his eyes began to scan the clutter on the make-up table once again.

When his gaze fell on the platinum beehive wig to his right, he snatched it from the stand and planted it on his head. As he continued to straighten it, Brigit stood and walked to the dressing table to his left. A tube of lipstick rested there. Silent, she picked it up and read the name: Lucky Red. Silently she passed it to Matthew-Matilda Swenson and watched as he took his time in applying it. When he was done, he tucked the tube under one of the rubber false breasts glued securely to his hairless chest. He smacked his lips a couple of times for good measure before swiveling on the short stool and facing Brigit full on.

“How do I look?”

“Beautiful,” Brigit replied with a soft smile.

“Let’s get this show on the road, then,” Matthew-Matilda decided. Brigit offered her free hand to the drag queen as he slowly rose from the stool. As they touched, Brigit saw the door appear to her left. Her smile remained as she escorted the towering drag queen toward it slowly.

“What’s your name, honey?” he asked. His voice had gone from a pert pitch to a seductive low tone. It was a
part of the personae, Brigit knew. She would entertain it for the next few minutes of knowing him.

“Brigit,”


“I’m a Grim Reaper,”

“Oh my,” Matthew-Matilda froze, suddenly remembering his joke about his father. Brigit smiled and shrugged in a sign of dismissal to his silent apology.

“Matthew Swenson,” she began as she opened the waiting portal to his fate.

“Matilda,” he groaned with a dramatic roll of his blue eyes.

“Matthew Matilda Swenson,” Brigit corrected. “May you find eternal peace.”

“You’re a sweetheart,” the drag queen said before stooping to plant a light kiss on her cheek.

Matthew-Matilda turned dramatically and walked through the door, holding his breath as if he knew the stage and a big spot light was waiting on the other side. Brigit closed the door softly behind him and withdrew his portfolio from her pocket. When she opened it, she found the pages blank – only his name and passing date remained. Assignment complete.

Silently, she slipped the black folder into the opposite coat pocket and left the dressing room. She had to complete the next assignment before the day was over. John expected her back at the office to discuss her interactions and actions. Allowing Matthew-Matilda to tell his story to break him from the loop of time he was stuck in had taken quite a bit of time; but it was an action she had felt necessary to avoid a struggle.

As she stepped from the dressing room into the dark and narrow hall that had led her there to begin with, she felt the other spirit looming at the end of the hall. Her grip on the handle of the umbrella tightened again before she began the walk toward it. As she approached, she could feel it taking the same number of steps away from her.

“Show your self,” she instructed when she reached the end of the hall and could see the main room of the theater with the aid of the faint light from the windows close to the ceiling. A slight vibration to her left caught her eye and she turned to face it. It was a young man with a frightened look on his face. He was wringing his hands nervously as he watched her, ready to run if she made a move toward him.

“What did you do with Matilda?” he asked. His voice was shaking.

“I have passed him to his fate. Who are you?” Brigit asked softly.

“I’m Mickey. I was supposed to fetch Matilda to the stage. She’s been waiting for me,” he explained.

“Matilda has gone, Mickey.”

“I want to see her show, please,” he pleaded.

Brigit eyed the young man for a moment. He had barely left being a boy, yet, he was barely a man as well. She wondered how long he had been waiting to pass himself.

“That’s not possible at this moment,” Brigit finally said. “You’ll have to catch the next one,” she suggested when she saw his shoulders drop in dismay.

“Can you get me in? Please? I’m crazy about her,” he pleaded.

“I’ll do what I can,” Brigit promised.

“When will I know?” Mickey asked excitedly.
“Soon, I promise. Just hang out here and I’ll come for you when I have the green light,” she assured him gently.

“Thank you, ma’am. Thank you,” Mickey gushed. His fear of her presence had disappeared. The vibration of his energy was becoming stronger. He would do as she instructed. He would wait here for his chance to see Matilda Swenson again.

Brigit nodded and turned away from him. She had to get on with her next assignment. She had made a promise to him, to Mickey. She would come back for him as soon as she could find his portfolio and he would finally have his chance to see Matilda Swenson sing.
11: Bobby Hooper

As Brigit exited 72 St. Mark’s Place, she closed her eyes to the bright light of the portal that would take her to the next assignment. When she opened them again, she was standing on a tree lined street with cookie-cutter houses on either side. White picket fences surrounded a few of them, marking the boundaries of one lot from the other. Standing in the middle of the street, Brigit withdrew the second portfolio from her coat pocket.

Bobby Hooper, aged five, had passed in the mid-fifties and his parents had left the area shortly after his passing. His father had been in the Air Force and, as such, had been reassigned to another base within months of his oldest son’s death. Mrs. Hooper, Bobby’s mother, had reluctantly followed her husband despite the heartbreak of losing her child. Brigit read his short story carefully, hoping to find a sign that would make this task easy.

The fact that it was a child bothered her. She had never been particularly good with children despite her every effort to charm them. That had been Maggie’s department. Maggie had a way with children that made The Pied Piper look like a charlatan. It was part of her success as an elementary teacher. The children naturally loved her. Brigit had often imagined that Maggie would one day be the Mama Dee of the neighborhood.

Brigit turned and eyed the small square house that had been indicated in Bobby Hooper’s portfolio. It was a small place with faux shutters outlining the windows that faced the street. The white picket fence that had been put up around the yard was now a faded brown, the white wash having peeled and eroded away with time. The yard was void of any flowers and the hedge planted on either side of the tiny front porch was overgrown from years of neglect. It was obvious to Brigit as she opened the gate and began walking up the cracked-cement walk that there had been many short term residents in the small house and none of them had cared enough to keep up appearances.

As she entered the house, she listened carefully for the sound of a child playing. Silence was all she heard as she stood in the front room. Her ears strained for the slightest sound to indicate the boy’s presence. She was about to double check the address indicated in his portfolio when she heard the deep sigh carry across the silence from the back of the house. Slowly, Brigit began to walk toward it’s origin in the kitchen.

He was sitting on a chair in the corner of the kitchen. His roly-poly frame was slumped against the back of the chair as if he had been punished and he was waiting for the word that he had served his time. His brown hair had been nicely combed to one side as befitting a little boy of the time. His shorts and striped t-shirt were clean and pressed. Bright white socks set off the navy blue of his canvas sneakers as his pudgy legs dangled over the edge of the chair. Brigit noticed the look of fear that came into his eyes as she emerged from the hall into the near empty kitchen. How long he had been sitting in this room, she didn’t know. All she could see was his sudden fear that a stranger was present. She wondered if it was an emotion that he had expressed each time a new family had come into his home.

“Hi Bobby,” she said gently. She stopped a few feet in front of him, not wanting to excite his fear any more than she already had. The chubby little boy gave no reply. “How long have you been sitting here?” she asked. Silence followed her question and she began to believe that getting him to talk to her was going to be an act of God.

“You’re mom sent me to bring you to her,” she said.

Brigit felt the sudden ridiculousness of the statement as soon as she had finished it. Parents had been preaching about strangers using that line to snatch children for decades. Bobby Hooper had obviously been a recipient of that preaching. Only his eyes showed the wariness he was feeling as her words sank in on him.

Wondering how she was going to get any kind of response from the child, Brigit withdrew her field guide. Hopefully, the last page would have a suggestion on how to deal with silent children. Quickly, she flipped to the last page.

*My baby loved to sing…*

Brigit’s eyes snapped from the words that had appeared there to Bobby Hooper’s round face. He was sullen,
sitting in the chair and staring back at her with untrusting eyes. She could only imagine his chubby little cheeks uplifted in a smile of delight as he sang. As she looked into his dark brown eyes, her mind quickly began the search for any childhood song that had long been hidden in her memory. She pushed herself to remember the songs her mother had taught her when she was a small girl…

“Hey, Bobby,” she said gently. She slipped the Field Guide back to her pocket and knelt before the child. “I heard you like to sing. Do you know the song about the Ten Little Indians?”

The roly-poly boy’s eyes snapped to meet Brigit’s in sudden curiosity. His fear was beginning to ebb.

“Do you know the song?” Brigit pressed, glad to finally have some sign of ‘life’ from the child. “Will you sing it with me? One little, two little, three little Indians…” Brigit sang softly. She waited to see if he would join. He merely stared at her as if she had suddenly lost her mind. Brigit realized he wasn’t going to join in and quickly searched for another song. “How about The Mulberry Bush? Do you know that one?”

A movement caught her eye and she paused. The boy had wiggled his fingers where they lay on his thigh even though his pudgy hand had barely made any other noticeable movement. Brigit smiled and returned her attention to his face. Slowly, she sang the first verse about going around the mulberry bush as a small light began to dance in his brown eyes. She waited, hoping his small mouth would open and he’d sing with her. His silence persisted, though.

“Bobby, let’s do London Bridge. You know that one, right?” she praised. “Do you want to sing with me?”

Brigit stood up and offered the child her hands to indicate her willingness to go through the motions of London Bridge with the child. She hoped it would do the trick in getting him close to her so the door he needed to pass through would appear. Once it did, she would open it and urge him through. She was sure there were plenty of sing-along sessions on the other side. If not, she would remind herself to speak to John about it when she returned to the office. Surely, he could put in a request to have them so Bobby Hooper would be entertained through out eternity.

“C’mon, Bobby, let’s do the dance,” she urged.

Brigit began singing again and found herself trying very hard to remember words in the right order. Finally, the little boy could no longer contain himself and slid from the chair to join her in the dance. Together, they held hands and swung their arms as Brigit watched his face, pleased to see the delight that had finally erased the sullen expression she had first encountered. She felt her heart becoming light for the first time in weeks as she fell to the floor with the little boy when London Bridge came tumbling down. She felt her spirits rising as she began to belt out the words of a song she had never thought she would sing again. Brigit suddenly understood the difference between growing up and growing old.

By the sixth time through the song, Brigit noticed the child had begun to sing. His voice still betrayed his sense of wariness, but the joy of the song put a small on his face. When the song ended, she found herself lying on the floor beside Bobby Hooper. His eyes were dancing with delight as he turned his head and looked at her. She felt his silent gaze urging her to get back up and sing it again. Instead, she sat up and took his chubby hand in her own.

“Bobby, it’s time to go away from here. Are you ready?” She looked deep into his eyes. A slight panic flashed in his brown eyes as he processed what she had just said. Hoping to reassure him, she continued: “Where you’re going, sweetheart, they sing all kinds of songs all the time. Wouldn’t that be fun? You’d have so many friends to play with. Do you want to go there?”

“Is my mom there?”

It was his first spoken words to her. Brigit felt the depth of his question on her heart. He had been waiting a long time for his parents to come back. Of course he would want to see his mom again.

“If she isn’t, she will be soon,” Brigit replied. “Do you see that door there?” she pointed at the plain white door to her left.

“That’s the pantry,” Bobby pointed out.
“That’s the way to where you need to go. They have so much fun on the other side. Are you ready to go make some new friends?” she asked.

Bobby sat up and eyed the door suspiciously for a second while he made up his mind. He looked back to Brigit to see whether she might be pulling his leg. When he realized she wasn’t, he nodded enthusiastically. Still holding the child’s hand, Brigit stood and walked with him to the pantry door. While the door had been purposely built with the house, Brigit had felt the energy that was vibrating behind it when she had first taken Bobby Hooper’s hand. It was his portal, his entry to the eternal sing-along.

When they were near the door, Brigit put her ear to the door. Playing ‘monkey-see-monkey-do’, Bobby did the same. A broad smile lifted his chubby cheeks as the music drifted through the wood to his ears. The lady had been right. Everybody was singing and having a good time.

“Can you hear it Bobby? Can you hear the music?” She looked down and saw him nod excitedly. Brigit pulled away from the door and slowly opened it. Bobby looked up at her. A light of gratitude was dancing in his brown eyes.

“Bobby Hooper,” Brigit said. “May you find eternal peace, little man.”

Bobby wasted no more time in the kitchen of the house he had last seen his parents in. The music from the room behind the pantry door was blaring, calling him to join in. He flashed a broad grin at the tall lady in black and darted through the door. Brigit closed it gently behind him. A smile was burning across her face as she left the small house.

Brigit returned directly to the office. John was sorting through a pile of portfolios at his desk when she sat down across from him. He was still hunting for candidates, she guessed. He glanced up at her briefly.

“You’re back, finally,” he said. He sounded bored or annoyed, Brigit was unsure.

“Sorry,” she apologized. “Did you know London Bridge could be so repetitive?” she asked, deciding to ignore the tone of his remark. John looked up at her and was surprised by the smile on her face.

“No, I was unaware. I was never much of a singer as a child, I’m afraid. How were your assignments?”

"The first one was interesting,” Brigit began. She explained the tactic of breaking Matthew-Matilda Swenson from the time loop he was on by letting him tell his story. John listened intently, nodding his head occasionally to express his approval for what she had done.

“Very good,” he finally said. “How about the second one? Bobby Hooper?”

“That,” Brigit sighed, “was a lot of fun.”
12: Moving On

The next few weeks passed quickly. Brigit and John were set to their tasks of reaping those who had waited the longest to pass to the other side. A few were unruly, but Brigit found that she was becoming more comfortable with her instincts and somewhat used to the possibility of a fight. There had been a couple of close calls with the darker spirits, but in the end, Brigit had managed to get them through the appropriate door and on to face their fates.

The season continued its change during those few weeks. The air grew colder; the leaves had long left their posts on the trees. Brigit occasionally took a few minutes to look around her. She noted the changes in the scenery and began to guess as to the day of the month. Her internal clock was going silent. All she had to judge time by now was Maggie’s leaving for work in the morning and the setting sun. Seconds had become minutes to Brigit, and minutes had become hours.

Her home time was spent in silent observation. Maggie’s grief was still present, but Brigit could see that it was becoming thinner with each passing day. As each layer of grief was buried, Maggie would remove some small reminder of their life together. A picture here, a keepsake there… Brigit watched her lover take the items and store them in a small box in the hall closet. As each object was removed from its resting place, Brigit felt a piece of her heart crack with the sadness of it. When she lay down beside Maggie in the darkness, she reminded herself to stand strong in her promise to wait for Maggie. It didn’t matter that the physical reminders of their love were slowly vanishing. Brigit was keeping her promise. Maggie would keep the memory.

Mama Dee came and went as frequently as ever. Although she never verbally expressed why, Brigit watched her friend as she fussed over Maggie and engaged her in conversation at the dinner table. When the two women would erupt into laughter, Brigit laughed with them. When they grew silent because they had come too close to a memory of Brigit, Brigit would sigh and gently touch each of them on the shoulder. She could feel their warmth under her hand. They felt only the shiver that ran through them from where she had touched them.

November passed into December by the turning of the calendar on the wall in the kitchen. Brigit had stood beside Maggie as she had taken this inane chore under task and they both sighed deeply at the reminder that Christmas was coming soon. It would be the first holiday that a tree was not dragged home and hours spent decorating it. It would be the first holiday that the special presents weren’t exchanged at midnight and the rest of them exchanged at dawn. It would be the first Christmas that their rituals would not be observed. Brigit had reached out to take Maggie’s hand, hoping to reassure her in some small measure that she was still present; but Maggie turned and walked away. The opening and closing of the front door let Brigit know that Maggie had gone for the day.

It was two weeks later when Brigit found Maggie turning a new page. She had just come in from the office and was walking through the quiet house in search of Maggie when there was a knock at the door. Brigit stopped as Maggie came dashing from the bedroom trying to affix an earring to her ear lobe and actually passed through her on the way to the door. The shock of that sensation froze Brigit where she stood. The warm waves from Maggie’s energy washed through her from head to toe to fingertip. When she turned to look at her partner, she realized Maggie was dressed for a night on the town – for a date…

Maggie had opened the door and found Mama Dee standing on the other side. Her graying hair was covered in the knit cap she had made for herself earlier in the fall. A matching scarf was wound around her neck up to her nose.

“Oh, it’s you, Mama. Come in,” Maggie said as she still struggled with the earring.

“You sure do look nice, child. Where is this girl taking you?” Mama Dee asked as she began to unwind the scarf from her neck. Brigit stood in the door way watching, resisting the spark of anger that was trying to ignite in her.

“To Duchevey’s on Sixth Avenue. She’s said she would be here by now,” Maggie said frustratingly.

“I hope she has a good reason for being late,” Mama Dee said with a disapproving shake of her head.
“I’m sure she does, Mama,” Maggie sighed as she finally managed to clasp the earring. She stood up straight and turned for her friend to see. “Do I really look okay?” Maggie asked.

Brigit bit her lip as she looked at her partner. Maggie was wearing the black velvet cocktail dress Brigit had picked out for her the year before on the occasion of her own company Christmas party. Maggie had looked as hot in it then as she did now. The spark of anger was starting to turn somewhat green as she let her eyes wander down the silhouette of Maggie’s body.

“You look beautiful. Now, tell me again how you met this girl?” Mama Dee instructed as she sank onto the sofa and pulled the knit cap from her grey head. Little curls sprang free at various points on her crown.

“I met her on the bus three weeks ago. She works downtown for a law firm – I forget the name. It’s long, that’s all I can tell you right now. Anyway, she’s made junior partner and she’s extremely intelligent. We’ve managed to talk every morning on our way to work. I like her, Mama…” Maggie measured her words as she said them. Brigit wondered why Maggie would have to think about what she was saying. It seemed as if she might be unsure of what she was really feeling. At least, that was Brigit’s interpretation of it.

Mama Dee was about to say something more when a second knock sounded at the door. Maggie jumped to open it. On the other side, a huge bouquet of flowers masked the face of the person holding them. When they were lowered to reveal the woman presenting them, Brigit immediately decided she didn’t like her. Quickly, she glanced at Mama Dee to assess her opinion of the stranger. Mama Dee, ever the lady, gave nothing away.

“Sorry I’m late,” the woman said as she stepped into the living room.

She was wearing a black pin-striped power-suit, the teal silk shirt beneath its coat opened to the top line of her cleavage. Her dark brown hair had been swept up into a tight French curl and secured by an ebony clasp. Brigit looked to the floor to see that the woman was wearing black velveteen pumps on her feet. It was a costume she probably donned everyday, Brigit mused as she returned her gaze to the new woman’s face. To make it worse, she had a broad, charming smile on her face. Brigit took a couple of steps forward and stood just behind Maggie, as if to reassert her invisible presence in the room.

“These are beautiful!” Maggie gushed as she examined the bouquet that had been passed to her.

“I found them on my way here. I had the limo driver circle the block so I could buy them for you, hence, the reason I am late.” the stranger bragged. Brigit rolled her eyes and looked to Mama Dee for support. Mama Dee only stood from where she was sitting, reminding Maggie that she was still in the room.

“Oh, Mama, this is Lorena Rubens. Lorena, this is Mama Dee. She’s my neighbor and dearest friend,” Brigit introduced. Lorena Rubens strode toward Mama Dee with her hand outstretched in greeting. Mama Dee took it and they shook; but Brigit noticed the hesitation in Mama Dee’s actions. Brigit felt a sudden surge of relief. Mama Dee didn’t like her either. Good, Brigit thought, it’s not just me…

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Miss Dee,” Lorena said.

“And you,” Mama replied politely.

“I better put these in some water,” Maggie said.

“I’ll take care of that for you, child,” Mama Dee offered. She took the large bouquet from Maggie and turned to face Lorena Rubens. “Where are you taking my only daughter?”

Maggie and Lorena laughed lightly at Mama’s question. Brigit and Mama Dee remained silent in waiting for the response.

“I’ve made eight o’clock reservations at Duchevney’s on Sixth Avenue. Would you care to join us?” Lorena offered. “They have a wonderful menu. The chef is a dear friend of mine.”

Brigit rolled her eyes again. More bragging. It was not an endearing quality.
“Oh no,” Mama replied. “You all go and have a good time.”

“Thank you, Mama,” Maggie said as she opened the hall closet and pulled out the black silk wrap Brigit had also picked out to go with the cocktail dress. “I’ll call you when I get home.”

“Alright then,” Mama Dee said as she received a kiss on the cheek from Maggie.

“It was lovely to meet you, Miss Dee,” Lorena Rubens said as she opened the door for Maggie and waited for her to pass. Mama Dee made no reply as she watched the door close behind the two younger women. Finally, a deep sigh escaped the little old woman and she turned to make her way to the kitchen. Brigit followed closely, her anger and jealousy erupting.

“How could you let her do this?” Brigit asked as she followed her friend.

“She’s got to move on, I suppose,” Mama muttered.

Brigit stopped. Had Mama Dee heard her?

“The girl can’t spend the rest of her life alone. It’s a shame, really. She was so happy with Brigit,” Mama went on. Brigit’s shoulders slumped and she sank against the wall. “But this girl here, she looks like maybe she can take care of Maggie. That’s what she needs. Someone to watch over her.”

“I’m watching over her,” Brigit replied.

“She needs someone to hold her and love her,” Mama added.

“I hold her every night and I love her for all eternity,” Brigit put in.

Brigit watched Mama Dee take a large vase from the cupboard and fill it with water. Then, she set to the task of removing the bouquet from the cellophane wrapper and trimming the stems before arranging the bouquet in the vase. A stubborn silence had over come Mama Dee as Brigit watched. When the bouquet was set, Mama Dee swept the trimmings into a pile on the counter before scooping them up in her plump hands and forcefully dumping them in the garbage. Mama was angry; but at what, Brigit had no clue.

Carefully, Mama set the vase on the kitchen table so Maggie would see it when she came in to make her coffee in the morning. She paused after setting it down. She could feel the cold spot to her left and she knew she wasn’t alone. Mama had felt it before and she had the inclination that it was a familiar spirit that moved through the rooms of the apartment Maggie had shared with Brigit. Once, Mama Dee had thought, she had even heard the familiar voice. It was a feeling she had possessed since the night of the accident – a gift she had carried silently since childhood. She could feel and hear the unseen and, lately, it had been growing stronger than ever. Slowly, Mama turned away and walked toward the hall. She paused in the doorway and looked back.

Brigit met her gaze.

“You should keep a close eye on your girl,” Mama Dee instructed to the empty room before turning around again and leaving the apartment.

“I will, Mama,” Brigit whispered in a promise.

Her attention turned to the bouquet Mama Dee had set beside her. Slowly, she extended her hand to touch the bright red rose that was on the verge of blooming. As her fingertip neared the edge of the outermost petal, it began to deepen in color. In seconds, it had turned black. Brigit pulled her hand away and eyed the result.

She had never done anything malicious. She had never really fought with Maggie about anything. There had been spats, but nothing that had never gone unresolved before going to bed…. Yet, the feelings inside her now were churning like a bubbling brew in a large cauldron over a roaring fire. How could Maggie move on so quickly after ten years of happiness? Slowly, Brigit extended her finger to the large white Calla Lily at the top of the bouquet. She watched as it slowly turned brown and withered under her touch.
That was enough, she decided. She was sure she could find other ways to make her point, to let Maggie know she was unhappy with the situation. She couldn’t entirely kill something that had brought a genuine smile to her partner’s face – no matter who it had come from. Brigit stood and walked to the front room. As she sank into Maggie’s reading chair, she thought about Mama Dee’s advice. She would keep a closer eye on Maggie. Something about Lorena Rubens didn’t set right with Brigit. She couldn’t put her finger on it yet, but she couldn’t do anything to stop what had been started either. Not yet, anyway…
Another two weeks passed quickly, bringing Christmas at hand. Brigit had gone on about her business at the firm, reaping as many as she could between the times the sun rose and the sun set. John expressed his surprise that she had taken on such a heavy work load so quickly. Brigit had only shrugged and picked up another pile of portfolios before walking out.

Things at home were progressing as well. Brigit had watched as Maggie came in from her date that night, a slight flush present in her cheeks that Brigit immediately recognized. It could have been the wine they had enjoyed over dinner, but Brigit heard the voice in her head telling her firmly that she knew it was something else. Lorena had asked to see Maggie to the door, but Maggie had only allowed the woman to kiss her on the sidewalk outside. Brigit had felt the tiniest measure of relief in that action. Perhaps Maggie was unsure after all...

Maggie had noticed the dead flowers in the bouquet the next morning. She had merely shrugged and plucked the two stems out to throw them away. Brigit’s effort had gone unrecognized and now lay in the garbage. She decided that she would have to work on another way of letting Maggie know her feelings.

Two nights later, Brigit had come home to find Maggie cooking dinner. The dining room table had been set for two and candles were lit. Soft jazz played through the speakers of the stereo in the office. Maggie was dressed casually, but not in her usual lounge pants and oversized t-shirt. She was entertaining and Brigit knew exactly who was coming to dinner.

Brigit had stayed long enough to watch them eat and converse. Lorena did most of the talking describing her exaggerated adventures in the Swiss Alps and the huge corporations she had taken on in behalf of the underdogs of society. Brigit couldn’t help but roll her eyes when Lorena made a joke that was meant to impress Maggie. When Maggie stood to clear the table, Brigit’s anger was ignited by Lorena’s sudden move to catch Maggie by the hand.

“But dance with me,” she said as a slow ballad had begun to play on the station that Maggie had chosen.

“I don’t dance well,” Maggie answered, a quick blush rising to her cheeks.

“It’s simple. I’ll lead,” Lorena said as she stood. She pulled Maggie to the center of the living room and slipped her arms seductively about Maggie’s waist.

Brigit felt her fingernails biting into the cloth on the arm of the reading chair as she watched the scene unfolding. She couldn’t do this. She couldn’t watch where the scene would end. Quickly, she jumped up and stormed to the door. With her anger at its height, she yanked the door open and slammed it behind her.

Maggie and Lorena both jumped at the sound of the slamming door. Maggie had felt the rush of wind that had swept past them before the noise had come. The energy within that wind was familiar. There had been a faint scent of French lavender on it. She had smelled it before, but she had thought it was just because Brigit had so recently been present in their apartment; but now... after so many weeks of Brigit’s absence... She began to shake with the fear it had awakened deep inside her.

“What the hell was that?” Lorena asked. Even though there was a tremble in her voice, she was trying to appear brave.

“Maybe it was a neighbor’s door,” Maggie suggested even though she had heard it clearly as her own front door. She was trying to suppress the shiver that had taken control of her, but it refused to go away. Even the weight of Lorena’s hand still on her waist gave her no reassurance.

“Does that happen often? Your neighbors slamming their doors?” Lorena asked.

“No,” Maggie said. Lorena turned and looked at the shaking woman. A look of concern came into her eyes as
she realized Maggie had turned deathly pale.

“What’s wrong?” Lorena asked, raising her hands and cupping Maggie’s face.

“I don’t know,” Maggie offered.

“Are you frightened?” Lorena asked in a purr, gently stroking Maggie’s cheek with her thumb. Maggie tried to shake her head, but it barely moved under Lorena’s firm hold. “I could stay tonight, if you want,” Lorena offered. Maggie tried to shake her head again, but Lorena’s hold was not easing up.

“That’s not really necessary,” Maggie whispered. Lorena lowered her head and brushed her lips across Maggie’s softly. Maggie felt her knees begin to gel, but she was sure it was more from the incident that had just happened and the knowing that it was supernatural than it was from Lorena’s kiss.

“But I want to stay,” Lorena whispered before pressing her lips against Maggie’s again. When they finally parted, Maggie could only nod her head even though every instinct within her was yelling for her to do otherwise. As Lorena led her down the hall by the hand, Maggie couldn’t help but glance over her shoulder and wonder…

Brigit found John at the Bleecker Street Café. He was sitting at the counter conversing with Giuseppe quietly and seemed somewhat surprised when Brigit slid onto the stool beside him. The angry expression on her face told him the answer to the question before he had even opened his mouth to ask it. Maggie had found someone new. Brigit was feeling betrayed. Instead of broaching that particular topic for immediate conversation, John feigned ignorance and expressed his joy that she had shown up.

“I was just telling Giuseppe about a potential new recruit. I found his file today. I think he would do well with the ‘Potential Problems’ department,” John explained as Giuseppe slid a cup of coffee in front of Brigit. She accepted it with a silent nod. The fact that she had never heard Giuseppe utter a word made her briefly wonder how John could carry on anything more than a one-sided conversation. That thought, however, was quickly burned by the bonfire of her anger.

“That’s great,” she mumbled in response to John’s revelation.

“I think we’ll go together to interview him,” John decided before picking up his tea cup and sipping noisily. He was being obnoxious, Brigit thought.

“I can’t wait,” she said.

Her mind was going elsewhere. She was wondering if she should have stayed and watched what she assumed would happen. She wondered if Maggie would allow the other woman to touch her like Brigit used to touch her. The thought of it caused Brigit’s fury to burn hotter. John had fallen silent beside her, staring at the opposite wall waiting for her speak again. Knowing he was baiting her with his silence, she conceded by asking: “How long does it take?”

“How long does what take, darling?”

John turned and leveled his ice blue eyes on her. He could see the emotions running wildly through her mind. Her face was as smooth as stone, but the energy flowing through her body was screaming it all. He knew exactly what she was asking, but, he wanted her to voice it out loud.

“How long does what take, darling?”

“With Life felt like?” she asked. She turned and met his icy gaze with a level one of her own. John felt himself stiffen at the sight of the emotions churning in the depths of her soul. He forced a gentle smile to his face and relaxed.

“Oh – that,” he sighed. “Well, love, it depends on you. If you truly want to forget it, you will with time. However, you run the risk of forgetting everything,” he warned gently. He hoped she would catch the subtlety he was trying to invoke empathetically.

He had been there once himself, asking the same question of his own now-retired-mentor. He could still hear
the ice filled answer that had pierced him to the core and helped him make the decision to try to remember how Life had felt. He would remember the good times and the bad simply because he didn’t want to be as cold blooded as Araxius Herodotus. John had walked away from that discussion and consciously decided to remember everything. He could not fathom forgetting the feel of his lover’s touch or the warmth of breath against his skin in the darkness. He never wanted to forget the long warm kiss in the middle of a cold September rainstorm that had etched itself into his mind as the absolute happiest moment of his life.

He had the instinct now that Brigit, despite her anger, would not want to forget such sensations from her own life either. Not really. He had not met Maggie yet, but, John could feel the love Brigit still carried for her. It was Brigit’s cloak, her protection and courage. He had the sense that it had been that way during their mortal existence together. If she were to discard all of that just to sidestep the pain she would feel upon bearing witness to Maggie’s continuation of life, Brigit Malone would be left vulnerable. The soul she would become would be an empty shell of the soul she was now. How could he make her understand that pain was part of the new existence she had chosen to honor her promise to Maggie? How could he teach her to be tolerant of Maggie’s progression through life?

Brigit remained silent as John continued to look at her. She knew he was reading her as easily as he read one of their portfolios. She didn’t care. At least someone could see her.

“Don’t make the decision lightly, love,” he suggested. “Take your time on this one, trust me.” Brigit nodded in acknowledgement of his advice before asking:

“How do you know?”

Her voice was soft and John realized that she was deep within her confusion at everything as a whole.

“Because I’ve been where you are,” he answered.

“You weren’t always a Reaper?” Brigit asked. She slowly picked up her coffee and blew across the surface.

“I was mortal once. I didn’t choose this particular occupation when I was alive, if that’s what you mean. No one grows up saying they want to be The Grim Reaper,” John laughed.

“I guess that would be kind of on the morbid side. Can you imagine how many mothers would put their child through a life time of therapy if the kid’s first words were ‘Grim Reaper’?” Brigit smiled at her own joke. She was beginning to relax. John was glad.

“Or worse, exorcism... the church’s business would be at an all time historical high,” John continued with the joke.

“So why did you take the job?” Brigit asked.

“For love.”

“Oh,”

“You sound disappointed,” John chuckled as he turned and reached for his tea again.

“Oh, no, I’m not. I just thought maybe you had a slight morbid streak. That’s all – what was her name?” Brigit asked, reaching for her own cup.

“His name was Dillon.”
14: For the Love of Dillon

John shifted in his seat and nodded to Giuseppe in indication that he would need another cup of tea. The time to answer Brigit’s question on her first day regarding John Blackwick’s hardest assignment had finally arrived – as he had known it eventually would. At this point, John considered it best to tell the tale if only to show his protégé a new lesson about the existence she was now passing through.

Brigit waited patiently for him to begin the story. She could sense the discomfort emanating from her mentor as he wrestled with where to begin. Giuseppe took John’s teacup away and returned it promptly without a word. When the waiter stepped away, John took a deep breath.

“I was born in Dublin. My father was a delivery truck driver and my mother stayed at home with us. There were four of us children. I was the only son in the bunch, so expectations were somewhat high. My father hoped I would grow up to be a banker or a solicitor, but I had other dreams. I wanted to be a poet. All day, I would daydream and write the words as they flowed from my mind through my hand to the small notebook my eldest sister had given me. I was very introspective. I listened to everything – the wind, the noise in the street, conversations that I had no business overhearing. It was all an inspiration to me. I paid close attention to the emotions that came to life within me because some little aspect of drawing a breath and being there to witness some second in the continuous flow of life all around me as it ignited a string of words that had to be recorded.

“Dillon was the neighborhood hero. He was the one all the mothers loved and all the fathers wished their sons would be like. He was athletic, smart and extremely handsome. We had grown up on the same street all our lives, but, we had never crossed paths until I decided to sit on the front stoop one day to write.”

“How old were you?” Brigit interrupted as she lifted her coffee cup and prepared to take a sip.

“I was sixteen. By then, my mother had begun to encourage my writing. My father was somewhat disappointed. I think he realized I wasn’t going to be anything truly financially beneficial to the family. I wasn’t interested in sports or politics. I was doing my best to keep out of everyone’s way so I could revel in my daydreams.

“On the day that I met Dillon O’Shea, I had been sitting on the front stoop writing. By now, my poetry was evolving into short stories. My second eldest sister had found an advert for a short story contest in a London magazine she subscribed to and urged me to enter. I was working hard on it when Tommy Higgins and his cronies came around. Tommy snatched my notebook from my hands and began taunting me about being a sissy, cursing and laughing at me as he turned this way and that... I was jumping around like mad trying to take my notebook back. All my dreams were recorded there. My opportunity to be a famous writer was taking shape on those pages. Tommy Higgins had a reputation for destroying everything he touched and I was suddenly embolden to make sure my writing wasn’t going to be another one of his casualties.

“So, there I was, jumping around trying to snatch my book from Tommy Higgins when Dillon appeared. In all the dancing around and scuffling, I hadn’t seen him approaching us. Tommy was a head taller than I was, so I was having quite a time in reaching my book. His buddies, Billie and Collin, they were pushing me around like a punching bag. I had just hit the sidewalk when I saw Dillon finally. He reached up and easily snatched my book out of Tommy’s hand.

“What’s going on here?” I remember Dillon asking. Everything seemed to come to a screeching halt. Tommy Higgins puffed out his chest and tried his best to look intimidating. Dillon was unfazed. He was too busy scanning the pages Tommy had been making fun of to notice the challenge Tommy Higgins was issuing. I was somewhat embarrassed, naturally. The neighborhood hero was reading my words. I was just waiting for him to turn and join in the melee of persecution.

“Mind yer own fookin’ business,” Tommy Higgins had told him.

“What did you just say?” Dillon had demanded. I was just laying there on the sidewalk.
“Are ye deef? I tol’ you ‘to mind yer own fookin’ business’.” Tommy repeated.

I was shocked – no amazed – at how quickly Dillon responded to being cursed at. He swung his arm so fast that none of us realized what had happened until Tommy hit the sidewalk beside me. His nose was gushing with bright red blood. The other two, Billie and Collin, they just stood there with their mouths hanging open like two gaping holes. Their leader had been laid out in one punch.

Finally, Dillon turned to me and I was struck with all these new emotions at once. I had never had an interest in anyone romantically until that point. There he was, standing over me with that angelic smile on his face. His hand was outstretched to me. When I took it and he helped me up, I was suddenly aware of the energy that could pass through and bind two people together. He felt it too. As Billie and Collin finally dragged Tommy Higgins away from us, Dillon handed me my notebook. He had such a strange look on his face.

“Are you all right?” he asked me. I could only nod. I was still trying to identify the energy that had cours ed through my body. I was trying to put words to what I was suddenly experiencing for the first time in my life. I was especially trying to control the sudden stirring of life in my trousers. I don’t mean to be crass, but it’s a part of the story…” John apologized. Brigit shrugged.

“Trust me,” she said, “I completely understand.”

“Dillon and I were inseparable from that day. I think my father was relieved on some level. I’m sure he thought Dillon would be a good influence on my manliness. My sisters were all giddy with the thought of Dillon O’Shea coming around to our house quite regularly. He was so handsome, but, he was always there to see me. He had no time to spend with girls who were continually gushing and flirting with him. We had a great many things in common, surprisingly. He loved poetry and begged to read mine. He became my biggest supporter. We would sometimes go for long walks and spend hours discussing the nuances of nature and how a certain string of words could evoke different emotions and interpretations. We were only sixteen and eighteen, but, we talked for hours as if we were scholars of an ancient wisdom.”

“Did you ever become a couple?” Brigit asked quietly. A look of sadness came to John’s face. It was the first time she had seen anything other than placidity or amusement in his expression. She wondered if she should have been so bold as to ask.

“At the time of our existence, you must understand, being homosexual was strictly forbidden. It meant ostracism from the community and excommunication from the church. It opened the door to hatred beyond comprehension. It was definitely something not discussed openly.” John explained. “I loved him deeply and he loved me, but for the longest time – we used our conversations about poetry to disguise what we were really trying to tell each other. The discussion went on for four years before anything happened. By then, we were grown men. He had taken work as a delivery driver, like my father, and I was tutoring children with their studies. I didn’t have the money to go away to university, but I was smart. I had entered a few writing contests, but had not won anything substantial to brag about.

“It was in September on my twenty-first birthday that everything changed. I had entered my twelfth contest and I had won! I had finally won! Dillon was so happy for me. It was then that I told him everything in plain English. The look on his face as I finally said out loud that I was in love with him made me think that I had done something terribly wrong. When I asked him as much, he only shook his head. He replied that he loved me as much, in the same way, but that our love could never be acted on. It was wrong, he had said. It was then that I suggested we move to London, away from our neighborhood and families and live together however we wished. I offered my winnings as our ticket out of Dublin. Dillon was negating my ideas as quickly as I offered them. Finally, he decided we should just drop the subject and go to the pub to celebrate my success. I was heartbroken, but I went along anyway.

“We spent a few hours there, drinking pint after pint before we decided to call it a night and crawl home. By then, it had started to rain and neither of us carried an umbrella. I think I was more drunk than Dillon, as I had never been much for the drink. When we left the pub, I followed him blindly hoping the rain would wash away every feeling in my possession at that moment. I wanted to drown in it and feel nothing. I didn’t realize where he was leading me until we were no longer surrounded by street lamps and row houses. I followed him, though, not
questioning where he was taking me in the rain.

“It was then that he kissed me. In the middle of the night, in the middle of the cold rain, he was kissing me. His tongue was deep in my mouth, his hands were holding me to him tight and I could feel the reaction it was having on him in his trousers. It was having the same effect on me and I didn’t want it to end. It was absolutely the happiest moment of my life. When he finally pulled away, I remember having the sensation of being suddenly sober. He was staring deep into my eyes and I wanted to kiss him again. Instead, Dillon took my hand and pulled me toward a small shed that had been built under a massive oak tree. It was dark there, but it was shelter from the storm.

“What happened next was heavenly. I had never thought I could feel so secure and fulfilled. We made love for hours, exploring each other, entering places within each other that I had never thought possible. I felt our souls meeting and dancing and meeting again with each session. Dillon was my soul mate. I couldn’t imagine being apart from him.

“The next morning, we awoke to the sun shining through a tiny window. The rain had stopped and we were changed. We had held each other all night and I was pleased to still be in his arms when I opened my eyes. As we dressed, we discussed where to go from there. We agreed that we couldn’t remain in our neighborhood without causing distress for our families. Dillon made the decision to move to London and secure work. I wanted to go with him, but he told me to wait and he would send for me. He had been planning all night while I slept. He would be the one to make the decisions for our future and he would be the one to make sure we would be all right. Dillon had decided our roles in the relationship, you see?

“So, I went along with his decisions. He left for London that week. We escaped once more to have some time together, but it did not last all night like our first time. He was hurried, almost afraid that we would be caught. Then he was gone. He took the ferry without looking back and I stood on the dock until the ferry was eaten by the horizon waiting for him to do so.

“It was four months before I heard anything from him. He had secured work at a bank as a teller. It wasn’t much money, but it was enough to provide him room and board. He promised to send for me soon. There were no endearments beyond that promise, which I understood because I knew he desperately wanted to keep our love a secret.

“Another six months passed and Dillon had still not sent word that it was okay to join him. I had won another contest at this point and I decided to surprise him by paying my own way to London. It was the biggest mistake I could have made. I arrived in the evening at the return address that had been on his letters to me. It was a small place, a street level apartment. When I arrived, I stood outside his apartment looking in the window. He was already home. I could tell by the lights burning inside. It was then that I saw him with another. They were going at it madly, Dillon was on top. He looked angry, as if he meant to punish the young man he was shagging.

“My heart suffered its biggest break at that moment. I turned and began to run away. I was scolding myself for having the belief that he loved only me. I was angry that he had not waited for me to join him as I had been waiting to do. I was furious that he could touch someone else in the same places he had touched me. I was so blind with my rage that I did not stop to look both ways before crossing the street. I was hit by a delivery van and then tossed onto the windshield of a taxi going in the opposite direction. I was dead as soon as I finally hit the pavement.

“I remember standing outside the scene, still reeling with my anger at what I had seen Dillon doing. I looked at my body, not even caring that I was looking at my own body. A crowd began to gather when I saw Dillon. He was walking toward the corner with his paramour as if they were just chums out for a stroll. I found some bittersweet relief when I watched him approach the scene and look at my body lying crumpled and broken on the street. The blood drained from his face as he ran to my side and began to stroke my face. I couldn’t feel his touch, though. I could only stand there watching him as he began to mourn.

“I was so angry though. I didn’t care that he was hurting inside. I decided at that moment that I didn’t want to see him ever again.”

“But you did,” Brigit guessed. John only nodded. He had paused long enough to take a sip of his tea.
“I spent the next few days wandering back and forth between Dillon’s apartment and the dock where I had landed. I wanted to go home, to Ireland; but I was stuck. It was on the fourth day that Araxius came to me. He offered me a position with the firm. I took it because I knew I wasn’t ready to pass over and Araxius made it very clear I would never reach the shores of Ireland again if I chose to pass over. There was no option to merely remain a ghostie, mind you.

The idea didn’t take long to process and I took the job. By then, Araxius had moved the main office to Dublin. It was my only ticket home, you see?”

“How long did you stay there, in Ireland?” Brigit asked.

“Oh, for awhile. As I gained tenure, I was sent all over the world to complete assignments. I’ve seen so many places I would most likely have never seen as a mortal man. Granted, I’ve been on assignment, but when the firm is operating at full staff, there is time to take a walk around and see the sights,” John smiled as he offered this particular tidbit. Brigit nodded in understanding. She would have time too, eventually.

“What changed?” she asked as Giuseppe floated over to the counter before them, a carafe of coffee in his hand. He silently refilled her cup and passed her a small cup of crème so that she could prepare her drink to her liking.

“It took many years,” John sighed, “but the heart that I had carried for so long – my poet’s heart -- returned to the emotional side. I couldn’t forget the love that I had borne for so long for Dillon O’Shea. I asked Araxius, one day, how long it would take – to forget everything that I had known during those years. He told me exactly the same thing that I have told you. That if I chose to forget, I would forget everything. It was a choice he said he had made and he was able to do his job efficiently as a result. I, personally, found Araxius Herodotus the coldest soul I had ever encountered. I understood a lot of it was his back ground, having been a military man of the Roman Empire. As you know, some things do not leave the soul when they cross to the spirit realm. I looked to Araxius for guidance when I was at a point in my work that I could not pass the emotions it was creating. He was my mentor, but I looked at him and realized I did not want to be so cold. I was a poet. I depended on my emotions.

“Twenty years into my service with the firm, I was in middle management, if you will. I supervised a regiment of Reapers in Western Europe, giving them their assignments – overseeing their training and providing assistance when they were in difficult situations. One day, I was preparing assignments when I came across Dillon’s portfolio. As I sat in my office, I began to shake and struggle with my first instinct to rush to his side. I made a decision to break a rule,”

“Rule number three? A Reaper shall not reap his own?” Brigit asked.

“That’s the one,” John confirmed. “My heart told me it was the right thing to do. So, I went to Dillon O’Shea. I found him sitting in his apartment, the same one I had seen him in that night. He was so pale, so thin. I hadn’t read his portfolio, but I could see that an unnatural illness had been the cause of his death.”

“How did he react to seeing you again?” Brigit asked quietly.

“He was relieved, apologetic; happy… there were so many emotions he let loose in those few minutes of our time together. All I could do was offer my forgiveness to him, to tell him I still loved him. Then, I opened the door and told him to go home. He asked me to come with him, but I had to deny him. That broke what was left of my heart, but I was a Reaper now. I couldn’t just pass over. I think that broke his heart, but he passed. When I closed the door, I found Araxius standing behind me. I was demoted after a severe lecture. It took me another twenty years to make middle management again, but in hindsight, it was all right. I no longer had a flame burning in my heart to steer me in my decisions. I had my memories, but I no longer had that particular emotion to take into consideration.”

Brigit stared hard into her coffee. She understood everything her mentor was saying. There was a warning in his tale, a subliminal message behind the words he spoke. She caught every nuance he was not saying out loud.

“The living must go on, Brigit,” John said quietly. “We must continue with the job we have undertaken. If we choose to forget everything that made our souls what they currently are, we become as cold as the stones that lay above our heads in the grave yard. Try to understand that we all need to feel alive while we are alive.”
Brigit looked at John and saw that he was looking at her. There was a warm light in his ice blue eyes as he spoke in Maggie’s defense.

“She still loves you,” he continued, “but all she has now is your memory. Take that into consideration as she moves on.”

Brigit could only nod. She turned her face away and looked toward the street scene outside the café window. The sun was still hours from rising. The old man in the booth beside the window was watching the empty street intently. From where she sat, she could see the sadness deep in his eyes. He was waiting, but for what, she had no clue.

“Did I tell you I’ve found a new recruit?” John cut into her thoughts; the lilt in his voice told her he was glad to finally move away from the previous subject of his memory.

“You did,” Brigit replied quietly. “When do we do the interview?” She looked up to see a forced smile dancing in his eyes.

“No time like the present…”
John had given Brigit the portfolios in his pocket as they set out from the café. As she scanned the names embossed on the thin black folders, she was surprised to see that it was two of the same family.

“Brothers?” she asked as she opened the first folder.

“Yes,” John replied. “They’re immigrants. Thomas is the younger brother. He’s not quite so volatile as his elder brother, Seamus; but, they were both a force to be reckoned with as mortal men. Thomas had the tendency to follow Seamus’ lead through their lives.”

“So, which one are you considering as a recruit?” Brigit asked as she quickly scanned through Thomas’ file. She closed the portfolio and opened Seamus’ to scan it equally as quick.

“Either one will do, honestly,” John said. “They’re both brawlers. I think that particular quality will be beneficial in the harder assignments, don’t you agree? I mean, it’s not as though either of us really like a fight,” he pointed out.

“This much is true,” Brigit agreed. She had noticed early on that John Blackwick hated a fight as much as she did. It was what kept them delving too deeply into the ‘harder’ assignments.

They walked together down the sidewalk toward the same neighborhood that Brigit had met her fate in. She felt a shiver run down her spine as she remembered the buildings and the sounds of that particular evening. The changing leaves had long since fallen from their posts in the trees lining the street and been swept away by the wind and street cleaners. All that remained were the grey limbs that would bear green buds once the first breath of spring arrived again.

They found Thomas sitting on the stoop of a tenement building, his head turning right to left and back again. He was waiting for someone. Brigit had the feeling that someone was never going to come. Thomas was watching, though, and his eyes followed each person that walked past him. A look of contempt was in his dark green eyes as he tore his gaze away and returned it to the opposite end of the street. Brigit felt his eyes settle on her as they continued their approach. She had the feeling he knew they could see him. She saw his back straighten as they neared.

“Thomas Flannery,” John addressed the young man sitting on the stoop.

“Aye, who are you?” Thomas replied.

“John Blackwick. This is my associate, Brigit Malone,” John introduced. Brigit saw the young man’s deep green eyes flick over her again. The look of disdain in them deepened momentarily.

“Never heard of ye,” Thomas said.

“We are aware of as much,” John agreed. “However, we have come to offer you a proposition.”

“I’m waiting for me brother,” Thomas said quickly, ignoring John’s mention of a proposition. “He said to meet him here.”

“Your brother isn’t coming,” Brigit said softly.

“Why not? What’s happened to Seamus? What did you do to him?” Thomas looked horrified at this tidbit of information. He cast an accusing glare directly at her.

“We’ve not seen your brother, yet,” John cut in. Brigit noticed that he had taken a step forward and placed himself between Thomas and herself. “However, we will be visiting him next if you decline our offer.”
“Why won’t Seamus come for me? He said he would be here.” The young man was still ignoring anything beyond news of his missing brother.

“Seamus is dead, Thomas,” John sighed.

The two Reapers watched as the announcement sank in on the young man. His lower lip began to tremble and an angry fear filled his eyes.

“You’re lying! Who sent you? Where’s my brother?”

“Your brother is dead,” John pressed. “As are you. You were set upon by two of the men that you and your brother planned to rob tonight. Do you remember? ” John was laying out the fact, Brigit noticed. She wondered if it was for lack of time, or patience, that John was going to force the young man to acknowledge what had happened to him.

“You’re lying,” Thomas insisted. He was sobbing now. Brigit watched in fascination as his spirit immediately crumbled before them. “I knew this was a bad idea. Damn you, Seamus! You said this was our ticket to go home. You fookin’ idjit! I told you this was a bad idea!”

John and Brigit exchanged glances before returning their attention to the crumbling young man before them. In that glance, they had agreed this was not the candidate they wanted.

“Thomas Flannery, would you like to go home now? Back to Ireland?” John offered.

“I can’t leave without Seamus. Me Mum would kill me,” Thomas sobbed as he ran his arm across his face to wipe away the tears only he could feel.

“That would be a moot point,” Brigit said quietly. “Your mother will understand,” she assured him. Thomas Flannery cast a glare that pushed her back to silence. She wondered briefly if his brother had the same attitude towards a female. If it were the case, she knew they would have a problem if Seamus Flannery chose to take the offer his brother was ignoring.

“Thomas Flannery,” John stepped closer to the young Irishman and Brigit saw the door appear to their right. “You may pass now. Your mother will understand all,” he assured the young man. Thomas Flannery stared hard into the ice blue eyes that were leveled on him. He recognized the light that danced in the gaze he met. John Blackwick would not give him any other option. Realizing as much, Thomas Flannery nodded his agreement and sighed deeply.

“I do want to go home,” he admitted. “I never wanted to come here in the first place; but Seamus insisted. He said we could live like kings here. We’ve been living worse than the rats in the alley,” Thomas revealed. “I was not borne to be a thief. I was borne to be a prince. Mum always said so,” he continued. “Yes, I want to go home now.”

John pulled open the door. Brigit noted it’s location and frowned. Thomas Flannery was not going home, as he hoped, but rather to a place that his mortal life had merited his reward. It was too bad, she thought. She was sure that deep down there was some spark of goodness that could have saved him from this fate.

She watched as the young man stepped through the door without another word. John closed it softly and shook his head.

“You lied to him about going home,” Brigit pointed out quietly. The door had been to John’s right – it was definitely not the path home for those who had walked the darker path of mortal existence.

“Unfortunately, I felt it was necessary. I believe he would have further wasted our time if I hadn’t. That’s too bad really,” he said quietly. “I was hoping to take the lesser of two evils.”

“Seamus is worse?” Brigit asked.

“I’m afraid so,” John answered. “Thomas was more of the thinker than Seamus. Still as dangerous, but he would have thought about it for a second longer than his brother will. Well,” John took the now blank portfolio of
Thomas Flannery from Brigit and slipped it into his coat pocket. “I suppose we must move on to the next interview.”

Together, they continued walking down the sidewalk. Brigit opened Seamus Flannery’s portfolio and read it slowly as she walked. He was a thief, a murderer, a liar… there was no goodness listed in his file what-so-ever. She wondered how John could see any potential in such a person to complete the job they were going to assign him. Even with hard cases, a measure of compassion and mercy was still a good thing to have. Apparently, Seamus Flannery lacked either based on his life’s record. She was about to point out as much when John stopped and outstretched his arm. Her attention followed his pointed finger down the alley to where they could hear the sound of angry grumbling and the occasional curse.

Seamus Flannery was pacing irritably back and forth across the narrow alleyway. With every other step, he would take a deep drag from the stub of his cigarette and then exhale it with the steps in between. Brigit and John stood at the head of the alley watching the eldest Flannery brother as he paced. He was waiting and both Reapers knew why. Judging by the scowl on the Irishman’s face, Brigit was glad John was the one in charge here. If Thomas Flannery found disdain in a woman’s presence, she was sure Seamus Flannery found disgust. She was especially glad she wouldn’t be the one to tell him that his brother had already passed over.

Seamus continued his pacing. The cigarette between his fingers had become a smoldering nub. Angrily, he threw it to the pavement and smashed it out under the toe of his heavy boot. Keeping his attention on the end of the alley, the Irishman reached into his leather jacket and withdrew a crumpled pack from the inside breast pocket. Inanely, he withdrew another cigarette and placed it between his lips as he deftly slipped the pack back to its resting place. His pacing halted only when he stopped to strike a match and touch the flame to the tip of the cigarette. Brigit watched him intently as he continued to watch the end of the alley. His eyes were narrowed, as if they might pierce the shadows for any sign of his brother.

“Are you sure about this?” Brigit whispered as John repositioned his hold on the ebony walking stick he carried.

“It was Seamus or Thomas. Obviously, we have no choice in this now unless Seamus decides to cross as well. Are you having doubts?”

“Yes,” Brigit admitted. She returned her gaze to the Irishman. His pacing had resumed. Now, there were muttered curses to accompany it in between the inhale and exhale of his fresh cigarette. Her ears detected some words in Gaelic, others in English and some that were a mixture of the two.

“What is it?” John asked in a whisper as he watched Brigit study the potential new hire.

“I don’t know yet,” she admitted.

She didn’t know. Something deep in her gut, however, was telling her to use caution around the swearing Irishman. It went beyond the obvious dislike of females the Flannery brothers possessed. A small whisper in the back of her mind was telling her to be very- very careful around him. Instinctively, her grip tightened on the umbrella handle.

“Just be careful,” she warned quietly. A light smile tugged at the corners of her mentor’s mouth.

“Let’s keep an open mind, Brigit,” John said. With that, he turned and began walking casually down the alley toward the flame-haired, swearing Irishman.

Brigit watched in silence, measuring her breaths evenly as she waited for the first sign of trouble. She had seen John’s fighting abilities. He was always calm and collected during a confrontation. With a brawler like Seamus Flannery, though, Brigit had the instinct that it would take double the effort to pass him over if he rejected the bargain the Grim Reaper would offer. Seamus Flannery’s portfolio was written and the doorway would appear as soon as John Blackwick was within arm’s reach of him. She noticed, however, that John kept just outside his reach of the red-headed man.

John stood waiting for the flame-haired Irishman’s answer. He had delivered the news that Thomas had already passed and witnessed a momentary weakening in Seamus’ façade. With a shake of that red-head, however, the crack
in that wall was gone and the emerald green eyes were narrowed on him again in suspicion.

“The option is yours, Seamus Flannery,” John reminded evenly.

“So, let’s say I take yer offer,” Seamus said after exhaling the smoke from his mouth. “What happens to me when I’ve completed the job?”

“Fortunately, for you, there is no real completion. The job of a Grim Reaper is constant in the spirit world. People continue to die every day. Good people, bad people – they all must be escorted to their fates, Seamus. I’m presenting you the opportunity to stall yours.”

Seamus grunted and took another deep drag from his cigarette. John could see the wheels were grinding in the Irishman’s head. Seamus Flannery was well aware of his judgment. John was hoping to play on the wisp of thought that Seamus was selfish enough to want to avoid facing that fate for awhile longer.

“And yer sayin’ I would be the head of my own department?” Seamus asked.

“I suppose you could put it that way,” John answered.

“Imagine that,” Seamus said with an amused shake of his head. “Me in charge,”

“In a sense,” John agreed. “What is your decision?”

The emerald green eyes snapped to meet his again. Greed and danger danced through them. John sensed that Seamus had already made the decision and was merely biding his time to see whether he could gain anything more than stalling the facing of his fate. John met his gaze evenly, unwilling to offer anything more than that stalling.

“All right then,” Seamus finally said. “I’ll take it on. When do I start?”

“Today. Your training begins at once,” John raised his right hand and signaled for Brigit to join the conversation. “This is my associate, Brigit Malone,” he introduced when he sensed Brigit was within hearing range. He watched as Seamus Flannery’s attention snapped to Brigit and assessed her quickly.

“And what department does she deal with?” Seamus asked.

“We’re currently restructuring the firm,” John replied. “At present, Brigit is my assistant. She will have a hand in your training. When I am disposed, she will be in charge.”

Brigit felt Seamus Flannery assess her again and shake his head in disbelief. She was about to open her mouth to protest his assessment, but John laid a soft hand on her arm and quieted any protest she might think of. Her original doubts, the thoughts she had been unable to put a label on, were beginning to swarm and meld together. There was going to be a problem between her and Seamus Flannery. Unfortunately, she lacked the vision to know exactly what it would be.

“Fine,” Seamus spat as he threw the stub of his current cigarette to the pavement and smashed it out under the toe of his boot. “Let’s get busy then.”

When they returned to the office, Brigit listened silently as John escorted Seamus through the offices and explained the operation of the firm. She watched as John presented the Irishman with the Reaper’s Field Guide and then watched as Seamus hastily began to scan over its contents. He was eager to start work. She could see that he was also one who would do anything and everything he could to be impressive. She wondered how many errors he would make along the way in trying to prove himself. When John let Seamus into the arsenal room, Brigit finally had a few moments alone with her mentor.

“You’re still having your doubts,” John pointed out quietly as he sank into the seat behind his desk.

“I am. I still can’t put a finger on it, though. I just think, eventually, he will become a problem,” Brigit prophesied. John studied her for a second before nodding his head in agreement. He too could foresee a problem, but
like Brigit, he couldn’t find the moment it would unfold in their laps.

“We’ll deal with it when the time comes. In the mean time, we must get him trained by the rules and make sure he understands them as they are written. We can’t afford to have a maverick reaping souls. It’s bad enough the Bailey still hasn’t come around and the files keep pouring in. You haven’t see him, have you?” Brigit shook her head. She had been too focused on her assignments to have noticed the Bailey running amok anywhere near her.

“Be sure to keep an eye out for him, will you?” John requested. Brigit nodded and was about to ask another question when Seamus burst into the office, swinging the gnarled club wildly in front of him.

“What do you think of this?” he asked as he took a couple more swings through the air. It was the shelaighley, a traditional walking stick of Ireland made from the roots of the Blackthorn tree.

“How does it feel?” John asked.

“It feels good. I would have taken that black Samurai sword, but it wouldn’t lift off the table. So, I took what felt familiar to me,” Seamus explained.

“A sword is only to be used in extreme assignments, Mr. Flannery,” Brigit addressed him. Seamus looked at her, this time without a light of disapproval.

“Why?” his red eyebrows had arched in curiosity at her comment.

“The use of a sword condemns a soul to eternal limbo. There is no heaven, no hell. It’s the emptiness in between that a soul will face if a sword is used to pass them,” Brigit continued. John nodded in agreement with the lesson she explained.

“Oh, well, since you put it that way…” Seamus took a few more swings with the shelaighley again and smiled to himself.

“Aside from that, that particular sword will only allow itself to be carried by one of two people,” John added, catching both Brigit and Seamus’ attention. “Only its maker or a Reaper on a divine and honorable mission may carry it. There was a spell put on it by the last samurai to die by it. As he uttered the curse, the conquering warlord that had carried it found that he could no longer command or wield the sword and he left it in the field beside his fallen enemy to be taken to the spirit world. It was brought to our firm by Araxius Herodotus himself. It has only been used once since its arrival,” John explained quietly. He watched as the history lesson of the sword sank in on the two Reapers.

“What about the other swords?” Seamus asked as he mulled the story over.

“I’ll refer you back to Brigit’s explanation regarding the use of a sword,” John sighed patiently. “Now, please, take a seat, Mr. Flannery. I need to design your training schedule,” he motioned to the empty chair to Brigit’s left. “Brigit, take these assignments for today. I’ll fill you in when you return.”

Brigit took the pile of portfolios John indicated and silently walked out of the office. Her mind was churning with the sense that Seamus Flannery was going to end up being more a problem than assistance. It was a welcome distraction, though, she thought. She couldn’t allow the thought of Maggie to enter her mind right now. She was still unsure whether she should continue to keep her promise. It still burned that Maggie would move on so quickly.
16: Dealings

Brigit kept herself busy for a week, ignoring the passing of the end of the year and the beginning of the New Year. John was more than willing to pass her a pile of portfolios upon her return to the office. Their assignment piles were beginning to shrink thanks to her attention to the job. Brigit made no objection to the work load. It was a welcomed distraction from the thoughts that would pass through her mind during the minutes between. It also kept her from directly dealing with Seamus Flannery.

She had kept from imagining the going-on of Maggie’s every day existence. Brigit couldn’t allow herself to imagine the intimate moments Maggie was spending with Lorena Rubens. She couldn’t allow those pictures to enter her mind. If she did, she felt a spark of anger that she desperately wanted to avoid. Brigit had always hated to be angry. She had always felt the emotion to be such a drain on her energy.

It was there, though. The little spark glowed in the darkness that she continually tried to avoid looking into. When she would glimpse it, Brigit would quickly divert her attention. She couldn’t feed it, not now. She hadn’t made a decision yet.

Seamus Flannery was taking to his training like a fish to water. John expressed his happiness with his choice more than once and Brigit found she was more and more uncomfortable with it. Seamus had made a few remarks in her direction, remarks she chose to ignore for the time being. His cockiness wore on her nerves as he would recount his field training under John’s tutelage. As he would tell the tale of scuffles during some of the more minor assignments under his department as if they were great feats of daring bravery and Brigit found it increasingly hard to control the urge to roll her eyes in boredom with the story. Instead, she suffered the details until John would pass her another pile and excuse her for the day.

Toward the middle of the second week of not going home, Brigit took a moment to ponder it all. She missed Maggie. She missed the familiar surroundings of the home they had built together. She wanted to feel Maggie’s warmth against her body. She wanted to wrap her arms around her lover and hear the gentle breathing that came when Maggie was deep in a peaceful sleep.

Upon returning to the office, she was not surprised when John slid more work toward her. He, however, was surprised when she shook her head in decline.

“I’m going home tonight,” she announced quietly.

“So you’ve made a decision in regard to Maggie?” he asked.

“Who’s Maggie?” Seamus piped up from the corner where he was going through a box he had been assigned to sort out.

“My wife,” Brigit replied automatically. She bit her tongue as soon as the words were out. She had not meant to expose anything personal to Seamus. Especially anything about Maggie.

“Go then,” John said quickly. “We’ll see you in the morning.”

Brigit only nodded and exited the office. She had made her decision. She would keep her promise. She would learn to deal with Maggie’s course through the rest of her life. Brigit would be there when that life ended and the next one would begin.

“She’s a bleedin’ lesbo?” she heard Seamus ask in a harsh whisper. “That’s too bad. I was hoping to have a go…”

“Keep dreaming, lad.” Brigit heard John warn with an amused tone in his voice.

The apartment was empty when Brigit entered. It was after five, by the clock on the wall. By the look of things,
Maggie had spent little time at home lately. Newspapers were piled on the end of the sofa; the rubber band holding them in a roll had not been removed. The flowers Lorena had brought Maggie that first night had since been replaced in the vase on the kitchen table and dishes lay in the sink, half filled with water to prevent stains. Brigit made her way to the bedroom with a slight sense of foreboding. She was hesitant to view more evidence of Maggie’s absence from their home.

The bed was perfectly made. The decorative pillows had been lined against the headboard and the comforter smoothed to near photo-finish perfection. Brigit’s attention went to the small table on Maggie’s side and felt her heart sink. The small photograph Maggie had kept there for years was gone. She wondered, as she sank onto the bed and sighed heavily, if the photograph had joined the other mementos of their life in the box that now lived in the hall closet.

But what did it mean? Was it a new power that she could harness to alert Maggie that she was still present? Was it a new way to remind her lover to stay true to their love and everything they had once had? It would definitely be more noticeable than the killing of fresh flowers in a cut bouquet...

...Brigit’s mind raced with the possibilities as she looked around the room. A small velvet box on the bureau caught her eye. Taking a deep breath, she picked it up and opened it. Inside, she found a pair of diamond earrings. A wicked smile came to her lips as she eyed them. They had to be a gift from Lorena. The wickedness of Brigit’s smile was based on the knowledge that Maggie had no use for diamonds. She had never possessed a fondness or a desire for the gems. Anyone who truly knew Maggie knew that she was the least likely person to wear diamonds. Brigit snapped the lid shut on the small box and looked to her left. A small wastebasket still sat nestled in the corner. With a tinge of delight, she dropped the jewelry box in the small bin.

She turned her attention back to the bureau and began to scan for other items that could have come from Lorena when she heard the front door open. She could hear Maggie chattering and another voice – Lorena Rubens’ – adding to the conversation. Brigit resumed her seat on the edge of the bed and listened to the commotion in the front room. She could only smile when she heard Maggie’s verbal wonderment about the door to the hall closet being opened.

“Are you sure you closed it this morning?” Lorena was heard to ask.

“I didn’t even go into it,” Maggie replied. The pause that followed the reply told Brigit that Maggie had noticed the lid to the box she kept there being removed. Brigit could feel the energy of the uneasiness at the sight make its way down the hall as Maggie closed the door.

“Maybe it’s a loose bolt,” Lorena suggested.

“Maybe. Let me change real quick and I’ll be ready for dinner,”

Maggie appeared at the bedroom door a few seconds later. Brigit watched as her partner stopped, immediately scanning the room for anything amiss. As if by instinct, she watched as Maggie’s eyes settled on the small photograph Brigit had replaced to her bedside table. The audible gasp that escaped Maggie brought Lorena rushing to the room.

“What’s the matter?” Lorena demanded.

“I, um,” Maggie was having trouble finding the exact words to explain what she had found. “I thought I saw a mouse,” she finally said.

“What?” Lorena asked. “Where?” She stepped further into the bedroom.
“Over there, by the bureau,” Maggie pointed. Brigit watched as Lorena walked to Maggie’s side of the room and began to search for the non-existent mouse. To Brigit’s delight, the search led the other woman to the wastebasket – and to the jewelry box resting lightly on top of the rubbish Maggie had been accumulating there for months.

“What is this? You threw the earrings away?” Lorena asked, lifting the box out of the small bin.

“What? No, they were on the bureau…I must have accidentally knocked them into the bin,” Maggie offered as an excuse. Brigit bit her bottom lip to keep from chuckling at the sudden discomfort of the situation.

“If you didn’t like them, you should have just returned them to me. You have no idea how much I paid for these,” Lorena snapped at Maggie.

“Lorena, I didn’t throw them away,” Maggie argued.

“You have no appreciation for how much I care for you, that much is obvious, Margaret,” Lorena snapped. Brigit stiffened at the use of Maggie’s given name. No one called Maggie by her birth name. To Maggie, it was an insult – as much of one as the idea that Lorena had been trying to buy her love with the diamonds.

“Don’t call me ‘Margaret’,” Maggie said through clenched teeth.

“I’ll call you whatever I want. I can’t believe you would be so reckless,” Lorena spat. “You know, I don’t think we should go to dinner tonight. I think we need some time apart.”

“Agree,” Brigit grumbled as Lorena forced the discarded jewelry box into her coat pocket and made to exit the room. On a whim, Brigit stuck her foot out and caught the departing woman at the ankle. The fall that ensued caused Brigit to finally giggle as Maggie jumped out of the way.

“Are you okay? What happened?” Maggie asked as she knelt to Lorena’s side. Lorena pushed the woman away forcefully.

“Get off me,” she snarled.

By now, Brigit was on her feet. She had felt the force Lorena had used to push Maggie away. The spark of anger she had been trying so hard to ignore for the last week suddenly roared to life as a full on bonfire.

“Don’t ever touch her again,” Brigit growled as she reached out. She yanked Lorena Rubens to her feet by the lapels of her suit coat. The sudden fear she saw in the fallen woman’s eyes fueled her rage. She could tell Lorena Rubens was scared. Maggie was still sitting on the floor where Lorena had pushed her. Brigit could see the questions dance through Lorena’s eyes as to who -- or what -- had a hold of her.

“What the fuck is going on?” Lorena stammered, trying to sound furious. Her sudden fear, though, prevailed.

“I don’t know,” Maggie answered meekly. She had watched Lorena spring from the floor as if she had been yanked up. She had felt the rush of the air around her and she thought she had heard the faint command to Lorena to never touch her again. She shook her head. She had been hearing things, that was all. She was sure the sudden stress of the scene was causing her to imagine voices that were not there.

“Leave,” Brigit snarled as she pushed Lorena toward the door. From the corner of her eye, she saw Maggie stand behind her. She had no intention of letting Lorena come near Maggie though. Lorena stumbled as she felt the force of the shove Brigit delivered. Her fear disappeared and was replaced again by the anger she had been searching for.

“Keep your hands off me!”

“I didn’t touch you, Lorena,” Maggie pointed out. She was well outside arms reach of the other woman. “You need to leave now,” Maggie said.
“I’ll leave when I damn well feel like it,” Lorena snapped, taking a step toward Maggie in the attempt to show who was the more dominant. Brigit dug deep into the bonfire of her anger and pushed Lorena again. This time, the force sent her flying across the room. Lorena landed on her back and lay still for a second, the wind having been knocked out of her. When she finally scrambled to her feet, she made a rush for Maggie. Again, she was blocked by the invisible wall that Brigit had become.

By now, Maggie was crying audibly. She couldn’t see the force that was keeping Lorena from reaching her. All she could see was the fury in her new lover’s eyes and the harm that lay within that fury. It scared the hell out of her; yet, something invisible was preventing her from suffering Lorena’s wrath. Maggie had the fleeting idea as to what it was, but she was not ready to wrap her mind around that idea – that Brigit was still around to watch over her. Right now, all Maggie wanted was for Lorena Rubens to leave.

Maggie watched as Lorena was pushed from the room by the invisible force again. She heard the scuffle as it progressed down the hall. Slowly, Maggie followed the sound, watching as Lorena fell and picked herself up only to hit the floor again. Whatever was propelling Lorena out was determined to carry out that wish. Maggie slowly turned and looked at the photograph that had reappeared on her bedside table. It was Brigit. It had to be.

Brigit slammed the door and quickly turned the bolts once Lorena had been tossed out of the apartment. She felt her heart racing with the energy the scuffle had fed. She was about to go to the window to watch the other woman make her escape when she heard the sniffle come from the bedroom. Maggie was crying – a sound that had been rare during their time together. It was a sound that always broke Brigit’s heart. When she returned to the bedroom, she found Maggie sitting on the bed holding her picture.

“What was I thinking?” Maggie sniffled as she held the small picture frame in her hands. “I should have known it was too soon.”

Brigit only watched as Maggie stared at the photograph. She didn’t know what to say. She didn’t think Maggie would have heard her anyway. Instead, she leaned against the doorframe and watched as Maggie lay down, pressing the photograph to her cheek and letting her tears flow.
17: Assigned with Seamus

Brigit returned to the office the next morning just as the sun was beginning to rise. Maggie had cried herself to sleep and had slept fitfully through the night. Brigit had kept a watchful eye on her, leaving the room only once when she heard a quiet knock at the front door. Wary that it might have been a repenting Lorena Rubens, Brigit had left her partner’s side to peer through the peep hole at Mama Dee. The little old woman knocked lightly once more, but shook her head and crossed the hall to her own apartment when it became apparent that Maggie was either not home or just being anti-social. Brigit felt bad for her old friend. She could only imagine the loneliness Mama Dee was experiencing now that Maggie was exploring beyond the boundaries of her life without Brigit.

“You’re here,” John greeted as Brigit appeared in the doorway to his office. She looked to the corner where Seamus had been seated the evening before and noted that he was absent for the time being.

“Did you think I wouldn’t be?” Brigit asked as she approached his desk and reached for the pile she assumed was her work load for the day. John waved his hand at it and passed her a portfolio he had been reading through.

“I knew you would be in, just not so early. I take it that you’ve made a definitive decision regarding Maggie?” Brigit nodded silently. “Good. Here, I need you to take this and assist Mr. Flannery in its execution,” John said as Brigit received the extended portfolio. “He’s out on a few minor assignments at present. However, I believe he will need your assistance on this particular one. Reap the souls by any means necessary.”

“Why not assist him yourself?” Brigit asked as she briefly glanced at the names embossed across the cover.

“Because, darling,” John sighed as he picked up a handful of portfolios to the right and waved them as proof that he had better things to do. “I have found potential recruits that may allow me to reopen one of the European offices. If I can manage to convince them of the benefits of joining the firm, I can return a good portion of our present waiting workload to their responsibility.”

“I see. How long will this take you?” Brigit asked.

“I’m hoping to only be gone a couple of days. I don’t know. My Italian is somewhat rusty, so I’m hoping I’ll be able to communicate effectively enough to accomplish what I have in mind,” John explained as he reached for his suit coat and began to shrug it on. “In the mean time, you are in charge. If you need me, just call out.”

Brigit nodded and watched as John pocketed the portfolios and strode out of the office. She glanced again at the names on the portfolio he had given her. They were unfamiliar to her; but then, most names were unfamiliar to her until she read the contents of their lives. In the mean time, she had to find Seamus in order to give him the new assignment. Since she had not been present when he took his current assignments, she was unsure where to begin in looking for him. Instinctively, she retrieved the Reaper’s Field Guide from her coat pocket and flipped to the last page.

“Where is Seamus Flannery?” she grumbled as she gazed at the blank page. It took only a second for the words to appear across the blank page: Pier 13, San Francisco.

Brigit closed the book and returned it to its place in her coat pocket. She picked her umbrella out of the umbrella stand and walked down the long hall. It was inevitable, she thought to herself as she approached the main door. Eventually, she knew, she was going to be partnered with the red-headed Irishman whose comments and insights seemed to find all the right buttons to push under her skin.

Pier 13 was bustling with mortal life when Brigit arrived. As she moved through the throng of workers going about their business with ease, her eyes scanned the area for the flaming red hair that crowned Seamus Flannery. She had learned during the past couple of months to note the difference between a mortal and a spirit. The energy vibrations were different. A mortal’s vibration was strong. It created waves of outward-emanating energy as the mortal moved about. A spirit’s vibration was more subdued. There were no waves surrounding a spirit as it moved.
The vibration seemed to remain contained to the immediate space where the spirit happened to be.

Seamus was scuffling in the furthest corner of the warehouse with the soul he had been sent to pass over. Brigit stood quietly watching them tussle. She noted the look of fear on the assigned soul’s face as he tried to fend off Seamus’ blows. However mean this soul had thought he could be, Brigit mused, he had met his master in Seamus Flannery. With that thought, Brigit noted the look of delight on Seamus’ face as he took another swing at the soul he had been sent to cross over. John had been right. Seamus Flannery was perhaps the perfect person for the job of the harder assignments. Brigit could tell the Irishman really got into his work.

When Seamus finally wrestled the man toward the opened doorway, he easily pushed the soul through it and slammed it with a force that made her flinch. Even the mortals in the closest vicinity seemed to hear the slam and reacted by stopping their work to quickly glance around them before shaking off their sudden fear and returning to work despite their new uneasiness. Brigit remained still as she continued to watch him. He casually walked to the wall and stooped to pick something up. As he straightened, the item dangled from his fingers as he appraised it. It was a gold locket. Brigit watched her colleague open it to look at the pictures glued inside before stashing it in his coat pocket. When he turned, Seamus finally noticed her.

“Oh, hello, lass,” he greeted, forcing a charming smile to his face. “What brings you to this neck of the woods?”

“John sent me,” Brigit replied evenly. “What was that you put in your pocket?”

“Just a token,” Seamus answered. “It fell off him during the fight. He won’t miss it,” the Irishman decided out loud. “Besides, t’was a fair fight. Conqueror takes all, ye know what I mean?”

“Hm,” Brigit grunted. She eyed the other Reaper for a moment, wondering how many other ‘tokens’ he had snicked as a reward for his accomplishments.

“So, what does our fearless leader need of me today?” Seamus inquired as he reached into his coat and withdrew the crumpled pack of cigarettes from their resting place. Brigit noted it was the same pack he had been pulling from the night they had recruited him. It was never empty, only crumpled.

“He assigned you this and he’s asked me to assist you with it,” Brigit explained as she withdrew the file John had given her before his departure. “He’s left for Italy for a few days to do some recruiting.”

“I see,” Seamus said as he exhaled the smoke through his nostrils and reached for the file Brigit held out for him to see. “Why would he think I need back up?” he asked as he scanned the contents.

“It contains multiple souls. I suppose he thought back up might even the playing field for you,” Brigit explained. “Are you finished here?”

“Aye,” Seamus smiled. “Just let me fetch me walking stick,” he said. Brigit nodded and stepped back as the other Reaper went to retrieve the shelaighley he had set aside so that he might use his fists instead. Once it was in hand, he turned and smiled the charming smile again. “Ready when ye are, lass…”
Brigit and Seamus left the pier in San Francisco in silence. She had nothing really to say to her co-worker. The idea that he was stealing mementos from his assignments irked her. She wondered if John would have anything to say about it once he found out. As they had passed through the portal, however, Brigit’s thoughts returned to the task at hand. She had scanned the file briefly – enough to know that they were definitely entering a situation that would need their full attentions.

The Chupacabra Gang had been notorious in their day. Their evilness rivaled the other well known motorcycle gangs of the time. They had often made headlines for having robbed unwitting vacationers on the side of a highway. They were known for raping the wives, beating the husbands for sport and torturing the children for laughs. They were outlaws of the highest sort. Their ‘Wanted’ posters still hang on every Post Office wall through out the southwest.

Brigit had only been eight years old at the time. She had been unable to fathom then what she could wrap her mind around now. Her mother had simply told her that the Chupacabras were pure evil in black leather and chains riding a two-wheeled death chariot. As Brigit had scanned their file, she realized without doubt that her mother had been right for once.

The Chupacabra hideout had been in an old airfield hangar in the middle of the New Mexico desert. The portal had delivered Brigit and Seamus to the main door, which hang open from the years of disuse. Whomever had entered and destroyed the chiefs of the gang had neglected to lock up on their way out.

“Keep quiet,” Brigit warned in a whisper. Seamus nodded in agreement. They returned their attention to inside the hangar. It was filled with boxes and crates, creating a maze of passages that could prove dangerous to anyone moving between them. The windows high up the walls had been spray painted black, allowing no light to filter through.

Together, they entered the hangar and began to slowly walk down the corridor of crates. Involuntarily, Brigit’s grip tightened on the handle of her umbrella. She wished she had something a little more substantial to fight with, something a little more dangerous. John’s instructions had been to reap them all by ‘any means necessary’. As she listened to that instruction in her mind again, she realized this would not be an easy assignment by any stretch of the imagination.

“Why did ye become a Reaper?”

The question, though in a whisper, broke the silence like a roaring wind. Brigit had instructed him to keep quiet for a reason. Somehow, she had known, Seamus Flannery would not be able to follow such a simple instruction.

“I have a promise to keep,” she replied in a whisper as well. She was hoping the answer was short enough to suffice, that it would give him the hint to maintain the silence they needed to aide them in their hunt for the Chupacabra Gang.

“To yer Maggie, I presume?” Seamus sounded amused. “That’s sweet, lass. How long have ye been dead?” he asked again. He was beginning to raise the volume to his voice.

“Long enough,”

“No, seriously, how long?” he asked again. He was beginning to raise the volume to his voice.

“Since Halloween. Now, will you please lower your voice?” she snapped. She glared at him over her shoulder. It was a look she would never have guessed she was capable of. It was a look she knew she had received from her mother plenty of times throughout her childhood. Brigit knew it was the look because it had affected Seamus the same way it had always affected her. There was a sudden shock registering on the Irishman’s face followed by a hard swallow and, then, silence that told her she had achieved her goal.
A loud clatter followed by a loud curse and then laughter brought the Reapers to a halt. They exchanged glances again and came to the same conclusion that their task was directly in front of them. Brigit wondered if the element of surprise was going to be in their favor; but, it was too late to change their game plan now.

“Who are these guys again?” Seamus asked, his voice was notably lower in its whisper this time.


“What the hell kind of name is that?”

“I’ll explain later,” Brigit promised.

“How many of them are there?”

“Six, I think,”

“No matter,” Seamus shrugged as he hoisted the shelaighley to rest on his shoulder. “I’ll take the bigger ones.”

Brigit ignored the cocky remark as they continued the remaining length of the corridor. From the sounds of the ruckus before them, all six of the gang members were in the same space. That was good for the Reapers. It would save them the time of hunting further. As they stepped into the clearing, Brigit and Seamus took a second to observe. The Chupacabras were amusing themselves. Empty beer bottles were strewn on the floor around them as they sat at a small table playing cards. By the pile of cash and jewelry in the middle of the table, Brigit guessed they had been interrupted during a serious game of poker. It was suddenly no wonder that they had been taken by the surprise that led to their mortal demise.

“Hello, boys,”

The sound of Seamus’ announcement before striding into the space was like a slice of lightning through a blackened sky. In surprise, Brigit cast an annoyed glare that fell unnoticed on the Irishman’s back as he walked away. Before she could return her attention to the startled gang members, the fight had already begun. Seamus broke into a full tilt charge at them with his shelaighley held high over his head, a war cry escaping from him as he ran. He was trying to prove something, she thought as she watched him start swinging the Blackthorn stick wildly at the gang members that had now jumped to their feet with knives and broken beer bottles held by the neck in their hands. He was trying to prove that he needed no help, she mused as she watched the melee. One of the Chupacabra had Seamus in a headlock as another was punching him repeatedly across the jaw. Seamus, though, was laughing and delivering a sharp elbow to the ribs of the one holding him captive. The remaining three Chupacabra were vying for their turn to punch the intruder. Brigit remained where she stood. She was waiting for the moment that Seamus would indicate a need for her assistance.

As Brigit continued watching, she suddenly realized that all six were not in the room. One was missing. Where was the sixth gang member?

Just as the question came to mind, she heard the screeching cry of a woman from behind her. Brigit turned in time to see the attacking woman running at her, a steel pipe raised high above her head. The female Reaper only had a second to raise her umbrella to fend off the blow. The Chupacabra woman stumbled as Brigit’s defense propelled her out into the open. Brigit calmly followed the woman, coming within arm’s length of her so that the door to her fate would appear. The woman swung the pipe again, but Brigit ducked it effortlessly as she reached to open the door. Twice more, the pipe was swung at her head. Brigit deflected the blows with the black umbrella, all the while keeping her eyes locked on the deep black orbs that betrayed the other woman’s every thought. As they began to circle each other, Brigit maintained an even breath as she read the woman’s frantic search for the Reaper’s weak spot. Raising the pipe above her head, the Chupacabra woman decided a full frontal attack was her best option. She did not realize her back was to the door that Brigit had so casually opened.

As the woman charged, Brigit lowered her umbrella and waited. The look of surprise on the Chupacabra woman’s face fully explained the unexpected force of Brigit’s front kick to her abdomen. The force of the kick propelled the woman through the air and through the door. Still maintaining her calm, Brigit stepped forward and
swung the door shut before returning her attention to Seamus.

The sight she found, however, made her cringe. Seamus was beaten badly. He had managed to pass three of the gang members through their doors; but two remained unscathed. From where Brigit stood, they appeared to be the fiercest of the bunch and they were going to town on Seamus with the intention to kill. While she was aware that they could do no such thing, she could see that Seamus was losing the battle. He had been sufficiently mauled by the group to be reduced to a huddle of swinging yet target-less fists. His shelaighley had been lost somewhere during the fight.

She had stayed out of the fight too long and now Seamus was hurt because of it. She had the brief thought that there was going to be hell to pay for her decision to let Seamus prove himself wrong. Their doors were opened. Brigit noted how intent they were on Seamus and saw the opportunity she needed to end the assignment once and for all. This had gone on long enough.

Quietly, she approached the nearest gang member. For all their cursing and yelling, he didn’t hear her approach. Swiftly, she flipped her umbrella and hooked the crook of the handle about his throat. She only had a second to register the look of surprise on his face as she hurled him through the open door to her right.

As she slammed the door, she felt the force of the blow against her jaw. The remaining gang member had tossed Seamus aside and was now focusing his wrath on her. Brigit shook off the blow and locked eyes with the remaining soul as he took another swing at her. Like the female Chupacabra, his eyes betrayed his thoughts of attack. Her mind remained focused on reading his thoughts as the sounds of Seamus’ moaning reached her ears.

“Do you know what I’m goin to do to you, bitch?”

The voice that snarled at her was as close to a demon’s as Brigit could imagine. The remaining gang member had stopped swinging at her and they now circled each other like hungry dogs. Brigit kept her eyes locked on him, aware that he could spring at any moment. She doubted that she would be so lucky with him as she was with the Chupacabra woman.

“What are you waiting for?” Brigit asked calmly.

The lack of fear in her voice seemed to enrage him. With a deafening roar, he charged at her just as Seamus spoke her name. As it registered in her mind that Seamus was calling for her, she was caught off guard and felt herself in the death grip of the gang member. The air was being squeezed out of her as he lifted her off her feet and crushed her against his chest. A fire of maniacal delight danced in his eyes as Brigit struggled against him.

“I’m gonna have some fun with you in a few minutes,” he snarled.

His breath was hot against her face as she let herself go limp against him. He gave her a good shake as he began to curse at her. When her thoughts had finally stilled, Brigit lifted her head back and looked him in the eye again. The maniacal light was still dancing there. Tilting her head a little further back, Brigit smiled briefly before snapping it forward with as much force as she could manage. There was no sound as their heads collided, but the surprise of it was enough to cause the Chupacabra to drop her and stagger back a few steps. Brigit landed easily on her feet, her mind focused, her body relaxed but ready for the next assault.

Enraged even further, he charged her. Aware that the door to his fate was open behind her, Brigit had only to step aside as he rushed by. His roar turned to screams as he fell into the dark abyss that led to his final judgment. Quickly, Brigit closed the door behind him.

“Brigit,”

It was a painful moan that brought Brigit back to her senses. She went to Seamus and knelt on the ground beside him, quickly taking in the extent of the damage inflicted. The gashes in his coat and shirt revealed the open wounds inflicted by their adversaries. She knew there would be no blood, but, she also knew the sickness associated with the injuries would quickly set in.

“I have something to tell you,” he murmured laboriously.

Brigit let her eyes roam down his torso and saw a long gash between two ribs. They had opened his side all the way to his lung. Small bubbles of black goo were trying to pool in the opened space; but they appeared to clot as soon as they reached the air. Brigit frowned at the sight. They were spirits now. There should be no liquid involved anymore.

“Not now, Seamus,” she said softly. “I have to figure out how to get you out of here,” she explained as she looked around for anything to bind his wound with. The Chupacabra gang had been destroyed long before their file had been located. Anything of usefulness during their mortal existence was now long eroded to dust and blown away.

“No, I think you need to know,” Seamus pressed, grasping her by the arm. His fingers were like claws through the sleeve of her coat. Brigit glanced down at him. His eyes were beginning to roll back into their sockets.

“What do I need to know?”

“I’m going to kill you for this,” he vowed before passing out.

Brigit stared hard at him for a second, contemplating the idea of just leaving him there. She shook herself free of his grasp and clenched her jaw in irritation. John would have her head if she abandoned Seamus in the warehouse. Surely there was some rule about leaving a fallen Reaper behind. Or did that only apply to fallen soldiers?

There would be too many questions and not enough good answers to justify abandoning her fellow Reaper — no matter how annoying he may be. In the end, Brigit mused as she stared at the unconscious Irishman, it was his own fault for being so arrogant. She had merely wanted to see him fail, if she were to be honest about it. Now, as a result of both their actions, she faced a new dilemma.

Frustrated with the consequences she could foresee over all that she had done and all that she could do, Brigit stood and walked to the nearest door to figure it all out. As she looked over her shoulder at the unconscious Irishman, she knew she had to take the lesser of the two evils.

With that in mind, she returned to his side and grabbed him by the arm. He was dead weight. Yet, if Seamus Flannery was going to kill her as he had promised before passing out, then, he deserved to be dragged all the way home.
Brigit felt herself huffing for breath as she drug Seamus down the main hall of the office. A few groans had escaped him from time to time during the journey and she had taken no great care to make sure he had a smooth ride. When she reached the door to his personal office, she slammed it open, not caring that it bounced off the wall and returned to smash the wounded Reaper on the head as she pulled him across the threshold. With some effort, Brigit managed to lift him onto the couch that doubled as his bed during his down time. She stood over him for a moment longer, wondering if that should be the extent of her kindness toward him after his threat to kill her.

Her mind was still burning with the irritation of his threat as she left the office and went to the supply closet down the hall. Inside, she found pillows and blankets meant for those Reapers who tended to reside as well as work at the main office. Though a Reaper required no real rest, the previous heads of the firm had often encouraged it as a means of prolonging the burn out stage. Quickly, she grabbed a pillow and a blanket for Seamus and returned to his office. He was beginning to twitch and shake. The infection was beginning to set in. Knowing there was little more she could do for him now, Brigit shoved the pillow under his head and unfurled the blanket over his body. She had never been the maternal type and she was damned sure not going to start acting the part now. Especially where Seamus Flannery was concerned.

With that thought in mind, Brigit turned and looked around the small quarters. A small desk sat against the wall. The files she and John had compiled before Seamus’ hiring had been brought in and lined against the wall adjacent to the desk. There were only a couple dozen boxes, but Brigit was well aware that they were stocked full to the brims with portfolios of potentially dangerous assignments. A thick black book lay open on the desk. Brigit stepped closer to have a look. Through the dim light of the office window, she could see in a terrible scrawl the names of those assignments that Seamus had completed. The Irishman was taking his responsibilities on the administrative part of his job quite seriously, she noted as she quietly closed the book.

Another moan escaped him and she glanced over her shoulder. He had been keeping a relatively decent pace in completing his assignments. Once he was well, he was going to be behind again. Brigit frowned. She knew John would be none-to-pleased with that notion. She would have to figure out a way to manage some of Seamus’ files in with her own. It was a risk, she knew, but it only seemed fair. She had set the firm back by allowing Seamus to get hurt. She would have to manage the work load by herself until Seamus was well or John had returned.

Brigit’s frown deepened at the thought of John’s return. She had no idea how she was going to explain this to her mentor. The truth would probably be the best route, she decided as she sighed deeply. In the mean time, Brigit knew, she was going to be working some serious overtime. She’d be lucky to see Maggie anytime soon…

As that thought settled in on her mind Brigit went to the stack of boxes against the wall and reached into the one missing its lid. She withdrew a stack of files and stuffed them into her coat pocket. She would just have to do the best she could until she could figure things out more clearly.

Seamus could feel the fire running through his veins. He was unsure, though, whether it was his anger or the sickness John had warned him about in the case of a serious injury. She had let him go into the battle alone. She had stood aside and merely watched as he had taken on the gang members when she had been sent to assist him. She had always led on that she was such a brave soul, a dyke capable of taking on anything; but it had all been a farce. Dyke or not, Seamus angrily realized, Brigit Malone was still a female and females were weak. Ultimately, Seamus had lost his fight because of the female Reaper and her ruse of bravery. She would pay for that, Seamus determined as wave after wave of nausea and fire rushed through his body. She would pay dearly for it one way or another…
After making sure Seamus was as comfortable as he could be, Brigit strode down the hall to John’s office. She noted as she walked that she was the only one without a designated office. Most of the time, she was only in the firm’s headquarters long enough to receive instruction from John Blackwick or to refresh her load of files. During that time, she was usually in John’s office.

Considering the trouble I’m going to be in, I might not ask for one just yet, she thought as she retrieved some waiting assignments from the box she and John had been working from for the last week. Stuffing this pile into her coat pocket, she turned and exited the room and strode back toward the main entry to the firm’s headquarters. She paused long enough to look in on Seamus one more time before leaving. She had one more stop to make before beginning her work.

Mama Dee was lying on her sofa with her eyes closed. By the pained look on the older woman’s face, Brigit could tell that her old friend was suffering one of her migraines. Mama had suffered them off and on during the years that she had lived across from Brigit and Maggie; but Brigit had noticed that their frequency of visits to the old woman had increased since the accident. Brigit had heard Maggie suggest on more than one occasion that Mama Dee go to see the doctor about them, but Mama Dee had waved away the notion as if she were waving away a fly.

Brigit stood over her friend, watching in concern. She wanted to reach out and touch the woman’s face – wishing she could ease her friend’s pain if only for a few minutes.

"I know you’re standing there, child…”

Brigit started at the sound of Mama’s voice as it carried through the silence to her ears. The old woman’s eyes had not opened, but her mouth had moved. Brigit could feel a smile coming to her own face as a previous notion came to mind yet again. It was true after all. Mama Dee could sense her.

“It’s Brigit, Mama,” Brigit said gently.

“I know that, child,” Mama Dee retorted. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m just checking in on you,” Brigit replied. “Were you sleeping?”

“No, I just like to keep my eyes closed these days,” the old woman quipped. “I’m awake. I just have another one of my pains. It hurts to open my eyes.”

“When are you going to the doctor?” Brigit asked.

“You startin’ to sound like Maggie. It’s just a headache. It’ll be gone soon enough,” Mama sighed deeply. “Why are you still around, child?”

“I promised Maggie I would be,” Brigit answered. “I like to keep my promises. Does she know I’m still around?”

“I think so,” Mama Dee replied. “She’s pretty upset about what happened with that Rubens girl. Was that you that caused the ruckus?”

“Yes, Mama,” Brigit replied honestly. “She wasn’t right for Maggie.”

“That makes two of us that think that. I’m glad you’re still here. I miss you and I know Maggie misses you too, even though she says she feels like you’re with her every night.”

“I am with her every night, for the most part. I tried to be fair about the Rubens girl, but I guess my jealousy got the better of me,” Brigit laughed lightly. “Are you sure you’re going to be all right?”
“I’m fine, child. Do you want me to tell Maggie anything?”

“Just tell her that I’m going to be busy with work for a bit, but that I’ll be back with her as soon as I can. I’ve run into some snags at the office and I have to take care of them before I can rest some.”

“What are you talkin’ about? Work? The office? Child, what are you doin’ now that you’re dead?” Mama Dee asked, her face wrinkling in the confusion of it all. Brigit noticed, however, that the woman still didn’t open her eyes.

“I’m a Grim Reaper, Mama Dee,” Brigit revealed. “I pass over souls that are waiting.”

“Oh, good lord! Is it my time?” the old woman asked suddenly. The fear of the thought expressed itself clearly on her face, but Mama Dee still didn’t open her eyes. Brigit only laughed.

“No, Mama. I’m not here for you. You’re still very much alive.”

“Thank you, Jesus! You scared me for a minute,” Mama Dee chuckled, patting her heart as if to calm it down. “I don’t suppose you’d want me to tell Maggie all that?”

“No, I don’t think she’d understand any of it right now. Besides, Mama, when your time comes, it won’t be me that will come for you. You’re a part of my family and it’s against the rules for us to reap our own.”

“Since when does the Grim Reaper have rules?” Mama Dee asked. Brigit laughed out loud this time.

“Don’t believe everything you read or hear, Mama. Trust me on that one. Just tell Maggie that I love her, will you?” She requested.

“I will, Brigit,” Mama Dee sighed.

“And go see a doctor.”

“Go on with yourself,” Mama Dee shooed with a wave of her hand in Brigit’s direction. “Visit again, child. I sure do miss you.”

“I miss you too, Mama.” Brigit said as she opened the door to Mama Dee’s apartment and let herself out. She had been hoping there would be some way she could communicate with her old friend. After that day in the kitchen when Mama Dee had strongly urged her to keep an eye on Maggie, Brigit had held firm to the hope that she would have another chance to converse with her friend. That day had finally happened and Brigit felt herself smiling joyfully as she pulled the first file out of her pocket. For the moment, her problem back at the office was the furthest thing from her mind.

Mama Dee opened her eyes and exhaled slowly. She had known that Brigit had been around all along. She had been hoping the girl’s spirit would eventually reach out to make contact. It was a gift she had borne for years, but kept hidden due to the stigma that surrounded it. In her day, admitting that one could see or hear the dead on a regular basis would only lead to trouble. Especially if your daddy was a deacon of the church… As a result, Mama Dee had never mentioned to anyone that she could talk to the dead. She had just been biding her time until Brigit figured it out and made contact on her own.

As the old woman sat up, she thought about Brigit’s revelation of her new occupation. The idea of the Grim Reaper unsettled Mama Dee. It had long been a superstition she had kept a deep reverence for, sure that when her own time came it would be the Grim Reaper that would take her. There were rules, Brigit had said. Mama Dee slowly shook her head with the thought. It was too bad. Mama Dee had the thought that it would be nice to see a familiar and loving face to help her through the moment that she knew was coming upon her soon…
Belinda Yaris

Brigit stood on the sidewalk reading the portfolio carefully. Her assignment was located in the station below, waiting for the passage to her fate on the subway train that was due to arrive soon. As Brigit read the file, she wondered how they had managed to overlook the potential of the subject as a recruit. John had scoured every file – or so he had said – and found only a few acceptable candidates. As she read, Brigit wondered why Belinda Yaris had not been considered.

Belinda Yaris, aged twenty-three, had been the victim of a fatal mugging on the north bound N train from Brooklyn. Her dream had been to be a writer, but that dream had been cut short by the long end of a switch blade. She was a good kid with an analytical mind, organized work ethic and an imagination to reach across the universe and back. She possessed perfect qualities to be a Reaper, and Brigit’s mind was boggled by the thought of passing this one by. Besides, at this point, she needed all the help she could find.

Closing the file, Brigit rushed down the subway entrance stairs and stood patiently on the platform. Down the tunnel, she could see the light of the approaching train. It would stop for only a few seconds and Brigit knew she would have to find the car that contained Belinda fast before the train continued on its scheduled course.

As it rumbled into the station and came to a screeching halt beside the platform, Brigit rapidly scanned each car as she walked past. Finally, in the last car, the Reaper found Belinda Yaris standing with her back against the opposite door. Silently, Brigit stepped into the car as the doors whooshed shut behind her.

Leveling her dark eyes on the subject of her assignment, Brigit realized that Belinda was staring at her. Yet, her bright blue eyes seemed to look through rather than at the Reaper that had stepped onto the otherwise empty car. The heavy black eyeliner around those bright blue eyes seemed to emphasize the sense of apathy and boredom Belinda Yaris had succumbed to during the years of waiting for something to happen. As she looked deep into those bright blue -- yet bored -- eyes, Brigit had the thought that Belinda Yaris had succumbed to that sense of apathetic boredom long before she had ceased her existence as a mortal. Almost everyone Brigit had ever known to be a participant of the ‘Goth’ culture seemed to be bored with life almost from the moment they had finally confirmed their darker identities.

“Belinda Yaris,” Brigit addressed the young woman out loud. She noted the sudden acknowledgement of her presence by the young woman by the keen focus of those bright blue eyes. They no longer looked through, but rather, at her.

“Hello,” the young woman replied. “You can see me?”

“I can,” Brigit answered. She sensed a feeling of relief pass through the young woman standing across from her. “My name is Brigit.”

“I’m so happy to meet you,” Belinda gushed before she rushed to cross the short width of the subway car. Brigit barely had time to react when Belinda threw her arms around the dark woman’s neck in a grateful hug. “Finally, someone who can see and hear me! It’s been so long since I’ve had a real conversation. Last week,” Brigit finally managed to push the young woman off her, but their separation did not cease Belinda’s ramble. “I tried to talk to this crazy, old homeless man, because I just knew he could see me; but, he turned and ran out of here screaming. It really made me sad. I almost cried,” Brigit watched the young woman begin to pout with the memory of the episode. “But now, here you are and you can see me and talk to me. Hey, that’s an awesome coat,” Belinda said as she noticed the sequins on the lapels of Brigit’s black coat.

“Thank you,” Brigit replied. “Belinda, I have a proposal for you,”

“Where did you get it? I’ve been wanting a pirate’s coat for forever,” Belinda cooed.

“It’s something I’ve had for years,” Brigit explained before catching herself. “Belinda, you do realize you’re no longer living, right?”
“What? Oh, yeah. I’ve known for years now. It’s too bad that I was wearing this, though,” she waved her hand downward to indicated the ragged black knit shirt with slashed long sleeves, the ankle length black skirt with overly large safety pins as buttons on the pockets and the well worn military boots on her feet. “Not exactly the outfit I would have picked for my last moments on earth, you know? I definitely had better.”

“I can only imagine,” Brigit replied as she eyed the young woman’s attire. “Anyway, I have a proposition for you.”

“Oh yeah? Would it mean finally getting off this stupid train for good?” Belinda asked, readjusting the weight of the black leather bag that hand off her shoulder. In its swing, Brigt recognized it to be in the shape of a coffin.

“It would,” Brigit answered.

“Then, I’m in,” Belinda immediately said.

“But you don’t even know what I’m about to offer you,” Brigit pointed out in surprise.

“Doesn’t matter,” Belinda replied. “If it gets me off this fucking train, I’ll do it. You have no idea what it’s like to be trapped on this thing every day and night. It’s disgusting most of the time. I see people puking or pissing in the corner, shooting junk into their veins at three in the morning. Oh, sure, it gets cleaned up before the early morning rush; but most of the time, I simply can’t stand it. Especially when I see my friends come on, or I see him, the bastard that knifed me for my purse…”

Brigit watched as the other woman covered the coffin purse protectively. Almost as soon as she did so, the train lurched to signal its attempt to slow down in its approach of the next station. Brigit glanced behind her and then returned her gaze to the young woman before her.

“Brigit, please, you have to get me off this train,” Belinda pleaded.

As the train came to a grinding halt beside the platform, Brigit eyed the young woman one last moment. The doors whooshed open behind her as she made a resolute decision.

“Very well, take my hand,” she instructed. Without hesitation, Belinda grasped Brigt’s outstretched hand and smiled a huge smile as Brigt guided her off the subway car. As soon as they were both safely on the platform, the doors slammed shut once more and the train hurtled back into motion.

“So, what do I have to do?” Belinda asked when the noise from the departing train had finally died away.

“Have you ever wondered what it would be like to be a Grim Reaper?” Brigit asked. Belinda looked at her savior in sudden surprise.

“No shit? You’re a …” the young woman was suddenly at a loss for words. Brigt felt herself smiling in acknowledgement of the Goth girl’s awe. “No fucking kidding? Really? Holy shit,” Belinda finally managed to get out. “I’d love to! What do I have to do?”

“For the time being, follow me and observe closely. You’re training begins this second. Unfortunately,” Brigt tucked Belinda’s file into her coat’s breast pocket to make sure it would not end up back with the piles of assignments it had come from. “I don’t have the time to train you by the book, so you’ll have to go through on-the-job-training. Here,” she withdrew her field guide from the hip pocket of her coat, “read this while we’re between assignments. Ask questions as they come to mind. I’ll do my best to answer them,” Brigit promised as she hooked her umbrella over her arm and reached for a new assignment. Belinda, who had been scanning the first page of the small book she had been handed, suddenly looked up at her.

“Why me?”

“Because you said you would,” Brigt replied with a slight smile. “Come, we’ve got a lot of work to do.”

“No, really, why did you pick me? Surely you made some sort of decision before you even got onto the train.
Why?” Belinda asked as she fell in behind Brigit and followed her up the stairs leading to the street level.

“I’m down two Reapers right now. You have a solid mind and a calm sense about you. If I can train you quickly, I won’t be too far behind on my work,” Brigit explained as she read the file in her hand. Everything she had said was the truth. The only admission was her hope that John wouldn’t come completely unglued once he found out all that had happened during his absence.

“Then, teach me, oh-great-Grim-Reaper,” Belinda intoned. “I will be clay in your skilled hands,”

“Don’t get too enamored,” Brigit warned. “It’s not as easy as you might think and it’s definitely not as morbid.”

“Who cares? I’m off the train. Show me what you got,” Belinda replied with an indifferent shrug.

“Okay, then. We’re off to the first assignment,” Brigit explained as she turned away. “Read your field guide.”

“Reading now, oh-great-one,” Belinda quipped as she fell in beside Brigit.

“Stop that,” Brigit muttered.

“Yes, oh-great-one…”
His mouth was dry, as dry as any desert plain he could ever imagine. Twice, he lolled his tongue across the top palate of his mouth trying to form enough spit just so he could swallow and ease the cracked walls of this throat, but nothing came. He had even tried licking his lips to calm the dryness there, but his tongue lacked the moisture to bring even that slight respite.

His body was on fire, searing away any moisture that might form within him to bring him any second of relief. He could feel it flowing through his veins to burst from his skin. When he could open his eyes, he could see the walls of his office slowly wavering from the heat that he emitted from where Brigit had dumped him on the couch. She had shown an ounce of mercy in covering him with a blanket before she had abandoned him to burn in the flames. Somewhere over the course of the infection, however, he had inadvertently kicked it to the floor beside him. It would have helped, he had the thought, to put out the flames that sprang like lava plumes of an angry volcano from every pore of his mangled body.

Seamus wondered how long it would be before he had a moment’s peace from the inferno he was enduring. John Blackwick had told him that the degree of a mauling determined the degree of the infection. As he wondered which particular level of Hell he was wandering through, Seamus came to the conclusion that he must be badly damaged. He only wished he had the strength to examine his wounds. Then, he’d have even more of an excuse to kill the female Reaper once he was fully recovered.

He remembered uttering those words to her before passing out. How she had managed to bring him back to the main office, he didn’t know. He didn’t care. She had said her presence during the assignment had been to provide back up; yet, when the charge had been sounded, Brigit Malone had remained behind in the shadows. Seamus had been left to deal with the Chupacabras by himself, as he remembered it. Five to one had not been a fair fight, especially after he had lost the shelaighley. Yet, being a true warrior, the brave soldier with the blood of a fighting Irishman borne from the direct descendents of the fearless Fiona of legend, Seamus Flannery had fought hard in completing the assignment. He had succeeded, he remembered it all clearly. Brigit had only finally come to his aide after his collapse. Too little, too late, Seamus thought.

A creak of the wood floor in the main hall pulled Seamus from his fiery thoughts. Brigit had not been back to the office since she had left him to roast with the vicious fever of the infection. By his count, that had been a couple of days gone by now. Had she finally returned?

“Oy!”

The call came out more a groan than a coherent word. Seamus licked his lips and swallowed hard in the attempt to dampen his vocal chords.

“Oy!” he called again.

It must have been more coherent this time, he thought. The gentle creak of the wood ceased its quiet echo off the walls of the main hall. Someone was there. Seamus could feel the chill emanating from the soul that was standing just outside the closed door to his office. Though he wanted to close his eyes in the sudden relief from the burning of his body, he knew he couldn’t allow himself to be so vulnerable to an unknown presence. Instead, he kept his emerald daggers poised at the door, hoping that he would be able to summon some amount of strength to try to save himself if there were to be an attack.

“Who’s out there? Show yer bleedin’ self,” he commanded, trying to sound stronger than he actually was. “C’mon! Show yerself!”

Slowly, the door swung open and Seamus felt his head jerk back with the sight of the figure before him. The pale man (if it was a man, Seamus mused…) dressed in tattered black robes stood just inside the door frame. His eyes were wide in fear and bewilderment.
“Who the fook are you?” Seamus demanded.

“Bailey,” came the hoarse whisper of a reply.

“Do ye work here too?” A silent nod was his only answer. “What department?”

“Bailey,” the pale man said again. Seamus closed his eyes finally. The chill reaching out from the pale man was so soothing. It allowed Seamus to focus his thoughts a little more clearly.

“I know yer bleedin’ name, man. What do you do for the firm?” he asked, hoping to get an actual answer. “What is yer job?”

“Bailey,” the word came a third time and Seamus groaned in frustration rather than pain. An intelligent conversation was obviously not going to happen. Seamus didn’t have the patience to try to drag one out of the pale man either.

“Well, do me a favor, Mr. Bailey,” Seamus instructed. “Find John Blackwick and bring him back. Tell him things are sorely amiss at the office. Tell him Seamus said so. Do ye understand me?”

“Where?” the Bailey asked. Seamus let his eyes open and take in the pale figure that suddenly reminded him of all the pictures he had ever seen representing the figure of Death – the conjured image of what a Grim Reaper truly looked like.

“Italy,” Seamus finally said, drawing on the infuriating memory of Brigit telling him that John had gone for a few days. “Fetch him at once,” the Irishman instructed sternly. The Bailey nodded in comprehension and began to back slowly from the small office, taking with him the cool energy that Seamus had been finding such comfort in.

When the Bailey had gone, Seamus closed his eyes again. He could feel it returning, the fire of the infection coursing through his veins. He only had a few minutes, he knew, before he would be engulfed in the searing flames that threatened to scar him for all eternity. He was lucid. He needed to gather his wits quickly and begin to formulate his strategy for vengeance. Calculations could be made on another day, when the fires were finally gone from his being. At the moment, Seamus determined, he had to begin the blue print to the end of days for Brigit Malone.
“So, how do you know what weapon will be right for you? I mean, how did you choose an umbrella over, say, a bow and arrow? How about swords? Can we pick a sword?”

Brigit sighed as she tucked the last completed assignment into the pocket that held all the others. Belinda Yaris had not ceased with the questions since she had completed reading *The Reaper’s Field Guide*. As the questions rolled one after the other with barely a moment in between to receive an answer, Brigit silently began to wish that the field guide had been written with more consideration to the mentor and their time. At some point during the barrage of inquiries, Brigit had simply begun offering an ‘I don’t know’ and ‘That’s a good question’ as a reply to her new apprentice – especially when a question had come in the middle of a scuffle with a dark spirit that had no desire to cross over peacefully.

“We’ll come to that when we return,” Brigit said quietly.

Suddenly, she felt tired. They had been working non-stop for two days, unable to return to the office to refresh their assignments – or so that she could check on Seamus Flannery. Her mind had been divided into too many directions throughout their travels. On the one hand, she was focused on their assignments and the assessment of Belinda Yaris – wondering if she had made a good choice in offering a position to the Goth girl with an endless supply of pertinent questions. On the other hand, she found herself worrying that she should have done more for Seamus in his mangled state and the subsequent illness that Brigit knew would beset itself upon him. Behind all that, she wondered how she would explain it all to John when he returned. Running delicately between all these thoughts was the deep missing of Maggie.

“Are we done?” Belinda asked when she finally glanced up at Brigit. She had been scanning the pages of the field guide for any item she might have missed during the initial reading. Her mentor, Belinda noted, suddenly looked tired.

“For now,” Brigit responded when she had finished massaging her temples. A phantom sensation had arisen in her head, reminiscent of the migraines she would occasionally suffer when the stress of a hectic work day would finally take its toll. “I need a break. How about you?”

“Oh, I could go for days. I feel great,” Belinda chirped with a smile. “Where are we going now?”

“Back to the office. There’s something there I need to check on, and, seeing that you possess a fountain of energy, you can set to work on recording the completed assignments,” Brigit determined.

“My first task, goodie,” Belinda said cheerfully as she fell in beside her mentor. Brigit sighed, but kept her silence. She hoped for the time being that her apprentice would follow the set example and be quiet as well.

Belinda sighed happily as she tried to keep in step with Brigit. She was stoked about the new turn her ‘life’ had taken. She had watched Brigit like a hawk, observing every nuance of her teacher, every small movement the dark woman made through the completion of each assignment. Belinda had found herself in awe when Brigit had fought with the dark spirits. The woman seemed to maintain a perfect sense of calm composure during the fight, her eyes never leaving the focus of her attention. Once, Belinda had asked a question in the middle of such a confrontation. The sudden asking had broken Brigit’s concentration which resulted in the sudden death-hold of a monster Brigit was trying to cross over. Luckily, Brigit had quickly managed to regain her train of thought and, somehow, remove herself from harm’s retched grasp. Belinda made the decision to save her questions until the assignment was complete after that.

As she walked beside Brigit, Belinda began to assess her own skills. She had never been a fighter. If anything, she had always been able to talk her way out of a confrontation. Except on that day when she had ceased to be a mortal and became trapped on the subway. Talking had done nothing for her that day… Yet, as she pondered all that she had observed Brigit doing, Belinda was sure she would still not be one to fight. Deep down, she hoped there would be something else for her within the firm that she would be better suited for because fighting and
confrontation was definitely not one of her strengths.

Together, they walked along avenues and boulevards of the city. Along the way, Belinda would occasionally notice the waiting spirits. Some would spot the Reapers and run to hide, obviously afraid of the idea of being crossed over. Others would simply stare at them with various expressions of indifference, boredom, anxious questioning or simply endless patience.

“There are so many of them,” Belinda noted out loud.

“The fruits of Death are constantly blooming,” Brigit replied quietly. “Can you tell the difference between a living soul and a waiting soul?”

“I think so,” Belinda mused.

“How are they different?”

“Is this a quiz?”

“Yes,” Brigit replied solemnly.

Taking a deep breath, Belinda launched into her theory that the difference between a living soul and a waiting soul had to do with the aura that surrounded them. The living were vibrant, creating waves of rippling energy as they moved from place to place. The waiting soul’s energy seemed stagnate, confined to the space immediately around them. Brigit only smiled as she listened. It was the same theory that she had formed during her own beginnings as a Reaper.

“Why are you smiling? Did I say something funny? Am I wrong?” Belinda questioned immediately when she spied her mentor’s expression.

“No, you are correct,” Brigit answered. “I’m proud of you for being so observant.”

Belinda fell silent again as they continued walking. The wonderment of her new level of existence fascinated and elated her. In the back of her mind, though, she couldn’t help but think that it all would have made a really good story.

When they entered 666 ½ Bleecker Street, Belinda felt her spirit surge higher with its elation. The dark wood surrounding them and the eerie gargoyles peering down from the ceiling delighted her. It was every Goth girl’s fantasy to be in a place so seemingly medieval. Belinda nearly made herself dizzy as she spun around and around to take it all in.

Brigit had not noticed her apprentice’s sudden stop to marvel at the dark architecture. Instead, she had immediately gone into Seamus’ office – noting that the door was open though she clearly remembered the closure of it upon her departure. For a moment, her heart skipped a beat with the fear that John had already returned and discovered the ill Irishman. The skipping of the beat, however, was merely another phantom sensation. Brigit was aware that she had not heard, nor felt, her own heartbeat in almost a year.

Seamus Flannery was sleeping in exactly the same place she had left him. The blanket she had placed over him, though, had fallen to the floor. Quietly, Brigit picked it up and gently covered him again. His skin burned a bright pink and Brigit guessed a high fever was running its course through him. She was about to touch his forehead when she heard a gasp behind her. Looking over her shoulder, she saw Belinda standing in the doorway, her mouth open in shock.

“Is he okay?” Belinda whispered.

“He’s very sick at the moment,”

“Who is he? Is this your boss, Mr. Blackwick?”
“No, this is Seamus Flannery. Mr. Blackwick isn’t due back for another day or so,” Brigit replied, looking down as Seamus grimaced in obvious pain.

“Will he be okay?” Belinda asked, coming closer so she too could have a better look at the burning pink red-headed man sleeping on the sofa.

“Eventually, yes. I think he will be back to his normal self. In the meantime, we shouldn’t disturb him. Here, take that black book on his desk,” Brigit gestured toward the large leather bound tome sitting on the desk against the wall. She heard the young woman grunt with the weight of it.

“What is this?” Belinda asked as Brigit turned and began to usher her from the room.

“It’s the record book of completed assignments. Mr. Flannery has been keeping his records up to date. I intend to continue his efforts. Here, you can use this room,” Brigit guided the girl across the hall and opened the frosted glass door before them.

It was a sparsely decorated office, containing only a small desk and a row of empty bookshelves. Both women stood just inside the doorway taking in the dreariness of the room.

“My own office,” Belinda finally uttered. “Sweet,”

“I’ll speak to John about some more furniture for you. Perhaps a sofa life Mr. Flannery has?” Brigit promised with a sigh.

“It’s fine the way it is,” Belinda assured her mentor as she crossed the small room and set the black book heavily on the writing desk. “What exactly am I supposed to do again?”

As the question sank in on Brigit, she hastily pulled the completed files from her coat pocket and extended them toward the young woman.

“You write their names and dates,” Brigit quickly instructed. “I know it’s not the kind of writing you aspired to during your life,” she offered almost as an apology.

“Hey, it’s writing. I’ll figure it out,” Belinda replied with a confidant smile. Brigit nodded in weary agreement as she watched the young woman shrug the coffin purse from her shoulder and drape its strap over the back of the wooden chair. Next, she watched as Belinda searched the desk drawer for a writing utensil.

When the search yielded a sharpened black quill and a small pot of ink from somewhere in the furthest depths of the drawer, Belinda smiled an even broader smile and opened the book. Eagerly, she seated herself and scanned the previous entries before poised herself to begin her new task. As she dipped the nib of the quill into the ink pot, Belinda noted a feeling of relief creeping through her senses. She had worried that she would not be able to rise to the occasion of reaping souls. Now, she was doing something she knew she could do in her sleep: Writing. Perhaps, she thought, this was the way out without having to give up the opportunity of remaining after all. She wasn’t ready to cross over just yet and this was the chance to keep that at bay for as long as she could.

“Belinda, I’m going to step out for a bit,” Brigit’s voice broke the young woman’s rampant thoughts. “I’ll lock the main door, just so you’re aware. Do me the favor of checking on Mr. Flannery in a little while?”

“Sure, oh-great-one,” Belinda chimed as she picked up a file and began to carefully copy the name emblazoned on the cover.

“Stop that,” Brigit groaned as she left the small room.

“Yes, oh-great-one…” Belinda intoned with a devilish smile on her face.

Seamus had heard them enter. His fever burned so fiercely, though, that he had been unable to open his eyes if only to silently accuse Brigit Malone of her inactions that had led to his present state. Through the roar of the
inferno in his head, Seamus had heard the second female’s voice. She sounded young, he thought. That was good, he thought further. The young were impressionable. The young could be molded and manipulated to one’s advantage. When his next moment of lucidity arrived, Seamus determined he would reach out and make a good impression on the younger female. After all, charm was never in short supply for Seamus Flannery.
John turned the key in the door to 666 ½ Bleecker Street and smiled. It was good to see that Brigit and Seamus were keeping with the policy of locking up when they went out. He had hoped that all had gone smoothly for them during his absence these past couple of days. He had every ounce of faith that Brigit’s silence meant that she was managing the North American office easily. When he had stopped into the Bleecker Street Café, Giuseppe had indicated that he had not seen either of the Reapers since John’s leaving. That was good as well, John thought as he closed the main door behind him. Their absence from the café meant that they were keeping themselves properly busy.

His trip had been a success. Only one soul had declined his offer to be a Reaper, but John had anticipated more. So, one refusal was not so bad in his book. The others had understood the concept of their new occupations quickly and John had felt confident in leaving them long enough for a quick check in with Brigit and Seamus. Once that was done, he intended to return to Rome to complete the re-establishment of what he hoped to be one of many European offices.

It had felt good to be back on European soil, all be it in a country where his grasp of the language was as rusty as a hundred year old coffin’s nails.. John had managed, however, and the first hurdle had been overcome.

John stopped suddenly in his advancement toward his office. He had passed by Seamus Flannery’s office, aware that the door was open. From the corner of his eye, however, he had glimpsed the flaming red hair of the Irishman on the sofa. Suddenly alarmed that the other man might be sleeping during business hours, John took a step backward and peered into the office. The sight he found alarmed him all the more.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph!” John muttered as he rushed to Seamus’ side. “What the hell has happened here?” he asked to no one in particular. He pressed his palm against Seamus’ forehead. The heat that met his fingertips caused him to quickly jerk his hand away from the scorching skin.

“She left me,” Seamus groaned miserably.

“How long have you been like this?” John inquired as he lifted the blanket covering the sick Reaper.

The wounds he discovered peeking out from the tears in Seamus’ leather jacket and underlying t-shirt incensed him all the more. The meat in the gash between the two ribs had began a slow mend, but John could see that it had been a deep wound to begin with – possibly all the way to the man’s lung. Seamus had returned to his silent suffering. John gently returned the cover and stood. Brigit had some long and serious explaining to do.

John turned to exit the office and stopped short again. The sight of the young woman sitting at the writing desk in the office across the hall startled him. The fact that her bright blue eyes were train on him made it all the more unnerving.

“Who might you be?” he asked when he had regained a slight piece of his normally professional composure. He was angry, to be sure; but it wasn’t this stranger’s fault. Not yet, anyway…

“Belinda Yaris, sir,” the young woman offered meekly.

“How did you get in here, Miss Yaris?” John asked sternly as he began to take slow and measured steps toward the office where she sat. If she was an accidental inhabitant, John was fully prepared to oust her one way or the other. He saw her swallow hard. She could sense the ire he was trying so hard to remain in control of. Good, John thought, maybe I’ll get some answers.

“Brigit brought me here. She hired me two days ago,” Belinda offered cautiously. The answer was a double-edged sword through John’s comprehension.

“Did she? And where is Brigit now?” John inquired steadily, never letting the girl’s gaze stray from his own icy
glare.

“She stepped out, sir,” Belinda answered. Something in the pale man’s eyes warned her to remain with the facts and only the facts as she could offer them.

“Where did she go?”

“I don’t know, sir. She only said that she was stepping out and locking the door. She did ask me to check on Mr. Flannery in a bit, but I’ve been so caught up in my work that I’ve forgotten…” Belinda’s words trailed off into nothingness with a slight wave of John’s hand to silence her.

“Would you happen to know what has befallen Mr. Flannery?”

“I don’t, sir, I’m sorry,” Belinda apologized. Frustrated, John broke his gaze with the young woman and looked at the floor in the deepening struggle to control his temper.

“What are you working on?” he finally managed to ask.

“Records, sir. Brigit has been reaping for two days straight. She instructed me to record the completed assignments.”

John stepped closer to the desk to observe the young woman’s handiwork. He noted the correct entries of names and crossing dates in as fine a penmanship as he had ever seen and he nodded approvingly. Most Reapers scribbled their records, whether in haste or laziness, John had never been completely sure. Brigit, it seemed, had found a proper scribe to keep the firm’s records. That was one plus in her favor at the moment.

“Very well, Miss Yaris. Carry on,” John sighed before turning away.

“Yes, sir,” Belinda gulped.

As he exited the small office Brigit had stationed her in, John was sure he heard a deep sigh of relief escape the odd looking young woman. After taking a final glimpse at the stricken Reaper in the hall across from the one he had just come from, John Blackwick let loose the control over his rage and stormed the remaining length of the main hall to his own office. The slamming of the door behind him echoed back down the hall.

As the sound resonated until it was silent again, Belinda Yaris concluded that she had just encountered the Grim Reaper himself: Mr. Blackwick.
Brigit entered the café feeling even more deflated than when she had left Belinda back at the office. She had hoped to spend a few moments with Maggie, to relax and perhaps vent everything that had gone on lately at work. Maggie was gone, though. By the time on the clock in the kitchen, Brigit quickly realized that Maggie was still at work. It was probably just as well, she decided as she exited the apartment they had shared together. Maggie wouldn’t have heard a word she said anyway.

Giuseppe gave her his usual nod before turning to make her a cup of coffee. Brigit thanked him quietly when the cup of the steaming brew was slid before her. He had already added the cream and sugar for her. The aroma of it was sweet to her phantom sense of smell. She wished for half a second that Giuseppe was a conversationalist. Yet, in the time since her first entrance into the Bleecker Street Café, the smiling man behind the bar had never uttered a word.

Brigit turned her attention to the window. She knew that she needed to return to work soon -- especially if she was going to have any kind of argument to present to John when he returned tomorrow. Perhaps, she thought as she sipped the coffee, he would be somewhat considerate of the fact that she had tripled – if not quadrupled – her work load on top of sacrificing her time with Maggie just to maintain the pace during his absence. There were so many scenarios to envision, though. Brigit decided it was probably best if she wasted no more time trying to find the perfect one to hope for. John would do whatever he would do. Brigit would simply have to suck it up and face whatever he decided to mete out in the form of discipline. Her last remaining hope was that, at the least, he would give her the chance to explain what had really happened. She had the deepening sense that Seamus Flannery would tell a story that was far from the truth…

She was emerging from this last thought when she felt it. It was an odd sensation, she thought as she looked over her shoulder at the spirits seated in the booths behind her. The feeling wasn’t coming from them. They seemed to be lost in their own thoughts and conversations – ignoring completely the fact that a Reaper was sitting amongst them. Slowly, Brigit scanned the room for the eyes that she could feel boring into her.

They were trained on her with a determination she could not have imagined him to have. The sad blue eyes that met hers seemed to silently beckon her to join him in the booth next to the front window. As if under a power not of her own, Brigit stood and crossed the café until she was standing before him. With a wave of his hand, he invited her to join him.

“What’s on your mind?” Brigit asked, trying not to sound confused.

The old man with the sad blue eyes merely stared at her. She noted that the sadness she usually felt when passing him was currently not present. She wondered what had changed that he would finally release such an emotion.

“Well?” Brigit pressed before raising her coffee to take another drink. The silence from the other side continued. Brigit sat her cup on the table between the two, trying to decide whether to continue to be polite and remain at the table or to be rude and simply walk away. Finally, she decided it was best to get going. Obviously, the old man was wasting her time. As she made to slide out of the booth, the old man caught her arm.

Surprised by the agility of his motion, Brigit looked at the withered hand on her forearm and then slowly back at the old man. A gentle smile came to his lips as he stared deep into her eyes. Though his lips never moved, she could have sworn she heard his voice clearly.

“Listen with your mind, girl…”

At first, it was a clear whisper and it startled her. It must have shown on her face. A bigger smile began to emerge on the old man’s lips.

“You didn’t move your mouth,” Brigit said out loud. The old man nodded in agreement. “I don’t think I
understand.”

“Just hear with your mind.” The instruction was somewhat louder this time and Brigit felt herself relaxing. “Can you hear me clearly?”

“Yes.”

Brigit was still confused by it, but she noticed that she was beginning to hear it all. The conversations from the booths behind her flowed easily to her ears. She glanced over her shoulder at the other patrons of the cafe and saw that their mouths were not moving despite the fact that their attentions were clearly focused on the other spirit they were engaged with. Suddenly, even Giuseppe had a voice – all be it – one with a very heavy Italian accent.

“How did this happen?” Brigit asked, returning her attention to the old man.

“It is a simple process once you open your mind to it,” he answered. “My name is Edmund J. Polly.”

“Brigit Malone,” Brigit introduced herself.

“I know. Mr. Blackwick thinks quite highly of you. He was so excited the day you came in. I overheard him telling Mr. Cincotta all about you before you arrived. He was so relieved to have found someone with the proper qualification to be a Reaper,” Edmund J. Polly related. Brigit suddenly felt the weight on her shoulders double.

“His perception may change after tomorrow,” she sighed.

“Why would you think so?”

“I’ve failed to maintain, Mr. Polly. I was not aggressive enough in my managing role and as a result, Seamus Flannery has been hurt. So, essentially, John and I are kind of back to where we were before we found Seamus and it’s my fault.”

Edmund shook his head, but Brigit was unsure whether it was in amusement or agreement that it was a bad place to be.

“That Mr. Flannery is a hot head. Don’t blame yourself, Miss Malone. He would have gotten himself into trouble one day whether you were present or not. The up side to that is that you were present, eh?”

“I was,” Brigit confirmed. “But I have the feeling Seamus will tell a very different version of the story than what really happened,” she admitted.

“Posh!” Edmund waved his old hand in disregard to his companion’s admitted fear. “So what if he does? You will simply have to make sure you tell the true version of it, am I right?”

Brigit nodded. As quickly as the weight on her shoulders had seemed to double, it suddenly began to feel lighter.

“May I ask you something, Mr. Polly?” she asked after a few minutes of listening to the quiet hum of the café that surrounded them. Edmund J. Polly arched his eyebrows in patient waiting for her question. “Every day that I have seen you here, you have looked so sad. Why?”

A touch of the sadness quickly returned to wrap itself around Edmund J. Polly. Brigit immediately felt sorry for asking the question.

“I’m waiting for the love of my life,” Edmund sighed. He turned to gaze out the window as a pair of mortals strolled by arm in arm. They were young and so obviously in love. The ripples of their energies combined and created an enormous bubble that threatened to permeate the glass of the ghost café they had just passed.

“You see, we were to meet here the night of the fire. It was so sudden – like a grenade going off. We all tried to run as soon as we smelled the smoke; but the roof collapsed so quickly. There were originally ten of us that were
caught in the collapse. Some have already crossed over, you see; but not me. Nor Giuseppe. He’s too proud to leave
the café in someone else’s care. He says he’ll be content to stay here for eternity. Something about it being a good
business,” Edmund shook his head again. This time, Brigit could see the amusement flowing with his thoughts.

“How long will you wait for her?” Brigit asked. Edmund J. Polly leveled his gaze on her.

“For true love, I’ll wait forever. Surely, you of all people would understand that concept, Miss Malone.” Brigit
nodded in silent agreement under his knowing gaze. Surely he would have overheard her conversations with John
regarding Maggie.

“What was her name?” She finally asked.

“Liliana Margarita de la Huerta. She was so beautiful,” Edmund sighed. “We were going to elope that night so
many years ago. It was our plan to use the money my father had given me for college to board a ship and sail for
Spain. Liliana had family there, you see. We had the intention to seek out their assistance in starting our lives
together there.”

“Why elope? Why not stay here and build your lives?” Brigit asked. “You were in love. Surely no one would
have denied your happiness,” she pointed out. The old man only shook his head.

“My father would have. It would not have been proper for someone of my social status to marry Liliana. She
was our housekeeper, you see? My father was a very prominent business man with many social and political ties. It
would have been a scandal if our romance had ever been discovered. You still seem confused, Miss Malone,”
Edmund J. Polly pointed out as Brigit suddenly realized he was telling the tale of a young man.

Her confusion arose from the visual sight that was sitting across from her. Edmund J. Polly, as Brigit saw him,
was a man that appeared to be well into his seventies or early eighties at the time of his death – not a young man of
maybe twenty.

“Well, I apologize for saying so, but; you’re old. You’re telling me a story of young love,” Brigit finally
admitted. A slight smile touched the old man’s face once more.

“I was young,” he confirmed. “The vision of me that you see now is the soul that was within the body that
perished that night in the fire. I’m sure you have come to realize by now that not everything is as it appears on this
side of living,” he chuckled.

“I suppose I should have thought of that,” Brigit sighed.

“There is still much for you to learn, Miss Malone; but in due time you will possess a wisdom of this world that
will rival Mr. Blackwick. You are a quick study. You must simply remember to keep an open mind.”

A comfortable silence fell between them, as if they were long time friends. Edmund J. Polly had become that,
Brigit thought. He had listened to her and reassured her as an understanding and caring friend would have and that
amount of kindness meant the world to her at the moment. He had been a young man with an old soul and he had
taught her the simple truth of the lesson behind having an opened mind. One could hear so much more if they just
allowed themselves to hear with more than their ears. One could say so much without ever opening their mouth.
This was what she had learned from the old man with the sad blue eyes.

After awhile, Birgit returned to her thoughts of work and the idea that she should get back to it as soon as
possible. When she said as much to her new friend, she found a small measure of reassurance in his blue eyes as he
reached across the table and gently patted her hand.

“Have faith, Miss Malone. Mr. Blackwick is a sensible fellow. Just be sure to be completely honest with him.
All will go well for you,” Edmund J. Polly predicted.

“Thank you, Mr. Polly,” Brigit said, forcing a slight smile to her face. Considering the fact that Edmund J.
Polly had been sitting in this very same booth on the day that John Blackwick had first entered the café himself, she
guessed he would know better than she about her mentor’s character.
26: The Confabulating Irishman

Seamus groaned loudly as he heaved himself into a sitting position. The gash in his side sent a sharp pain through him with the sudden movement. It was enough to cause the Irishman to suddenly feel nauseous. When the room finally stopped spinning, Seamus exhaled a long breath and ran a hand through his hair to make sure it really had been the room spinning and not his head.

The fever had finally subsided at some point, although, Seamus had been unable to pinpoint the exact moment. All he could remember was that he was no longer on fire and that he could hear her. She had been singing something. There were no words, exactly, but he had heard her voice reaching across the charred remains of the landscape of his mind. Realizing that the fires were finally gone, Seamus had opened his eyes and decided it was time to start moving again.

His sudden movement had caught her attention. Through the blur of his focus, he had seen her rush from the office across from his own and scurry down the main hall toward John Blackwick’s office. Ah, that’s right, Seamus thought, the boss is back… As the thought finished its procession through his mind, John Blackwick appeared in the doorway, a serious -- yet concerned -- expression set firmly on his face.

“Ah, so ye have returned. I thought me mind might be playin’ tricks on me in me sickness,” Seamus quipped as she struggled to focus his vision. “I think the fever burned me blind, though. I can barely see ye,” he added.

“Just take it easy, Seamus,” John instructed. “The blindness is only temporary. How long have you been down?”

“Since the last assignment,” Seamus groaned as he tried to straighten his back. All the days of sleeping on the sofa had left him feeling crumpled, like an arthritic old man. “How long have ye been back?”

“Two days. What happened?” John asked. Seamus snapped his emerald green eyes to John Blackwick’s face in sudden seriousness. He noticed the glare had no affect on his mentor.

“Have ye not talked to yer lovely assistant?” There was an edge to his voice that bordered disrespect, but given the situation and the state of his present condition, Seamus didn’t care. He hoped John Blackwick would at least understand the force that would follow that edge should he have taken Brigit’s side.

“I’ve not seen her. Miss Yaris says Brigit left the office two days ago. She has yet to return,” John explained. Seamus eyed the other man for a second before deciding he was being honest. “Now, tell me what happened to cause this.”

“Ye might want to take a seat,” Seamus suggested.

Obligingly, John Blackwick fetched the wooden chair from the writing desk and positioned himself on it. Seamus saw a slight movement in the office across the hall and strained his vision for a better look at the young woman that had fetched the boss. She had dark hair and a pale face, but Seamus could tell nothing more than that.

“Mr. Flannery,” John addressed him. Seamus quickly returned his attention to John and found a look of slight impatience on the other man’s pale face.

“Well, ye see, it was a tough assignment ye handed me…” John began.

John watched the Irishman intently as he launched into the telling the tale of the glorious battle between himself and the merciless members of the Chupacabra gang. John kept silent through the saga, noticing the slight movements that gave away the truth of Seamus Flannery’s over-exaggeration in certain parts. The Irish, John Blackwick was well aware, could be prone to great confabulation when they were telling a story. Being an Irishman himself, he knew the impulse well. His restraint of the urge had only come from the many years under Araxius Herodotus. The Old Man had possessed no patience for anything more than the simple truth in any tale and John had
learned early on to temper the bardic notions that had once ran so strongly within him.

Despite his knowledge that the injured Reaper was lying to a degree, John couldn’t help but to feel his temper beginning to spark. It was not so much over Brigit’s lack of action in regard to Seamus Flannery, but rather, it was more the fact that she had remained absent from the office since her subsequent return and deposit of Belinda Yaris. John felt slighted in the thought that his protégé, his assistant, would not trust that he would understand once he had heard her side of the story. Brigit’s continued absence from the office added to the waning of John’s understanding. His only hope, as Seamus Flannery finally concluded his tale, was that he could regain his sense of understanding once he did hear her side of it all.
27: Brigit’s Side

The door to 666 ½ Bleecker Street had never appeared so bleak, Brigit mused as she stood on the sidewalk staring at it. *Behind that door,* she thought, *is a mess I created.* Seamus was undoubtedly still unconscious from the suffering of his wounds. By now, Brigit was sure, Belinda would have run out of names to record and was possibly meddling in things she should not. Beyond that, John Blackwick would have returned from his trip and discovered the mess that had accumulated with Brigit’s absence.

She had not been back to the office since leaving Belinda two days before. Brigit had originally thought, after leaving Edmund J. Polly at the Bleecker Street Café, that she would head straight back and resume the break neck pace of Reapings so that she could appear busy when John did make his return. However, after leaving the café, Brigit had turned north and made her way to the cemetery where her mortal body had been put for eternal rest.

It had been quiet there. As she had walked amongst the grave stones and monuments, she listened hard for any sound that would indicate she was not alone. Yet, she had heard nothing during her passage. She had found it somewhat strange that a cemetery should be so completely void of waiting spirits. During her life, she had always thought a cemetery would be filled to the brim with souls waiting to meet their judgments, and as a result, Brigit had maintained a quiet reverence for the acreages that had been separated from the rest of the landscape by iron bars and stone walls.

A small stone marker had been set at the head of her grave. It was simple, bearing her name and dates as most grave stones did. Below the dates, Brigit found the wish: *May You Know Eternal Peace.*

Brigit bit her lip as she read the words. Maggie had picked those words, she was sure. Despite Brigit’s calm demeanor during life, Maggie had been aware of the turmoil that could occasionally come to Brigit’s mind. Her partner of ten years minus one day had always been in tune enough to know when the ghosts and demons of Brigit’s memories would rise up to haunt her. Brigit had always thought she had let them go, blocked them from her conscious thought so that the ghosts and demons had no hand in defining her; but every once in awhile, she could feel their spectral fingertips on her skin. Apparently, Brigit mused as she stood by her grave and read the wish once more, Maggie could feel it too.

She had remained beside her grave longer than she had intended. Her thoughts on her own life before the accident and after the accident had wrapped around her, holding her there to view them like photographs. She had to remember them. She had to honor them – no matter how painful or sad they had been. Somehow, Brigit knew that in doing this, it would free her to continue on with her present existence. It would free her to further open her mind to all this side of living would show her.

Her last stop before making her way back to 666 ½ Bleecker Street had been to see Maggie. It was early enough in the morning that Maggie would still be asleep. Brigit had stood over her lover, watching her sleep peacefully. She wished for a second that she could lie down beside Maggie, wrap her in her arms and hold onto her until the end of Maggie’s days; but there was work to be done and Brigit knew she could no longer put it off. It was the bargain she had agreed to for Maggie’s sake. As she exited the bedroom, she heard Maggie’s sleepy voice call to her.

“I love you, Bree,” Maggie sighed. Brigit stopped in the door way and looked back at her sleeping lover.

“I love you too, Mags. Forever, I love you.”

The office was quiet when Brigit entered. From where she stood after closing the door, she could tell that John Blackwick was present in his office. From the sound of shuffling papers in Belinda’s office, Brigit assumed the girl was still hard at work on her original task. Guessing that it was best to get the explaining over with, Brigit squared her shoulders and began her approach toward The Grim Reaper’s office. She and Belinda had only a second to exchange a glance as she passed the young woman’s office. A surprised, yet relieved, look emanated from Belinda’s blue eyes. Brigit, however, had no time to interpret any message that may have been sent her way.
John was sitting at his desk engrossed in a stock of portfolios before him. Brigit stood just inside the door, watching her mentor. He was usually a blank slate when it came to expression. It was usually impossible for Brigit to determine her mentor’s thoughts or mood. Today was no exception.

“Have a seat, Brigit,” John instructed without looking up at her. Brigit obeyed by entering the room and filling the chair across from the head Grim Reaper. She was not surprised that he had known it was her. “You have some explaining to do,” he pointed out quietly.

“Yes, I do,” Brigit confirmed. “Where would you like me to start?”

John Blackwick looked across the massive mahogany desk that separated them. He was expecting to see some humor on the woman’s face. Instead, he found a seriousness to match his own. It was as if Brigit had developed some sense of understanding to the gravity of the situation and realized there was no humor to be found in it. As John looked deep into her dark eyes, he saw the seriousness planted deep within her and he wondered if perhaps she had lost her sense of humor all together. Quickly, John pushed past that thought and leaned back in his chair. She had asked him where she should begin.

“Start with the assignment,” he instructed, making himself comfortable. Although he was sure Brigit would not be prone to confabulating the story as Seamus Flannery had, John knew he needed to provide his full attention in order to see it all. The sin of omission was just as bad as the sin of confabulation in his book.

Brigit nodded solemnly and began the tale. She explained the meeting of Seamus Flannery on Pier 13 in San Francisco and her observance of the other Reaper’s taking of the gold locket from the spirit he had crossed over. John acknowledged the slight tinge of annoyance with the idea that a Reaper would be so bold as to take souvenirs and he made a mental note to have a discussion with Seamus regarding it. Brigit continued on with the story of the next assignment and the details of it, John observed, were not as glorious as the first version he had heard. He had already guessed that Seamus’ arrogant nature had taken over the scenario and that his hot-headed determination to over-achieve was what had landed the Irishman into the resulting state of non-commission. John was most interested in Brigit’s sense of responsibility of the scene and whether she would own up to that responsibility in the end.

Brigit explained the facts only. John could see from her expression that she was being honest. There was something, however, that she was omitting. John saw her pause in her tale, as if deciding whether to admit this one detail. When he saw her push it aside in her mind, he realized that she had deemed it a personal issue not worth his consideration and therefore, not important to the tale. She ended it all in explaining that she could think of nothing else to do but to return to the main office with the mangled Seamus Flannery and to leave him to suffer through his infection as he would.

“I made him as comfortable as I could,” Brigit offered quietly.

John pursed his lips as his assistant fell into a waiting silence. She was prepared, he thought, to receive whatever discipline he would hand her. He wasn’t ready to do that just yet, tough. There were other things to be considered.

“Where did you find Miss Yaris?” John asked.

“She was one of the assignments I had scooped up. I apologize for not consulting you before bringing her on, but, I saw potential in her. I was surprised that we missed her when we were going through the files the first time.”

“She was a good find, Brigit. I’m not upset with her presence. She’s been quite efficient in her work. Where have you been since bringing her here, though? And why didn’t you send for me when you returned?” The questions had been present since the moment Brigit had set foot in his office, but John knew he had to hear her side before scolding her for her lack of forethought.

“I was unsure of how to reach you. It’s a weak excuse, I know,” Brigit replied, “but I have learned a couple of things these last two days that will ensure it won’t happen again.” John met her level gaze.

“What makes you sure your employment will continue?”
The question sounded cruel as he uttered it. John wished almost immediately that he could take it back. Brigit, however, did not flinch with the iciness of the question. It was as if she had been expecting it all along.

“I have hope,” she replied.

John looked away from the dark woman as he pondered his next action. There were many things to consider before he could make a just decision. Finally, he returned his attention to her and found that hers had never left him. The somber air around Brigit was beginning to unsettle him.

“Go home, Brigit,” he finally said. “I’ll deliver my decision in three days.”

“I don’t understand,” Brigit admitted. John could hear the confusion in her voice. She had expected a severe and immediate sentence.

“You’re suspended until I can decide what to do. I think it’s the fairest thing to do at this point. Go home. I’ll come to you once I’ve made up my mind,” he said quietly.

Finally, Brigit stood and exited his office as quietly as she had entered it. He heard a short exchange between the two women before the main door to 666 ½ Bleecker Street was opened and Brigit was gone.

John remained relaxed in his chair for quiet some time after she had left. While she had mismanaged the assignment and failed to ask for help, Brigit had made some recovery of balance by increasing her work load and the discovery of Belinda Yaris. Brigit had admitted her mistakes. She had taken responsibility fearlessly. John knew he couldn’t discount those facts. Yet, there was one thing she had omitted and John found that to be an irksome thought. Whatever it was – personal or not – John wanted and needed to know what it was before he could allow her to carry on. He had told her three days. There was time to determine his sentence in a cool manner. He had time to find justification for what his heart demanded of him in regard to Brigit Malone.
28: Fascination

“Mr. Blackwick, sir?”

John started at the sound of Belinda Yaris’ voice behind him. He had been so consumed with the ideas of how he would approach Brigit that he had not heard the new girl’s entrance into his office. Looking over his shoulder, John found her standing just inside the door with the large black ledger she had been so diligently recording in held against her chest. Her eyes, so very bright blue against the pale skin and raven hair, were trained on him in a wary stare. It seemed the young woman always looked at him this way. John couldn’t tell whether it was a look of fear or deep reverence – or both.

“Miss Yaris,” John cleared his throat and tried to sound as though he were pleasantly surprised to see her. “What can I assist you with?”

“I’ve finished with this book,” Belinda declared. “I was wondering where I would find a new one.”

“Oh, yes, of course. Over to your right there, Miss Yaris, are the blanks. Completed ledgers are stored here on this wall,” John instructed with a nod of his head toward the wall of bookshelves behind him.

He stepped aside as Belinda diligently marched to the bookshelf and stored the completed tome where he had indicated before turning and marching back across the room to retrieve a fresh one. There was something about her that fascinated John when he had a moment to contemplate the new recruit. Yet, as soon as he had a thought to spare for Belinda Yaris, a different and more pressing thought would quickly follow – pushing any further musings of Belinda Yaris from his mind.

“Mr. Blackwick?”

John’s attention was returned to the young woman once more.

“Yes?”

“Is there an official policy book for the firm? I mean, you know, something that lays all the rules out?” she asked timidly.

“Oh, no reason, I guess,” came the reply; but John suspected there actually was a reason behind the inquiry. “I was just wondering if there were rules regarding workplace relationships.”

John studied her face for a second as he thought of how to respond. She was young enough to be the type to find infatuation with the mysterious, bad boy type. Although she had had limited interaction, John quickly came to the conclusion that Belinda Yaris may have developed a slight crush on Seamus Flannery. As John continued to ponder the right response, he noticed the newest member of the firm beginning to grow nervous with the wait.

“Well,” John finally began, “I don’t know that there’s ever been a circumstance that warranted the creation of a policy regarding that,” he mused. “However, I would have to strongly suggest that, should it occur, that both parties involved maintain their priorities regarding the firm and their duties as assigned. I should also hope, Miss Yaris, that you will use your better judgment if an opportunity should present itself.”

Belinda only nodded in response before exiting his office. He hoped she understood his warning without his having to be overly blunt. He remembered Brigit’s prediction that Seamus Flannery would one day become a problem and even though he tried hard not to dwell on it, John knew eventually her prediction would come true. The recent chain of events revealed the beginnings of that particular worry. Considering the fascination Belinda had revealed without knowing it, John suddenly hoped Seamus wouldn’t drag the young woman into the drama as well. She seemed like a good girl with a good heart. John abhorred the idea of having to mete out a dire punishment on her because of one bad choice.
Belinda returned to her desk and sighed. John had answered her question somewhat vaguely, but she had caught the warning at the end of it. She had the sense that John Blackwick suspected the object of her fascination, but Belinda was sure he was misjudging Seamus Flannery. The Irishman seemed sweet toward her during their few conversations, almost gentle, even though he pretended to be so very dangerous.

Belinda opened the fresh ledger and reached for the files Seamus had turned into her that morning. His quick recovery from his sickness had caused John to set Seamus back to work at reaping souls although they were relatively easy ones compared to what the Irish Reaper said he was used to. He had lamented his boredom with the assignments during his brief visit to her office. Belinda had merely listened, hoping he would notice that he had her full attention.

As she began to record the pertinent information, Belinda decided they were wrong about the rugged, flame haired Irishman. They didn’t see what she saw in him. They were wrong about Seamus Flannery and that was all there was to it.
Brigit stood from Maggie’s reading chair and went to the window. She was impatient, yet, she was not sure whether it was from the waiting for Maggie to return home or from the waiting to see what John would decide to do to her. Deep down, she hoped he would give her the position back. She was not willing to resign herself to the idea of being crossed over just yet. It would ultimately mean the breaking of her promise to Maggie – the whole reason she had taken the offered position in the first place.

She had only been home for two days, but it felt like ages as she pondered the possibility that John would arrive with the purpose of crossing her over. Brigit hated the waiting, but at the moment, she had no other option. Today was the third day. Brigit hoped John would make his appearance soon and the wait would finally be over.

Yet, the street was empty. Looking up and down it from the bay window, Brigit caught no sight of her mentor. Sighing heavily, she turned and made her way back towards Maggie’s chair. She would just have to sit and continue her wait.

As she began to lower herself into the cushion, Brigit paused.

An odd energy was emanating from the door. The chill that floated across the room caused her skin to tingle despite the warmth of her black coat. Curious, she crept to the door and listened. She had felt this before. As she listened for any tell-tale sign of the source, her mind raced to find the memory where she had experienced the feeling. Quickly, she pressed her eye against the peephole as the energy continued to grow stronger. A gasp escaped her when he stepped onto the landing and paused, looking first at the door that concealed her and then at the door across the hall. His black robes fluttered with an eerie breeze that blew from behind him. His pale skin seemed almost transparent in the dim light of the hall. Brigit could feel her heart thundering in her ears as she realized who she was peering at. It was the Bailey and he was on an assignment. When he turned to enter the door across the hall, Brigit felt her fear explode. He was after Mama Dee…

Mama Dee closed her eyes and began to massage her forehead. She had felt the migraine coming on as soon as she had awakened that morning. As a precaution, she had called the women’s shelter and told her boss she wouldn’t be in today because of the headache. After a compassionate plea to please go see a doctor, Winifred had excused Mama Dee for as long as she needed on the condition that she present a doctor’s note upon her return to work. As she hung up the phone, Mama Dee had silently thought that today might actually be the day to finally make an appointment. The headaches were becoming too frequent and at her age, she couldn’t financially afford to miss any more work.

A deep sigh escaped her as she massaged her head. There was more behind all this, she thought. She wished she could talk to Brigit. Maybe the young woman would have some more insight for her now that she walked on the unseen side of life.

Mama Dee felt herself smile at the thought of Brigit. The young woman’s energy had been a little stronger in the apartment across the hall for the past two days, but Mama Dee had not managed to have a moment to openly acknowledge it. Maggie must have noticed it as well, Mama Dee thought. The woman had not made her usual request for the old woman to join her for dinner. Maggie was keeping it all to herself – a notion Mama Dee couldn’t really blame her for.

The tea kettle began its lonesome cry in the kitchen and Mama Dee opened her weary eyes. The throbbing was mounting. She hoped a big cup of chamomile and mint would reduce the pressure long enough to allow her to call the doctor’s office and set an appointment. After that, Mama Dee decided, she would let the banging explode while she hid in the darkness of her bedroom.

Mama Dee lifted the kettle from the stove to cease its cry. As she poured the boiling water into the waiting mug, she felt the chill creep through the air behind her. Slowly, she set the kettle on the counter, uncaring that it would scorch the counter top beneath it. Every hair on her body began to stand on end as she braced herself for what she would face when she turned around. Although she would not see it, she could feel it. The cold energy that
reached out to embrace her caused her heart to thunder in her ears, suddenly drowning out the explosion of the migraine that had finally begun its massive assault of pain and fireworks…

Brigit entered Mama Dee’s apartment silently. The Bailey had been too focused on his prey to hear her as she exited her own apartment. She only hoped she was not too late to stop him in his mission. It wasn’t Mama’s time to go. It couldn’t be…

As she crept down the narrow hall that led to Mama Dee’s kitchen, she could see the Bailey standing in the doorway – frozen as if he were suddenly afraid to move. The string of curse words she heard in Mama Dee’s voice alarmed her. Mama Dee had never uttered a swear word in Brigit’s presence before and to hear the old black woman do so now caused Brigit to increase her speed. With a sudden flying leap, Brigit propelled herself the remaining length of the hall and tackled the Bailey from behind. A cry of sudden surprise escaped him before they both fell crashing to the kitchen floor.

As they grappled on the floor, Brigit felt the occasional hard kick to her ribs as Mama Dee joined in the fray. The frightened commands to get out of her house, to return to the depths of hell from whence they had came reached through to Brigit’s brain as she desperately fought to maintain the Bailey in her grasp. He was slippery, though, like a fish fresh from slimy waters. His robes were oily in her hands as she grasped at them. Twice, he slithered out of her reach but Brigit would manage one way or another to regain her hold before feeling another kick from the frightened Mama Dee. Finally, Brigit managed to still the chaos in her mind for half a second.

“John, I need you quickly,” she cried out in her mind.

Whether or not her mentor heard or answered, Brigit was not aware, The Bailey had slipped out of her hold once more and begun a frightened scramble for the hall. Brigit rose to her feet once more and lunged to tackle him again. In mid-air, she had heard Mama Dee gasp. Either the old woman had finally seen her mortal body or she had recognized Brigit – or maybe even both. Brigit had no moment to spare thought as she and the Bailey crashed to the floor in the narrow hall and continued their frantic writhing for escape and control. Somehow, Brigit managed to wrap her legs around the death bringer’s waist and lock her feet at the ankles. She was instinctively intent on squeezing any life out of him as she held his bald head in a firm head lock under one arm. At her head, she could feel Mama Dee’s cautious approach. With a quick glance back, Brigit saw her friend creeping down the hall, a frying pan held over her shoulder like a baseball bat.

“Mama, no, it’s okay now. I have him,” Brigit gushed as the Bailey wiggled in an attempt to escape.

“Brigit?” There was a note of disbelief in Mama Dee’s voice.

“Brigit, what are you doing?”

Brigit’s attention snapped to the other end of the hall to find John standing there. There was a surprised look on his face as he viewed his assistant on the floor with the elusive Bailey in possibly the most complicated death hold John Blackwick had ever seen.

“Would you like the long or short version?” Brigit gasped. The Bailey wiggled again and she tightened her hold one more notch. The Bailey began to wheeze as he gasped for air.

“Well, I can see that you’ve found the Bailey,” John mused. “You may release him now.”

“He’ll run,” Brigit pointed out.

“Will you?” John addressed the frightened Bailey. As well as he could manage, the Bailey shook his head. “Release the Bailey, Brigit.”

Slowly, Brigit let go but remained on the floor in the attempt to catch her breath. It had been more of a struggle than she had realized. Had she been alive, she thought, her adrenaline would have hit maximum over drive. Although she wasn’t alive, Brigit recognized the effects the momentum of the confrontation had had on her.

“Brigit, did I hurt you?”
Brigit looked up at the woman the Bailey had come for. Mama Dee looked different, Brigit thought as she lay there looking up at her old friend; but from upside down and through dim light, Brigit wasn’t sure what could be different on this side of living.

“I’m okay, Mama,” Brigit replied, smiling so that her friend could see that was indeed all right. “Though, I think you should have been a soccer player, not a social worker.”

“You,” John pointed a long, thin finger at the Bailey. The Bailey stiffened under the sight of it. “Sit over there and do not move. I will address you in a moment.” Obediently, the pale figure nodded and sat on Mama Dee’s sofa, glancing nervously over his shoulder as the Grim Reaper turned to face the two women still congregating in the hall.

“What’s happened, Brigit? How come I can finally see you?” Mama Dee asked as her fear from the commotion suddenly disappeared and a new awareness took its place.

“Mama, your time came,” Brigit answered apologetically.

“You mean… I’m…” Mama Dee made to turn and run to the kitchen, as if to confirm that she really was dead by seeing her body; but Brigit caught her friend by the shoulders and steered her in the opposite direction.

“You are, Mama,” Brigit said quietly. “Trust me. Here, have a seat,” she suggested.

“I ain’t sitting by that,” Mama spat defiantly as she cast an angry glare at the Bailey. Instead, she plopped herself on the coffee table and looked from Brigit to John and back to Brigit.

In the brighter light of the front room, Brigit could finally determine the differences in Mama Dee. Gone from her face were the wrinkles of age and the grey hair of so many years of witnessed sadness.

“I thought you said you wouldn’t be the one to come for me when my time came,” Mama Dee reminded Brigit.

“You’ve had a conversation regarding the rules with a mortal?” John interrupted.

“And who are you?” Mama Dee demanded of the man that had the gall to stick his nose into the conversation.

“Mama Dee, this is John Blackwick – my boss,” Brigit introduced.

“Oh,” Mama Dee gulped with the significance of the introduction. “Well, let me just say that I’m grateful you allowed my Brigit to be here. I might have made the sin of kicking the shit out of your boy over there if she hadn’t been,” Mama Dee chuckled nervously.

“Instead, you kicked the shit out of me,” Brigit laughed. “Mama, I was suspended from work. Mr. Blackwick didn’t know this was going to happen,” she explained.

“Oh, I see,” Mama Dee’s amusement seemed to dim as she thought about what Brigit had said.

Brigit saw the look pass through her friend’s dark eyes that told her that she had the thought to inquire further, and possibly even scold Brigit for getting herself into trouble. Eventually, Mama Dee thought better of it and simply shook her head.

“Instead, you kicked the shit out of me,” Brigit laughed. “Mama, I was suspended from work. Mr. Blackwick didn’t know this was going to happen,” she explained.

“Oh, I see,” Mama Dee’s amusement seemed to dim as she thought about what Brigit had said.

Brigit saw the look pass through her friend’s dark eyes that told her that she had the thought to inquire further, and possibly even scold Brigit for getting herself into trouble. Eventually, Mama Dee thought better of it and simply shook her head.

“Speaking of such, we need to have a conversation,” John cut in. Brigit nodded and indicated that they step out of the room. John followed her across the hall and into her apartment. If I’m going to cross, Brigit thought, I’m going to do it in my own home.

“I’m ready,” Brigit said once John had closed the door.

“Good, because we have some serious catching up to do at the office. Seamus has resumed reaping, but the workload has began to mount again. I’ve decided to keep Miss Yaris at the office to maintain records. That will free up the Reapers to continue their assignments. You pick up, you drop off and pick up some more. In the meantime, should you find any more recruits, I request that you bring them in for an interview before just simply taking them
on,” John instructed.

Brigit looked at him in surprise. She had expected a harsh scolding at the least. Instead, she had received the instructions for a more streamlined operation.

“I think I know of a potential recruit,” she finally managed to say.

“You Miss Dee?” John asked. Brigit nodded. “For what department?”

“Children,” Brigit replied as she remembered the Bobby Hooper assignment. Though she had had some fun with that one, she knew children were not her forte. Mama Dee would be perfect for the position if John gave her the chance.

“Very well,” John said. “I’ll interview her at the office. In the mean time, Brigit, bear in mind that should you find yourself in such a predicament again, I’ll have no choice but to cross you. You are to set an example within the firm, am I clear?”

“Yes,” Brigit answered.

“I have one more thing,” John said as Brigit turned to return to Mama Dee’s apartment.

“Yes?”

“There was something in your story the other day that you decided not to tell me. What was it?”

Brigit stared hard at the floor as she thought of how to respond. Of course John would have noticed the pause. She had hoped he would not have asked.

“A threat was leveled against me,” she finally said. “There will come a day when he’ll try to make good on it,” she predicted. John suddenly understood that her omission was deeply personal but he was glad she had told him all the same. Two sets of eyes were always better than one.

“I see,” the Grim Reaper sighed. “We’ll deal with it when the time comes,” he promised. Brigit nodded and opened the door. Together, they crossed the hall again and found Mama Dee casting the stink eye at the progressively nervous Bailey sitting across from her.

“Mama,” Brigit interrupted casually, trying to hide her amusement at the scene they had entered. “Mr. Blackwick would like to have a conversation with you. I want you to go back to his office and listen carefully,” Brigit instructed.

“Where are you going to be?” Mama Dee demanded.

“Maggie will be home soon. She shouldn’t be alone tonight,” Brigit said quietly. Mama Dee suddenly looked sad. Tears welled up in her black eyes, yet, they refused to fall. “I’ll be in as soon as I can.”

“You keep an eye on your girl,” Mama Dee instructed once again as she stood. “You let her know that I loved her like a daughter.”

“We both know that, Mama,” Brigit assured her friend.

Brigit received an agreeable nod from John before the three of them exited the apartment.

She sighed heavily with the thought of Maggie’s return. This was going to be too much for Maggie; but Brigit was determined not to let it be the straw to break the camel’s back…
The next few days were spent in quiet observation. Maggie had taken Mama Dee’s passing hard. Brigit had
guessed that she would. It had been a hard year for Maggie. First, she had lost her lover of ten years minus one day,
and then, she had lost her dearest friend. To top it all off, Maggie was left to deal with the aftermath of it all
seemingly on her own.

The memorial service was held the next Saturday. The church Maggie had reserved for the occasion was huge,
but she soon found that it had not been big enough. The number of lives Mama Dee had touched over the years had
been unimaginable. Not only were the current residents of the women’s shelter present, but past residents were in
attendance as well. They all spoke through tears of gratitude for the various acts of love Mama Dee had shown them.
Beyond that, Mama Dee’s peers and colleagues were present to pay homage to the small woman for the giant
example they all desperately wanted to follow. Then there was the spectacle of the gay community to add to it all.
The drag queens were present, decked out in their finest attire to honor the little old black lady that had treated them
as though they were one of her own – never judging, never harsh. She had loved them all no matter what, and now,
they all mingled together in the biggest show of love for one small woman.

Brigit had turned to Mama Dee where they stood at the back of the hall and found the little old woman wiping
her eyes. The tears weren’t really falling, but Brigit knew it would be some time before Mama Dee no longer felt the
same physical sensations she had felt as a mortal.

“I guess I best get back to work,” Mama Dee sniffed when then pastor of the church had finally ended the last
prayer and thanked everyone for coming.

“How’s that going for you?” Brigit asked quietly. Mama Dee had jumped at John’s proposal once she heard
there were children involved. Even in death, Mama had been quick to recognize that her love for them could still be
shared.

“I’m getting there,” Mama assured her. “I met Mary yesterday. She’s a wonderful one. I really enjoyed talking
with her.”

Brigit nodded and smiled. Had Mama Dee told her of the meeting when Brigit had first started, she would have
been shocked that a conversation could have taken place between the two women given Mary’s use of an ancient
language. Now, however, Brigit found herself accepting the statement without further thought. Mama Dee had
always had an open mind. She would be able to grasp the spirit world’s nuances a lot quicker than Brigit had.

“How’s our girl getting on?” Mama Dee asked as they turned and followed the crowd from the church.

“Her sadness is overwhelming right now. She hasn’t been sleeping well, either,” Brigit related. Mama Dee
shook her head and sighed heavily.

“The poor baby probably thinks she’s all alone in this world now,” she said. “You go on home and take care of
her. I’ll let John know it’ll be a couple more days.”

“Thank you, Mama,” Brigit said before watching her friend turn and walk away from the church. Brigit
continued to watch until she felt Maggie behind her.

Slowly, Brigit turned and found Maggie arm and arm with Tom Bennett. Brigit felt herself begin to smile at the
sight of their long time friend at Maggie’s side. Tom had always been a good friend, sharing in the many good and
happy times the two women had. She was glad to see him present today, just as he had been present at her own
funeral. His usually happy demeanor was somber at the moment, but his presence was providing a slight measure of
comfort to Maggie as far as Brigit could tell.

“I’ll walk you home. The book store can stay closed for a few more hours for all I care,” Tom said as Brigit fell
in beside them. She noted that Maggie made no protest as they began to walk back to their apartment. Usually,
Maggie would have insisted that Tom not delay in maintaining the everyday business of the small book store he owned downtown.

“I just can’t believe it all,” Maggie sighed. “First, Brigit – now Mama Dee. Who’s next?”

“You shouldn’t think like that, Maggie,” Tom chided his companion as they strolled along.

“He’s right,” Brigit agreed out loud.

“Everything happens for a reason, darling. You know that,” Tom continued. “Who are we to question the universe?”

“You’ve been hanging out with Sola DuLach again, haven’t you?” Maggie laughingly accused. Brigit felt herself smile at the jab and the fact that Maggie was laughing – if only half-heartedly. Sola DuLach was Tom’s best friend, a strange woman in her and Maggie’s opinions. Tom often rose to the defense of Sola’s oddity, but now, he only shrugged.

“Sometimes, Sola can make sense,” he offered. “She sends her condolences, by the way.”

“I appreciate them,” Maggie replied softly.

“Would you like me to bring Shazam! over? He would be wonderful company, you know. He absolutely adores you and would certainly keep you distracted,” Tom offered. Maggie only shook her head in decline. Shazam! was Tom’s five year old Welsh Corgi, a small dog with big ears and an even bigger penchant for cheese and crackers – Brigit’s favorite snack.

“I don’t think Shazam! liked me as much as he liked Brigit. She fed him cheese and crackers every day during that week he stayed with us while you were in Paris,” Maggie reflected, allowing a bittersweet smile to alight on her face. “That made them permanent friends.”

“It made him poop orange for a week is what it did,” Tom argued with a laugh. “She could have given him anything besides cheddar! Poor thing,” he continued laughing as he shook his head.

It was then that Brigit noticed that Tom’s crew cut was fresh. The white line across the nape of his neck peeked up from under his collar like a flash of white light on a darkened day. Upon closer inspection, she noted that his cheeks were overly smooth and his moustache was neatly trimmed. Tom Bennett knew all too well the distaste Mama Dee had possessed over a handsome man failing to maintain his appearance. As a final respect to be paid, Tom Bennett had taken his time in looking respectable today. Brigit wondered briefly if Mama Dee had seen this and appreciated it.

“Well, here you are,” Tom announced as they stopped in front of the building where Maggie now resided alone. “If you change your mind about Shazam!, just give me a call. Most likely he’ll be with me at the book store,” Tom said as he wrapped his arms around Maggie and gave her a strong hug. Maggie only nodded against his broad chest.

“Thank you, Tom,” she managed to gasp.

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” he promised as he finally released her and stood back. Maggie only nodded again. Brigit silently watched on. She was grateful for Tom – no matter how odd his friends were.

She stood with Maggie as they watched Tom Bennett walk away. Once he was out of sight, Brigit turned her dark eyes back to Maggie. Maggie looked so tired, Brigit thought. She wondered how her partner would ever recover her sense of happiness and continue living after this. It seemed that Maggie’s inner light had been growing fainter over the last few days. Brigit couldn’t help but acknowledge the deep concern growing inside her as she watched helplessly.

Once they were inside the apartment, Brigit watched as Maggie stopped in the living room and took a long slow look around. So many memories surrounded her. Was this part of the problem? Maggie sighed heavily and turned to go to the bedroom. Brigit followed silently, wishing there was something she could do or say so that
Maggie knew…

Maggie stopped at the bathroom and opened the medicine chest over the sink. Brigit leaned against the door frame and watched her partner take down the brown prescription bottle. They were Brigit’s sleeping pills, prescribed during the spring before her accident. She had suffered a serious bout of insomnia with the worry over a large product line her company had been trying to launch before the new buying season was to begin. The stress of the deadlines had been keeping Brigit awake for days on end, causing extreme exhaustion. Maggie had not thrown out the prescription that Brigit had forgotten about after the insomnia had finally been conquered. Brigit watched as Maggie shook two of the pills from the container and then paused. The thought passed quickly through her dark brown eyes, but not so quick that Brigit had been unable to see it. Her heart lurched as she read it clearly. Maggie’s sadness was so overwhelming that she had given thought to taking enough of the sleeping pills to make sure she would sleep forever…

“No, just take two,” she said. “Two is enough.”

Maggie sighed again and plopped the two pills into her mouth before replacing the cap on the bottle and returning it to the medicine chest. Brigit sighed in relief before following Maggie to the bedroom. She watched as her partner stretched out on the bed. Silently, Maggie reached for the picture on the table. Brigit thought she heard the sound of another crack forming in Maggie’s heart as she gazed at the photo in the frame.

“You’re not alone, sweetheart,” Brigit said quietly, even though she knew Maggie couldn’t hear her.

“Brigit?”

The sound of Maggie’s voice shocked Brigit.

“Brigit? If it’s you, let me know, please,” Maggie asked out loud, closing her eyes although she spoke. “Move something, say something. Just let me know you’re here,” she pleaded.

Silently, Brigit crossed the room and stood beside the bed. Maggie’s body was relaxing. The sleeping pills were working quickly. Slowly, Brigit reached out and touched her partner’s cheek. It was warm beneath her fingertips. Suddenly, a sob escaped Maggie, but Brigit was unsure whether it was from relief or deep sadness.

“It’s okay, sweetheart,” Brigit cooed.

“Why did you have to leave me?” Maggie sobbed heavily.

“I didn’t mean to, Mags. It was an accident. Can you really hear me?”

“Yes,” Maggie answered, struggling to control her grief.

Brigit sank down onto the edge of the bed and watched Maggie intently. She was relaxing more and more despite her grief’s violent ripples. The sleeping pills were obviously still potent after all this time. Maggie would be asleep soon. Brigit realized that this was her opportunity to communicate with her lover. She was in the between realms of sleep and lucidity. Maggie’s mind was opened. She would be able to hear Brigit clearly with being caught between the two realms. Suddenly, there was so much that Brigit wanted to tell her.

“I’m still with you, baby girl,” Brigit finally said, pushing Maggie’s curly brown hair back from her face. “I haven’t broken my promise. I’m not really gone.”

“I miss you, so much, Bree,” Maggie sighed. “Sometimes, I believe I can still feel you holding me at night. It hurts so badly to wake up in the morning. I just want to be with you.”

“Not yet, Mags. It’s not time. You’re still alive. You need to keep living, sweetheart. There’s a life waiting for you. You need to find it,” Brigit urged quietly.

“I had a life with you,” Maggie argued.
“I know. I’m still with you. I’ll always be with you. I won’t let anything happen to you,” Brigit promised. She could feel Maggie’s energy beginning to wane. She could also feel Maggie beginning to struggle against the sleep that was beginning to overpower her.

“I love you, Bree,” Maggie slurred.

“I love you, too, baby. Go to sleep now. It’s okay. I’m here. I’m not going anywhere yet. I’ll stay,” Brigit cooed. As if to reinforce her promise, she stretched out behind Maggie and wrapped her arms around her. In response, Maggie scooted her body closer – intent on feeling Brigit completely wrapped around her.

“Tomorrow, I want you to throw the pills away,” Brigit whispered as she felt the last weight of sleep settle on Maggie. A sleepy and unintelligible reply was heard before the first deep breath came that signaled Maggie’s submission to that which had been eluding her for days now. She was asleep.
He flicked the stub of his cigarette to the street and reached inside his jacket for the crumpled pack he kept in the breast pocket. His green eyes were trained on the building across the street. He had seen them enter it earlier. He wasn’t concerned about their re-emergence from it, however. Considering the fact that they hadn’t come out yet, Seamus was sure beyond doubt that this was their residence. He felt his stomach beginning to churn with the thought of Brigit Malone playing house with her Maggie. Their lives were an abomination. They should have been straightened out a long time ago…*but I have a bigger bone to pick with her*, Seamus mused as he struck a match from the worn book of them he kept in his pocket and touched the flame to the tip of the cigarette between his lips.

He had been less than amused when told that Brigit Malone would be returning to the firm. He had overestimated John’s sense of fairness in the matter. Obviously, the head Reaper had more of a soft spot for the woman than Seamus had realized. It irked him that she would be allowed back to her post after such negligence. *Oh well*, Seamus thought, *all is fair in war…*

And it was war, he determined as he stared hard at the building. Brigit Malone had betrayed him. The icing on the cake had come when John Blackwick had entered his office and demanded the tokens of his conquests. She had tattled on him like a schoolgirl in pigtails. He had won those souvenirs fairly. To have them taken from him was just one more thing to stoke the fires of his ire. She had caused something to be taken from him. He would simply have to find something to take from her…

Inhaling deep on the new cigarette, Seamus turned and began to walk away. There were plans to be made, a scheme to be hatched. He needed to begin assembling the cast for their parts in his play. Brigit Malone would learn her lesson. Seamus was set hard on that.
She awoke slowly. As she rolled her head to the side, Maggie noticed the heaviness of it. It was a side affect of the sleeping pills she had taken, she knew. She remembered Brigit’s complaint of the same sensation the next morning after taking them. Now, as she focused her gaze on the clock quietly ticking on the bedside table, Maggie wondered if she should have taken them at all.

She had needed the sleep, though. It had been a rough week and the state of sleep had kept its borders closed to her.

Slowly, Maggie pushed herself up into a sitting position and sighed. It was more than her head that felt heavy. Her whole body felt heavy. She came to the conclusion that it was no wonder that Brigit had stopped taking the pills after only a few nights…

Another deep sigh escaped Maggie. After so many months, her thoughts still seemed to revolve around Brigit. Her dreams contained images of memories, imaginations that Brigit was still present even though Maggie was well aware that she would never see Brigit walking though the door and announcing that she was finally home. That particular weight bore down on her brain the heaviest of all. Brigit had promised forever and that promise had been broken.

Or had it?

Maggie’s attention drifted to the framed picture of Brigit that sat beside the quietly ticking clock. She had tried to remove the visual reminders, yet, she had come home that day and found this one particular reminder returned to its place. Then, there had been the awful fight with Lorena Rubens where Maggie had been sure she had heard Brigit’s voice telling Lorena to leave. That had been followed by the scuffle with an unseen force that had ended with Lorena’s ejection from the apartment. Maggie had thought she had imagined it all. She had been sure Lorena had just been overly hysterical in her departure. At least, that was what Maggie had tried to convince herself of in the following days. It was far easier to believe that scenario than the idea of Brigit’s ghost hanging around.

Yet, as she thought of it now, she remembered hearing Brigit’s voice again. It had been just a few moments before she crossed the lines into deep sleep. Brigit’s voice had been so clear… What had she said? Maggie began to fight hard against the fog left by the sleeping pills for the short exchange she could now remember having with her lover during those moments between lucidity and sleep.

*It was an accident…*

*I’m still with you…*

*I haven’t broken my promise…*

*I love you too…*

The next sound to escape Maggie was not a sigh, but rather, a sob – a deep and painful sob that rode on the clarity of the words she had heard before falling into the deepest sleep she had experienced since before the night Brigit had been killed. The sob released her. It freed her from the weight she had been carrying quietly. Her tears flowed in a torrent over her cheeks as she gave way to the freedom from the heaviness that had been sitting on her heart all these months.

Brigit had never and would never lie to her. In the end, Maggie now had the feeling, Brigit was keeping her promise.
33: The Break

Brigit had returned to the office as promised after spending a few more days watching over Maggie. To her surprise, the office was empty. As she searched the smaller offices, she felt her confusion growing. She had expected to, at the least, find John there with the hope of being given some assignments right away so that she could get back into the swing of things.

Yet, the offices were empty…

“I could use a cup of coffee anyway,” she said out loud as she turned out of John’s office and began to walk back to the main entrance of 666 ½ Bleecker Street. It was a true thought. She had not had any coffee in almost a month now and the thought of a cup of Giuseppe’s brew had suddenly become quite the craving within her.

She was surprised to see them all there. John, Belinda, Seamus and Mama Dee had occupied a large table in the middle of the café. They were conversing cheerfully; Brigit noted as she entered the café and exchanged a nodded greeting with Edmund J. Polly. John was the first to see her come in.

“Brigit! Good, we were just wondering if you would find us,” he greeted. “Come, join us.”

“Here, baby, sit next to me,” Mama Dee instructed as she began to scoot her own seat closer to Belinda.

Brigit caught the firmness of her friend’s tone and obediently stepped to take the space Mama Dee had indicated. Seamus Flannery was sitting across the table. Mama Dee, Brigit guessed, was just being protective even though Brigit was sure the old woman knew nothing of the strained relationship she shared with Seamus. If Mama was aware of it, she had not heard it from Brigit.

“What is everyone doing here?” Brigit asked as a large hand bearing a large mug suddenly glided over her shoulder. The aroma that greeted her senses made her smile as she looked up into the face of Giuseppe Cincotta.

“Welcome back,” he greeted in his deep baritone voice.

“Thank you, Giuseppe,” Brigit replied.

“We decided to take a break,” Belinda piped up in response to Brigit’s question. “John says we’re close to catching up and we deserved a break.”

“Aye,” Seamus added as he eyed Brigit. “We’ve been working like mad to make up for the shortage of staff.” Brigit paused in mid-sip of her coffee to meet his glare. He had oiled his words carefully, but she had caught their meaning all the same.

“I apologize for the inconvenience my absence may have caused you, Mr. Flannery,” Brigit said evenly. She had hoped for more sarcasm, but in a way, she was glad it came out as it did. It was a blanket apology for everything. There would be no fight today. Seamus flinched slightly with her reply. He had oiled his words carefully, but she had caught their meaning all the same.

“I apologize for the inconvenience my absence may have caused you, Mr. Flannery,” Brigit said evenly.

She had hoped for more sarcasm, but in a way, she was glad it came out as it did. It was a blanket apology for everything. There would be no fight today. Seamus flinched slightly with her reply. It was barely a movement, but Brigit had seen it and she saw the fires of anger light in the Irishman’s emerald eyes. He knew she had seen it.

“I think I need to get back to work,” Seamus suddenly said after a few seconds of uncomfortable silence danced in the space between them.

“What? I thought you said you were caught up for the day?” Belinda protested as Seamus rose from his chair. Brigit looked at the girl as she detected notes of disappointed surprise in her voice.

“I just remembered something,” Seamus lied. “I’ll see ye back at the office,” he muttered before stalking out of the café. Belinda looked down into the contents of the cup before her. Disappointment shone clearly on her face though she remained silent.
“At any rate,” John finally spoke, acting as though they were resuming a conversation that had been rudely interrupted. “How are things with you?”

“Everything is fine,” Brigit answered. “So, we’re really close to being caught up? What happened with the Bailey?”

Brigit listened intently as John related the goings on of the office during her absence. Seamus had returned to reaping the harder assignments that were his department. The Bailey had been put on strict orders to deliver the new files himself every evening. Brigit felt Mama Dee shudder beside her and looked at her friend in questioning confusion.

“I don’t like him,” Mama responded. Brigit suppressed the urge to laugh out loud before returning her attention to John.

“I’m hoping that if he is delivering our workload himself that it will slow him down and give us the opportunity to catch up – not to mention beginning to lay the foundations for new offices around the world,” John explained.

“I can see the logic in that,” Brigit agreed. “And what about you, Belinda? How do you like the firm?” Her former protégé looked up from the contents of her mug and shrugged in half-reply.

“It’s cool,” she said somewhat apathetically. Brigit left her attention on Belinda as John lauded the young woman’s accomplishments over the last month. Belinda had secured the new and permanent position as the official record keeper of Reaper’s, Inc. The praise, Brigit noted, seemed not to affect the Goth girl as she let her bright blue eyes return to the contents of her cup.

“What are you drinking?” Brigit asked when John had finished talking.

“Hot cocoa,” Belinda sighed.

“John,” Brigit formed the question in her mind and the head Reaper immediately nodded in agreement. Without another word, he scooped Belinda’s cup from the table and headed to the bar to refill it for her. Surprised, Belinda looked after him and then to the two women that were looking back at her in earnest.

“Why did he do that?”

“I asked him to,” Brigit replied. “What’s going on with you?”

“Nothing, why? And how did you ask him to? You didn’t say anything I didn’t hear you say anything,” Belinda pointed out.

“Don’t change the subject,” Brigit instructed.

“You have been acting all melancholy lately. Mr. John, he gives you a pat on the back and you just shrug it off,” Mama Dee pointed out. “I think you’re distracted by something.”

“I’m not distracted,” Belinda denied.

“Belinda, we’re not jumping on your case,” Brigit said gently. “We’re concerned. Sometimes, a girl just needs to talk it out.”

“I think she’s in love,” Mama Dee declared, before picking up her own coffee cup.

“I am not,” Belinda suddenly looked surprised at the old woman’s accusation. The slight blush rising in her pale cheeks betrayed her.

“At any rate,” Brigit pushed the denial aside as she watched the color flood her protégé’s face. “We’re a family. If you need to talk,”
“I’ll let you know,” Belinda interrupted with a sigh. The blush, however, remained.

“I still think she’s in love,” Mama persisted.

“Is all well?”

The three women at the table looked up to find John Blackwick beside them. A fresh cup of cocoa was in his hand. Brigit exchanged one last glance with Belinda, seeking reassurance that the younger woman was indeed all right. She grew more concerned when Belinda looked away.

“It’s as well as it can be,” Brigit sighed.

“Good!” John slid the refreshed cup of cocoa before the Goth girl and resumed his seat. “Brigit, I think we need to discuss further plans for the firm and develop a strategy for increasing productivity.”

“John, I’ve only been back a few minutes,” Brigit laughed. “I thought you were taking a break?” John looked at her in surprise as her words sank in on him. Finally, he allowed a slight smile to emerge across his thin lips.

“You’re right. Business can wait a bit longer, eh?”
34: Back in the Swing

Things did seem to be flowing easily lately, John mused as he nodded solemnly to the Bailey. No words were exchanged as the pale figure in fluttering black robes deposited the day’s new portfolios on the corner of John’s desk and exited the office as quietly as he had entered. As he watched the dark figure glide back down the hall, John acknowledged the tense underlying energy that seemed to course through the productivity since Brigit’s return.

He was aware of the source, yet, until something happened between them – John could do nothing more than keep one eye open to it. He only hoped Seamus Flannery would eventually come to his senses and let it all go. Brigit had apologized that day in the café, although, John was sure she had not meant to be so far reaching in the apology. Seamus had been slick in his attempt to lure her into an argument of some sort. John had caught that much. He had been proud that Brigit had eluded the attempt in such a lady-like manner. Even so, John knew it would not be the last attempt Seamus would make in an attempt to cast a bad light on Brigit. He only hoped Brigit would not fall into the trap…

Brigit had resumed her assignments eagerly, reaping during the day and returning to Maggie at night. John had the sense that it might seem unfair to the other Reapers that she would be allowed to have a dual existence with the firm. It was part of their agreement, though. So long as Brigit Malone maintained the efficiency of her assignments and the priorities of the firm, John would continue to honor their agreement as long as Maggie Devon still drew mortal breath.

John set the newly delivered files at the bottom of the stack before him. He was taking his time with them these days. New recruits were still his first priority and he did not want to miss the opportunity to find another Belinda Yaris. Brigit had done well to bring the young woman on. He wanted to make sure the future members of the firm were of the same caliber.

A quiet knock at the door broke John from his thoughts. He looked up and found Brigit standing just inside it.

“*I’m heading home,*” she announced.

“You’ve dropped your completed assignments?”

“Belinda’s working on them now,” Brigit confirmed.

“Very good. Thank you, Brigit,” he said quietly.

“For what?”

John looked at his assistant for a long moment. There were so many things he was grateful for in regard to Brigit Malone. Finally, he smiled and simply said:

“For getting back into the swing so easily.”
35: Hearing Matilda Sing

Brigit picked up the short stack of portfolios John had left on her corner of the desk.

She had paused long enough to wish Belinda a good morning on her way to the head Reaper’s office. As she looked around the younger woman’s space, she had noticed the addition of a black leather sofa and a vase holding an overly large sunflower bloom on the small table beside it. The bright yellow of the flower’s soft petals seemed to add all the more light to the otherwise bleak room. Upon commenting on the loveliness of the sunflower, Brigit caught the notes of pride as Belinda gushed that it had been a gift from Seamus Flannery. Mama Dee had been right, after all. Belinda Yaris was in love.

Biting her tongue to keep from issuing a warning against the younger woman’s obvious infatuation, Brigit simply smiled and reiterated how lovely the flower was. Something inside her warned her to maintain her silence in regard to Seamus Flannery, if only for the sake of the peace that seemed to mask the every day operations of Reapers, Inc. Eventually, that mask would fade away. Brigit had no wish to rush that particular moment into existence.

As she walked down the hall toward John’s office, Brigit couldn’t help but revisit the fact that she still didn’t have her own office space within the firm. Seamus had his quarters assigned to him almost immediately upon joining the company. Brigit had planted Belinda in the small room she now occupied upon bringing her to the main office and even Mama Dee had an office to call her own. Brigit reminded herself to have a discussion with John regarding the situation when she returned from her assignments.

The first portfolio of the day’s assignments caused Brigit to smile. Mickey Benjamin was finally going to have his final wish fulfilled. Feeling light, Brigit made her way to the main entrance of the office as she read the address out loud: 72 St. Marks Place.

He was seated at a small table in the middle of the room, one arm resting on the table and his legs crossed at the knee in patient waiting.

Through the dim light of the morning sun that forced its way through the dust encrusted panes of glass high up on the walls, Brigit could see the trails through the dust on the floor where he had dragged the table from where it had been stored against the wall. How long he had been sitting there, she was unsure. A bottle of champagne on the table beside him indicated his preparedness for the celebration he intended to have once he heard Matilda Swenson finally sing. Almost a year had passed since the crossing of Matthew-Matilda Swenson, though. Brigit wondered if a celebration was still intended after so much time.

The echo of her boots on the club’s wooden floor caught his attention. Mickey Benjamin quickly turned to face her. Hope filled his eyes as she emerged from the shadows.

“You came back!” the young man gushed as he jumped from the chair and rushed to embrace the female Reaper. “I’ve been waiting for so long. I was afraid you had forgotten about me.”

“I’m sorry it took as long as it did, Mickey,” Brigit apologized. “I’ve been a little busy.”

“It’s okay, sweetie,” Mickey said as he finally released her. “You kept your promise. That’s all that counts.”

“I always keep my promises one way or another,” she replied as she caught the odor that arose from the collar of his purple silk shirt. “Have you been drinking?” Brigit asked as she glanced at the champagne bottle on the table. The cork, she noticed, was still securely attached. Yet, a distinct smell of alcohol had arisen from the young man when he had stepped back from her. She didn’t remember smelling it on him during her first encounter with him.

“What? Oh, that,” Mickey suddenly looked embarrassed. “No. I don’t drink. The night we,” he faltered, looking for the right word.
“Passed,” Brigit offered.

“That will work,” Mickey agreed. “The night we passed, Matilda and me, well, I fell down the back steps after I told Mr. Pershing that Matilda was dead. I landed in a puddle of whiskey someone had spilled at the bottom of the stairs. It’s a terrible smell, isn’t it?” The young man sniffed at the collar of his shirt and wrinkled his nose in disgust.

“Mickey Benjamin, are you ready to leave this place?” Brigit asked as she withdrew his portfolio from her coat pocket. Quickly, she read the pages of his life as the door appeared to her left. On the last page, she saw the details he had just told her. His passing had been the result of a mis-step on the stairs leading to the club owner’s office. It had been an accident.

“Yes, finally, yes,” Mickey gushed as he began to run his hands nervously through his hair.

“Mickey Benjamin,” Brigit reached out and gently pulled open the door that had appeared to her left. From the other side, they heard the music and the singing of Matilda Swenson from the other side. Brigit saw Mickey’s face light up with the recognition of the voice that reached his ears.

“She’s fantastic,” he whispered in awe.

As she watched him for a second longer, Brigit realized the depth of the young man’s adoration for the drag queen she had crossed over almost a year before. She suddenly regretted not being able to return for him sooner.

“She’s fantastic,” he whispered in awe.

“I’m really, finally, going to get to see her sing,” Mickey gushed.

“Here, you’ll need this when she’s done,” Brigit said. She had fetched the champagne from the table Mickey had been sitting at and shoved it into his hands.

“Thank you, so much. You have no idea what this means to me,” Mickey said as he threw his arms around Brigit’s neck once more. The champagne bottle was pressed firmly between them as he gave her a good squeeze. Brigit smiled and pushed the young man off again, making sure he had a hold of the bottle as she did so.

“Get in there already,” she said gently. “Mickey Benjamin, may you find eternal peace.”

Brigit watched the young man enter the portal as the sound of a sultry torch song wafted through the air to her ears. Matilda Swenson did have a lovely voice. As Brigit held the door open for a few seconds after Mickey Benjamin had crossed over, it occurred to her that she had managed to catch the show at the St. Marks Club after all.
“I’m off to Rome again,” John declared as he shrugged into his suit coat and buttoned it. “I trust that all will go well while I’m away,” he asked as he leveled a solemn gaze on Brigit as she looked up from the portfolios before her. She had easily taken over the seat behind his desk and resumed the work of sorting the daily assignments. She had glanced up, John observed, just long enough to grasp the meaning behind his look.

“I’ll call if I need you,” she assured him quietly before returning her attention to the files. “How long will you be gone?”

“Just long enough to interview these few potentials and to make sure all is running well in the office there. I shouldn’t be more than a couple of days,” John assured her. “I was thinking that we should begin separating the files by region so that we can be prepared to open other new offices.”

“That’s a good idea,” Brigit agreed. “I’ll set Belinda to it. It will be a good project for her. Something to keep her focused from her recent distraction,” Brigit said quietly.

She had not been the only one to notice the budding relationship between Belinda and the Irishman Brigit still found herself at odds with. It seemed, however, that she was the only one worried by the potential outcome of it.

“Are you sure all will be well?” John asked.

He was concerned about leaving Brigit alone with Seamus Flannery. John had been trying to make sure they had as little interaction as possible since learning of Seamus’ threat to Brigit. Now, however, he had no choice. The state of the company demanded his presence elsewhere. He could only pray that Brigit would keep her guard up until he could return.

“It will be fine, John,” Brigit said again. “I will call if I need you. I promise,” she said firmly.

“Very well then,” John sighed upon the realization that the subject was closed. He knew Brigit would not voice any concerns – if she had any at all to voice. “Good luck with the work load. The Bailey appears to have found a way to increase his productivity.”

“You’ve noticed?” Brigit laughed. It was true. The Bailey had started depositing his assignments later and the Reapers had noticed the amounts were beginning to increase again. “Get going, John. We’ll all still be here when you come back.”

With that, the head Grim Reaper turned and exited their office. It was theirs, in all honesty. Brigit had voiced her request for her own space, but John Blackwick had pointed out that it was not necessary. As his assistant, Brigit assumed his role and duties when he was not present. To save time, she would occupy his office. Considering the current state of the firm, John mused as he passed Mama Dee in the hall and exchanged a nod of greeting; he was going to be away a lot soon. The office would eventually belong solely to Brigit and John would only find use for it on occasion. Brigit had learned so much over the last couple of months. Soon, John further mused as he reached for the main entrance to 666 ½ Bleecker Street, she might be facing a promotion if the state of Reapers, Inc. continued to go so well.

Brigit sighed heavily as she reached for the next stack of portfolios. She had never truly realized how mentally taxing it could be to sort through the daily mail. She suddenly had sympathy for John Blackwick and his position as head Reaper. A movement at the door to the office distracted Brigit from further thought. It was Mama Dee and she looked concerned.

“Where’s he going?” Mama asked, pointing over her shoulder at the now gone John Blackwick.

“He’s headed back to Rome for a couple of days. He’s found some potential new recruits for the office there,” Brigit explained. “How are you today?”
“I’m okay, I guess. I just finished a hard case. Poor baby,” Mama Dee shook her head sadly. “I hate when a baby passed because its parents were stupid.”

Brigit was not surprised by this declaration. Mama Dee, a woman who had been unable to bear children of her own, could never understand why people who had been better blessed didn’t recognize the gift a child was. Apparently, this consideration had been carried over even in death for Mama Dee.

“How hard did you hug the child before you passed him?” Brigit asked, hoping to lighten the mood.

“Not hard enough, I’ll tell you that,” Mama Dee sighed. “Do you have some more for me?”

Brigit glanced at the short stack John had started. Sadly, there weren’t enough to there to keep her friend distracted from the sadness of her last assignment. She said as much as she passed the files over to Mama Dee.

“It don’t matter,” Mama sighed again as she scooped them up. “I’ll take what you got. So many babies to take care of,” the old woman said.

She pushed herself up out of the chair she had sank into and turned to make her way out of the office. Brigit sighed heavily as she watched her friend retreating down the hall. She was glad John had agreed to bring Mama Dee on. So many babies were waiting and Mama Dee was the perfect one to show them the final moment of love.

Brigit resumed sorting through a few more files before a commotion seemed to erupt in the hall. The sound of the front door slamming open and then shut had startled her. Her pulse calmed, however, after the string of almost unintelligible curse words reached her ears. Seamus Flannery had returned to the office and he sounded none too happy. Brigit caught barely a glimpse of him as he charged into the arsenal room and slammed the door behind him. Even through the thick walls, she could still hear him cursing. Some words in English, some words in Gaelic – other words a mixture of the two. Over it all, she caught the fact that his last assignment had broken the Irishman’s beloved shelaighley and it had pissed him off. She could only imagine what had happened after that.

She heard the door of the arsenal room whoosh open again and Seamus re-emerged. A new shelaighley was in his hand, but his temper still burned. Their eyes met as he made to enter the office but stopped short at the sight of her sitting behind the desk. A dangerous light began to dance in his eyes as he realized the significance of her presence in John’s seat.

“Where’s John?” the flame-haired man asked slowly.

“He’s gone to Rome for a couple of days,” Brigit replied evenly.

Although Seamus Flannery suddenly looked quite the demon standing in the door way, Brigit knew she could not let this sight unsettle her. Seamus had been trying to find a way to push her buttons ever since she had returned from suspension. So far, she had been successful in ignoring him. Now that she was in charge again, she knew she couldn’t continue to do so for long.

“Is there anything I can assist you with?” she asked.

“Ha!” Seamus spat. “I know how yer assistance goes. No, thank you,” he growled as he turned to leave. “I’ll manage on me own just fine.”

“Seamus,” Brigit began, but he whirled to face her once more. His face was bright red with rage.

“It’s ‘Mr. Flannery’ to you, lass!” the Irishman lashed out at her. “Only me friends call me by me Christian name. You are most definitely not one of me friends.” His voice had risen in volume, but Brigit maintained her sense of calm. It seemed to stoke his rage all the more.

“Very well, Mr. Flannery,” she said calmly. “Should you change your mind, I’m here. Now, I suggest that you take a break and calm yourself before you return to the field. I’ll have assignments ready to pass out within the hour.” With that, Seamus turned, muttering something Brigit could only half hear. “I’m sorry?” she asked, hoping he would repeat himself. Instead, he continued walking away with her question quickly following behind him.
Before she heard the slamming of the door to 666 ½ Bleecker Street, she finally heard his reply: *Not as sorry as you’re going to be…*
Excerpt: Reapers, Inc. -
The office was eerily quiet when Brigit entered. She stopped just after closing the door and listened. There was a nervous energy floating through the air. The walls of the main hall seemed to tremble with it. Brigit found it to be an odd sensation but decided to stop in Belinda’s office to go over the file she had dropped off earlier.

Pierce Nelson was still alone. This time, however, he looked up from his work as the dark woman entered. The visible paling Brigit witnessed on his cheeks as he suddenly looked away made her all the more curious. Pierce Nelson was uneasy about something.

“Is Belinda still out?” she asked.

“She’s in, er, uh, Mr. Blackwick’s office. They’re, ahem, waiting for you,” he related nervously.

“They?” Brigit inquired, cocking a dark eyebrow at the increasingly uncomfortable accountant.

Pierce Nelson gave no reply as she sighed deeply and left the small office. She wondered what was going on that the whole building would be pulsating with such nervous vibrations. She wondered, as she walked down the length of the hall, what would deter her from finishing her day and finally going home to Maggie this time. As she started to enter the office she shared with John Blackwick, Brigit glanced to her right through the opened door of the small office she had first met Yoshiro Takamoto in. Though he appeared to be meditating again, Brigit sensed that he was aware of the energy that was rippling through the walls all around him. His hands were braced against his thighs rather than resting placidly in his lap. He was prepared for immediate action and Brigit wondered why.

John Blackwick was standing before the large mahogany desk, his face void of expression as he eyes met Brigit’s. She glanced to her right and found Belinda sitting sadly before Mama Dee. The concerned expression on Mama Dee’s face held Brigit’s attention.

“What’s going on?” she asked as she turned to stand beside John. She set her coffee cup on the corner of the desk and looked at each of the three faces looking back at her.

“Brigit, there’s been an ‘incident’,” John began coolly. Brigit raised an eyebrow.

“You mean aside from the missing Bailey? What now?” she asked; suddenly fearful that the news John would have to tell her would definitely prevent her from going home to Maggie.

“Perhaps you should sit down, baby,” Mama Dee suggested gently. Brigit caught the tone her friend used. The look in the old woman’s eyes told her nothing, however. Brigit remained where she stood.

“Why?”

The deepening looks of concern on Mama Dee and John’s faces caused a surge of panic to rise from Brigit’s gut. The shamed look on Belinda’s face only added power to the surge. Sirens were beginning to wail in the back of Brigit’s mind. Something was terribly wrong here.

“Mr. Flannery has gone rogue…”
About the Author

B.L. Newport was born with a strong belief and sensitivity in the supernatural side of life. After growing up in the small Northwest Arkansas town of Siloam Springs, she has lived in New York City and Las Vegas, Nevada. During these journeys, B.L. has discovered the joys of hard work, good friends and a good cup of coffee. She now resides in Denver Colorado with her soulmate, Rochelle.

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