

THE REAPER

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CHAPTER 1

A New Job

Reece Williams approached the foreboding oak door to the Headmaster's study, anxious about his forthcoming interview with Miss Baxter, the careers advisor at Barnsworthy Grammar School. He wasn't nervous because of what the meeting was about, but rather because – like most boys at the school – he had a severe crush on the attractive redhead.

He knocked and pushed the door open to see Miss Baxter offering him one of her trademark warm smiles. His legs turned to jelly and only an express train trundling past the end of the school yard pulled his gaze from the careers counsellor and allowed him to recompose himself.

The teacher spoke.

"Come in and take a seat, please."

Her voice seemed unnecessarily alluring to Reece.

Does she do that on purpose?

"It's Reece Williams, isn't it?"

Christ, she knows who I am.

It didn't occur to him that Miss Baxter been given a list of interviewees and that he was simply her three o'clock appointment.

The teacher waited for confirmation as Reece looked around the room, trying not to be distracted by those pretty freckles just above Miss Baxter's nose..

I'd better say something.

"Yes, Miss."

Miss Baxter straightened a few papers on the desk, opened an A4 notebook, and picked up her favourite Parker pen, poised to take notes.

"Good. Now then, Reece. What are you planning to do once you leave school?"

"Dunno, miss. I hadn't really thought about it."

The teacher glared at the boy.

"You must have had some thoughts on the matter, Reece. You're seventeen and you have less than a year left at Barnsworthy Grammar. I understand you've already decided not to go to university so, if you're planning to stop your academic trajectory at eighteen, you'd better make your mind up about what you want to do for the rest of your life."

Academic trajectory? Who uses phrases like that in conversation?

Reece replayed the teacher's last five words.

The rest of my life. What a terrifying thought. How can I be expected to know at seventeen what I want to do for the next fifty, sixty, or even seventy years?

He knew he had to come up with some kind of answer. As a child, he'd wanted to be an astronaut or explorer but, as he got older, the realisation set in that those jobs were not for the likes of him.

He was about to respond when Miss Baxter's cell phone rang. She picked it up off the desk, saw the caller ID and accepted the call, all the time keeping Reece firmly in her sights.

"Yes, sir. His name is Reece Williams. He's here with me now."

Who's calling Miss Baxter to talk about me?

The careers advisor looked Reece up and down before speaking again.

"Of course, Controller. I'll do it now."

She got up from her chair and walked over to the door of the headmaster's study. She turned the key that was already in the lock. Reece watched her, mystified, as she returned to her desk.

What's going on?

Miss Baxter returned to her phone call, listening intently to the person on the other end of the line. She then disconnected the call, clasped her hands together, and leaned forward.

"I have good news for you, Reece. You have a job."

Reece frowned.

"What do you mean, I have a job? I'm still at school. Even if I wanted a job, my mum and dad would never let me leave school before finishing my exams."

"I meant exactly what I said. You've been selected to take up a very important position with the Department of Death."

The what?

"What's the Department of Death, when it's at home?"

Miss Baxter said nothing.

Reece had already played out the afternoon meeting in his head before even entering the headmaster's study. He knew how it was supposed to go. And nowhere in his prepared script was there any mention of a job with the Department of Death. In the version that he had envisaged, Miss Baxter would ask him what he wanted to do when he left school. He would say he didn't know. Miss Baxter would then give him a few pamphlets and he would bunk off school early and meet up with his mates. What was happening was all wrong.

"I don't want a job. Not yet, anyway. So thanks very much, but no thanks. I don't need your job."

Miss Baxter shook her head.

"It's not a job offer, Reece. It's a placement. You will be doing this job."

"You can't make me."

"You have no choice."

"There's always a choice."

"Only if the Controller decides to give you a choice. Which he hasn't."

"Controller? What Controller? I don't know any Controller. I'm outta here."

He gave Miss Baxter the sternest look he could muster.

"And don't try to stop me."

He stormed over to the study door, thankful that Miss Baxter hadn't removed the key. There was a loud click as the key turned in the lock. And, yet, a hint of curiosity gnawed at his mind.

"I'm not saying I'll take it, but what is this job? What would I be doing?"

Miss Baxter was accustomed to histrionics when probationers were assigned. She even understood why newbies reacted as they did. But they all came round in the end.

"A reaper. You've been selected to be a reaper."

Reece stared at the teacher.

"Like the Grim Reaper?"

"Something like that."

He shook his head.

"You're nuts, Miss Baxter. Bat-shit crazy."

With that, he left the room.

CHAPTER 2

Going Home

Reece ambled along the road, kicking the occasional tin can, trying to process the afternoon's very confusing events. The meeting with Miss Baxter had gone nothing like he had anticipated. In fact, it had taken an exceedingly bizarre tangent. It *can't* have happened like he remembered it. His mind was buzzing.

Was I high?

No. He hadn't smoked weed for a fortnight.

Was I drunk?

No. His secret stash of lager in his father's garden shed was still a secret – as far as he knew – and he only drank when his parents were both out. They hadn't been out at the same time for at least three days.

Am I ill?

That question he couldn't answer for sure. He didn't feel ill but that didn't necessarily mean he wasn't ill. He marked that scenario as possible.

Was I asleep? Was I dreaming?

If that was the case then he'd still be dreaming. Dreams can be uncannily real sometimes. Maybe he was at home, tucked up in bed. He took a kick at a garden wall, stubbing his toe in the process.

I felt that. I can't be dreaming then.

The final option couldn't possibly be true.

Did it really happen?

He arrived at his garden gate and pushed it open. It complained loudly and sprung back quickly as if it were trying to keep Reece out of the garden. He sauntered up to his front door and unclipped his key ring from a loop on his school trousers.

He tried to put his front door key into the Yale lock.

That's weird. My key doesn't fit.

He checked the keys on his key ring one by one.

It's definitely the right key. Must be something wrong with the lock.

He tried one final time before giving up. He pressed the doorbell and heard footsteps approach from inside the house.

His mother, dressed in denim jeans and a pink tie-dye T-shirt, pulled the door open slightly, a security chain limiting how wide she could open it. She dried her hands on a tea-towel as she spoke.

"Can I help you, love?"

Reece frowned.

"Duh. Yeah. You can let me in, for starters."

His mother looked confused.

"Why do you want to come in?"

"Cos I live here, mum."

His mother pushed a foot against the base of the door in case the stranger tried to force his way in.

"I think you've got the wrong house, love. You don't live here."

"Stop messing around, mum. It's me, Reece. Your son."

His mother then said five words that struck right at his heart.

"I don't have a son."

"Of course you do. It's me. Reece. I'm seventeen and I go to Barnsworthy Grammar. I've just got home from school. Let me in, please."

"Sorry, but I don't know anyone called Reece. What's your surname? Have you just moved here and got confused about which is your house? They all look a bit similar, I know."

"I'm Reece Williams – your son – and I've lived in this house all my life. You're Amy Williams. You're my mum."

His mother shook her head.

"Well, you got my name right but I think I'd know if I had a son. And I don't."

A male voice from inside the house called out.

"Who is it, Amy?"

Reece's mum was now quite flustered.

"It's a young man claiming he lives here."

Reece's father called out again.

"Is he drunk or on drugs or something?"

Amy looked into her son's eyes.

"Doesn't appear to be either, Paul."

Reece was frustrated. What were his parents playing at? If this was a joke, it was a pretty sick one. He called to his father.

"Dad, what's going on? Why doesn't mum recognise me? Is she having a stroke or something?"

Paul Williams got up from his seat in the living room, joined his wife and poked his head around the front door.

"Look. I don't know what your game is, lad, but, if you don't get out of here and leave us alone, I'm calling the police."

Reece's frustration was mounting.

"But I'm your son. I'm Reece. You're my dad. You raised me for the last seventeen years. Why don't you recognise me?"

Paul stood firm.

"Final warning, mate. If you're not gone in ten seconds I'm calling the old Bill."

Reece had no choice. His parents were obviously not going to let him into the house. He turned and skulked away, feeling lost and abandoned.

Where can I go now?

It was a pleasant summer evening and he found an empty bench in the nearby park. He sat down, and tried to get his head around what was happening. His face dropped as he watched couples enjoying romantic strolls, dogs being taken on their evening constitutionals, and families just taking advantage of the light evenings. He'd have liked to have been with *his* family now, even doing something mundane like watching TV together. Instead, he was all alone, not only disowned by his family but thrown out of the family home.

He was so engrossed in his own thoughts that he didn't notice another person sit down on the bench alongside him. A female hand reached across and rested on the back of his hand and a woman's voice broke his solitary contemplation.

"It takes a bit of getting used to, I know, but you'll be alright, Reece."

He turned to see that both the hand and the voice belonged to Miss Baxter.

"What are you doing here, miss?"

She gave him the same smile that she had given him back in the headmaster's study.

"I'm here to help you through your induction as a reaper."

Reece's face turned to one of anger.

"Do you know what you've done? You've ruined my life, that's what you've done. Because of you, I have no home to go to. My parents don't even recognise me – in fact, they say they've never had any kids."

He shook his head.

"What am I supposed to do now?"

Miss Baxter's smile seemed to be glued to her face.

"You're supposed to come with me and start your training."

"And, if I don't come with you? If I refuse?"

"It'll do no good. It's part of the great cosmic plan. You have no choice."

"There's always a choice."

Miss Baxter's smile disappeared from her face.

"Not in this world, there isn't."

Her smile trickled back..

"Anyway, what are you going to do if you don't come with me?"

"I'll be okay. I have friends who'll help me."

Miss Baxter stood up and started walking away, towards the boating lake that was the focal point of the park. As she disappeared from view, Reece heard an echo of her final words.

"Good luck with that, Reece."

CHAPTER 3

The Gang

Sid, Christian, Tyson (he hated his real name, Charles), and Micky 'The Dick' Dickinson were where they were every evening – hanging about at the parade of shops that formed an unofficial border to their 'patch', their neighbourhood.

Reece was relieved to finally see friendly faces. The evening had deteriorated into an overcast night punctuated with attacks of persistent drizzle. He couldn't sleep on the streets in such weather – he'd catch his death of cold. He jogged up to the group.

"Hi guys. I need a favour from one of you."

The four teenagers looked at him wondering who the hell this strange guy was who wanted favours.

Tyson was the biggest, strongest, and mouthiest of the four and the natural protector of the group. He was also the tallest. He glared down his nose at Reece.

"What d'you want, mate? You ain't from around here. We don't know you."

Reece looked at Tyson, confused.

"It's me. It's Reece. Stop messin' about, Tyson. We've been mates most of our lives. Look, I can't tell you why, but I need somewhere to crash out tonight."

Tyson bristled.

"You ain't staying at my gaff. I don't know you from Adam and I ain't in the habit of letting strangers sleep at my place."

Sid mocked the situation.

"Stranger danger, stranger danger."

Christian and The Dick laughed, far harder than the quip deserved. Tyson remained unmoved, concentrating on his duty as guardian of the gang.

"Look, mate. We don't know you and you don't know us. You'd better find a bridge or summat to sleep under, 'cos you're not staying with us."

Reece couldn't believe his ears. He was a founder member of the group and they'd always had each other's' backs. In fact, he'd lost count of the number of times he'd crashed out on the floor at Tyson's house or Tyson had stayed at his.

He pointed at Tyson and the other three in turn.

"You're Tyson, you're Sid, you're Christian, and you're The Dick – I mean Mickey. We're mates. We've always been mates. We do everything together."

Tyson's defences were raised again. This bloke wasn't going to give up.

"Don't point no fingers at us like that, pal. That sort of thing can get someone hurt."

Reece knew he was fighting a losing battle. His friends clearly had no idea who he was. He'd been banished, ostracised from his own life.

There was no point in hanging around any longer. He took one final look at his friends and walked off in the direction of the motorway. At least he'd find a bridge there.

Reece sat under the bridge for about twenty minutes, watching the rain intensify until it evolved into a downpour, but those twenty minutes felt like twenty hours. He was despondent.

How do homeless people cope? They must be really tough to last for any length of time outside.

Reece couldn't see himself lasting very long on the streets. He liked his home comforts. He liked his bed, his duvet, the washed and ironed clothes that magically appeared in his wardrobe each Sunday night, and he particularly enjoyed his mother's cooking. He loved to play video games on his gaming console and watching Netflix movies on his bedroom TV. But all that was gone now – he was on his own.

“Are you ready to come with me, Reece?”

He turned to see Miss Baxter once again sitting next to him, still smiling.

“It won't get any better, Reece. In fact, it'll only get worse. You may as well come with me. Remember, you have no choice.”

Reece wanted to reiterate that there was always a choice but he knew he'd be lying. He stood up.

“You're right, Miss Baxter. Whatever you've done to my family and friends, you've made it so I have no choice. Well played.”

CHAPTER 4

First Day Of School

One moment, Reece and Miss Baxter were walking away from the motorway bridge and the next they were strolling down a pure white corridor. Reece felt distinctly disorientated.

“Where are we?”

Miss Baxter quickened her pace and Reece was forced to do the same, just to keep up.

“This is Control.”

“Control?”

“This is where everything that happens on Earth is coordinated.”

“What do you mean, coordinated?”

“Have you ever played The Sims video game?”

“Not recently, but yes.”

“Think of Earth as a giant Sims game. On your computer, you coordinate and plan what’s going to happen to your virtual people. The Controller does the same. He lays out your life’s path, its highs and lows, its happiness and sadness, and he watches his plan unfold.”

“What plan?”

“That, I can’t tell you.”

Reece was adamant.

“Okay. So why does he do that?”

Miss Baxter shrugged her shoulders.

“Who knows? We have theories – I, myself, think that he does it for his own amusement but nobody knows for sure. Maybe even the Controller doesn’t know why he does things.”

“So. The Controller’s God?”

Miss Baxter laughed.

“Good heavens, no. He’s the Controller. He’s not a god.”

“He sounds pretty god-like to me.”

“He’s aware that mortals assign various labels to him, many of them based on religious beliefs, but his existence is scientifically explicable. He *did* create the simulation that you all live in, but he says the idea that he’s a deity is way off the mark.”

“So what is the explanation behind his existence?”

“To be honest, I don’t know. I hear that it rests on an incredibly complicated chemical formula that is way too complex for mere mortals to understand. So I don’t even try.”

“Are you mortal, Miss Baxter?”

The history teacher nodded.

“Basically, yes. But I’ve been augmented – updated if you will. And so will you be, in order to perform your duties.”

“What duties?”

“That’ll all be explained during your induction.”

The corridor seemed to go on for miles and Reece was quite relieved when a door suddenly materialised in front of them. It swung open, unaided, with a

swishing sound. Miss Baxter passed through the opening and Reece followed her like an obedient puppy.

A dozen blue plastic school chairs, each with a cup holder and tablet desk attached to it, were arranged in a phalanx. Each chair, bar one, was already occupied by a student. Miss Baxter nodded to the teacher, a severe looking man with a round face and typical male pattern baldness. Any hair he did possess was light ginger in colour.

Miss Baxter gestured to Reece to sit down on the vacant chair.

"My apologies for our tardiness, Instructor, but Mr Williams took a little longer than expected to agree to join us."

The Instructor's stern face metamorphosed into a smile.

"Don't worry about it, Miss Baxter. These things happen."

Miss Baxter acknowledged the Instructor's understanding and left the room.

The Instructor's face returned to its former unyielding state and he strode over to where Reece was sitting. He fixed a steely glare on his new pupil.

"That was the last time you'll be late, boy. Do you understand me? Do you – how you youngsters say these days – do you feel me?"

The Instructor was truly a fearsome figure, his bald head having now taken on the perfect shade of purple to match his ire.

Reece nodded.

"I understand, sir."

The Instructor's head returned to its normal pink colour in seamless synchronicity with the smile that replaced his angry scowl.

"Good. We'll get along like a house on fire then, Mr Williams. Do you agree?"

Reece nodded frantically.

"Yes, sir. A house on fire."

The Instructor returned to his former position at the front of the class. He cleared his throat.

"No doubt, you are wondering what a reaper is and, consequently, what a reaper does. Does anyone have any ideas?"

A girl raised her hand.

"Is it anything to do with the Grim Reaper, sir?"

The Instructor nodded.

"Well done, Miss –?"

He waited for the girl to fill in the blank. She obliged immediately.

"Simone da Silva."

A dreadlocked youth put his hand up. The Instructor pointed to the boy.

"Yes, Mr –?"

"Trey Cooper, sir."

"Go ahead, Mr Cooper."

"Are we going to be trained assassins, sir?"

The Instructor frowned.

"We don't use that term here, Mr Cooper. It has exceedingly negative connotations. We are providing a valuable public service. We prefer to think of ourselves as facilitators, smoothing the passage of our clients to the next phase of their existence."

Reece went to check his wristwatch to see whether it was close to the end of the day's lessons, which was, in itself, a pointless exercise as he had no idea of what time class was due to end.

That's strange.

His watch had gone.

What's happened to my watch?

Reece's interest in his watch's absence hadn't gone unnoticed by the Instructor who, instead of chastising the lad for being distracted, offered an explanation.

"Yes, Mr Williams. Your eyes do not deceive you. Time is an illusion, a human construct, the progression of events from the past to the present to the future. Here, at Control, time is an irrelevance and, therefore, your timepiece is of no importance and has been disposed of."

Reece scowled at the instructor.

"My parents gave me that watch for my thirteenth birthday. Give in back."

The Instructor marched over to Reece's desk and stood over the teenager.

"You have no parents, boy. Ipso facto, it cannot have been gifted to you by them."

He strode back to the front of the room.

"Things are different, here. Get used to it. You'll find things a lot easier if you let go of your previous life."

He scanned the room, allowing his eyes to settle for a couple of seconds on each student in turn.

"That's all for now. At the next lesson, you'll be issued with your uniforms and learn exactly what your job entails."

The door to the classroom swung open and the trainee reapers filed out. One of Reece's fellow students, a pretty blonde girl with a constant cheeky grin tapped him on the shoulder.

"Hi. I'm Suzy."

Reece responded politely.

"Cool. Reece."

The girl smiled.

"Do you know where you're going, Reece?"

He hadn't thought about it before.

"Actually, I do. But I have no idea how I know. I've never been here before."

"Same here. Weird, isn't it?"

Reece agreed. Everything about Control seemed weird.

Twelve doors suddenly appeared in the corridor and opened so that their occupants could enter and make themselves comfortable.

Reece went through door number five and surveyed his room. The only things in it were a wardrobe, a table, a chair, and a bed. An en-suite shower room was to the right. To say that the furnishing of the accommodation was frugal would be an understatement. There was absolutely nothing there that offered even the slightest hint of entertainment.

What I'd give for my computer and TV, right now.