

PROLOGUE

Hi, my name is Bob, and I'm the Grim Reaper. Now, before you get too worked up, this ain't no damn AA meeting; so all you friends of Bill? – just don't.

Yes, my name is Bob, (well, it was when I put pen to paper on this journey anyway), and you got it – I AM the Reaper, the guy who collects souls for the gods. Yeah, I did use a plural and didn't use a capital G. I cap the name of only one God. If that bothers you, you're really gonna be in a bad way after a couple of chapters. This book ain't for the faint of heart or weak of spirit. (I love it when writers say that shit. Stephen King and Michaelbrent Collings write shit that will keep you up nights – not me.) If you're the sort that gets easily offended, that's good to know. That's sorta my goal, at least one of them, offend "religious" people that is. Basically, this is a biography of sorts with a little history of the world, prior to my entrance thrown in.

So lean back, grab an adult beverage or fire up a fatty, whatever trips your trigger, floats your boat, winds your clock – you get the picture. I would, however, strongly encourage you, "Refrain from partaking of any of the more mind-bending and or perception altering hallucinogenic compounds, legal or otherwise.

One more thing – and it's important. I swear by any and all the gods if one of you damn "Here, hold my beer" rednecks licks a toad to get off – I am personally gonna haul your ass over to Baal. Yeah, *that* Baal. The Canaanite Baal – baby eater extraordinaire. Now he has the reputation of being one nasty god. He's the one Jupiter refers to as "Baal the Bitch; Cosmic Buzz-Kill". Now, whether or not that is accurate is a story for a later day.

Got it? Good, because I hate repeating myself.

Now let's get to it.

The Reaper of Souls

Robert Angus Dunbar the Seventh. (Since 1475 A.D. anyway)

I've been tailing this guy for three weeks, not that he knows. I'm one damn good stalker – a nice little trait I picked up from a Mimbrenño Apache fella by the name of Mangus-Coloradas (La-choy Ko-kun-noste, AKA "Red Sleeve"). Most people don't remember him. Now that, my friends, is a damn shame. Mangus-Coloradas was father-in-law to the great Cochise of the Chiricahua and grandfather to Geronimo; not to mention Mimbrenño Apache Chief Victorio and the Mescalero Apache Chief Kutu-hala. If you don't believe me, Google that shit. La-choy Ko-kun-noste was the greatest warrior and strategist of his time; few if any through all time could hold a candle to him. Now, If he had been that fucking idiot, Custer, or maybe a Civil War general like Ulysses S. Grant, Robert E. Lee, or some other white ass fucking general, you'd know who he was. History is written by the winners. No, this ain't gonna be no history lesson with moral judgments and what-not. Well, maybe a little, I am quite the opinionated sumbitch on many issues.

I digress. I have a tendency do that a lot. It's one of the byproducts of living so long. So quit yer whining and suck it the hell up.

As I was saying, or bragging if you will, I am a stalker's stalker. This guy was nothing, to tail. Here's a tip from Bob's your Uncle; it's not the target that usually busts your ass. It's some clerk at the seven come eleven who spots you two or three days in a row and blows your cover. Hey, it happens. It just makes it more interesting.

I haven't been given the reason why this guy needs to cancel all his long-term plans. I have no idea. Hermes dropped off the name and location about a month ago; no details, just a name and a location. Dr. Jay Willingbrook in Springfield. The gods are funny like that, they didn't even give me a state. It's not like there's only one Springfield in the damn country, ya know. It took a couple of weeks but I found him. I love Google. Now, as I mentioned I have been tailing the Doc for about two and a half weeks. From what I've seen, so far anyway, he seems like a decent enough guy. Being decent enough doesn't mean shit to the gods.

Dr. Willingbrook is the chief of surgery at the Springfield Medical Center. He always seems to have something nice to say to everyone. He even gets the door for ladies, you know, shit like that. To top that off he's got about the hottest redhead since Rita Hayworth for a wife. Still, none of that means shit to me. He's on the gods' radar and that ain't where your ass wants to be – not when they've called me in. I'm pretty much the King of last chances, and yours aren't good by the time I get involved. Only once in the history of the Reaper has one person survived my visit.

I am somewhat startled from my revelry when I hear someone talking from behind me.

"Excuse me, sir?" The voice is shaky; switched an octave half way through.

Don't ask me why I did this, maybe it's because I was bored, or ornery, or both.

I slowly turned around, and by turned around I mean just my head; damn near a full one hundred and eighty degrees. It's pretty dam creepy and is usually enough for most folks to start making the sign of the cross while thinking about that "Exorcist" movie, (Catholic or not, mind you).

I looked him up and down, slow and real dramatic like. He looked around seventeen to nineteen. Mother Nature must have been pissed at his parents – his face looked like somebody stomped out

a fire with golf shoes. Acne scars, cuts, chunks missing; it ain't pretty, but I've seen way worse so I smile, "What can I do for you, young man?"

The kid was staring down at his ratty looking Chucks, shifting his weight from side to side. Finally, he sorta peeked up at me through his long and somewhat greasy black hair, "I was wondering if you had any spare change?"

"Why?" I asked still smiling. "You needing a fix or something? Are you some kind of junkie? Are you just looking for a little taste or are we are talking 'I don't remember my own fucking name' quantity?"

Shit. His face turned deep red and he actually flashed a little attitude/anger at me from those surprisingly blue eyes. "I am NOT a junkie, *SIR*," he stated tersely. "I have never used illegal drugs in my life. I'm just hungry. I live under a bridge out by the interstate and haven't eaten for about three days now."

"Sorry to have bothered you, *SIR*," he spits out the sir even more sarcastically then before. I like that kind of shit. The kid's got some real cojones hanging there.

"Hold on a second," I said as I stood and rotated my body back under my head. It's a trip to watch and he doesn't even blink.

The kid wasn't moving either. He lifted his head up and looked me in the eye. I could see he was ready to fight, or at least try and defend himself. He was *REALLY* pissed. I did NOT see that one coming, but hey, I'm the Reaper, not a fucking psychic. "What's your name?" I inquired.

"Jonathan. Jonathan Winchester, sir." No sarcasm this time, but the subservient tone had gone bye-bye. I was really starting to like this kid.

"You can drop the sir shit, Jonathan. It don't impress me," I replied with a scowl.

"I'm not interested in impressing you," he responded, still looking me in the eye. "I was taught to address my elders with respect – sir."

He just stood there. I could see the tension draining out of him as his eyes started to waver. Even if you don't know you're staring into the eyes of the Reaper, it can still give you the willies after a bit, or so Thor tells me. Yeah, that Thor. Why? Do you think there's a shit-ton of Thor's running around in the heavens?

I got an idea. "I tell you what, Jonathan. If you'll do something for me, I'll pay you, and pay you quite well, provided you complete the task." I watched his face closely to see if my gut was right.

I could almost see the wheels turning in his head. It sort of hurt to watch. Finally, he turned those big baby-blues of his back up towards me. "Is it legal?" he asked.

"If I tell you it pays two hundred bucks, does it matter?" I replied.

He shrugged and said, “Probably not; unless I get caught.”

“Now we’re cookin with gas, Jonathan,” I said with a grin as I pulled a nice crisp Benjamin from my shirt pocket. His eyes lit up like the fucking Fourth of July.

I tucked it into his ratty ass looking trench coat and patted the pocket. “Consider that an advance in good faith,” I told him.

All he said was, “What do you want me to do?”
Bingo - game, set and match.

I turned around, sat back down on the bench, and motioned him to take a seat. I pointed at the Burger King across the street. “See the guy sitting by the second window from the right?”

“Yeah, the white guy in the blue shirt, right?” said Jonathan, his head nodding.

“That’s the one I’m talking about, yes,” I said. “I want you to go get a large soda, any flavor will do.” I fished a five-spot out of my shirt pocket and handed it to Jonathan. “I’m even gonna pay for it.”

“I can do that, sure,” says Jonathan, “then what?”

He’s a quick study. “Then,” I said with my best poker face, “I want you to dump it on the guy in the blue shirt; the whole damn cup. Do you think you can handle that, Jonathan?”

The kid mulled it over for a few seconds and then asks, “Is this like a prank or something?”

“Jonathan, my man, the two hundred dollars is to retain your services. You don’t get an explanation. I’m paying you to dump a soda on that guy. Why you’re dumping it doesn’t concern you.” It was officially fish or cut bait time for the kid.

“Gotcha,” he said and headed across the street. Did I mention I was starting to like this kid? Yes, I did. Pay attention. Take fucking notes if you have to. Oh, I got it, you make cute little bookmarks in your Kindle.

Five minutes later Jonathan came into view. Just as he came up to the table where the target was sitting, he looked back over his shoulder – and tripped. Well played. Anyway, sure as shit in a pigsty, the kid nailed the good doctor with the whole she-bang, cup, and all.

At first, the Doc didn’t react. He just sat there, looking down at his now red-stained blue shirt, Mountain Dew, Code Red from the looks of it. He grabbed a few paper napkins and wiped his face off. Then I got surprised, which doesn’t happen very often in my line of work. The Doc stood up and hit the kid with a well-placed right hook. Jonathan went down like a poled Herford.

Honest to the gods, I started laughing. Yeah, I know – that’s a pretty dick move since I set it all

in motion; so sue me. Now, the reason I was laughing was because I just caught a glimpse of the real man behind the face. It still doesn't explain why I'm supposed to kill him, but it's a good start. Seriously, who punches some scrawny pockmarked teenaged kid in a restaurant over a damn soda? I'll tell you who does; fucking assholes, that's who.

I took a couple of steps towards Willingbrook before I caught myself. That sorta took me by surprise – again – there I was, about to rain hell down on that asshole and totally screw the Cosmic Pooch. That is something that would not play well at my annual job review, I can tell you that much.

Just then the Doc comes shooting out the front door and hangs a Ralph, heading west on Elm Street and away from the sound of a siren coming from the south. Somebody must have dropped a dime on the dick, you know, called the cops. Seriously, if you don't know what "drop a dime" means, you've missed out on a LOT of life.

For the record, I'm not a total dickhead. After the Doc split I jogged on over to the Burger King to check on Jonathan. I caught a glimpse of him through the window as I rounded the corner for the front door. He was bleeding pretty badly. I'd have bet a grand that his nose was broken, from the looks of it. He made eye contact with me as I came in and gave me a whisper of a headshake to wave me off. I was impressed. He just got clocked and he's got enough on the ball to keep me out of it. I hit the head. By the time I came out, Jonathan was being looked at by an EMT and there's a LEO taking notes. Not the Zodiac sign, Nimrod. It stands for "Law Enforcement Officer;" apparently, you aren't much of a Criminal Minds fan. Broaden your horizons, people; besides, a lot of the characters portrayed on CM would qualify for Reaper status in the real world.

I walked back over to the bench across the street and waited for Jonathan to come out. About 30 minutes later, he hit the curb I got up and started walking north up Second Avenue. I glanced back and Jonathan was following me, keeping pace, but not trying to catch up. Remember, I still owed him another hundred for the job. Yet there he was, not trying to run me down; not hollering at me to wait or any such bullshit. See, now you are starting to see what I saw in the kid; and why I am starting to like him.

I found a bus stop at the corner of Second Ave. and Wallcock Lane. Yep, Wallcock. Anyway, I slid onto the bench and Jonathan plopped down about twenty seconds later. I actually didn't laugh at his new "Raccoon" face, ya gotta give me something for that; or not.

"You did very well, Jonathan," I told the kid as I handed him my silk handkerchief, "very, very well." I pulled out three more hundreds and slipped them in his pocket like before. It was quite gratifying to see the look on his face. "The extra two hundred is for the nose. I really didn't expect the guy to hit you. Maybe I should have seen it coming, but I didn't...my bad."

"What a fucking jerk," Jonathan muttered as he dabbed at the blood that was still trickling around the bandage on his nose. He jerked his head up; a look of total embarrassment in his eyes, and said, "I meant him, not you."

I put my hand on his shoulder and gave him a little shake. "I know," I responded. "That man is

what I call a “DWE” – Dick with Ears.”

That got a little chuckle out of the kid. It was fucking official. I liked Jonathan. I’m not even sure why. Hell, I don’t like anyone as a rule. I can’t. I got to be real good friends with Nero back in old Rome, and that didn’t end well as we all know. Sure, he was s couple bricks shy of a full load, but when he got to drinking, he was one hilarious motherfucker. Samuel L. Jackson would get it. Nero turned swearing into an art form. After Nero went sideways and burnt the city, I had to reap his soul. Not a lot of fun when it’s someone you know, let alone like. Eh, shit happens.

“Are you gonna have that nose looked at?” I asked.

“No, sir; it’s just broken, and not for the first time. It will heal and they can’t do anything for me except give me pain pills and I can handle it with aspirin.”

“Alright, if you’re sure,” I said, “besides, it might give you some character.” I was grinning by then. No way a broken nose was going to improve that look; just sayin.

Jonathan actually smiled. An honest to Zeus smile, too. It changed everything about him. He sat up straighter and started looking me in the eyes again. It was pretty fucking cool.

“Where are you from, Jonathan?” I asked.

He smiled and shrugged, “You won’t believe me, but I honestly don’t know.”

I laughed. “How the fuck does someone not know where they were born?” It would seem we shared a common thread, which I will get too later.

Still smiling he answered, “I started out in an orphanage, or at least that’s what they told me. It was the Cook County foster care system for me after I turned seven.” His eyes sort of clouded over for a minute. “Yep,” he said with a chuckle, “good times,” and then started laughing.

“I have no idea where I was born, who my parents are, what my heritage is or even if I have family somewhere that wonders where I am.”

“They named me John Smith at the orphanage, mainly because one of the nuns said John Doe was a little rough for a kid to grow up with.” He laughed at the memory. “I chose the name Jonathan Winchester when I turned eighteen. I like the 30-30 Winchester best.”

That got my attention and I interrupted, “Are you any good at shooting?”

He grinned like the proverbial cat chewing on a canary. “I’m okay,” which, with the grin told me the kid was probably way past okay. I filed that away.

I looked up and noticed it was quickly becoming evening. “I know you don’t have a place to stay, you told me that,” I said, “so I have a proposition for you.”

“What’s that?” Jonathan asked, a hint of wariness creeping into his voice and posture.

“How about you stay with me at the Holiday Inn,” I suggested.

It was like I threw a fucking switch. The kid slid about three feet back and put his hands up. “No offense,” he said, “but I don’t like guys, ya know?”

Jesus wept.

He thought I wanted to bone him. Yep, I lost it, completely, right down to the hillbilly knee slap. “Jesus F. Christ, Jonathan,” I managed to get out; his face now a ball of confusion, “I have no intentions, plans, fuck that – it never crossed my mind to try and get me a little of that.” I went back to laughing and Jonathan started to relax.

“Thanks, kid,” I said, “I needed that.” I was wiping tears from eyes and snot from my nose. “I haven’t laughed that hard in a long damn time,” I added. “Okay, now that I got my ass pretty much back under control,” I spoke as I wiped at the tears, “let me clarify my intentions. I am offering you a room of your own, kid. I don’t swing that way, never have, and never will. Your ass will be as safe from me as if you were staying in a convent.”

He was grinning by then, not to mention a little red in the cheeks. “Sorry, I just thought, well you know,” his voice trailed off as he tried not to laugh.

“No sweat kid. It’s all good in the hood,” I said. “So, now that your rectal virginity is secure for the night, what do you think?”

“I think,” he paused, “I think I could really use a shower and a bed to sleep in. It gets real damn old bathing in the river and washing my clothes by hand. Maybe they even have a Laundromat.”

“That they do, my man, that they do,” I answered. “It’s settled. For the record, this is on me and you don’t owe me shit. You earned it.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, still with a tinge of wariness. Fuck, I really like this kid.

“Positive. I don’t mean to brag, but I’m going to anyway; I am one very rich sumbitch.” Jonathan just smiled. “Thank you, sir. I really appreciate this.”

With that, I flagged down a cab. The driver took one look at Jonathan and said sheepishly, “I don’t want them homeless panhandlers in my cab. They stink it up.”

That pissed me off. So I took a deep breath, a really, really deep one. I inhaled for about three minutes – straight and steady. It’s a little trick I picked up from the dolphins one summer down on Padre Island. I’m actually inhaling and exhaling at the same time – it just sounds cooler than shit and can be rather unnerving. I finally let it out and leaned in towards the driver. I let him get a whiff of death; just a tad though. A human gets a good lung full of it and they are deader than a doornail in about sixty seconds. Then I whispered in his ear so Jonathan couldn’t hear me. “You, asshole, are going to apologize to the young man, whose name is Jonathan. Next, you will get

your sorry four-tooth ass out of this piece of shit and get the door for him.” He’s fixated on my voice. It’s very effective on the living. “To top it off, you are going to give him a twenty when we get to the Holiday Inn and thank him for blessing you with his presence. Are we clear?”

The cabby nodded his head as his hand went for the handle. I stepped back and glanced at Jonathan who had no clue what was going on; he hadn’t heard any of it. The cabby walked around to the passenger side, opened the door, and did one of them British looking bows with a wave of his hand for the kid to climb in. Ten minutes later the process was repeated in reverse. The look on Jonathan’s face when the cabby handed him the twenty and thanked him, was fucking priceless.

Most days, it’s good to be the Reaper.

I got Jonathan a room, some extra towels, two more pillows, three bars of soap, and two bottles of shampoo. Just for shits and giggles, I paid for a full night of porn. Hey, he’s a teenager and has probably never been laid by anything better than his left hand, so don’t judge me. (Like I care....I am laughing, yes, I am.)

“That’s it?” queries Jonathan.

“What do you mean?” I ask; a little puzzled to say the least, having covered that shit back at the bus stop.

“I get my own room, just like that, and I don’t have to pay you back somehow”? The word ‘somehow’ sort of slithered out like a cottonmouth on its way to the riverbank. I got what he meant, and, for a moment I thought about fucking with him. The moment passed.

“No, Jonathan, you don’t have to do anything more for me,” I smiled and winked. “Besides, I snore like an Arkansas Razorback with sleep apnea, and you don’t want any of that. Therefore, now that we’ve cleared that up I will see ya in the morning, kid. I’m in room 326. Don’t bother coming to wake me up, just head on over to the Perkins and I’ll meet you there. No hurry; sleep in, watch some porn and make a night of it.”

Jonathan just grinned and looked down. He’s honest to Zeus blushing like a schoolgirl; gotta be about the porn. “Thank you, sir,” he said, all choked up and shit.

I decided no bullshit right now; this is a “moment”. I put out my hand, which he slowly took. “You’re welcome, Jonathan,” I said with a smile. “Now, order some room service, eat, shower, and sleep. I will see you in the morning.” For a minute I thought he was gonna hug me. That would have ended poorly.

(No, you don’t NEED to know what would happened if Jonathan had hugged me. You WANT to know. See, that’s one thing about humans that cranks me tighter than seventy vestal virgins. You people are ALWAYS getting your wants and needs confused. You *want* a shit-ton of ‘stuff’ when what your really *need* is just a little ‘patience’ and maybe, just maybe; you should WORK for your wants and be grateful when your needs are met. You know; roof, food, clothing, a job

and maybe even a little family around the holidays. A lot of people don't have their needs met, let alone wants. So fuck a bunch of you wanting to know what would have happened. All you NEED to know is "Nun-Ya". As in, "It's non-ya fucking business!" I swear to Odin I love that one; just wish I could remember who came up with it – I'd give their props right here in my little Souvenir de la Grande Fauchouse.