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Love You to Death

Kaleigh Longe

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Bridgewater State University

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Dr. Lee Torda, Thesis Director
Dr. James Crowley, Committee Member
Dr. Ann Brunjes, Committee Member

Chapter One

Street corners are waiting places.

A throng of faceless people wait for the angry red hand across the street to give way to a luminescent white stick figure, granting them safe passage across a sea of black pavement. The woman in the yellow taxi that sits doubles parked with its flashers on waits for a call from her boyfriend. They're fighting. Inside the Corner Bistro, aptly named, the head chef waits for his favorite line cook to come back from her smoke break in the side alley. Waiting, waiting . . . waiting.

I do a lot of waiting myself. My job, like so many things in this world, is all about timing. And in about ten seconds, it'll be time for me to do my job.

Ten. I gaze at the sky which, though so vibrant yesterday, seems to be sick. Like a child come down with the flu, the sky's rosy cheeks have gone ashen, and tears may start to fall soon. Nine. I suppose it'd be a cold day in hell when my job doesn't involve tears, although I've never been to hell, so what do I know? Eight. Seven. Six. The skyscrapers and artsy museums across the street are so very rudely interrupted by an ancient cathedral large enough to swallow half the water in the harbor and still have room for dessert. Five. Bet it's a nice place for a funeral. Four. Minute dark spots are rapidly appearing on the sidewalk. Here come the tears. Three. Two. One. Go.

The little stick figure lights up, and the horde of people surges forward. Rush, rush, rush. Simultaneously, the yellow taxi across the street pulls away from the curb without bothering to check that the way is clear. Lazy. The car behind him is both speeding and texting. Stupid. The driver finally glances up from his phone, realizing his mistake far too late. He jerks the wheel,

the tires screech, and the car is no longer a car. It's a dark-blue, dented bullet that's going to make someone's children very lonely tonight.

That's where I come in.

Most humans have the pleasure of having their whole life pass them by without ever having to hear the revolting crunch of bones not only snapping, but *shattering*. The people who rush forward do not get that luxury. Those who scattered as the car careened toward them, hell bent on leaving naught but destruction in its wake stare in horror, hearing every shallow breath rattle this stranger's insides, and know that, had they been a second, *just a second* slower, it would have been them lying in the street, staining the pavement with their blood.

Everyone who was close enough to hear the screech, the thud, the shattering of glass, has dashed closer to join the crowd. It is rare to hear a bustling city fall silent, but the city falls silent now. No one dares make a sound. The car engines stop purring, the rain stops falling. It is the kind of silence you only hear when all hope is lost. The man is still breathing, but barely. Each breath could be his last. Everyone knows it, and I know it. I get to choose which one it will be.

Finally, the silence is broken by some brave soul whose 911 call is the catalyst for concerned mutters. I ignore the lilting sorrow of the woman's voice as she requests an ambulance, and step forward. This man has suffered enough. I walk through—quite literally *through*—the crowd, and crouch beside the man. Once upon a time, I would have been ashamed to admit that watching this kind of agony has gotten easier over time. His face is contorted, scrunched up like it's going to implode into itself. The tears streaming down his face drip onto the road, mixing in with the rain and the blood like some lethal cocktail.

The front end of car is speckled with red, dented more than one might expect. The driver lies slumped into the airbag, mostly unharmed. It's not his time yet.

But it is this other man's time. I am about to reach out to him, end his suffering, bring some degree of mercy to this tragedy, but a movement beside me catches my eye. A woman is knelt beside me, her head turned toward the man so all that I can see is the back of her head, an onyx ponytail half pulled out, swinging gently with each motion. She reaches out to the man, caresses his face so tenderly I wonder if she knew him personally. She murmurs to him, whispering comforting words that she must know are useless. I recognize her voice as the same one that called for help. It doesn't seem to bother her that her hand is now visibly smeared with a stranger's blood. Most people recoil at the sight of their own blood, let alone another's. Blood is a sign of death, and most humans know well enough to avoid it when they see it. But not this one.

I shake myself. Enough of this. I reach out and touch the man's face, my hand occupying the same space that her hand had just vacated. At my touch, his heart beats its last beat; his lungs empty, never to be filled again, and the woman turns around and—looks at me. And for what seems like an eternity, I look at her, and the dead man next to us looks at nothing. She must realize that something is so very, very wrong here, because I am afforded only the briefest glimpse of her face before she gets up and swiftly navigates out of the crowd, ignoring the wailing sirens of the ambulance shooting down our street.

When I looked at her everything inside of me constricted. No one in this crowd, this city, this *world* can see me, and yet I just stared into a pair of eyes the same color that the sky was yesterday. Stared into them long enough to know that they seemed familiar somehow, and they stared back.

Well, they do say the eyes are the window to the soul. Lucky for me, I have no soul.

I straighten up and pass back out of the crowd without looking back. The ambulance is blocking off half the street, here just in time to take the body to the hospital, where the man will be pronounced dead, and someone will be charged with the unpleasant task of informing his weeping wife that there was nothing they could do.

I wander away from the crowd just in time to glimpse the woman slide back into the alley and disappear into a side door. As the door swings shut again, I decide I probably recognized the girl from another job, on another day. Her stare probably wasn't directed at me, just the blank stare of someone who has witnessed a tragedy. I've been doing this nearly a hundred years now, and nothing has ever really changed. It's just another day in the life of Death.

Chapter 2

I slip back in the side door of the restaurant, darting straight into the bathroom before anyone can see me. Miracle of miracles, the doorknob turns without resistance and I ease inside, locking the door behind me. I know everyone is going to hear about the accident. A customer will tell a server, who'll tell another server, who'll tell the salad guy, who'll pass it down the line like tipping over a neatly arranged set of dominoes. *Do kids even play with dominoes anymore?* I wonder. Or does it just signify a place to find shitty pizza and diarrhea inducing subs? I'm out of touch.

Regardless, I'm more than aware that as soon as one person finds out, everyone is going to be asking me if I saw anything, and I can't very well deny it with the man's blood streaked through my fingers. So, I lather up my hands and scrub them under the kinda-warm-but-never-quite-hot water. Some people would jump at the chance to describe every gory detail, every speck of blood. In fact, I'm quite sure there's several people here who, if not satisfied with the original level of gore, would pull out a pen and rewrite events. They'd say the guy's head exploded, or shove some sappy final words in his mouth, and say how traumatized they were; anything to ensure their experience is the Big Thing of the day.

This, I reflect, is precisely the reason I don't talk about my personal life with my coworkers. Everyone wants attention for someone else's tragedy, to play the comforter, the caregiver. To say "Oh, that poor thing. She told me why she's been so distant lately. *Such* a pity, really. But I gave her a book on grief, really helped me to get through *my* tragedy." And just like that it's all about them. I don't want to be one of those people. I tried to comfort a man that was dying because it was the right goddamn thing to do. Wasn't the first time, and unfortunately for me, it probably won't be the last.

I tug some paper towels out of the dispenser and stare at myself in the mirror. It looks like there's a spot on my chin, but on closer inspection I discover it's just some grime on the mirror. My pony tail is disheveled, and I've got bags under my eyes.

And then there was that guy. It's the strangest thing, but I can't seem to recall his face. I just know that there was someone next to me, and when I looked at him . . . I don't know, something just felt off. Like he was out to get me or something.

I slide my cell out of my pocket and realize my I'll-be-super-quick-I-promise smoke break has turned into a twenty-seven minute break. I sigh. Shit.

I sneak out of the bathroom, hoping Mick will have been in the back office the whole time, and I can sneak back onto the line without incident. But, of course, life under my little black cloud is one incident after another. Mick stands at the end of the hall with a carving knife in one hand, beer belly preceding him by about six inches.

"Aisla," he spits, breaking the word into two distinct syllables, like he always does when he's angry. Eye-LA.

I resist the urge to flinch and say nothing. Mick has some kind of a soft spot for me, maybe because he knows my situation with my mom, maybe because I'm the only one left of our original team from five years ago when the place opened. Either way, if I let him get his anger out, chances are I can charm my way out of any real punishment.

"How many goddamn cigarettes did you smoke out there?" he exclaimed, waving his hands in exasperation. "That friggin' printer's been spitting out ticket after ticket for the past ten minutes, and where the fuck are you?"

“Had the shits, Mick. Been in the bathroom.” Men like Mick find vulgarity endearing from small women like myself.

“Funny. Think I’d have noticed you in there when I took a leak fifteen minutes ago. Get back on the line. I don’t want Sandy back here bitching about ticket times.”

I nod, and move to go around him and start sautéing, but he blocks my path.

“Don’t let it happen again,” he says, still holding the twelve inch blade.

That’s the great thing about working in a kitchen: even when you’re not *really* being threatened with a knife, you’re still kinda being threatened with a knife.

Back on the line, I slap on some gloves and start calling out tickets. Heat the pans, wipe the counter, time to get shit done. Next to me, Ronny’s dark fist bumps me playfully on the shoulder.

“Had the shits, huh? That’s ballsy, my friend, very ballsy,” he laughs.

I throw some onions in a pan, and marvel at Ronny’s ability to hear every-fucking-thing. The man might as well be Dumbo. He knows I was lying, but probably thinks I was just slacking off outside. Not that he’d care, though. I command a decent amount of respect for someone who needs help getting To Go boxes off the top shelf. If I had to guess, I’d say it has a lot to do with the fact that I just don’t really care what these guys think about me. Not because I’m trying not to care, but because I have better things to worry about. Well, worse things, depending on how you look at it.

I pour some white wine into two of the pans in front of me, and wish I could down the rest of the bottle. *I watched a man die today*, I think to myself. That’s just a little too heavy in an

already ten-ton life. Add a dash of the striking resemblance to my father's accident eight years ago, drop in a lime and salt the rim, and you've got yourself a Monday Misery Margarita, my friend. There's your alliteration for the day, kids.

Against my will, an image of my father's face comes swimming into the forefront of my mind, and plasters itself onto the mangled body of the stranger in the crosswalk. When I was fifteen my father had his own accident. It was two years before my mother and I moved to the city. We were on our way back from a long weekend at my aunt's house. Mom had come down with the flu earlier that week, and had stayed home, unwilling to risk vomiting in the car on the six hour road trip. He and I had been fighting, about something stupid, I'm sure, so I had refused to sit in the front seat with him, instead sequestering myself in the back, occasionally jabbing my knee into the back of his seat, just to piss him off. It was late, and the roads were deserted in a way that I wasn't used to, being born and raised in a city where everything is busy every second of every day.

They tell you not to swerve if an animal darts into the road. Hit it dead on and you'll have a better chance of surviving. Guess Dad didn't get the memo, because when he saw that deer leap into our lane like some kind of froufrou ballerina, he swerved. Right into a telephone pole. Since I was in the back, safely seat belted into place, I was mostly okay, a little dazed, some bruises, but my father . . . my father was another story.

I heaved myself into the front seat and cradled his head in my arms. I didn't care that there were tiny shards of glass poking me, or that my favorite hoodie was getting stained in a way that no amount of Clorox could ever get out. I just sat, with my father's body in my arms, until the police arrived, heralded in by flashing lights, and wailing sirens that hurt my ears.

They pulled me out of the car, pried my fingers away from my father's face, and covered me with one of those stupid ass shock blankets you see on TV. *Like that did any damn good*, I sneer. I don't really remember much after that. Just random blurs and assorted flashes. Which is probably good, because the dinner rush is coming in and I've completely lost focus.

One of my sautéés has burned. I rip the pan off the flames and hurl it down the line, narrowly missing Sherm, the oldest bastard to ever work a fry station. That guy remembers the first time an amoeba crawled out of the ocean and sprouted legs. Did I mention I have a temper? Ronny wordlessly hands me another pan, and I start another dish, muttering obscenities under my breath.

"Is my food up, yet?" I hear one of the waitresses call.

Ronny jumps in before I can snap back at her. "It's gonna be another minute, hon. I fucked the temp on those steak tips," he lies, covering my ass.

As I glance at the clock I see the waitress roll her eyes, her lips moving in a covert complaint she doesn't have the balls to say out loud. *Only six more hours till close*, I think.

At 11:34pm I stumble out the side door, so worn out I'm basically drunk. Chances are I'll black out the second I get home. I'm cranky as hell, and not in the mood for the late night subway crowd, so I decide to walk home. I turn left, away from the scene of the accident, glad I don't have to look at it for any more than a second. The street is quiet now. The crowd has long since dispersed, the ambulance is gone, and the man's family is probably at home shrouded in a sea of tears and tissues.

I think that maybe I should feel guilty for not sticking around to tell the cops what happened, but I don't. There were plenty of other people there, they can tell the story. Maybe Faceless Fred—that's what I call him now—told them what happened. That is, if he was even there at all. I still can't remember his face, so maybe he was just a figment of my imagination. I fish a cigarette and my lighter out of my pocket. I smoke more out of habit than necessity. Just need something to do with my hands.

I silently thank whatever god or gods there are that, for once, they got things right. It was so busy no one brought up the accident until the very end of the night. Sometime around eleven, the kitchen had quieted down enough that I heard one of the younger waitresses spewing the story to one of the bus boys.

"It's just, like, so scary, you know? I walk down that road every day! It could've been me there," she whispered, eyes wide.

The bus boy just shook his head and rubbed her arm, meanwhile I ducked out to the back of the kitchen to mop and clean by myself. Not unusual for me, so everyone just left me alone, for which I was thankful. My mother certainly foresaw my personality when she named me. Aisla. Like island. I truly am an island. And island is just another word for loner.

By the time my cigarette has finally burned out, I'm standing in front of my shithole apartment, with its shithole lock that you have to jiggle fifteen freakin' times to get it to open. I step inside and survey the scene. One bedroom, one bathroom, and not much else. I undress and plug in my phone that died somewhere in the midst of the hundreds of meals we pushed out during the rush. *Who the fuck goes out on a Monday night?* I wonder. Everyone apparently.

I don't bother putting pajamas on, and check my phone as quickly as I can, ready to collapse into bed. I have a voicemail from the hospital.

Hey, Aisla. It's Shauna. Just calling to let you know your mom's hanging in there. We still think it may be beneficial to operate. I know she's afraid of the risk, but it's our best option. We urge you to get her to reconsider. We ran a few tests this morning to get a better idea of where we stand; you can call in the morning to get the results. See you soon. Goodbye.

“We urge you to get her to reconsider.” As if I haven't tried. And tried. And tried. For the millionth time, I wish I made enough money to transfer my mother to a better hospital, better care, better doctors, better chance. For Christ's sake, I'm trying my best. I'm a chef at one of the best, priciest restaurants in the city. I make a damn good salary; if not for this, I'd be living in serious style. I'm talking penthouse level style. Not some shitbox with leaky ceilings, and exposed wires that'll electrocute me if I'm not careful. I should write a letter to congress and ask why I should have to pay an arm, a leg, two kidneys and a lung just so my mother can stay alive. Shouldn't we save people just because it's the right thing to do? Guess the universe doesn't want me to have either of my parents.

I'm too tired to be angry right now, though. Lucky for Shauna, or else I might call back and tell her how much I hate her for not being a better doctor. Instead, I collapse into bed in my underwear. My last thought is that I can't remember if I locked the door behind me, not a great idea in this part of town, but I just say screw it, and hope no one kills me tonight.

Chapter 3

Being Death at night in a big city is always an adventure. The city is more alive than I am. It breathes and pulses; gives and takes. I just take. In a dark recess of my mind, long repressed, I remember this city as it was a hundred years ago. Back then, it barely qualified as a city. It was where I first learned the ways of the universe at the side of an otherworldly being who called himself the Reaper.

All too well I remember it. If I had had a body, I would have trembled enough to shake the very earth beneath my feet. Nothing could have prepared me for the sensation of feeling a soul vacate what had once been a living, breathing human body. I had been an intelligent man: well read, respected by my colleagues at the university, I taught biology, was grounded in facts and science. But death? Death is a fact, but humans will never fathom the reality of it. They simply do not possess the capability to do so. Even when I died, it felt like nothing. I was there, and then . . . I was not. It was that fast.

I came to on a train platform, one that was devoid of trains, and that radiated white light from every surface. My mind was blank when I awoke, and I scrabbled to my feet. Where was I? Had I fallen asleep? Passed out? I craned my neck, trying to read the train schedule, to find some hint as to where I was, or where I might go and when. It was written in an odd language, though; one I had never encountered, and I found myself frustrated. I looked around for a staff member who could tell me what was going on, but soon realized there were no staff members. There wasn't a single soul on this platform. And where was Angela? Angela. All at once, the barriers in my mind crumbled and the stark reality of what had happened washed over me. I was panicked. I was supposed to be dead. Just a second ago I had lost consciousness, strangled by the noose around my neck. Was I hallucinating? Was this what happened when you died? I did not want

this; I wanted oblivion. I wanted not to think or to act or to be. I fell to my knees, weeping. It had all been for nothing. Death was supposed to be my escape from this. I could not bear the images rising, unbidden, to the forefront of my mind: strangers hitting me, the blast of my gun, and the thump of Angela's body as she fell to the floor, her eyes glazing over as her last breaths fled her body. This must be my punishment. I would not be allowed to forget. The knowledge that I had no choice, no way out, choked me, making the sobs escaping my chest scrape through my throat. The frustration escaped me in the form of a visceral scream. I moaned into the ground, the sound echoing around the empty platform. Please, make it stop. I want to forget. I need to forget.

I tried to take a breath to calm myself, but I couldn't. I realized suddenly that my body was out of synch with my panicked mind. The usual cacophony of bodily functions that would accompany panic were glaringly absent. No shortness of breath, no tightened throat, no churning stomach or racing heart. In fact, I could barely feel my body at all. As a man I had been anxious, and all too familiar with these symptoms, and to not feel them at all was wrong. I longed suddenly for the ability to hyperventilate, to be able to manifest my dread physically. The mind needs its partner.

In my panic, I had failed to notice a shape taking form in the light, a darkness that transcended any that I had observed in my natural life. It loomed closer, and my dread turned to unadulterated terror when it caught my attention. In my biblical studies I had read legends describing the sight of angels as being of a light so bright that it was nigh impossible for any mortal to look upon it. What I found myself gazing at here was the other side of that heavenly coin. What I saw before me was a void, a nothingness that morphed between shapes before my eyes, making it dizzying to look at. Could I run away from it?

As if sensing my thoughts, the void spoke. “Halt.” Its voice was like thunder, rolling, raging, deep and deafening. I froze.

“Do you know where you are?” it demanded.

I opened my mouth, but the words wedged themselves in my throat, refusing to come out.

“SPEAK UP.”

“N-no,” I trembled.

“You are in Limbo. Do you know why?”

“W-who are you?” I asked. I knew why I was there, or I thought I did, at least. I just could not bring myself to say it out loud.

Thunder rolled through the train platform. “I am the Reaper. In past centuries, I was known as Death. I served the Balance of the Infinite Universe as it was implemented on earth. I claimed those souls who had fulfilled their purpose there and sent them forth into the unknown, to the next step in their celestial journey, wherever it led. But you people, you humans,” he snarled as if the word were a slur, “you bred like a disease, never ceasing in your expansion. It became too much; you die in droves, hordes of you all keeling over each second. People suffered because I could not get to them in time, and so they remained, suspended in limbo between life and death, torn between their bodies on earth and the pull of their spirit toward the next life. It became chaos. I remember every face; their moans, their agony. I could not allow it to go on. I needed help. So I chose a soul, one who needed guidance, and I taught him. He became Death. You remind me of him. He, too, killed someone whom he held dear to his heart. His brother, just a boy, sweet and innocent, had been attacked in the woods. The wolf’s teeth pierced his small

body over and over. His brother heard the commotion and ran to help, but it was too late. By the time he managed to frighten the wolf off by throwing heavy stones, his brother was already past saving. But he would have suffered for hours, possibly days if his brother had tried to save him or bandage his wounds. Instead, his brother slit his throat, ending his misery. It's funny, you humans kill each other in cold blood so very often, and yet this man could not forgive himself for this most merciful of kills. When he died a short time after, I made him work, claiming souls by my side. It took centuries, but he finally came to understand death; that it is not always sorrowful, that sometimes, it is the kindest embrace a soul can experience. When finally the time came for him to move on, I chose another like him. Our numbers have grown some since then, but we have just lost one of our own to the call of the universe. You will take his place."

"I cannot. I am broken. I—" I break off, unable to go on. I long for the comfort of Angela's arms around me, her lips brushing against the stubble on my cheek, the silken touch of her hand. She could make any worry I had vanish. Even this, this complete insanity, would be nothing compared to her.

"Humans," it snorted, "Even in death your concern is only for yourselves. You may be broken, but broken things do not always stay that way. This is not a choice. A soul is a fragile thing and not a plaything to be tampered with. You will do the job and you will do it with honor and respect."

I swallowed hard. To say I was frightened is a disservice. There is no word sufficient to express my terror. Just as humans find themselves at a loss when contemplating death, so too I found myself unable to comprehend what was being asked of me. It was like being placed in the middle of an endless desert with no map, no landmarks by which to orient yourself, and being told to find your way out.

“I don’t know how to do this,” I pleaded.

“I know,” he responded in a voice that sounded almost pitying. “That is why I am here. I will show you.”

“Show me? Show me how?”

A tendril of the amorphous void in front of me stretched out, reaching toward my forehead. Dread hit me like a hurricane, and all I knew was that I did not want to let that thing touch me. It snaked nearer, only an inch from my face, and the last thing I saw before I was squeezed into darkness was Angela’s face, smiling at me.

I emerged out of the darkness in a grand explosion, and though the effort was a futile one, I found myself panting, trying to catch my breath. The skin on the back of my neck prickled, and I turned around to find the reaper’s amorphous form lurking behind me. For a moment, neither of us spoke, but simply regarded each other with uncertainty.

“You found that experience uncomfortable,” said the reaper, breaking the silence. It was not a question, and I was uncertain whether I was supposed to respond. “You will get used to the sensation as time goes on,” he explained. “Instinct should allow you to travel through the shadow realm. The simple will to travel will suffice.”

I do not respond to this announcement, finally taking in my surroundings. We are standing on a dirt road, alone but for the prone figure lying face down on the ground beside us. I drop to my knees as a cool wind breezes through the trees, rustling the woman’s hair like the mottled leaves above us. I reach out to her.

“No. Not yet.”

I freeze. “What do you mean ‘not yet?’ We must help her, there’s something wrong with her!” The woman’s golden hair, only a few shades darker than Angela’s, flutters again in the breeze, sending the scent of jasmine wafting toward me.

“There is no helping her. Her time here on earth is finished. When you touch her, her soul will be released and it will move onward. But you must be prepared,” says the reaper.

“Be prepared for what?” I ask with trepidation. I glance at the woman and my stomach churns. I try to look for signs of life in her still body, but none present themselves. I wonder whether she is alive. A feeling of dread deep in my stomach tells me she is dead, but the reaper’s comments suggest a soul still resides inside her body. And isn’t the soul the very thing that makes us alive? I swallow hard and look back to the reaper, who seems to have been waiting for my attention before going on. Though he has no face or eyes, his very presence gives me the feeling of being held under an intense scrutinizing gaze.

“You must be prepared for what you are about to do, and what you are about to feel. When experienced for the first time, the releasing of a soul can be . . . *overwhelming*. Bear in mind that what you are doing is the right thing to do, is the *only* thing to do. These souls must be sent onward, it is for the better.”

“How can it be for the better?” I demand. “I would wager my life’s savings that she does not want this! She must have a family; a husband, probably children, too. People that need her! She would not want this!” I am no longer sure whether I am talking about this unfamiliar woman in front of me, or if I am talking about Angela. I ripped everything away from her. Myself, her parents, her plans. We were going to have children. And in a moment, a single rash act, I stole it all from her. I cannot bear to take all those things away from this woman, too.

“This is not a choice; it is a duty. The wishes and desires of humans mean little in the scheme of the universe. As difficult and undesirable as you may find this, you do not have a choice. I have explained to you that there are consequences, will you choose to flout the rulings of the universe and release chaos into this world?”

I remain silent, torn between what I believe is right and what the reaper is telling me is right.

“Reach out,” he instructs me. “Touch her, anywhere. Your touch will allow her soul to move on. Do not be sad for her.”

Working against every fiber in my body, I do as the reaper has told me. I lay my hand on her shoulder, unable to bring myself to touch her bare hand, to form a connection so human, in order to perform a deed I find so vile.

The instant my fingers come into contact with her body, I gasp, my whole body going rigid. Tendrils of thought run over my body, barraging my mind with flashes of emotion and knowledge. I watch a young girl with blonde hair frolics through a patch of overgrown grass. A heavily bearded man kisses my hand. The same man advances toward me, angry and inebriated, and I am fearful. I lie in bed, sick and sniffing. I wrap yarn tightly in a bright yellow skein. I am inside this woman’s head. Shame overwhelms me as her life flashes before my eyes. I feel dirty. I am watching every secret, every intimate moment of her life, an intruder spying on her as she dies.

The memories run faster now as I approach the final years of her life. I shudder as I feel the last remnants of her souls rush over me, and just like that, she is gone. I lean forward, hugging my knees. What have I done?

“Do not weep for her.”

“How can I not?” I snap. “I just lived her life! Her whole life, all of it! And then I killed her.”

“You did not kill her. The stroke killed her. In time you will come to understand.”

“I can’t do this,” I whisper. It is too much. It is just too much.

“Whether you believe you can or cannot does not matter. You must carry out your duty. Do not expect wisdom to find you in an instant; understanding will come in time. Be gentle with yourself.”

I say nothing, but simply shake my head. I do not know what to feel, so instead, I try hard to feel nothing. There is a certainty in my chest reminding me that I have no choice in this. If I must do this, I must find a way to cope. Already I am dreading the next time I must live out another person’s life, like some sort of parasite.

The reaper interrupts my musings. “We have little time left. I must return to Limbo, and you must go on to your next soul. Look inside, and you will know. Go now. Goodbye, Death.”

And with that, he vanished. I stood alone on that dirt road, with only an empty vessel beside me for company. I had no time to ponder what I should do next, for a sudden ache in my chest urged me onward. I felt a need, a yearning, pulling me away from this spot, like a string pulling my heart toward another. Part of me wished to step back, to stay here with this woman until someone came by to bring her body home, but the string was persistent, pulling me forward.

Giving in to the felling, I stepped forward into the blackness, and travelled through the void to my next soul.

And so it has gone for a century, souls after soul, release after release, until I ended up here, standing in the shadows, watching the mini-skirted woman standing beneath a flickering streetlight on the shady side of town.

She revolves slowly, chain smoking cigarettes. She waits patiently, a beacon to the lustful, the lonely, the perverse. A risk taker, a daughter, a compulsive heroin user. Since she is on my list, I know everything about her. I can see every trite anecdote, and every life-changing event. I can see everything that ever has, or ever *will* happen to her, which, after tonight, is nothing. I gaze unflinchingly as a white car speckled with dirt pulls up beside the woman. The few bystanders that have been lurking nearby retreat farther into the shadows. They know what this is.

From this distance, I can't make out what is being said. Low bass rumbles out of the car, so much like thunder that I wait for lightning to strike. Though I can't hear it, I know that this sly pick-up is quickly escalating into an argument.

The car door whips open, and the driver steps out, unfolding to a height even her six-inch stilettos cannot rival. Their voice rise, echoing through the street, as if through a canyon. The driver has obviously offended her, because she leans forward and spits at him. Maybe the heroin coursing through her veins made her brave, or maybe she's just stupid. Either way, that was the wrong move. The man strikes her across the face, his rage the lightning strike to his car's thunder. In her shock, she misses the flash of the .44 in his opposite hand. She places her palms on his chest. Spark. And shoves, setting her wiry frame tottering. Bang.

The gun explodes, and so does her gut. The man stoops to the ground, furtively patting her down with no regards for her dying breaths or her last words. He extracts a wad of money from her breast and rifles through it, clearly dissatisfied with what he finds. With a quick hop, he folds himself back into his car, slamming the door and peeling away.

The acrid scent of burnt rubber assaults my senses as I stride across the street. I know before I see her that she will be passed out from blood loss. On closer inspection, her halter top is depressingly threadbare, doing very little to hide her cleavage as she lies sprawled on the sidewalk. Her blood is still oozing onto the concrete, leaving a stain that will eventually be covered over by February's harsh snows. For a few days, people will talk; they'll nudge their friends, point covertly at the stain, and whisper behind cupped hands. Then, far too soon, people will forget. If anyone bothered to ask where the stain came from, the only response they would receive is "I don't know." But they won't ask. They never do.

It will be many months before this woman's estranged father finds out about his daughter's violent demise. A handful of her usual customers will pass by this spot. They will see the stain, and look for a new human sex toy to satisfy them. A few of them might grieve for her, though "grieve" may be too strong a word. More likely, they will be dejected at the prospect of having to find a new woman to defile, but they will try to cover it by telling themselves they are sorry for her passing. As if they knew her as anything more than a place to jam their privates.

I press two fingers to her temple, releasing her soul. I am no longer beside a person; I am beside a body. Her soul is now free to go wherever it is destined to go. Maybe she's going to heaven. Who am I to judge? I'm not even sure heaven exists. Or hell for that matter. All I know of death is what I have experienced firsthand. I am not here to judge souls, just to release them.

Without me, without Death, souls would never move on. They need us to tell them it is okay to leave.

I'm not sure what it is about our touch that encourages a soul to move on, but I can understand the reluctance. Body and soul. One is not complete without the other. Without a soul a body is just an empty vessel, a snail shell left behind to be trampled underfoot. And since souls are invisible to humans, well . . . to be just a soul would be a very lonely existence, indeed. I, of all people, could attest to that. The closest I have come to a personal interaction in nearly a hundred years was this morning, when that girl, that woman, looked at me. Looked *near* me. She could not have actually looked at me.

On the other hand, the lack of interpersonal distraction makes focusing on the job that much easier. I have my list, I find the people, and I send them off to whatever afterlife, or reincarnation, or crushing void may lie in store for them. Next on my list is an elderly man; Ron Dawson. I feel a vague sense of relief as I appear inside his bedroom, knowing that this death will not be a violent one.

Ron Dawson is well into his eighties. His wife is in on the other side of town, in a nursing home on the edge of these placid suburbs. It is not often that I stumble upon a couple who can still stand each other after over fifty years of marriage, but this man has that pleasure. Evidence of his love stands scattered around his bedroom. The photo on his nightstand, a recent one from one of his weekly visits. A bookshelf stacked less with books, and more with piles of anniversary cards. A wedding ring, ancient, but polished with regularity, still on his finger.

I stand over him, close enough that, if I had a real body, my leg would have grazed his starched white sheets. Maybe the rustling would have woken him. But he does not wake. Mr.

Dawson will pass away peacefully in his sleep, leaving behind a widow, and some couple thousand dollars per month in social security. I would not be surprised if, sometime in the next few weeks, I find myself in a building that wallops anyone under the age of sixty with the pungent smell of elderly women's perfume and festering bed sores, where I'll appear in the background of Mrs. Dawson's double room. She may still have tears in her eyes, her heart may ache for her late husband, and her oxygen machine just won't be enough to save her. Couples like that usually follow each other. Like the other person was a vital organ they could not live without.

His chest rises and falls, and though I know every fact of his life, I wonder what it truly feels like to be Ron Dawson. To be secure, to be content, to be peaceful, even in death. Fact versus feeling. My existence is all fact.

It is a fact, I remind myself, that I have a schedule, and I need to stick to it. I cup his hand in my own, and his breathing ebbs away. He is gone, but he could still be sleeping. Now, I am on to another person, in another place, spreading the single, solitary, indisputable fact of life: we must all die.

It has been a long night. I do not need food, or sleep, but still I wish for just a moment of rest. Ever since Ron Dawson's house, a cloud has followed me, raining down drops of apathy until I was drenched. For over a lifetime, I have spent every second jumping from person to person, witnessing death after death, and what's the point, really? It shouldn't be possible for a shadow to feel heavy, but I do.

The sun is peeking in the window of this third floor hospital room, as if asking permission to rise. The whole room is bathed in rose gold and light grey shadows, making the bare white walls a tapestry of color that no artist could ever capture. If I wasn't here, it might be beautiful.

There is only one bed in this room, meaning, as I already know, this woman is gravely ill. While it is universally unpleasant to be surrounded by strangers while sick, it at least means you are essentially guaranteed to survive. They reserve the single rooms for the terminally ill, or the seriously injured. Putting those people in a group room means risking panic when I arrive.

Beside the bed, a woman has pulled the heavy visitor chair as close to the bed as it will go. Her head is resting on the leg of the slumbering woman in the bed, and her jet black hair is cloaking her face, hiding the tears that must be falling. The room is filled with a silence that weighs me down even further, but her shoulders are trembling in a way I have seen a thousand times, and recognize instantly. Her grief is a waterfall no dam could ever contain, and she does not want to wake the woman beside her.

Something akin to sympathy wells up in me, and I wish that the sun could make her life as beautiful as it has made this room.

My mind goes blank, and then I realize what I just said. That was not me. I did not, would not, *ever*, say something like that. I am not here to sympathize. I signed up for another hundred years of releasing souls, and thoughts like that will not help me get it done any quicker. I am here to atone for my sins, and nothing more. I step forward. This woman will code soon. I will touch her, she will move on, and so will I.

I am a shadow, silent and invisible, but the instant I move from my post beside the closed door, the sobbing woman snuffles, and looks up, brushing her hair from her face.

Her eyes are puffy, red, streaming tears, but there is no doubt. These are the same eyes I saw this morning, and they are staring straight at me.

Chapter Four

I'm back in the crosswalk, crouched in front of a dented, blood-speckled car. I rise and turn in a circle, eyebrows furrowed. All the cars are gone.

“What the hell?” I mutter.

This street is usually the set up for a sudden death round of Frogger. Rumbling busses, rattling exhausts, impatient taxis taking their frustration out on the horn; all gone. So too are the crowds of harried business people, jogging soccer moms, and skateboarding kids cutting class.

I spend most of my time alone; live alone, walk home alone, work alone as often as possible, but this? This is different. Cities should not be silent. They are alive, they should not sound like a cemetery. In fact, this city's innate cacophony of noises is one of the things I love best about it. The noise outside is a delightful distraction from all the noise in my head. But here I am, alone but for my thoughts, and all I can think is: where is everybody?

There should be a crowd of people here, a man on his deathbed. With a jolt, I realize I have been ignoring this man. There he is, laid across the road just like this morning. I don't know

what to do. I don't know CPR, and I think he may be past that anyway. And I can't call for help because there's no one to hear me.

No sooner does the thought enter my mind than I feel a pair of eyes burning a searing hole in the back of my neck. I spin on my heel, fists half raised, ready to confront what seems to be the only other person left on the face of the earth, but I can't. Because I can't see him.

Faceless Fred strikes again, I think. Every time I try to look at him head on he jumps to the outskirts of my peripheral vision like a sun spot; impossible to keep an eye on. And impossibly frustrating.

I kick the side of the car with a vehement "fuck". Miraculously, my foot doesn't hurt in the slightest, but what catches my eye next is a steel-toed kick to the head that sends me spinning.

My mother's face has been pasted onto the dying man. Beneath his receding hairline, every gasping breath is coming from my mother's lips. It's her mahogany eyes, so unlike my own, that are begging me to end her pain.

I don't know what to do, I don't know what to do, please, please, please, someone help, please. My chest heaves, and every rapid breath is like a dagger through my torso. Stars begin forming at the corners of my eyes, ready to reduce my vision to pinholes. Behind me, a voice like frozen honey, sweet but cold, speaks out to me.

"Don't look."

But I have to. I watch as my mother's face morphs like modelling clay beneath God's invisible hand, and her features are suddenly my own. We as humans don't often have the displeasure of seeing our own faces contorting in excruciating pain. And for good reason. The

disconnect of seeing my own face, plastered onto a stranger's body, soundlessly suffering an agony I cannot feel is enough to make the world spin. But not for long. Through my tunnel vision, I can see my face changing, being erased.

“Don't look.”

What is left behind is a face without a face. I desperately want to follow the voice's advice, and tear my gaze from this horror movie, but the body is suddenly dragging its way toward me. Its fingers are scrabbling against the pavement. It is starting to get up. It is coming for me.

I turn to run, but fall down, and wake up in a cold sweat, scared, but unscathed in my twin sized bed.

My legs are tangled in my sheets like fish in a net. And they're about equally as wet, too. As is the rest of me. I can feel sweat beaded along my hairline. It's still dark in my room; I'm not even sure how long I was asleep for. Now fully awake, I gingerly extract my legs from the jaws of my bed, heart still audibly thudding from my nightmare, and cross the room to where my phone still lies charging.

A click of the home button and two fried retinas later, and I know that it is 4:14am. Way too early for visitor's hours, but something in the pit of my stomach tells me that that is exactly where I need to be.

I'm about to change directly into real clothes, but my shirt clings to the small of my back, and when I move, the cold breeze on my ass tells me that even my underwear is sweaty.

Probably another reason I'm single, I snort.

I gather the nearest clothes I have; a white tee-shirt and some jeans that have holes in them, but not in the artsy, trendy way, in the over worn and too broke to buy new ones way. I leave my bedroom and cross the six steps across my “living room” to the bathroom. I don’t really do much living outside of work, though, so maybe I should come up with a new name for that room.

As I strip off my drenched and dirty work clothes from last night, I think to myself that if I ever sent out a meal that tastes as salty as I probably do right now, I would be out on my ass before you could say “re-fire”.

I crank up the water and wait, as if it’s actually going to get hot. Much like the water in the bathrooms at work, my shower is never quite hot enough to qualify as satisfactory.

I brush aside the curtain and realize by the grit under my feet that I probably need to clean soon. Sixty hour work weeks, and days off spent entirely at my mother’s bedside don’t really leave much room for personal care. But that can wait until later. For now, I let the water soak into my hair and skin. Even slightly cold, the water is soothing, putting a duller edge on my torn and frayed nerves. I don’t stay long in the shower, though.

After about five minutes, I get out without even bothering to soap up or shampoo. I towel off, the cheap tile icy against my feet, and stained from years of other tenants who were equally as lax about cleaning. I tug my hair into a messy bun, waiting a beat to make sure the strain of holding back my mane doesn’t snap the elastic.

Once fully dressed, I make my way to the door, grabbing the vitals as I go: keys, wallet, phone, protective pocket knife. I’m about to unlock the door when I remember that I never

locked it when I came home. I count myself lucky that no one strolled in, welcomed by my exhaustion, and make sure to lock the handle and the deadbolt on my way out.

Normally, I would take a cab to the hospital, but yesterday's incident has me on my guard. Instead, I power walk down my block with my head down, and trot down the grimy steps to the subway.

Aside from the rats, the place is mostly deserted. A homeless guy disguised as a pile of filthy blankets naps on one of the benches, not stirring even when the train blasts into the station. On board, there's a few early morning construction workers in fluorescent yellow vests right by the door. A few seats down from them, a woman in a dark pencil skirt and combo sits, looking utterly out of place on this dingy subway car. I assume she's either headed into work extra early, or finally going home after an all-nighter.

I swerve off to the right and set my sights on the seat farthest from all of them, then settle for the one next to it when I discover a freshly chewed wad of gum attached to the seat. As I sit, the train whips away again, leaving the homeless guy to his peaceful slumber.

Three stops later, I leave the business suit lady alone in the car. Our construction worker comrades had gotten off at the previous stop. She's rather absorbed in her smartphone, though, so I don't think she'll miss me very much.

I climb up to the street, and notice that the light has changed just enough for me to know that the sun will soon be staking its claim over the world again.

It is just about five in the morning, so most of the late night crowd has dispersed, leaving no indication that they were ever there to begin with. Or maybe they really weren't ever there.

The hospital is in a much nicer part of town, so maybe the inhabitants have more respect than to leave behind broken beer bottles and urine stains.

The hospital looms into view ahead. I always compare it to a guy with nice abs who never calls back; nice to look at, but rotten on the inside. I know I'm still way too early for visitor's hours, but I'm also way too familiar with this hospital to not know how to get in.

I circle around the Hopewall Memorial sign, past the newly renovated stone façade out front, to a place where the bricks are a little more faded. A side door opens and a nurse that I'm pretty sure is a zombie walks out. She has all the tell-tale signs of someone getting off a long shift. She doesn't notice me, but part of me wants to stop and see if she starts shuffling along, arms outstretched moaning for brains . . . or coffee . . . or a vacation.

I catch the door just as it is about to close and slip inside. If she's a zombie, I'm a ninja. I pad down the hall, the treads of my leather boots so worn down they hardly make a sound against the faded linoleum.

Down the hall, I hit the call button for the elevator. I have always hated elevators, even when I was a kid. The way they jolt when they start to move, the lack of oxygen, the potential for getting trapped inside; it's just not my thing. But, on the other hand, I only clocked in about four or five hours of nightmare riddled sleep, and I just don't have it in me to climb the forty bajillion stairs to my mom's room.

I glue my eyes to the ceiling, and try to ignore the lurching in my stomach as the beast takes off, and rises, rises, rises.

The doors open in front of me after what seems like an eternity, and I square my shoulders, pretending I'm a badass secret agent about to break into a high security bank. Nothing can phase a secret agent.

On the ceiling, harsh fluorescent lights wash the color out of everything. They are like the sun; don't look directly at them for too long, or you might just end up blind. Of course, I can't look at the floor either, because the tiles just reflect the glare of the lights right back into my corneas anyway. I settle for staring straight ahead.

My mother's room is almost all the way on the other side of the floor, but my leaden feet refuse to move as quickly as I tell them to. At this hour, though, the floor is empty enough that I don't really have to worry about running into anyone.

I rub the knot in my chest, and dredge down the hollow halls.

Unlike in my dream, I am thankful for the silence. Here, silence means peace. Aside from making it easier to avoid prying nurses, silence means that everyone is well. Noise, bustle, chaos; they all indicate that someone is on the cusp of life and death. The more people that are still asleep, the better. At least if they are asleep they aren't being poked or prodded, or subjected to the mind-numbing boredom of daytime television. You can only watch Judge Judy so many times before you realize she's just an asshole.

I can just make out the nurse's station swimming into view ahead of me. The woman who should be behind the desk is opening a door to my left, and inside, I can see an older looking gentleman clutching a pink puke bowl to his chest.

My mom's room is only a couple hundred feet down the adjoining hallway, which is blissfully devoid of other human life. I'm in the clear. My lead feet are now feathers, and it's all I can do to stop myself from sprinting, full tilt, to my mom.

I hear an elevator ding behind me, and the lump in my throat almost chokes me when a small hand closes around my upper arm.

I turn, coming face to face with Shauna, her voicemail from last night still ringing in my ears.

Her light brown freckles stand out in stark relief against her alabaster skin, and a fountain of matching hair cascades from her ponytail. She is about my age, maybe a year or two younger, and almost every inch of her screams innocence. Except her eyes. Her eyes spell trouble.

“Aisla.”

A door thuds shut, the other nurse emerging from the puking man's room. She glances at me as if I am out of place—which I am—but passes by without a word, obviously having a more important situation to deal with in the other room.

I turn back to Shauna, my stomach wriggling its way up into my chest, as if it will be safe there.

“Can we talk in private?”

My mind empties, and I stare blankly at her without responding.

The edges of her mouth turn up slightly in an attempt at an encouraging smile, and she slides her hand down my arm, taking my hand.

I recoil as if her touch burns, not caring that I'm being rude.

“I can walk on my own,” I snap.

She looks offended, but masks it before the hurt can fully manifest itself on her face.

“Sorry,” I amend, trying to keep my emotions in check.

She smiles again, a little more genuine this time, and leads me a few yards down the hall into a room marked “Private”. It is the spatial equivalent of a utility closet with a few semi-comfortable chairs crammed inside, on top of carpet that I’m pretty sure is the same pattern as the city bus’s upholstery.

She sits.

“Please,” she says, and indicates that I should do the same.

I lower myself into one of the chairs opposite her, ready to be reprimanded for my presence.

“Aisla, I have some bad news, and I wanted to tell you myself. I know you’ve been taking care of your mom for a long time, and so have I.”

She pauses, as if waiting for me to interrupt, but I remain silent.

“You two have been in and out of this hospital for about a year now. And I know we don’t really speak to each other very much, but I care very deeply about you and your mom.”

I interrupt.

“Just say it,” I demand, like a girl whose boyfriend is taking too long to break up with her.

Her face falls, eyebrows knitting together in something akin to sadness.

“Your mother’s test came back worse than we thought. Everything just spread so fast. Even with the surgery, her chances of surviving the week are very slim. If you had been able to convince her about the surgery sooner, then maybe-”

“Excuse me?” I exclaim, erupting from the chair like lava from a volcano.

“I-I didn’t-”

“You’re blaming me?” I shout. “You think it’s *my* fault for not convincing her?”

“Aisla, that’s not-”

She is still seated, and for once, I tower over someone.

I jab my finger in her round face.

“What about *you*? What about the doctors in this shithole? You’ve been tormenting her for *months*,” I hiss, anger bubbling, burning through the lump in my chest. “She doesn’t fucking deserve this. You-you fucking-”

The room is spinning, my chest heaving uncontrollably. I’m so dizzy I can hardly speak. She reaches out to me and I stumble until I hit the wall.

“Fuck you! Fuck you this is your-” I stutter as I fumble behind me for the door handle.

“I-this is-”

I put one hand to my face, trying to stem the flow of tears that are flooding to the surface. I finally managed to grab ahold of the knob and twist violently, bursting out the door.

I half walk, half run down the hall to my mother's room, leaving Shauna behind, part of me wishing I could go back and shake her until she felt some semblance of the same anguish I was feeling now.

I press myself against the wall outside her door, taking deep, heaving breaths in an attempt to compose myself before I enter. A few tears have escaped my eyes, and I wipe them away with the back of my hand. It's my fault. For not saving my mom. The only person I have left, and Shauna wants to tear her from me, like my heart from my chest, and tell me I am to blame.

Horrible, ugly noises are escaping me as I start to weep in earnest. I inhale until my lungs are full, and hold my breath. My life has been nothing but holding my breath lately, just hoping my mom will hang on. And she has. She's hung on this long, maybe Shauna, stupid, awful Shauna, was wrong.

It is only this tiny flutter of hope in my chest that allows me to remain calm and quiet long enough to walk inside her room, easing the door shut behind me.

Inside, machines I don't know the names of are beeping quietly next to the bed where she lies sleeping. At the sight of her, I break down again. I still remember the mom that used to push me on the swing, and chase me around the playground when none of the other kids would play with me; that mom is not the same mom as the one lying in front of me. This mom is aged and emaciated. And dying. Because of me.

In two long strides, I cross the room, and pull the visitor's chair up next to her bed. She doesn't wake when I press my face into her side to muffle my sobs. My tears are streaming down, staining her starched blankets with salt water.

I don't know how much time has passed, but my shoulders are aching, and still, I don't move. A small part of me wonders why no one has come to remove me yet, but that small part of me decides it doesn't care.

I stroke my still-slumbering mother's hand with my thumb, marveling at how cold she is. It's almost like the cold is spreading through my body, because I am suddenly shivering. I sense someone behind me, though I didn't hear the door open, and whip around, prepared to fight Shauna, tooth and nail, if she tries to make me leave.

But it's not Shauna.

There *is* someone there, someone I can't quite see. An indistinct shadow, like looking at someone from the other side of a waterfall. But I know. It's him.

And I'm scared.

Chapter Five

She looks afraid.

I am not quite sure if it is my presence that is frightening her, or her mother's imminent death. Although, I suppose the two are kind of the same thing. As she fears me, I fear her. Not physically of course, she could never harm me in this form, but the very fact of her eyes trying to focus on me is so fundamentally wrong, I feel a shimmer of fear inside. I had convinced myself that she hadn't really seen me, but here I stand, on display for the first time in almost a hundred

years. It's as if the universe is demanding I confront her. And no one knows better than I that the universe always gets its way.

The tears in the girl's eyes only serve to increase their likeness to the ocean. The seas are stormy, though. I can feel the turmoil crashing around her. Her eyes narrow above her gaping mouth, and I'm not sure if she is confused or angry. Perhaps both.

"Who's there?" she demands, and I say nothing. "Who the fuck are you? Show yourself."

She knows, somehow that I am here. I recognize the uncertainty in her voice, and focus on manipulating the energy around my presence in order to make myself more visible to her in an act that I regret immediately. In an instant, her uncertainty has turned to terror. Her knees nearly give out, and I can sense her heart pulsing at twice its normal rate, thrusting adrenaline through her veins. She clammers backward, shielding her mother from my view. I watch as her fists grasp at the olive colored blankets that are draped over her mother's body until her knuckles go white. And then I see her face.

Only one other person has ever looked at me the way this woman is looking at me now. She was—she is—the one death that has haunted me beyond the realms of mortal life. As Death, I hide in the shadows, I lurk unseen before the eyes of the dying; they never truly see me. They see through me, to wherever it is that they go when I release their souls from their bodies. And I am thankful for that. But when she died, she looked at me; fearful, pleading, helpless.

It was early in the morning, the sun maybe an hour away from peeking over the horizon. I shivered against the mattress and pulled the blanket tighter around myself, trying to get back to sleep. It was early spring, the mornings still bitterly cold, and the coals in the fireplace had long since died down. Gooseflesh had broken out along my arms, and I slide carefully out of the bed

to restart the fire, knowing I would never get any rest without it. I kneeled beside the hearth, about to begin stacking coals onto the pile of ashes when my ears pricked up. I could have sworn I heard hushed voices coming from down the stairs. I cocked my head, listening intently. Nothing. Must have been dreaming.

I finished up kindling the fire, taking a moment to savor the pleasantness of the warmth on my face. I sat down on the bed, careful not to jostle it too much, lest I wake Angela, who appeared to be slumbering soundly. I smiled softly as the shadows thrown by the fire danced around the curves of her face. I leaned forward, intending to brush my lips against her cheek, but stop short. There it is again.

I rose slowly from the bed. I was almost certain now. I flicked open the lock on the cedar chest that stands guard at the foot of our bed. The weight of the cool metal grip in my hand reassured me. Holding it carefully at chest level, both hands on the grip, I crept out of the bedroom, closing the door silently behind me. No need to worry her over nothing. And if it was something, she would be safe there.

I thanked god for the thickness of my wool socks granting me the ability to move in silence. I skipped gently over the third stair, the creaky one that I hadn't gotten around to fixing yet, and emerged onto the first floor. My reassurance was quickly ebbing away, and I worried that the drumming of my heart against my chest would alert the intruders to my presence. Their voices were gone now, but I could hear their feet shuffling against the floor, hear their hushed breathing. What did they want? Did they, too, carry weapons? Were they here to hurt us or just to burgle us? My mind was racing alongside my heart now. I edged forward in the darkness, the vague outline of the couch in front of me. It sounded like they were in the kitchen, but how many

were there? I inched forward again, hoping to get close enough to tell how many men were lurking in my house. I stepped forward. I stepped forward again. I tripped.

Angela had left a stack of books beside the couch, their dark colors rendering them nearly invisible in the darkness. The stack tumbled to the ground, banging like firecrackers. I stumbled, falling into the wall for support. Silence. They knew I was there now. They knew I was looking for them. I wrapped my trembling hands tighter around the handle of my pistol. Sweat slicked my palms as the intruders and I plan our next moves. Steeling myself, I crept through the house into the kitchen, ready to do whatever I had to do to catch these men and keep my wife safe.

I barely breathed as I entered the kitchen. There! Three shadows, frozen in fear. The front door, their salvation, was at my back. In a sudden burst of footsteps, two of the men rushed at me. A fist slammed into my cheek, the sharp pain sending me reeling. I turned just in time to see the two who had charged me sprint through the door. The other, forgetting himself completely, sprinted out of the kitchen through the door at the other end. That hallway lead back into the living room where the stairs would lead him right to Angela. I rushed back the way I had come, hoping to cut him off. The first rays of sunlight were just stretching into the sky, turning the darkness to a cloudy gray.

I streaked into the living room, where I heard his steps cut off abruptly. Shallow breaths raked my body, my pulse pounded in my temples. I placed my back to the stairs and surveyed the room. In the new morning light I watched the man streak out from behind the armchair and started toward him when a hand grasped my shoulder, tugging me around. One of the men come back for his friend! I spun into him, pressed my gun to his stomach and pulled the trigger.

The explosion deafened me. My ears were ringing, but I just made out the sound of the last man crashing out of the front door, and a whimper coming from the person in front of me. My throat tightened, my stomach knotted, my eyes widened.

The soft lilac of the nightgown I had bought her for Christmas was stained with a growing pool of blood. Tremors racked her body as she struggled to pull air into her lungs. Frozen, I did not breathe as she touched a hand to the hole in her stomach, a gasp escaping her lips when it came away coated in crimson and dripping onto the floor. I had to force myself to meet her eyes as she glanced between her hand and my face in horror. Our eyes met and hers seemed to say “What have you done? You were supposed to protect me.” I had promised as much in my wedding vows. The trance that had overcome me finally broke; I scrambled forward and grasped both her hands between my own.

“I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry. The men, they were here and I—you’ll be okay, I am here. I can—”

She shook her head at me, the movement nearly imperceptible. The sun rose over the horizon, its rays pouring in through the window to caress her face as she heaved her final breath. She still had that look in her eyes, like I was a stranger. I was no longer her husband; I was her killer.

And that is the look that this woman is giving me now, one hundred years later in this defunct hospital room, precisely the same despite the dissimilarities of their features. Angela’s hair hung in auburn tendrils as I washed the blood from her body; this woman’s hair is the color of the crippling darkness that hid the intruders from me. Angela’s face was more angular, her cheekbones prominent as I held her face in my hands one last time before I buried her. The woman standing before me has a softer face, perhaps a lingering roundness still left over from

her childhood. She appears to still be rather young, maybe only in her middle twenties. Though Angela and I were still quite young when we died.

In the backyard of our home, I tamped down the last shovelful of dirt with the flat of my shovel and fell to my knees, retching into the grass. We lived in a rural area; there was at least a quarter mile between us and our nearest neighbors on both sides, and layers of budding trees and full evergreens in between. I was thankful for that; I could not bear the thought of someone thinking I had done this on purpose. Being taken in by the police, sent to court trial after court trial, living out the rest of my days in some derelict prison, having to live with the knowledge of what I had done.

I tramped inside, not bothering to wipe the dirt off of my shoes. I stopped to retch again at the sight of her blood still pooled on our kitchen floor. A tiny glob of vomit splattered to the floor and I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. I gathered everything I needed and made my way up the stairs. No need to skip that squeaky third step anymore. My movements were unconscious, as if my body knew what it needed to do without me guiding it. In the moment before I kicked the chair out from under me, I prayed to Angela's spirit not to forgive me, for I knew I did not deserve it, but for a way to make it up to her.

"Thank you, Angela," I breathe. I know not whether this is truly her doing, but I know that I must protect this woman. That she can see me, that she can hear me, the startling similarity between her and Angela; they are signs.

I am aware that my silence has been going on for far too long, that this girl is expecting an answer, but my mind is reeling with questions. Is she a relative of Angela's? A distant great-

great niece perhaps? Is there another world I don't know about? One where the good and virtuous become guardians of the human world, picking people to watch over?

I am seized with curiosity, and it is all I can do not to begin questioning the woman at this very moment. But the ashen pallor of her face reminds me where I am and why I am here. I take a cautious step forward.

She tenses. "Stop. Tell me who you are," she demands in a trembling voice that is so frightened I am nearly dragged under a ten foot wave that urges me to embrace her as I haven't embraced anyone in so many years. If only I could.

"I am here to—release your mother," I say.

She flinches as my voice resounds inside her head. In this form, this is the only way for me to communicate with her. Her eyes widen in desperation.

"Release her? Release her from what?" she asks, though I sense she already knows the answer.

"Your mother is going to die. I am here to release her soul. I am sorry," I reply. And I mean it. I ache for her.

"What's going to happen to it? Her soul, I mean."

Despite her eyes beseeching me, begging me to offer her solace in the certainty that her mother is going somewhere better, I reply honestly.

"I don't know."

"Can't you just leave?" she asks, hands grasping protectively at her mother's body.

I couldn't leave you if I tried, I think. Her eyes are still shining in fear, and I wish only that I could for once flout my responsibility and allow her mother to live another day. I know in my heart, however, that I must uphold my end of the cosmic bargain that balances the universe.

“I wish I could,” I tell her. “Truly. But there is a balance that must be upheld. I must obey it. I am sorry,”

Fresh tears sparkle in her eyes.

“No. Please. Please, this is my fault, you can't.”

“I have to,” I respond, letting my own experiences of guilt fill my voice with sympathy.

“Let me say goodbye,” she whispers.

I nod. I shouldn't wait, but I will make an exception. Just this once. Angela would have wanted me to; she had a soft spot for sorrowful people, a certain knack for comforting them.

“Did you—did you just nod? It's hard to tell,” she explains.

“Yes. I did—you can—can say goodbye,”

She blinks slowly at me, eyes unfocused, and I can tell that she's no longer really looking at me, but steeling herself for the unthinkable. She nods to herself and turns away from me.

She lightly jostles her mother's arm, and though I try not to listen, I can hear subtle murmurs escaping the dying woman's parted lips. The woman, whose name I realize I do not know, whispers to her. Through the link that connects Death to the dying, I sense that her mother is conscious enough to understand her words, but too weak to form a reply.

Despite her hushed tone, occasional words and phrases float through the air to me. From the fractured pieces of conversation, I conjure a familiar tapestry of immense love, and an even deeper sense of guilt.

As she finishes her goodbyes, I ponder what this girl could possibly feel such guilt for. Illness does not discriminate. She is not the one who caused her mother's cells to attack themselves in a vicious civil war; it is the blood clot travelling up into her mother's brain that is at fault, not her. She is blameless in a way that I could never be. I wonder if it would have been any easier if Angela had died of illness, too. Certainly the slow creep of death would have been painful, watching her deteriorate from the vibrant woman I took dancing at the Lazy Jaguar to an emaciated woman with no hope. But nothing could be worse than knowing it was my fault.

The woman shifts her weight, turning to gaze at me with waterfalls in her eyes, tears streaking down her face, making her shine in the sunrise. She bites her lower lip so hard I fear she may start bleeding. Instead, she nods at me, signaling that she has said all that she is able to, even if it is not enough.

The truth is, it is never enough. Language cannot hold feelings, cannot truly express them. Children are taught to "say the magic words", but there are no magic words. There is only the hope that someone will understand, will feel with you, rather than just for you. It is an important distinction, and though her mother may not, I feel with her. I have regretted every day for a century that I never told Angela I loved her one last time. There is so much I could have said in those brief moments, and instead I fell silent. I realize now that it probably would not have mattered. Nothing I could have said would have changed what I did, just like nothing this woman says to her mother will change the fact that she has suffered and she is about to die.

The woman meets my eyes, and her face reflects every second of shame and disgust that I have lived over the past hundred years. All too well I know the self-hatred that is coursing through her veins like heroin. I feel it every day, some days worse than others, but I shove it down, repress it, too much of a coward to confront it honestly. In spite of all the dreadful memories being dragged to the forefront of my mind after decades of focused repression, I feel a sense of decency in knowing that I afforded this woman a chance that so few people get. It is the most useful, the most human I have felt in a long time; I would give anything to feel like this just a little longer. Maybe that is why I choose to tell her what is going to happen to her mother.

“Your mother only has a minute or so left. A large blood clot is travelling into a vital spot in her brain. It will block off a great amount of blood flow, and in her already weakened state-” I trail off at the sight of her face. She looks as if she is going to vomit.

“I suggest you leave,” I continue. “You don’t need to see this.”

“I need to be with her,” she croaks.

“I can’t force you, but that is my suggestion. Spare yourself. She won’t even know you are here. You have done enough.”

She opens her mouth as if to protest, but the high-pitched wailing of her mother’s monitor interrupts her. She jerks toward her mother as if to do something, then remembers her efforts are futile. Two blue-scrubbed nurses crash into the room, throwing the door wide, where it passes through me and slams into the wall.

As the other nurses rush to resuscitate the woman, a male nurse strides through the door, grasping the daughter’s shoulders, pulling her toward the door. Her face is blank, not resisting, but never taking more than a jerky half-step toward the door at a time. Eventually though, the

nurse wins out and the woman is gone, leaving a hole in the room, as the nurses work against the universe, trying to prevent a death that is already written. A moment later, in the warm light of the morning sun, another body goes cold. My hand caressing her cheek, and the sound of a flat-lining monitor are her last sensations.

With tears brimming in her eyes, a nurse with flamingly red hair calls the time of death. Her coworker puts an arm around her and leads her out. One of them will be tasked with the unpleasant duty of calling the morgue and arranging the pick-up of the body. The other will pretend it didn't happen. And the daughter, well, I don't know where she is, what she may do. I do know I need to find out more about her, though. I have to know where this connection came from, why she was thrown in my path.

But I will have to swallow my curiosity for now; time is ticking and people are dying.

It has been two days since my run-in with the girl from the car accident. Her gaze is plastered in my mind, blocking out my own sight, frustrating me more and more as I attempt to puzzle out her ability to see me. Her very existence is a shadow, constantly following me. She is every dark haired girl on a sidewalk, every stare that goes straight through me, and I cannot shake the feeling that I have not seen the last of her.

I am in another hospital today. It is far across town from the other one, and the woman from the car accident has probably never stepped foot here before, but it reminds me of her. Perhaps because all hospitals are essentially the same; too clean to be natural, set up in a way that is meant to be comforting, but really just triggers something in the pit of your stomach that tells you to beware.

I'm here for a surgery gone wrong. A sixty-something habitual smoker with an infection from a surgery meant to fix her heart problems. She goes fairly quietly, though I am grateful that her wound is covered. The stench of rotting flesh is quite strong, making me wonder how her family has not sued for malpractice.

At least, I assume she has family, as the bedside table is littered with odds and ends that she could not have gotten on her own. In fact, her family must have been here quite recently, because today's paper is included among the debris. It is opened to the obituaries. Ironic.

I am about to make my way out, when one of the names catches my eye. It is the name of the other patient, the one with the blood clot. Usually, the names of those I release float away like children's balloons in the breeze, but this one I remember. I scan over the paragraph, searching.

Marie Morana is survived by her only daughter, Aisla. Marie was Fifty-one.

Aisla. Finally, a name to the face. Skipping down another line, I find the burial information at the very bottom, and before I have even thought about making up my mind, I have. The burial is this afternoon, and I will be there.

But this body will not do. There will have to be some adjustments to my schedule.

I have spent the remainder of the morning clearing my schedule, so to speak. Technically speaking, Deaths are not meant to speed up or slow down the time of a person's death. We follow the universe's bidding, but I am sure that these few deaths will be insignificant in the greater picture.

I am in a tiny apartment on a darker side of town. A woman's body lies prone on the scuffed floor, just inches from a purple pleather couch with the stuffing falling out. A needle floats in the puddle of vomit beside her head. She is alive, but only just. The excess amounts of heroin are about to stop her heart. Three beats. Two beats. One beat. My hand on her chest. Gone.

She is skeletal, her joints a bit too prominent, her face a bit too gaunt, but she will do. Not that I have a choice. I do not get to pick which souls I release. I move forward, crouching beside her, and focus my energy the way the Reaper taught me, concentrating on filling the empty vessel her soul has left behind. I am being stretched, solidifying. Soon, I can feel grit beneath my skin on a floor that has gone without sweeping for far too long. There's vomit on my lips, which I am careful to avoid as I push myself to my feet. The button on the acid washed ripped jeans around my hips thrusts into my pelvis.

Now standing, I adjust the sequined top the woman was wearing and wonder whether she was planning on going clubbing on a Thursday afternoon, or if this is last night's party armor. By the smell of it, and the not-yet-dry pit stains, I assume the latter. I wish for a moment that I did have choice in which souls I am sent to release. For over a hundred years, I have existed as a phantom, a specter. To be suddenly corporeal, suddenly solid and *real*, is jarring. I am hyperaware of every inch of my new body, and all the rank smells and sensations around me. Since I died, I have only inhabited a body one other time, on my first release with the Reaper. Perhaps it had something to do with the freshness of my own death, the familiarity I still felt between myself and the body I had held for thirty years, but inhabiting the body of another felt inherently wrong. I was an intruder, a parasite, stealing the body of another. I was desecrating something sacred. The body is not meant to be shared between souls. It is yours and yours alone.

Now that I have released her, the connection that would have allowed me to peek inside her mind to find the layout of the apartment is gone, prompting me to pick my way across her living room, tripping over a cat box full of vile smelling excrement, though I see no sign of feline life. I hope it is not dead somewhere in here.

There are only two doors off of her living room. The door to the left is revealed to be a bathroom in desperate need of a professional deep clean. I stagger out, overwhelmed by the scent, so much stronger in a real body, and whip the door closed behind me. The other door leads to a room that is more war zone than bedroom. Clothes, magazines, empty bottles, crumpled papers, all litter the floor. The bed is unmade, and the dresser drawers hang open. I rummage in the latter for a more appropriate outfit with little luck.

I finally settle for a baggy sweatshirt that hides the woman's track-marked arms. A muffled buzz emanates from below the mound of clothes in the drawer. I thrust my hand in, probing for the source, and come up with a cell phone. The screen tells me it's Randy calling, and I flip it open, pressing the red button to send the call to voicemail. I am about to drop the—mysteriously—sticky phone back into its resting place, when I see the time displayed. 3:37.

Damnit. The burial is at four, and halfway across town. I scan the room, trying to puzzle out where a woman like this might leave spare cash. The corner of a ten dollar bill peeks out at me from under a broken alarm clock on her bedside table. I snatch it and hurry outside, careful to avoid tripping on the cat box again.

I leave the door unlocked and hope that no one breaks in while I am gone. I will have to get back in here later to put her body back, and I haven't the time to search through the explosion

site for her keys. I take a taxi as far as the ten dollars will get me, and fast walk the next few blocks to my destination.

A black metal arch stretches over the entrance, a wooden sign is bolted to it, reading: CEMETERY. As if the loaded silence, and prickle on the back of your neck wasn't enough of a give-away. I cross the threshold, trying to remain inconspicuous. I follow the path deeper into the graveyard until the human voices interrupt the ghostly ones.

I follow a voice that has the obvious droning intonation of a minister who has no desire to be where he is. But, I reflect, it is probable that no one in the tiny group assembled in front of the gaping hole in the sprawling landscape wants to be there.

I edge closer, finally settling in the shadow of an enormous oak older than many of the graves. I watch the minister flip to another page in his bible, finishing his unwilling sermon, and marvel at the minute size of the congregation. I had only ever been to one funeral when I was alive, and grief had stricken most of the day from my memory, though I am all but certain that this is much too small to be normal. There are maybe five people gathered around this woman's grave, and even as I think this, one of the attendees taps Aisla on the shoulder, and at her indication, departs. She watches him go.

I am not close enough to see her oceanic eyes, but I can picture them clearly in my head, probably filmed with tears just as they were two days ago. I am not sure what I hope to gain by being here. I was hoping that by watching from afar I could figure out what her allure is, but I realize now how foolish this venture was.

I turn to leave, to right my mistake, but I wait until the woman's burial guest walks past me. I glance to my right, trying to avoid catching his eye, and realize my blunder in lingering so

close to the path: Aisla was watching him go, and her eyes come to rest on me. I shrink back, afraid to be seen, even in this disguise. But my attempt at obscuring myself is for naught. She sees me. Of course she does.

Chapter Six

I'm sitting on the edge of my bed, bleeding and making a valiant effort to push back the stars at the edges of my vision. I have exactly one set of what middle class people would call "nice clothes": a pair of black dress pants, and a dark blazer to go with them. Once upon a time, they were a gift from my mother; clothes to wear to my big interview at The Corner Bistro. Now, I'm wearing them to her funeral.

Or at least I would be, if I were a proper, domesticated lady and knew how to sew without puncturing myself to the bone with a needle.

The pants being as old as they are, and me having gained a pound or two since they were purchased, the slacks had vehemently resisted my efforts to guide them over my thighs. Needing a little more oomph, I had hooked my thumbs into the belt loops and heaved upwards, resulting in one of the loops ripping off, and a gash appearing on the side.

I have neither the time, nor the money to buy new pants for the memorial, so I had rummaged through my odds-n-ends drawer, brushing aside matchbooks, a tiny flashlight and some batteries to find the mini sewing kit I had swiped from the lost and found at work. I figured

it would come in handy at some point. I just didn't factor in the small problem of me not knowing what I was doing.

The first issue was threading the needle. The second was the sloppy, obvious set of stitches that I was producing. My frustration mounting, I jabbed at the fabric with enough force to drive the needle deep into my thumb. Hence, my wooziness. It wasn't the blood that bothered me, it was the foreign object piercing my skin. The bitter side of me wishes that my thumb was Shauna's face.

I hold a paper towel to my thumb and sigh deeply. I hate that bitch, that stupid fucking asshole. The very thought of her quickens my breathing and makes the stars reappear in my eyes. I don't have time for vengeance now; I need to hurry up and get ready or I'll be late. I imagine the newspaper headline: Awful Daughter Late to Mother's Funeral Due To Lack of Domestic Skills. My shittiness could be front page news.

My mother knows—knew—how to sew. When I was a kid and still played with Barbie dolls she used to take me to the little arts and crafts store on the outer edge of town and we'd pick out different fabric patterns together. Then when we got home we'd sit down and I'd tell her what kind of clothes I wanted for the dolls. I would watch as the needle would bob in and out of the fabric and before I knew it, I would have custom ballroom gowns and boot cut jeans for my dolls.

As I make my way back to my kitchen I ponder the irony of this situation. My mother was an amazing seamstress and I can't even secure a button. I wanted to learn how to sew like her, but I eventually lost interest in the dolls, thinking being a tomboy would be cooler. I wish I had learned. It's such a small thing, but the little things that we rely on people for eventually add

up. I should have spent more time learning from her, I should have spent more time just being *with* her. We spent a lot of time together when I was a kid, but after my father died I got my first job bagging groceries at the Quick Mart, and mom got another job on top of the cashiering gig, cleaning houses for the richer people in the next town over. Our schedules just never meshed. I'm still so grateful for the time we had when I was young, but you get to know your parents in a different way when you're an adult you understand them better; they're not just mom and dad, they're real people with memories and skills and thoughts. I missed out on that.

Tears in my eyes, I shuffle aside some withering take-out menus in my odds-n-ends drawer, finally emerging with a Band-Aid and an all but empty tube of disinfectant. The hole is small enough that I probably don't need it, but I don't know where that needle has been, and come to think of it, I'm not too sure about the Band-Aid either.

I go back to my room, and carefully this time, finish off my shitty sew job. With some determination, and the reallocation of some thigh jiggle, I squeeze into the pants, and before I know it, I'm in a cab on my way to my own mother's funeral.

Two days was not nearly enough to reconcile the fact that the thing we are burying today used to be my mother. Her body. When she first got sick, she told me "When I'm gone, I want to be buried. In that cemetery on Chestnut maybe. Just as long as you don't cremate me." When I had asked why, she laughed and said "Well, there's a chance I'll be going to hell. I don't want to be burned twice."

I had shaken my head at her as she winked at me, incredulous at her ability to make a joke just weeks after receiving what is arguably the worst news a person can ever get. Jokes aside, she was too good to go to hell.

Although, that guy, that *thing* told me he wasn't sure where she was going. I shake my head. In spite of my utter hatred of being told what to do, I have been trying to heed his advice, and forget him. He was kind to me, letting me say goodbye—I think. It's possible he is at fault somehow. I don't know. Thinking about him makes my head hurt, and I am almost grateful when the cab drops me off at the front gate.

I make my way into the cemetery. I have made arrangements for the minister to meet me at the burial site. I found the guy online, and I'm not even sure he's a real minister. The shame of not being able to afford any better roils in my gut, but hospitals are ruthless. My mother is gone, but the thousands of dollars in hospital bills are not. These money woes are the same reason I could only afford a tiny headstone, adorned only with her name. I wish I could've gotten her back home to rest next to my dad. She would have liked that.

As I approach the gaping maw of the earth that will soon swallow my mother's body whole, I see that said minister has already arrived. As I get closer, I notice his head is topped by a nest rather than hair. Or a toupee maybe, but it looks more like a nest. I hear tweeting overhead, and wait for the birds to soar down and lay eggs on his head. My stomach clenches as I hold back a laugh and curse my nervous laughter. Though I suppose it could be worse; I could be a nervous pee-er. Imagine my predicament then. I'd have to excuse myself and squat behind that big oak tree over there.

And that's assuming I could even get out of these pants. I think I might have sewn myself into them. I guess I could always tear them off, superhero style. I'd just need the cape to go with it. Might help me get through this. Steeling myself, I meander over to Bird Man Minister and offer him my hand, along with a smile that I'm sure looks more like a grimace.

“My condolences,” he says in lieu of a hello, his voice much deeper than I had expected.

“Thank you,” I say, because that’s what you’re supposed to say.

I swallow hard and try to focus on his face, rather than the hole he’s standing next to, because I’m quite sure that if I look at that hole I’ll lose the meager breakfast I managed to choke down.

“How many people are we expecting?” he asks, using the royal “we”, as if he and I are united.

“Umm . . .” I trail off, realizing I have no idea how to answer him. I put a tiny ad in the paper, but most of my extended family live several states away, and I’d probably have about as much luck contacting them via smoke-signal as I would trying to find their phone numbers. And, though my mother had been fairly popular in the hospital, eking out as many smiles as she could from nurses and patients alike, it’s not like nurses can go to every patient’s funeral, and sick people are too, well, *sick* to leave.

The only person I’m even marginally counting on to come is Mick. I had gone into work yesterday, eyes still red and haunted, and told him that I would need today off. Something was wrong, that much was obvious.

“Did something-?” he had begun, falling abruptly silent when he saw me nod vigorously, just wanting the conversation to be over.

My face had clearly confirmed his suspicions, because he pulled me into a tight embrace, filling my nostrils with a pungent mix of sweat and uncooked pasta. I had pulled away after a

few moments, wiping my eyes and saying, “Careful, Mick. Door’s open. Don’t want anyone thinking I’m sleeping with the boss to get a raise.”

His eyes had softened for a moment before he smirked and replied “Yeah, right. You’re not my type. Too short.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I’m about as tall as you are wide,” I quipped.

He snorted. “You’re sharp, kid. You don’t deserve all this bullshit. Leave the funeral info on the desk here, and take the rest of the day.”

“I need the money,” I protested.

“Don’t worry about the money. You’ll be paid for today.”

This simple act of kindness had nearly overwhelmed me, and it was all I could do to squeak out, “Thanks for having my back, Mick,” before he waved his hand dismissing me.

I had left a barely legible note with today’s details on it and gone home to stare blankly at the wall. Just like I’ve been staring blankly at Bird Man Minister. For way, way too long.

I’m spared apologizing by the arrival of a nurse pushing an older woman in a wheelchair with breathing tubes snaking up her nose. The nurse looks vaguely familiar, unlike the woman, whose coughing is loud enough to wake all the dead here and finally start that zombie apocalypse everyone’s been worrying about. The nurse greets me with a pity-filled smile. Her name is Sharon, or Sherri—something with a “shh”. I wish the woman with her would be something with a “shh” and shut the hell up for just five seconds.

“Hi, Aisla. I was really sorry to hear about your mom. She was so strong, but she’s in a better place now. Ruth here wanted to come say bye and-”

“Your mother and I had breakfast together almost every day before she got too weak to leave her room,” she wheezes. “She reminded me of my daughter,” she continues, but the rest of her sentence is derailed by another bout of coughing. Thankfully. Hearing my mother referred to in the past tense is a little too much right now.

Glancing over the nurse’s shoulder, I see two male figures ambling toward our ragtag group of mourners. They crest one of the verdant hills and make their way over.

One is Mick, still clad in baggy pants and his chef’s jacket. He claps me on the shoulder, squeezing reassuringly.

“Can’t stay long, hun. Gotta be back for the dinner rush, but I wanted to be here for you.”

I nod and turn to the other man, who I finally recognize as my uncle on my father’s side. If I glanced at him quickly enough, I could almost mistake him for my father. They have the same sloping nose and almond shaped eyes. The only difference is the hair; my father never got a chance to go as gray as Danny has. If my father was were here he’d be able to make me laugh, I know he would. Danny was a bit more reserved, my father was the life of the party. He could make anybody laugh, anybody.

“Danny,” I say, surprised to see him.

“Aisla. Been a while, huh? Haven’t seen you since last Thanksgiving.”

“That was two years ago, actually.” I don’t know why I felt the need to correct him.

“Right. You still with that guy? Matt?”

Matt. If ever there was a name I didn’t want to hear today, that was it. Matt and I had been dating for almost two years that Thanksgiving. We’d just moved in together six months

prior, so we invited everyone over to our new apartment, showed off the faux-hardwood floors and the kitchen that had—get this—a fully functional stove; nothing like the one in my mom’s and my old apartment. Our last place had a stove where only one burner had flames all the way around, and the oven couldn’t reach temperatures past two hundred fifty degrees. Moving here from what I was used to with my mother injected me with a double dose of culture shock. When I lived with my mom we couldn’t both be in the kitchen at the same time, and now my kitchen had room to fit a dozen people for Thanksgiving. The bed was a queen size, twice as big as my decades old twin mattress. Occasionally, I’d lose Matt in the night, and have to roll over five or six times to get close enough to steal his body heat. And best of all I had a claw foot bathtub I’d always wanted. It was a little chipped in a few spots, kind of dull and yellow around the edges, but it was still a claw foot tub, and I was happy.

When my mom arrived she gasped at how beautiful the place looked. We’d decorated for Thanksgiving, used the new plates we’d saved up for and made fancy place settings with everyone’s name on them. It was the first time I’d eaten a holiday dinner on something other than paper plates from the dollar store. My mom had been there a million times since we moved in, but she never seemed to get tired of looking at it, beaming with pride as she examined the home Matt and I had made together. I guess it seemed like a palace to her in comparison to what we were used to. Part of me felt guilty that I hadn’t brought her into this new kind of living with me, but I couldn’t help but be happy to have my own little slice of life here.

More people had started arriving soon after, and the chaos of Thanksgiving began. We gathered around the long table and I poured wine, carved the turkey, cleaned up spills, pulled the pie out of the oven just in time to stop it from burning, still used to adding at least twenty minutes to any given recipe to combat the awful oven I used to deal with. I smiled politely at

some racist comments by his grandfather, pretended to laugh at the jokes about getting a real chef to cook their turkey dinner. I watch with trepidation as plates and forks and wineglasses found their way to the sink, knowing we'd have to wash them later. For a second I missed the convenience of the paper plates. Use 'em and toss 'em, no clean up necessary.

For as much as you're supposed to look forward to seeing your family on the holidays, I was grateful when six o'clock hit. I kissed my mother goodbye and finally closed the door, leaving us alone for the first time in seven hours.

"Ugh," I had sighed, collapsing onto the couch.

"I know. At least it's over, though."

"Don't forget we're hosting Christmas, too. I think I'm going to get a bunch of ethnically diverse Santa decorations this year. Just to annoy your grandfather."

He laughed and shook his head. "You're a goof."

"Oh yeah? Not to burst your bubble, but I'm your goof and you're stuck with me," I smiled.

"Maybe I like being stuck with you. Told you I'm gonna marry you some day."

And I believed him. Then mom got sick.

And it happened just that fast. One day she was fine, and the next day I got a call at work from someone telling me I needed to get to the hospital right away. She thought she just had a touch of the flu; she had the swollen glands and the fever, she'd been resting and drinking lots of fluids, she was going to be fine. I got to the hospital and they told me my mother had Leukemia. Then they rattled off a bunch of medical jargon that I couldn't understand. The gist of it, they

said, was that she was in the first stage right now, but if she didn't respond well to treatment she wouldn't have much time left. Maybe months. Then I had to go home and tell Matt that my mom was sick.

Sick. It's not a strong enough word for what happens to you when your life is invaded by cancer. Sick could never describe the civil war that goes on in your body. The way your cells battle each other; one side fighting for your salvation, the other for your destruction. It could never encompass the look in my mother's eyes every time I went to see her that told me she knew she was dying. Not in the factual way, but in the way that says you are counting down your days, afraid to close your eyes at night because you might never open them again. But she still tried to be brave. She'd smile and ask me about my day, but I could see the weight of that knowledge lurking there. No, sick isn't for cancer; it's for cases of the sniffles, and little coughs. But it was too much, far too much, to say out loud "my mom is dying" so I said she was sick.

But the problem is that sickness like my mom's doesn't just affect your body. It also does a number on your relationships; either dividing people, or bringing them closer together. For Matt and me, it was the former. Not that he didn't try to be supportive. He did. But in the months between that Thanksgiving and mom's diagnosis, moving in together had lost some of its charm; the dishes started to pile up, money got scarce, laundry went undone.

My family had never had a lot of money; dad worked as a mechanic in a tiny shop in our hometown and mom cashiered at the convenience store. They made enough to support us, but we never really had much. We lived paycheck to paycheck, sometimes going without cable or a pair of new shoes to make sure the electricity stayed on. There was never a retirement plan or extensive healthcare. When dad died it fell to my mother and me to support ourselves. When mom got sick, it fell just to me.

“I can’t do this anymore, Aisla. I’m sorry,” Matt said running his hands through his hair. You’re never here. When you’re not at the hospital you’re always at work.”

“Matt, what do you want me to do?” I asked, my voice rising. “She’s my mother I have to help her, I can’t just do nothing!”

“Aisla, it’s not up to you to help her. It’s up to the doctors. You need to take care of yourself, too. How many times in the past four months have I seen you? Four? Five? Every time we talk about this you agree to slow down and take care of yourself, but you don’t. I can’t watch you kill yourself like this. I know what I’m doing makes me a terrible person, but—”

“Then don’t do it.”

That was all I said. I didn’t apologize, I didn’t tell him I could change, I didn’t beg, I didn’t plead. I just said “don’t do it.”

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly, not meeting my eyes. “I just can’t do it anymore. I’ll come back tomorrow when you’re at work and get my stuff. I—”

He stopped short and picked up his car keys from the side table. I finally started crying as he shut the door behind him, but I couldn’t bring myself to chase after him.

I didn’t realize it at the time, but Matt wasn’t the one who ended things; I did. Long before that day. I stopped worrying about him when he got home late, I stopped surprising him at work with a bagel and a coffee to help get him through the day, I even stopped sleeping in our bed with him. I couldn’t explain it, it just felt wrong to be that close to somebody. Like fog clearing off a mirror, Matt’s place in my life slowly faded away, leaving me staring at my own reflection. And just like that I knew; Matt didn’t choose to leave, I chose to let him go.

Looking back now, I think of all the things I could have done. I could have scaled back to four or five days at the hospital, taken a day off work every now and then, offered to move into a smaller place, one we could afford and still save money to pay for all the medical bills without me working sixty or seventy hours a week. I could have spared him just one day a week and we might still be together. At the time, that seemed like too much. To dedicate even a second of my time to anything or anyone but my dying mother seemed profoundly wrong. It had been just us since I was sixteen. Even when we didn't see each other for a day or two because of work I still felt connected with her. There was something about knowing there's someone out there busting their ass for you that gives you a kind of armor. Like they're always there, just behind you, ready to have your back if you need it. She gave me everything she had. How could I not return the favor when she needed it most? Matt couldn't possibly understand that; both his parents were alive. If only I'd understood that giving my whole life to a dying woman meant I would have nothing left when she was gone.

The next day, when I came home his shoes had disappeared from their usual spot beside the door, the books he always left on the coffee table were gone. He took his TV and the dresser we'd bought together. All my sweaters that had been in the bottom drawer were neatly folded on my bed like they'd never been touched. The closet lay half empty where his jeans, his collection of band t-shirts, and the hoodie I got him for Christmas the year before used to hang. When I went looking for all the pictures of us, to pack them away, I found he'd taken those, too. The only thing he left were his keys. They hung on the hook by the front door where they always did, like he was somewhere in the house, waiting for me to come and find him.

A week later I was gone, too. I moved into the apartment I'm in now. I couldn't afford to stay in our apartment on my own, and I didn't want to anyway. I couldn't live with his ghost any more than I could live with myself for ruining something that could have been.

Bird Man Minister taps me on the shoulder, gracefully interrupting what has been possibly the most awkward conversation I've ever had.

“May I begin the service?”

“Please.”

I'm about to turn and announce that the service is starting when I realize that the group is so small that everyone has heard already. They all muddle closer around the grave, and the minister pulls a tiny bible from his jacket. At my father's funeral, I was hyperaware of everything: every person, every syllable spoken, every smell. This time though, it's as if I'm not even here.

It feels like an invisible wall is separating me from the others, and the minister's sermon is nothing more than a gravelly hum. I glance around me, searching for any distraction from reality. I see a figure in the distance, far away enough that I'm not sure if they're coming or going. Probably visiting a loved one.

This person is my future: visiting an empty cemetery, alone, empty, praying to a headstone for guidance.

I am broken from my reverie by the Bird Man's voice calling my name.

“Ms. Morana.”

I stare back at him, not used to being addressed so formally. Aisla? Yes. Bitch? Eh, on occasion. Ms. Morana? Never.

“Would you like to say a few words?”

I swallow hard, nod, and step forward. I try to walk myself through it: open mouth, emit sound.

“I-”

I can't bear it. If I say anything, I'm admitting that this is real. I step back, shaking my head, displaying both my inability to speak and my state of denial.

The minister sighs as if irate at my grief. I ought to pull that stupid toupee off his head. My fists clench, but before anything can come of my anger, a finger lightly taps my shoulder.

“I got to run, girl,” Mick murmurs. “Dinner rush is coming soon and I left Ronny in charge.” He shakes his head, clearly picturing the state of ruin his kitchen is probably in. “Take a few days and clear your head. Process. We'll take care of everything.”

“Thank you, Mick. For everything.” I stretch my arms around his beer belly. “I got twenty bucks says Sherm is on fire when you get back.”

“I got twenty bucks says you're right,” he retorts.

“Send me pictures,” I say, laughing in spite of the tears.

He chuckles. “Will do. Good luck. Take care,” he says, running a hand across his thinning hair. “Bye, hun.”

“See ya,” I say, half raising a hand in farewell.

I watch the back of Mick's head as he ventures back to his kitchen. I hear the pages of the minister's bible rustle. Mick approaches the mammoth oak tree that marks a turning point in the path. My mother used to tell me that old, ancient trees like that were just the souls of really stubborn people that God had planted in the ground.

Behind the tree, I see a woman's figure half-hidden in the shadows. I can't quite make out her face from this distance, but she doesn't look familiar at all. By the way she's dressed, I would have guessed that she was here on her own visiting someone, but she seems oddly fixated on the proceedings here.

My musings are interrupted by a solemn chorus of amens. The funeral is over. Just like that. Pretty soon some stranger will come and cover the casket in dirt and that will be that. I thought funeral services were supposed to provide closure, but standing here, surrounded by virtual strangers, listening to a generic sermon delivered by a Rent-A-Minister, I've never felt farther from closure. I'm in the open, but invisible walls are closing in. Sheri/Sharon and the coughing lady are coming toward me, forcing the fist around my throat to close even tighter.

I turn on my heel before they can speak, or cough, and stride toward the mysterious tree woman.

In a few long strides, I've halved the distance between us. I'm close enough now to see her eyes darting between me and the path leading out of the cemetery. Her muscles are taut, as if she plans to dart away at a moment's notice.

"Hey," I call, still traipsing toward her.

She steps around the tree, revealing herself completely. Despite the warmth, she is tempting heat stroke, wearing a hoodie big enough to drown in. Her face is gaunt, reminding me of the way buildings implode into themselves during demolition.

“Are you—were you here for the—?” I trail off, gesturing behind me to indicate the remnants of my mother’s funeral.

She hesitates before answering.

“Yes.”

I wait for her to offer more information, like how she knew my mom, or why she’s hiding behind a tree like a pedophile in a white van. When she remains silent, I decide to ask the less offensive of the two questions.

“How did you know my mom?” I ask, watching her eyes carefully. There is something familiar inside them, something that makes my skin prickle, and the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

“I—was in the same hospital. We both were treated by the same nurses. I cannot imagine your grief. I am sorry.”

Without warning, she spins away from me and lopes off, reminding me of the gazelles I used to see on the nature channels in the hospital. I call after her, but my utterances fall on deaf ears. The way she spoke, the cadences and inflections in her voice, I have only heard one other person speak like that. A person I have been trying desperately to pretend doesn’t exist, a person I’m not even sure *is* a person. A person I am determined to get answers from.

But not today. Today, I have goodbyes to say.

Chapter Seven

Simply put, this was a mistake. That much was obvious, or rather, should have been obvious, from the beginning. Yet I chose to ignore that. And for what? Curiosity? Was curiosity worth having her calling out to me as I hurry away, so overtly suspicious of my presence? Foolish.

The grass rustles as a whisper flows through the air, kissing my face and shaking the leaves of the trees. The whisper seems to have quieted the woman's shouting, because the cemetery is silent once more. Unwittingly, unwisely, I glance back to find Aisla, the girl with a name like music, crouched alone in the sea of headstones. She presses her forehead to the ground, and for a fleeting moment, I think about going back, placing a hand between her shoulder blades, just being there. But I know I must leave. I have been gone too long already.

At the outside gate, I realize my second mistake of the day. I brought enough money for the cab ride here, but not the ride back. I am . . . stuck.

I am Death. I am graced with stores of knowledge, a hundred years of experience, in phantom form I am able to appear in an instant, I can touch souls, induce mind-numbing fear, and yet, here I stand, stranded. With no choice but to go on foot.

My century's worth of experience walking these streets makes it easy to find my way back to the home of the woman whose body I have stolen—well, borrowed really. It is only the heat and the impractical footwear that makes the experience an unpleasant one. I walk through the shimmering heat waves rising from the pavement and contemplate the decades that have passed since I have dealt with the ailments of a human body. Perspiration beads in my hairline,

and my feet begin to ache as I tread on. The soles of this woman's scuffed shoes are so dreadfully worn down as to be no protection or comfort at all.

I try to hurry as quickly as I can, eager to return the body and take my usual form once more. Eventually, I find myself at the woman's doorstep. I turn the knob, hoping that no one entered the house in my absence. Upon crossing the threshold, I quickly scan the room to find everything undisturbed.

I make my way back to the cluttered bedroom, and change back into the clothes the woman was wearing when I first arrived. I am thoroughly ready to put this debacle behind me. I have not quite sated my curiosity, but after all, curiosity killed the cat, and I would rather not die twice. Who could say what would be in store for me then?

I pull the sequined top over my head, shimmy back into the constricting jeans, and return to the living room. The pool of vomit has begun to fill the room with its vile odor, and I must take a moment to brace myself for the looming necessity of putting my face next to it once more.

It is unlikely that anyone will investigate into this woman's death. She was not close with her family, and those she called friends are not the worrying type, but I am obligated to change as little as possible about her death. It is with this obligation in mind that I lie down beside the putrid fluid and close my eyes. I focus my energy away from her body, and feel myself peeling away from her like a snake shedding its skin.

It is a relief to be back in my natural form, but the relief only serves to emphasize what a foolish decision I made. One would think I would be wiser than that after a century of experience.

With a final glance behind me at the dead woman whose name I am already forgetting, I depart from the apartment with the spectral feline as if I had never been there in the first place. As fleeting as a thought.

I silently vow to be wiser now. I take this girl, Aisla, and force her to the back of my mind. I erect walls around her, brick by brick. I have become skilled at compartmentalizing the horrors of my past; doing the same with Aisla should be simple by comparison.

The task should be made even simpler with the evening I have ahead of me. I have three names on my list, the three names whose deaths I could not speed up as I did with the others. In a flash, I appear several blocks away from the apartment, and see two firemen shiver despite the blistering heat, subconsciously unnerved by my presence. Smoke billows from the house, undulating snake-like into the sky. It does not take an expert to know the meaning of this particular smoke signal.

It is 7:03pm. Dinner time for some, too late for this tragedy to make the prime time news, but perhaps tomorrow morning's instead. The news crews will show up soon, interview as many witnesses as possible, get all the harrowing details. Imagine if they knew I existed. I would never get a moment's peace. But then again, when do I ever?

The firefighters are attempting to douse the flames licking at the house, but it is not enough. They say fighting fire with fire never works, but apparently neither does fighting fire with water.

The world is full of irony, I think as I make my way into the blaze. I pick through the maze of fire and wonder if this is what hell looks like. Although, I suppose for this family, this is

hell. Whether they go from hell to hell is another question. Like I said: irony. It is truly inescapable.

Chapter Eight

I have whipped cream on my face, and in my ears, and my eyelashes. Everywhere. I have whipped cream everywhere.

“I thought the war was over, guys,” I shout to no one in particular.

A few months ago, one of our salad guys, Jon, took a handful of whipped cream to the face, courtesy of Ronny. In a not-so-well-thought-out attempt at payback, Jon sat in waiting outside the kitchen bathroom, expecting Ronny, but instead getting Mick. While Jon took a moment to watch the life of his career flash before his eyes, Mick wiped his face clean and declared “It’s on.”

What ensued was a war involving some of the most inventive ways of rigging whipped cream to explode that I have ever seen. But the last few weeks had been so quiet, peaceful even, that I thought the white flag had been waved, and that I was safe from such sabotage. But no such luck.

I momentarily abandon my search for red onions and go to clean off in the bathroom, catching a double take from Mick as I walk by.

“War back on?” he asks.

“Yep.”

“Motherfucker,” he replies, nodding.

Mick had been kind enough to offer me a week or two off work to recuperate after “my ordeal” as he called it, but I turned him down. I took the weekend to clean up, figure out just how deep into debt the hospital bills had put me, and come back to work this morning with a burning desire not to talk about it.

I need to keep busy. If I’m thinking about work stuff, I can’t think about other stuff. Well, I hope that’s how it works, anyway. I’ve only been here for an hour so, I’ll wait and see. Though I might become preoccupied worrying about being attacked with dessert toppings.

I wash my hands and go back to prepping for the day. I’ve rolled what feels like a million and one meatballs when I feel the hair on the back of my neck stand at attention. I glance behind me and see only the refrigerator and a shelf of spices. I huff out a sigh and return to my meatballs. I’ve had more than enough of that feeling this week. Between the car crash and the hospital and the cemetery . . . maybe I’m just going crazy. I snort derisively to myself. Maybe I’ll end up like one of those people who hold up cardboard signs and shout conspiracy theories about the NSA.

“How are those balls coming back there?” Ronny calls.

“Bigger than yours, ya perv,” I retort.

I carry one of the pans out to the line and hand it off to Sherm.

“Why is this so small?” he asks.

“What?” I ask back, unsure, as always, as to what Sherm is talking about.

Ronny saunters over, wiping his dark fist on an already soiled rag. “He’s right,” he says, sounding shocked. “This is a half pan. It’s Sunday, we need three of these.”

Fuck. I had been thinking it was Tuesday. Having those extra days off screwed up my days. I’m so used to my hospital schedule with my mom, that’s how I always kept track of my days. But now—

I take the pan back and return to the prep area in the back just in time to hide the welling in my eyes.

As I begin rolling more meatballs between my palms, shaping the damp, squishy meat into perfect spheres, I can’t help but picture the funeral in my head. I don’t really remember anything that anyone said, I just keep seeing their faces, mourning my mother, pitying me. I don’t want pity, I want my mother back. She never would have wanted to go like that, she wouldn’t have wanted to go at all. And there were so few people there. My mother deserved a crowd. Instead, all she got was her brother-in-law, her daughter’s boss, and another dying woman.

I can still hear the woman’s hacking coughs in the back of my mind, accompanying the cadence of the minister’s sermon. *What was her name again?* I wonder. Oh, right. Ruth. I picture her sunken, wrinkled face and feel a tiny twinge of guilt. I probably should have thanked her for showing up. I didn’t know her, but I’m sure my mother would have been happy to have her there. I just got so distracted by that decrepit-looking woman who was lurking around. Thinking about that woman and who I think she really is raises the hair on my arms and I try to go back to thinking about Ruth.

Ten minutes later, I have a satisfactory amount of meatballs and return to the line to set up my station. Because of my blunder I only have a few minutes before opening to get settled. I hope for a slow day, but know it's unlikely. As much as this city has decayed in the past decade, The Corner Bistro is fortunate enough to sit in the epicenter of a square two miles or so of untouched history. The streets are modern, but the buildings whisper stories of the past if you know well enough to listen. This makes it a popular spot for nostalgic oldsters and the population of younger people that have resisted the chemical temptations that are all too readily available.

I peel sheets of saran wrap off pan after pan of sides and garnishes and wonder how this tiny corner of the city managed to remain ancient and proud when everything else has been reduced to rubble and ruin. Maybe ghosts of the Revolutionary War still linger here, refusing to cross over while their beloved homes are in peril. I can respect that. It's noble, really, defending something like that. Better ghosts that defend something than ghosts that kill people and then stalk their loved ones while disguised as other people.

The miniature printer on the counter shudders and spits out the first ticket of the day. I snatch it up and call out the order: two spaghetti and meatballs and a ribeye steak cooked rare.

"Meatballs, huh?" asks Ronny, wagging a thick eyebrow at me.

I mumble something incoherent and slap a steak on the grill.

More tickets start pouring in with such frequency that I half expect the printer to start smoking as its little mechanical heart gives out.

The gogogo environment soon grips my mind and forces it for a brief moment of time to give its full attention to the flow of the kitchen. On good days I spend the lulls in service to cater to my proud heart, admiring the well-oiled machine that I helped to create. It's a source of pride:

the spot on timing, the teamwork, the code of honor between the staff. On bad days, I dedicate my spare seconds to cursing my fellow cooks, and wishing the labor board would let me bitch slap the lazy ones. Sometimes I throw things. Today though, I spend my breathing time tossing shovelfuls of dirt on top of rudely intrusive thoughts that lurk in the shadows of my mind, rearing their heads when the opportunity arises.

I see a ticket calling for a sea bass with asparagus and think about how much my mother adored sea bass. I remember her face shining in joy when I snuck some home one night, furtively wrapped in tinfoil and stuffed into a baggy pocket, and then fumble the tongs as I remove a set of steak tips from the grill. Two of them tumble to the floor, now coated in dirt and god knows what else, and I have to try to cover my mistake on the fly.

I glimpse a waitress whose blonde hair conjures images of the sickly looking stranger whose identity I am all but sure of. I think about finding him, getting the answers I need, and forget which ticket I'm on. I nearly start a set of grilled turkey before I remember that I've already done that, and re-center myself.

My day, afternoon, and evening continue in this vein until the traffic in and out of the kitchen dissipates, voices hush and movements slow. The printer seems to breathe a sigh of relief as minutes tick by without another order. Poor thing deserves a pat on the back.

Without the cacophonous bustle of the dinner rush, my mind feels more vulnerable, more susceptible to unwanted thoughts. Despite the occasional slips, the noise was my wall, my moat, complete with ravenous alligators and vicious piranhas. Without it, the pressure of a thousand unwelcome thoughts pressing in, knocking at my skull, gives me a migraine.

I try to rush through my closing duties, but am hampered by a sudden bout of memory loss. I walk into the freezer and forget what I needed. I can't remember if I already cleaned the ovens or if I asked Matt to do it. Forgetfulness aside, at 10pm I've finally finished my side work and wave a vague goodbye to a few of my still-cleaning comrades.

The sky seems darker than usual as I walk home, an impenetrable onyx shield guarding the heavens from the unsightly vagaries of human life. Somewhere in the distance, a woman wails unintelligibly. Another female voice returns the call and I wait to hear gunshots or sirens. Neither comes, so I know they must be friends; drunk or high and screaming simply because they can.

I send a pebble tumbling down the sidewalk, nosing it along with the toe of my shoe. I shiver guiltily in the cool summer night, reflecting on my slip ups today. Logically, I know that I didn't do anything catastrophic. It's a kitchen; sometimes we make mistakes. But I've always taken it as a point of pride that *I* don't make mistakes. I am always in control. I shouldn't let anything change that.

I round a corner and dig out my phone. It's a quarter past ten and I haven't checked my phone since I got to work at ten this morning. Not that I'd need to check it. I only ever got calls from my mom or from the hospital. So now my phone is empty. Devoid of even a spam email. Guess at least I'll save money on my phone plan now.

I blame my preoccupation on the events of the last week. And I blame the events of the last week on Faceless Fred. I climb the steps to my door and joggle the lock until it clicks open. I halfheartedly vow to find out who he is, but fatigue whisks my resolve away. I need to rest.

I'd sleep in my bed, but the couch is closer. I don't even bother kicking off my filthy shoes. I just curl into a ball, sinking into the worn cushions, and cannonballing into dreams.

Wakefulness comes to me slowly, drifting into my mind like a cloud across the sun, a dazzling sun whose rays reach down, sneaking in my window to caress my face with a warm kiss. It has been a long week, pages peeling off the calendar with agonizing slowness. But that'll happen when you spend twelve hours every day at work.

A kitchen is like a casino: smoky, repetitive, and lacking in clocks. The only difference is that instead of keeping the place dim and indistinct, a kitchen's light throws everything into sharp relief; an eternal high noon. The effect is much the same though: it makes time stand still and morph into indistinct shapes. An hour passes in the blink of an eye, and then a minute stretches far past its allotted sixty seconds.

I roll onto my stomach, still half asleep. With one bleary eye cracked open, I struggle to decode the neon blue blur of my alarm clock. 9:42. If I'd gotten my way, I'd be headed into work right now, but last night Mick had pulled me aside on my way out the door and insisted, very adamantly, that I take a day off. I, in turn, had insisted, very adamantly, that I NOT take a day off.

My theory about keeping my mind busy at work has not proven one hundred percent effective, but it surely must be better than sitting alone at home. But Mick had won out, citing lack of overtime funds as fair reason, and I reluctantly admit to myself that my aching body feels grateful for the break.

I rub my eyes and feel last night's sweat caking my face, clogging my pores. I give myself ten more minutes and then introduce my feet to the floor. I veer off to the bathroom and bare myself to the icy bite of the AC unit. Goosebumps erupt on my skin as I wait for the water to heat up, and then sweep into the shower's liquid embrace as soon as it's tolerable. Steam manifests before my eyes, billowing up and clinging to the ceiling.

I shampoo my drenched hair, and peek out the curtain to see the steam ghosting over the mirror that reflects half of my face and none of my thoughts. Science may never know what it is about shampoo and suds that awakens our inner philosopher, but under the drizzling stream of water, unbidden thoughts float to the surface of my mind like answers appearing in a magic eight ball.

I try to assure myself that I've done well this week, keeping my thoughts under control. Yes, I've been distracted from time to time. Yes, I've had some close calls, almost crying into various pots and pans, but that's normal. Or at least that's what I tell myself. I try to tell myself that it's okay, I've gone through this before. I got through this the first time. This is the same thing.

Oh, but it's not the same thing, taunts a little voice in the back of my head. *Last time, you had mom. You had help. But now—it pauses to chuckle sadistically at me—you're all alone.*

"Shut up," I murmur, lathering suds all over my body, and then chide myself for talking to myself as if I'm two people having a conversation.

The water is turning cool, so I give myself a final rinse and turn the shower off. The little voice pipes up again as I step out of the tub, leaving puddles in my wake.

Maybe you're going crazy. Talking to yourself will get you locked up. You're already seeing things.

I dab at my face with the rough hide of my pink terrycloth towel. The idea that I'm seeing things, I decide, is bullshit. I *saw* something, but I'm not *seeing* things. Whatever or whoever it was, it was real. That girl at the funeral was definitely real. I could feel the heat of her breath as we spoke, could see the shadow her slight body cast across the rippling grass. I'm certain I could've touched her. And as for that *thing*, I spoke to it. I pleaded with it.

And just what does that prove? inquires the voice, ever the skeptic. *No one else saw anything . . .* it trails off.

Anger at my own brain churns in my stomach. How can I put this thing behind me if it keeps asking questions?

Answers? suggests the voice.

Questions need answers or else they salt our earth, burn our crops and bring a plague on all our houses, all that Shakespeare shit. But I have no way of finding answers and even if I did, it doesn't seem like a very bright idea anyway. What I need is to stay busy, I know that for a fact. I think back to yesterday and my half-formed idea about visiting Ruth. It's not a very exciting idea, but it's better than sitting here arguing with myself.

Three subway stops later, and visitor hours are just beginning as the automatic doors whoosh open to admit me. Inside the lobby, a bored looking receptionist glances up at me before deciding that she doesn't need to bother with me. I approach her anyway.

“Excuse me?”

She looks up at me through heavily lidded eyes. “Yeah?”

“I’m looking for someone. Ruth something? I don’t know her last name. She’s really old. Coughs a lot?” I add hopefully.

“Third floor. Room 3296.” She responds and swivels her chair away from me.

I don’t bother thanking her, and instead head off toward the elevator. My stomach lurches as it takes off, then drops back into place as the elevator shudders to a stop and releases me onto a new floor. I recognize the unique scent of this floor the moment the doors open. It smells, quite frankly, like old people. My throat tightens as I inhale, trying desperately to reject air that is tainted with the cloying odor of that one perfume that every blue haired crone over the age of sixty seems to wear.

I turn left out of the elevators and wander down the hallway, counting off room numbers as I go. I pass a lone elderly man in his hospital gown leaning up against one of the gurneys parked off to the side of the hallway. I glance around surreptitiously, wondering whether he was supposed to be out here by himself but see no one. He smiles at me and waves, but I just keep going. 3290, 3292, 3294, and here we are. Ruth something’s room. Her door is shut, and I am grateful because it allows me to take a deep breath and try to prepare myself for the possibility and probability of Ruth talking about my mother. When my breath comes out shaky, it becomes apparent that I am not, nor will I ever be, totally ready for that to happen. I guess I’m just winging this then.

I peek in the tiny window in her door and see her propped up on a bunch of pillows, spooning Jell-O out of a tiny plastic cup. She lifts the spoon to her mouth and I place my hand on

the doorknob, but something prevents me from turning it. I came all the way here, but suddenly something is stopping me from going in. I feel a sudden emptiness in the part of my mind that was so determined to come and thank Ruth for coming to the funeral. I don't know why I'm here. Just like that, the last thing I want to do is talk to this woman. I turn away from the door, hoping she didn't spot me. Although, even if she did, there's not much she could do about it. The woman is basically dead; she can't very well chase me down can she? What good would going in there do, anyway? We'd make awkward small talk, she'd tell me some random story about my mom, I'd get upset, or with my luck she'd just end up dying on me.

That last thought makes me think again about my musings from yesterday. About how if Ruth died on me, I might see You-Know-Who. Before I know it, a plan is clicking itself into place in my mind. I did say I wanted answers. And I came all the way here, would be a shame to leave emptyhanded.

I move eagerly, now, hoping to hear a wailing heart monitor go off somewhere. The floor is silent, though. I wander a little farther down the hall, trying to seem inconspicuous. After almost ten minutes of meandering, it seems apparent I won't have much luck on this floor. I say a silent goodbye to Ruth and I trek back to the elevator. It dings to a stop in front of me and I board it, intending to hop up to the next floor. For a brief moment, the pause in action in the elevator makes me question my idea. There's no guarantee someone will die right here, right now. And isn't this a little skeevy? Looking for someone to die just so I can satisfy some perverse curiosity? I am halfway through deciding to just go home when the elevator stops at the next floor and opens to release me.

I freeze for a second, torn between what I want and what I know is right. A pair of nurses wander down the hallway, chatting together. I catch a bit of their conversation as they go by.

“ . . . probably not going to make it through lunch . . . ”

Aha. I turn and trot down the hall behind them.

“Who?” inquires the male.

“Maker,” replies his blond haired companion.

“Little old lady in 4328?”

“Yeah,” she says sadly.

Just like that, I am back in investigative mode. I drop to my knee and pretend to tie my shoe so they won't notice me and think I need their help. When their footsteps have faded into oblivion, I stand and head in the opposite direction. I turn a corner at the end of the hall and the room numbers start to drop.

In the meantime, I try to figure out what I'm going to do when I reach my destination. I can't exactly barge into some lady's room and wait for her to die. And I can't get caught loitering in the hallway waiting for her to die, either. Again, a brief moment of revilement overtakes me as the stark reality of what I'm doing dawns on me. I almost turn back. But I need to know. So I tell myself that this lady was going to die anyway, and my being here wouldn't change that or make it happen any quicker. My reverie is broken by a series of alarms going off in one of the rooms I just passed.

Change of plans.

I whip around and head back where I came from. In their haste to respond to the emergency, the two nurses from earlier don't register my presence in the hallway.

My prospective hiding places are nonexistent, so I pace in small circles and do my best to be inconspicuous.

Every few seconds I peek in the window; waiting, watching, making sure I don't miss him. I wait anxiously, afraid that I've missed it somehow, or that I really am insane and am awaiting an appearance that will never happen.

Just as the thought crosses my mind, I catch a disturbance in my peripheral vision. The air near the patient's head shimmers like a mirage, wavering in various states of solidity, sometimes revealing an arm, or a torso, or a face that I promptly forget.

A barely visible hand reaches out of the mirage. Slender fingers reaching for the shriveled face before them. They ease the crinkled eyelids shut and the machines flat lines with an earsplitting wail.

One of the nurses moves to begin compressions, but is stopped by his comrade's outstretched arm. She points to the patient's chart hanging on the side of the bed and mutters something to him. The woman on the bed must have had a DNR order.

I am nearly trembling with anticipation waiting for the nurses to leave. I'm going to miss him if they don't leave soon.

I watch eagerly as they pull the sheet over the woman's head, concealing her as if death has made her too shameful to look at. They move toward the door and I shrink back against the wall. They turn away from me and I slip through the closing door with moments to spare.

The door shuts with an especially loud thud in the silent room of the recently deceased, and I get the impression that this thing—this *being*—is turning toward me in surprise.

“You,” says the voice in my head, confirming my suspicions.

“Me.”