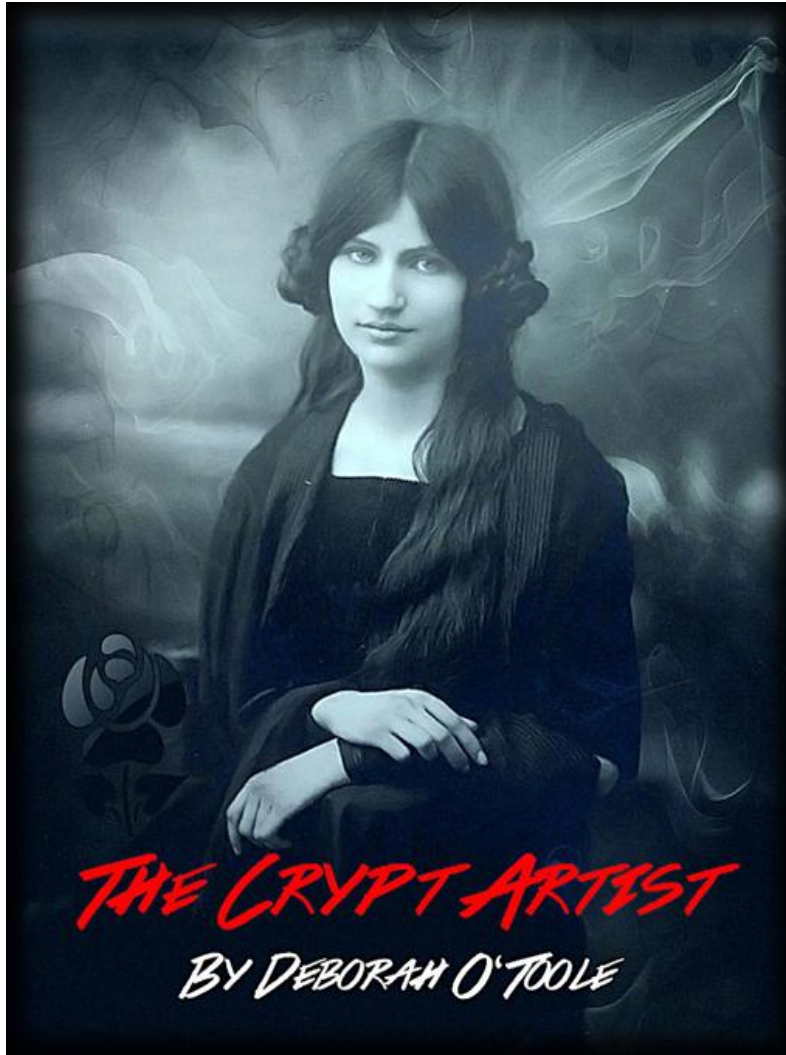


Excerpts from:
THE CRYPT ARTIST
By Deborah O'Toole



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ABOUT "THE CRYPT ARTIST"

The Crypt Artist by Deborah O'Toole will be released by Club Lighthouse Publishing in early 2020.

A near-starving artist finds himself inspired by a group of long-dead classic painters in a rundown loft in SoHo, New York.

Struggling artist Luca Wolfe lives in a dilapidated warehouse loft in SoHo, New York, barely eking out a living from sales of his work. One night he begins to paint a reproduction of art from the past, but becomes too inebriated to continue. When he awakens, he finds the painting complete, but unlike the creation he began the night before.

Frequent visits from the ghost of Malachy O'Leary - a quirky Irish poet from the far distant past - convinces Luca he is on the verge of losing his mind. He hears strange music and sees lights coming from the vacant apartment Malachy used to occupy while he was alive, and soon discovers Malachy is not alone: he is often accompanied by a perpetually hissing cat, and shares his old apartment with a selection of famous artists from long ago. Luca is the only one who can see the phantom visions and hear the ghostly talk, further convincing him he is slipping into a well of sanity from which there is no return.

However, a budding romance with another troubled resident of the building - criminal psychologist Izzy Richards - gives Luca the self-confidence and inspiration he craves, allowing him to delve deeper into his spurt of remarkable creativity like never before.

An unexpected windfall places Luca into a different arena, forcing him to deal with those who would take it away from him, even take his life for the circumstances he suddenly finds himself in. With the help of Malachy O'Leary and his odd stable of ghostly companions, Luca prevails.

But if he cannot alter the course of his own life in the process, all he has achieved will be in vain . . .

For more, go to:

<https://deborahotoole.com/>

THE CRYPT ARTIST: **Excerpt from Chapter One**

SoHo, New York
Present Day (2016)

LUCA WOLFE HURRIED ALONG THE sidewalk on Broome Street, a paper bag resting in the crook of his arm and a burning cigarette dangling from his free hand. He kept his head low, not in the mood for social interaction with his neighbors, or anyone else for that matter. He just wanted to reach the relative peace and safety of his loft, and to be done with basic humanity for the day.

About a block before he reached home, Luca saw a man approaching on a bicycle from the direction of Lafayette Street. A wicker basket on the handlebars contained a lone cat, who stared straight ahead as the man pedaled along the sidewalk. Luca could hear the squeaking of the bike wheels from a distance, growing louder as the bike came closer.

Luca stepped aside to allow the man to pass by, one foot on the sidewalk and the other in the thankfully dry gutter, all the while silently cursing the encroachment of space. The man seemed not to notice anyone around him, more intent on tooling toward some unknown destination, seemingly without a care in the world.

As the man drew closer, it was Luca's intention to disregard him until he passed by. However, he could not help but notice the man's antiquated mode of transport, his style of dress, and there was a definite double-take on his physical appearance. His red and cream Huffy Deluxe bicycle seemed from another era, maybe the 1950s, as did his bowler hat, and black wool suit with white shirt and colorful green bow tie. He seemed older and slightly built, with bright strawberry blond hair and a pale complexion, also carrying a look of blissful determination on his face. Human oddities were commonplace in New York City, but the older man somehow stood out from the rest in Luca's mind.

As the older man passed directly by Luca, the cat in the wicker basket turned its head and stared directly at Luca, its mouth formed into a hiss. He was startled by the feline's hazel-green eyes, which seemed to bore holes into him, but he was quickly distracted by the man speaking aloud.

As he tipped his bowler hat in Luca's direction while keeping his gaze straight ahead, his Irish sing-song voice came loud and clear: "Very well, thank you." Four words, one simple sentence, but said to no one in particular.

Luca stopped in his tracks, turning around to watch as the man and the cat kept going along the sidewalk on the bicycle, soon disappearing from view toward Crosby Street. Shaking his head, Luca continued walking in the other direction. "*Living in SoHo was nothing if not oddly entertaining at times,*" he thought with a wry grin curling his lips.

He then groaned inwardly as he approached the stoop to the Ramsey Building. A large van was parked in front of the structure, with several beefy young men hauling boxes and furniture up the stairs and inside. Someone else was obviously moving into the building today, yet another neighbor Luca would have to unwillingly contend with eventually. Grinding his cigarette to the pavement with his worn loafer-encased foot, Luca took the stoop into the building, two steps at a time, barely avoiding the beefy male exodus to fetch more boxes in the van.

With a sigh of relief, Luca climbed into the old Otis elevator for his trip to the second floor. When he alighted to the hallway, he could detect the familiar moldy odor of the warped wooden floor and less than pristine concrete and brick walls. A recent rainstorm had increased the aroma of decay, but he was accustomed to it by now. The hallway was rather dim, yet he knew he could find his way to the door of his loft apartment in complete darkness. Having lived in the Ramsey Building for the past five years, nothing was a mystery about the place anymore. Misery beget misery on a daily basis.

THE CRYPT ARTIST: Excerpt from Chapter One

"I TOLD YOU THE MUSIC was a bad idea," Howard Russell Butler snapped in a hushed tone, his dark eyes flashing angrily. "The drunk down the hall heard it, and he came looking for it."

"He's not a drunk," Jeanne Hébuterne whispered. "He's a fine *artiste*."

"That, my dear, is a matter of opinion."

"And mine counts just as much as yours," she returned crossly.

The light flickered back on in 2E, illuminating the drab, lifeless room in all its neglect. Bookshelves built into the wall were covered in a thick coat of dust, with several electrical wires hanging down from the ceiling. Three old chairs, covered in grimy brocade, were positioned in a circle in the middle of the room. The chairs were arranged around a low, flat coffee table that held a gas lamp and an ancient black wax phonograph cylinder. A cylindrical cardboard box lay on its side, left empty when *Shadows of the Night* had been the music of choice just moments ago.

The ensemble in the room also included five gossamer figures, all of them dressed in clothing from the era in which they came. Three men occupied the chairs, each one regarding the other with vague hostility and skepticism.

A short-statured man in a black wool suit paced the room in a circle, from one end of the space to the other, muttering under his breath as he did so. "This feckin' place is as much a disaster now as it was when I lived here." His Irish brogue became more pronounced as he continued addressing the room in general but no to one in particular. "Those bloody Ramsey's never did know their arses from their elbows. What a sorry lot of bumlbers."

"Oh *do* be quiet, Malachy, " Howard barked, his brow furrowing with irritation. "I've heard just about enough of your paddy twaddle." Howard was resplendently dressed in a dark blue pin-striped suit, a white handkerchief tucked into his breast jacket pocket, and black suspenders holding his trousers firm. He was the epitome of conservative class and style, but without being overly ostentatious.

"Yes, please Malachy, be quiet," Jeanne pleaded softly from her place by the window. "I'm trying to think, and your gabble is making it impossible."

"Well, pardon *me*," Malachy retorted indignantly as he stopped in his pacing to stare at the woman. "Who croaked and made you Queen of Sheba, may I ask?"

Jeanne dipped her head, her long dark brown hair dangling at the sides of her face. "I meant no disrespect," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. Her French accent was so thick it was nearly indecipherable. "I'm having a difficult time with my thoughts. Please try to understand."

"Poor little colleen," Malachy clucked sympathetically. "I'm sorry, Jeanne. I keep forgetting your unfortunate dilemma. Will you be forgiving me?"

She looked at him with her doe brown eyes, and sighed tremulously. "*Oui*, Monsieur O'Leary." With that, she turned to face the window again, her thin hands touching the cracked and dirty pane. She wore long, dark gloves with the fingers missing, and seemed to be repeatedly adjusting them to cover her nails, an attempt to hide the fact she chewed her long, slender digits while in human form. Her midnight blue dress was long and wispy,

gathered tightly at the waist with a slim belt of the same color, over which was draped a ankle-length black silk coat. There was also a distinct perfumed aroma surrounding her, with hints of sweet, unburned tobacco. The aroma always seemed to trail in her wake.

With another sigh, Jeanne began to roll back and forth on the balls of her feet, a slight moan coming from her lips. And so she always remained, until she was driven to interact with her strange companions once more.

Malachy resumed his pacing, muttering under his breath again. "The feckin' shyte I have to endure just to gather *me own* thoughts . . ."

He looked behind him, snapped his fingers and spoke sternly: "Come along, Hissy." He was followed by the transparent figure of a cat, his dear companion in life, who was only too happy to traipse after him after her initial hiss of rebellion. The hazel-eyed feline was beautiful, albeit a dichotomy of color. Her right foot was white while her left paw only had white on the tips and claws; her tail was black peppered with cream and grey stripes, her back a mix of black, brown, grey and cream, and her chest and belly were an unblemished shade of white.

"The pair of them are as mad as the march hare," observed John Quidor to no one in particular. He was a tall, devilishly handsome specter with black hair and dark green eyes. His gaze went to Jeanne by the window, taking in her beautiful hair and slightly swaying body.

"Let's get back to the problem at hand," Howard said crisply. "The drunk down the hall nearly caught us out."

"It's not going to happen," John disagreed, his eyes leaving Jeanne at the window and instead focusing on Howard. "You may not want to face facts, Howie, but we're as dead as doornails. We're just ghosts, sitting around in this vile little room. The drunk can never catch us out, as you implied. It's logistically impossible." John seemed at ease in his generation attire, which included a sable-brushed topcoat that fell to his knees. Underneath the coat, he wore a dark vest and white shirt, a dark blue tie, and a gold pocket watch hanging from his waist. He looked quite dapper, and he knew it.

"He heard the music," Howard insisted, his glare turning to the pacing Irishman. "All because Malachy wanted to listen to *Shadows of the Night*."

Malachy paused in his pacing again, returning Howard's glare. "The music is a memory from the lad's childhood. What's the harm in it?"

"And how do you know it's a childhood memory for him?" Howard prodded.

Malachy resumed his pacing. "I'm Irish, my good man. We have ways and means into the souls of others."

"What a load of codswallop!" John broke in with a laugh. "More of your Irish blarney, no doubt."

"May the lamb of God stir his hoof through the roof of heaven and kick you in the arse down to hell," Malachy responded with glee.

"Even *more* of your heathen gibberish, Malachy?"

"I'll leave that for you to decide, ya feckin' gobshite," Malachy hissed.

"Enough!" Howard roared angrily, annoyed with the pointless banter. He turned his head to stare at Malachy. "Do you know something we don't?"

"The lad you refer to as the drunk needs our help," Malachy said plainly. "And we're going to give it to him."

"What sort of help does he need, and how can we possibly give it to him?" Howard asked with a snort. "In case you haven't looked lately, the lot of us are see-through."

"Surely you understand the lad," Malachy replied cryptically as he moved around the room. "He's one of *your* kind. An artist. A struggling one, but an artist nonetheless. Me being a poet, I don't fully understand it. All I know is he needs our help if he's to survive through the winter."

"Why is he struggling? Just what sort of artist *is* he?" Philip Padwick asked quietly, the first time he had spoken in days. Although he rarely said a word unless directly addressed, Malachy felt Philip to be the most reasonable of the bunch. Philip's phantom presence was tall and thin. His balding pate still contained wavy blond hair, and the man always wore a colorful bowtie. The only drawback seemed to be his nervous habit of continually brushing faux lint from his gray jacket and trousers, as if to occupy his hands. His ensemble also included a soft gray fedora hat, which rested on his lap.

Malachy shrugged as he continued to circle the room, his feet barely seeming to touch the floor, which gave the impression he was floating on air. Hissy crept after him, occasionally stopping to rub against Jeanne's leg. She would smile and reciprocate, bending down to touch Hissy on top of her head. The cat seemed to detest Howard, would only stop occasionally to glare and hiss at him, but appeared to be indifferent to John and Philip. "He's done cityscapes and individual portraits in the past," Malachy spoke. "But without much success. He recently decided to paint reproductions of famous and semi-famous works in hopes of making a bit of extra money."

"Again," Philip pressed. "How can we help him? We're mere shadows of our former selves."

"He's going to replicate one of your works, along with those of your stodgy companions here. Would it hurt if you were to assist the lad in his efforts? Lend a guiding hand here and there, so's he gets it right?"

"I'm not sure how I feel about someone reproducing my work," John grouched. "It's not right."

Malachy rolled his eyes. "So you say, but aren't you the one who used to paint scenes from Washington Irving's stories about Dutch New York?"

"That was different," John defended himself. "I may have recreated literary subjects, but the work was my own."

"Whatever," Malachy dismissed him with a wave of his hand. "No one blinks an eye these days. As long as the reproductions are acknowledged as such from the get-go."

"This world is *not* my cup of tea," John mumbled, his voice tetchy.

"Nor is it mine," Howard declared, a disgruntled expression on his face.

"You have no choice in the matter, especially if you want to be present in it," Jeanne spoke softly from her place by the window. She glanced over her shoulder at the men briefly, and then continued. "Malachy is right. The *jeune homme* - young man - is going to reproduce our work regardless of what we do or do not do. Don't you want to make sure he gets it right, that he lives up to your true and intended impressions?"

"When you say it *that way* . . ." John admitted grudgingly.

Malachy flashed Jeanne a grateful smile before speaking again. "It's settled, then. We'll help the artsy boyo, right?"

They all nodded in agreement, and then their conversation stopped momentarily. Malachy wafted over to the black wax dictation cylinder on the coffee table, ready to play

the waltz again. He stared at the handle of the dictaphone, the transparency of his bright blue eyes seeming to go through to the back of his head. At the same time, Hissy paused in her stride to glare at Howard, giving him a long hiss and deep growl.

Howard snorted, but looked uncomfortable. "I hate that ill-mannered cat of yours, O'Leary. She's a damned nuisance."

"She senses anger in people, or rather in you. Perhaps if you calmed down a bit, she would stop hissing at you."

Howard bristled. "You can just bugger off, and take that cat from hell with you," he muttered under his breath, looking away from the cat. "Heathens, the pair of you."

Malachy smiled tightly, returning to the subject at hand. "Who's going first?" he wanted to know, his tone quiet.

Jeanne glanced over her shoulder again, a slight smile playing around her mouth. "Moi, Monsieur O'Leary. *Moi*."

"Tread lightly," Malachy warned her. "Our lad might be a heavy drinker, but he's not an eejit."

"He'll hear nary a shuffle from my feet or a word slip from my lips," Jeanne promised in a whisper as she turned around to face the window once more.

Malachy nodded, satisfied with her answer. "Let it begin, then, my pretty little colleen. Let it begin."

The music of *Shadows of the Night*, also known as *Quentin's Theme*, began to carry softly in the air, its sound lulling the ghosts into a tranquil mood. Smiling, Malachy resumed his circular journey around the dismal room, followed by his hissing cat.

THE CRYPT ARTIST: Excerpt from Chapter Three

"GOD, NOT AGAIN," LUCA MOANED as he puked into the commode for the second morning in a row. His barrel fever seemed worse today than yesterday, the muscles in his stomach contracting painfully as he heaved.

"Give it a rest," came the Irish whisper. "You can't get and keep the pretty colleen if you choose hootch over all else."

Luca threw up again, trying to pretend he didn't hear the whisper. Was his sanity so far gone, his senses so off-kilter, that he heard spooky chatter drunk, as well as sober?

He lurched to the kitchen, not bothering to rinse his mouth or smooth his hair. He ate a package of ramen noodles raw, anxious to get the bland cuisine into his jumpy gut.

Feeling slightly better, Luca made his way to the easel. He knew he'd gotten started on the John Quidor piece, but couldn't recall how far he'd gotten before passing out. Since his drunken sleep last night had been devoid of any dreams that he was aware of, he had no inkling of what he might find.

He stared at the portrait resting on the easel. *It was finished.* John Quidor's "The Headless Horseman Pursuing Ichabod Crane" was complete, almost as good as the original. While shocked, Luca was also pleased but highly wary. He knew he wasn't talented enough to create such fine art, especially working from a snapshot in a magazine.

Luca sat on the couch, resting his head back and closing his eyes. Just two days ago, his life was a daily slog of predictable misery that had somehow turned into a rash of unexplainable events, some real and some not - lights, music, ghostly whispers, and most memorable of all, being in bed with Izzy.

He returned to the bathroom, where he took a quick shower and changed into a clean pair of blue jeans and a black, long-sleeved shirt. He gathered all of his laundry, stuffing it into a large, plastic lawn-and-leaf bag.

When he stepped into the hallway from his loft, Luca glanced toward Izzy's door. All was quiet, eerily so. He glanced at his clunky wristwatch, shocked to discover it was only half-past seven in the morning.

The Ramsey Building had a tenant laundry room in the basement. If possible, the facility was damper and creepier than the loft apartments. A bare bulb hanging from the ceiling was the small room's only illumination, which also contained three old washers and dryers. Luca guessed their models to be in the realm of the 1980s.

The laundry room was deserted when Luca arrived with his bag in tow. He threw all his clothes into one washer, setting the water temperature to cold. He sat on a small stool in the corner to wait out the cycle. He covered his mouth as he yawned loudly.

By the time he tossed his wet clothes into a dryer, Luca's eyes were growing heavy with drowsiness. He returned to the stool and leaned his head against the wall. Maybe he could take a quick nap while his clothes dried. It didn't take long before he nodded off. Never expecting to dream in the creepy darkness of the basement, he was nonetheless transported into another surreal delineation.

He was in an empty room, standing next to a small man. The two stood face-to-face, staring at one another warily. Luca had to look down because he had several inches of height on the older man. While small in stature, the stranger had a vivid smile on his face

framed by strawberry-blond hair and striking sky blue eyes. He wore a black wool suit with a white shirt and dark tie. He reminded Luca of a leprechaun, with twinkling mischief present in his bright eyes and a crooked smile twitching at his lips. The only thing missing was his shillelagh and a pot of gold. And to add odd to strange, there was a cat perched on a small desk positioned next to the man, its face in an open-ended, never-ending hiss, its green eyes on Luca exclusively.

"Who the hell are you?" Luca demanded irritably. "And *where* are we?"

"Me name is Malachy O'Leary," the man replied, his sing-song Irish brogue thick and cryptic. "And we're standing in my old flat."

Luca paused. "Malachy O'Leary, the poet?"

"Yes, that would be me," the little man beamed with pride.

"But you're dead," Luca objected, his eyes growing wide with fear as he recognized the voice as the Irish whisper haunting his days and nights.

"Of course I'm dead, but there's no need to fear me. I mean you no harm."

"Why should I believe you?"

"You've got no choice, boyo. Like it or lump it."

"What do you want from me?" Luca asked plaintively.

Malachy seemed surprised. "I don't want anything from you, young man. In truth, I only want to help you."

"How?" Luca prodded. "And why?"

The little man gave a deep sigh, regarding Luca with his bright eyes. "I don't believe I'm saying this, given my own rather hootch-ridden history, but you need to stop imbibing the grape or your life will amount to nothing from this point forward. If you can't stop altogether, then for the love of God cut back considerably."

"Why do you care?" Luca asked, annoyed by the man's teetotaling pontification.

"You're a fellow creative soul," Malachy replied, his tone calm and soothing. "I'm not sure why I was sent to give you a helping hand, but I do know I feel an affinity with artsy types. In fact, quite a few of my friends are artsy types. But I digress." Malachy looked straight at him. "You're special, Luca, whether you know it or not. You've got what it takes to make a great success of your life. It's up to you whether you reach your God-given potential. Entirely up to you."

"This is bizarre," Luca muttered, closing his eyes, as if doing so would erase what was occurring. "And it can't be happening."

"Oh, but it is," Malachy reassured him, his voice matter-of-fact with an odd hint of cheerfulness. "And that's not the half of it, boyo. These artists you're replicating? Butler, Padwick, Quidor and Hébuterne?"

Luca nodded.

"Their ghosts are here too, along for the ride." Malachy chuckled, obviously tickled with himself and the situation they found themselves in. "They're here to help you, to assist you in this important endeavor. For it is very important for you personally, as you shall see in the long run. But rest assured you have a team on your side, so to speak."

Luca asked the next question that came to his mind. "Your old loft here is off limits, and the landlord told me what happened in there. What made you so unhappy that you would take your own life?"

Malachy went quiet for a full minute, then his tone came wistful and barely above a whisper. "That's a tale for another day, lad. For I shall not speak of it, not here, and not now."

Luca was speechless. He did not dare ask too many questions about Malachy committing suicide, or of the other ghosts he claimed were inhabiting the Ramsey Building, for fear of the answers Malachy might give him. However, he was ready with one more question that was closest to his heart at the moment.

"What about Izzy?" Luca wanted to know. If the little man could wax wise about his artistic possibilities, perhaps he had some answers about Izzy as well.

Malachy chuckled, a low, throaty sound that curled his lips into a wide grin. "I can't tell you the exact future - it's forbidden, don't ya know? - but if you do right by yourself first, Izzy will be part of the picture. I guarantee it, boyo."

"I think I love her," Luca confessed in a hushed voice. "I don't know her very well, but I think I already love her."

"Sure and you do," Malachy said agreeably. "All the more reason to do right by yourself. The rest will follow, I assure you."

Luca stepped back slightly. "Do I think I love her because she's the only woman whose shown the slightest kindness to me in years, or because I well and truly love her?"

"Only you can decide that."

"You're not much help," Luca accused him.

"But I *am* helping you, boyo. You just don't realize it yet."

Luca clutched his head with his hands. He wasn't sure which was worse - talking with a ghostly apparition, or believing the words coming so easily from his mouth . . .

THE CRYPT ARTIST: Excerpt from Chapter Five

"I DON'T LIKE THIS," HOWARD Russell Butler declared grumpily, adjusting the eyeglasses on his nose with a well-aimed finger. "I don't like it one damned bit."

"Please," Malachy wheedled, knowing all along Howard would prove to be the most difficult to convince of all the ghost artists.

Howard glared down at Luca, who was flat on his back on the couch, snoring loudly. "Look at the little bugger," he replied belligerently. "He didn't even make it to his own bed this time, did he? He's not fit to shine my shoes, much less lay claim to a piece of my artwork." Howard crossed his arms stubbornly. "No, sir. I want no part of this horseshit. And that's exactly what it is - horseshit of the highest order."

Having founded the American Fine Arts Society during his lifetime, Howard found it well beneath him to assist the slovenly young artist, although he grudgingly admitted to himself that Luca possessed a modicum of talent. Having come from the echelons of high class society, and having attended Princeton University, Howard was also proud of his career as a patent lawyer, which ceased in 1884 when he decided to focus solely on art. He considered one of his better achievements to be a solar eclipse painting that he did for the U.S. Naval Observatory. He also did a portrait of Andrew Carnegie, and went on to help construct Carnegie Lake, contributing his time and effort on behalf of Princeton's rowing team. He also spent time in France, but eventually retired to a house by Carnegie Lake, where he died in 1934, at the age of seventy-eight. To the present day, Howard's paintings - mainly of seascapes - were still on exhibit at fine places such as Metropolitan Museum of Art, Smithsonian American Art Museum, and the American Museum of Natural History, all of which he considered high-level notches on his belt.

"No siree," Howard reiterated to Malachy, keeping his arms crossed. "This is well beneath me, and you know it. This might be fine for the others, we're just keeping this whippersnapper in his cups for all we know, but it's not for the likes of me."

Malachy sighed softly. "Now, now, Howard. What were you like at Luca's age? Surely you can understand . . ."

Howard pointed to the couch. "I never made a display of myself like this dumbass does every night. I want no personal or professional association with this pathetic loser."

"But you agreed to help . . ." Malachy began to protest.

"I changed my mind. And that's *that*."

"You rank curmudgeon," Malachy hissed angrily. "You'd go back on your word? I should've known you weren't the sort to be spot-on. You've no integrity, man, no honor."

"You pissy, shitty little Irish bastard," Howard roared. "How *dare* you speak to me like that?"

"Act like a man and keep your word," Malachy roared back. "Are you daft, *Sassenach*? Pull your bollocks out of yer arse and do the right thing, for feck's sake."

"I truly detest you," Howard returned peevishly, although he had calmed a bit.

"Makes no difference if you like me or not," Malachy said airily. "The subject at hand is young Luca here, and you keeping your word to help him."

"Piss on you," Howard seethed, his transparent eyes flashing. "I'll keep my word, but nothing else. Afterward, I'll wash my hands of you and all of this Luca balderdash."

"So be it," Malachy intoned.

Harrumphing his way to the easel, and muttering under his breath, Howard got to work.

* * *

LUCA COULD HEAR MALACHY AND the other man bickering, their voices tickling his consciousness. In a disjointed way, he thought his drunken stupor wasn't such a stupor after all. He felt himself coming to as the combative conversation continued.

When Luca finally opened his eyes, he saw someone standing at his easel, arms moving as he brushed strokes across the canvas. Luca hesitated in calling the figure a man as his body was ethereal, seemingly whole but really not. It was as if a softly glowing ember surrounded the shape, moving in unison with the artistic brush strokes.

Luca stared at the man for what seemed a long time. Then he wondered if he was actually still asleep. Was he seeing this man at his easel in a dream, or was it sickeningly real? "Who the hell are you?" Luca whispered, not for one minute imagining he would receive a response.

Malachy suddenly glided into view, coming between Luca and the specter at the easel.

"Go to sleep, boyo," Malachy said gently. "You're having a dream, is all. Close your eyes and let yourself drift back into slumber."

Luca felt his eyes grow heavier with each word Malachy uttered. Sleep finally pulled him back into its relaxed and peaceful vortex.

"That was a god damned close call," Howard barked. "Weren't you keeping an eye on him?"

"Of course I was," Malachy replied irritably. "He came awake sudden like."

"He shouldn't see what I'm doing," Howard pointed out gruffly. "I don't like this business as it is, but to have that little bugger see me in action is *not* acceptable. If he wakes up again, I'll stop this whole shebang altogether."

"Understood," Malachy said shortly. "He's asleep again. Carry on, will you?"

Luca heard every word they shot back and forth, but he kept his eyes closed. Whatever magic was taking place - the result of which was a finished painting by morning - was something he did not want to interfere with.

"Are you sure the little bastard is down for the count?" Howard demanded crustily.

There was a slight pause before Malachy responded. "He's sleeping like a baby, never fear."

Luca drifted drift off for real this time, the angry voices fading in his head.

* * *

LUCA FELT SURPRISINGLY GOOD THE next morning. His head was clear when he rose from the couch and went to the easel.

The portrait of Howard Russell Butler's "Bald Head Cliff" was finished, and Luca knew damned well he hadn't done it. He remembered the voices from the night before, which had discussed him *and* the painting.

Luca stood transfixed, barely breathing. Pieces of what was happening to him began to fall into place with sudden clarity, and horrifying reality.

Malachy seemed to be prodding long-dead ghost artists to finish the reproductions Luca was attempting to create. The little Irishman, long-dead himself, had for some unknown reason become Luca's guardian angel. Malachy warned him about drinking too much, prophesized about his future with Izzy, and had testy exchanges with the artistic ghosts themselves.

"It's insane," Luca whispered out loud. "But it's all I've got. There's no other plausible explanation."

Running a hand through his disheveled hair, Luca decided it was time to try and sell the paintings. He now had four complete portraits. There was no sense in holding onto them when they could be putting money in his pocket. If they sold well, or he was able to place a few on consignment, maybe he could attempt even more reproductions.

It wasn't what he really wanted for himself - his life *or* career - but it would have to do for the time being. He was hardly satisfied artistically, yet he was willing to make sacrifices to make good inroads with Izzy. She did not seem like the type of woman to care about money, but having a few bills in his wallet on their next date would make *him* feel better.

His decision was made.

THE CRYPT ARTIST: Excerpt from Chapter Six

FOR THE SECOND TIME IN as many days, Luca cleaned himself up as best he could, on this occasion to present the paintings to his regular contacts in the art world.

After taking several pictures of the four paintings, Luca showered. He donned the same clothes he wore on his date with Izzy, blue jeans with a midnight blue turtleneck sweater. He carefully wrapped the works of art in paper from an old brown reel he'd kept for ages, and then slid the paintings into a soft leather carrying case. More of a satchel, Luca was able to sling the case over his shoulder like an overlarge bow and arrow bag with a long strap, which protected the portraits and made them easier to carry.

Luca's first stop was at Nest Seekers Realty on Kenmare Street, a few blocks from the Ramsey Building. His contact was Elias Goldman, a tall, wiry man who often took Luca's artwork on consignment for open houses, or sometimes bought it outright for staging future real estate prospects.

They met in a cramped office in the back of Nest Seekers, where Eli offered Luca a cup of coffee as thick as mud and just as bitter. Luca sipped the brew without really tasting it, more focused on Eli's perusal of the portraits, one by one.

Finally, Eli leaned back in his chair and regarded Luca. "This is some of your best work, in my opinion. You say they're reproductions?"

Luca nodded. "Yes." He was glad Eli liked the paintings, but somewhat guilt-ridden as he knew the artwork wasn't really his. Yet who would believe the real story behind it all?

"I like all four of them," Eli continued firmly. "We have a new open house for a brownstone on Spring Street this weekend. The stormy Maine shore piece would blend in perfectly with the current staging."

"Great," Luca enthused genuinely. "What about the others?"

"I'd like to use the Chanctonbury landscape right away as well," Eli replied. "As for the other two, maybe we can try consignment. They're both rather dark, aren't they? Death and Ichabod Crane. They would go well in a Gothic-themed flat we're trying to sell near the Dakota."

"Sounds reasonable," Luca agreed. "Do you think you can use more of the same portraits in the future, or will these do?"

"I'd definitely like a couple more each of the Maine scene, and maybe one of the Chanctonbury piece. How long do you think it will take you?"

"A week to ten days on the outside," Luca responded quickly. "If all goes well, less than that."

"Good." Eli reached across the desk to grab the company checkbook ledger. "What do I owe you for the first two?"

Luca couldn't believe his good fortune. His first stop on a short list of contacts enabled him to essentially unload all four portraits. His plan for the day had been to trudge by foot to Hester Street Realty, the Delancey Gallery, and two furniture stores on Bowry and Grand streets, but his day of calculated traipsing was over almost before it began.

Mistaking Luca's silence for reticence, Eli smiled affably. "How does one thousand per piece sound to you?"

Luca automatically summed the amount in his head. Because the Ramsey Building was a rent-controlled entity, the money might see him through two months if he lived

frugally. It was more money than he had ever been offered before, even for his original artwork. The thought caused him a brief flash of disappointment before he decided to go with the flow.

"Why not \$1,500 each?" Luca suggested boldly, relishing the idea of an extra thousand in his pocket.

"Okay," Eli agreed without quibbling, leading Luca to think he could have asked for even more and received it. But he was happy with the outcome. The extra money meant he could maybe take Izzy to Casa Bell again, hopefully sans the spilling of wine this time.

Thinking about Izzy made Luca smile, which didn't go unnoticed by Eli. He tore off a check from the ledger and handed it to Luca. "I'll see you soon," he said. "With more paintings, yes?"

"Definitely," Luca replied.

He deposited the check into his bank on the way home. On impulse, he stopped at the M&M Market Deli and bought a bouquet of yellow daisies. When he returned to the second floor of the Ramsey Building, he carefully set the flowers in front of Izzy's door.

Once inside his loft, Luca exhaled a sigh of relief. It was quickly replaced by a frowning of his brow.

What had he done? He had just promised Eli Goldman more reproductions of the same paintings. How did he expect to do that without the help of Malachy O'Leary and his motley crew of artistic ghosts? What if he never saw or spoke with Malachy again?

"I'm screwed," Luca whispered in a panic. "I'm fucking screwed."

* * *

IZZY KNOCKED ON LUCA'S DOOR a few hours later. She was holding the bouquet of daisies he'd left for her, a smile on her face.

"These brightened my day considerably," she said before he could speak. "Thank you, Luca." She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

Her touch left behind a tingling sensation on his skin. He grinned. "Would you like to come in?"

"I can only stay a few minutes," she told him as he shut the door behind her. "My afternoon session starts shortly." She looked at him, noticing the sober freshness of his face. "How are you? Have you been able to get any work done?"

He regarded her, many of his worries temporarily fading into the back recesses of his mind just because of her mere presence.

Luca cleared his throat. "Actually, I sold two portraits today, and have two others on consignment."

Izzy's face lit with pleasure. "Really? The reproductions?"

He nodded, touched by her happiness for him. "Yes. And they want more."

"Congratulations," she beamed.

"Thank you. It's been a long dry spell without between sales, so I'm happy about it." He grinned again. "That being said, how would you like to go to dinner with me on Saturday night?"

"I'd love it, but only if you have time. Like I told you before, I don't want to interrupt your creative flow."

"It's a date, then. Do you want to go to Casa Bella again? I won't spill my wine this time, I promise."

"It sounds delightful."

They stared at each other for several seconds, wordless. Luca saw her holding the daisies, as if she treasured them, which gave him a great deal of pleasure.

She stepped closer, slowly leaning into him. They kissed, the daisy bouquet softly rustling between them. When they finally pulled apart, their eyes met again and held.

"See you Saturday?" she whispered.

"Saturday," he replied hoarsely.

With a quick smile, she turned and let herself out, the door closing quietly behind her.

Luca stood there, his throat dry. "I'm falling in love with her," he said aloud. "No - I *am* in love with her." He groaned. "Oh, what the hell am I doing? I'm not a fit partner for man nor beast, and especially not for someone as wonderful as Izzy Richards."

"Don't sell yourself short, boyo." It was Malachy, his whisper barely discernible but nonetheless clear to Luca's ears.

"I need more help," Luca said bluntly.

"I know. Not to worry - it will be taken care of."

Luca sighed with relief. "Malachy?"

There was no answer.

"Malachy, please."

Still no answer.

Luca shrugged. Whether Malachy answered him or not, his initial reassuring whispers set Luca's mind at ease. However bizarre the situation and eerie the ghostly visits to his loft were, he had a strong feeling Malachy would never lie to him.

* * *

"ABSOLUTELY NOT!" HOWARD ROARED IN Malachy's face. "I'm not doing God knows how many repeats for that drunken little bastard. We are through." He shouted louder for emphasis. "*Through*, I tell you."

Loft 2E was dimly illuminated by the resident gas lamp just past midnight as five ghosts - four disgruntled, one desperately pleading - sat, stood or glided in their usual places. Hissy watched it all with mildly detached interest.

"Speak for yourself," Jeanne murmured from her place by the window. "I like Luca. He has great potential." Her dark eyes narrowed. "*You* sit on the sidelines if you want, Monsieur Butler, but I have no intentions of doing so." She threw her hands into the air. "What else do we have to occupy ourselves with in this decaying crypt?"

"Maintain my self-respect for starters," Howard barked at her.

"And then what?" Jeanne expelled her breath, gesturing toward him. "Sit there, groan and moan, and lose the opportunity to help someone in the land of the living? Shame on you. *Honte à vous*."

Howard glared at her. "Fine. I'll do as the little paddy asks of me. For now, that is. However, there has to be a limit to all of this foolishness. I have no desire to help a man who obviously has no wish to help himself. We simply cannot carry him forever."

"Agreed," Malachy spoke up, visibly relieved. "You'll give Luca another chance, then?"

Howard nodded curtly.

Malachy glanced to Jeanne, but she seemed to have lost interest in the conversation. Her back was to the group again, her gaze focused out the window, rolling back and forth on the balls of her feet. Her usual slight moan began in earnest, but ever so softly this time. Malachy was hardly surprised. She had spoken more tonight than in the entire time he had known her. She was probably exhausted, poor dear. Hissy went to her, sensing her distress, and began rubbing against her leg. In her agitation, Jeanne ignored the cat.

Malachy looked to John. "And you? What about you?"

John Quidor waved Malachy away, his eyes on Jeanne at the window. "Whatever twinkles your toes, Irishman."

Philip was not as agreeable as Jeanne and John. With a sour look on his face, he spoke grudgingly. "I'll do it, but I want it known I'm doing it under protest."

"So noted," Malachy responded with glee.

Philip sighed. "Besides, what else are we to do with this infernal, endless time we find ourselves saddled with?"

"I can think of plenty," Howard muttered darkly.

Malachy ignored him. "We're on, then." He looked at Jeanne, who returned his glance instinctively. "Are you ready to go front and center?"

She nodded, smiling softly. "*Oui*, Monsieur O'Leary." Happier now, she reached down and scratched the top of Hissy's head. The cat began to purr loudly, drawing a glare from Howard.

John shook his head, frowning at the Irish ghost. "I give up. How do you know what the drunkard plans to work on first? How do you know he'll choose Jeanne's work before ours?"

Malachy sighed. "I told you before, Johnny. I'm Irish - we have ways and means into the souls of others."

John snorted. "Yes, whatever you say, little man."

"That's more like it," Malachy beamed. "Our time here will go much smoother - and faster - if you remember it."

* * *

JEANNE PAINTED TWO REPRODUCTIONS OF her portrait "Death" in under two hours while Luca snored drunkenly from his bed. She glanced at his prone form frequently as she worked, admiring his disheveled good looks that had not yet been ruined by drink. Her strong draw to him was triggered by a combination of his looks, and a heartfelt pity that he could not seem to pull himself together.

The biggest magnet for her, however, was that Luca reminded her of her own beloved Amedeo Modigliani. Not in physical appearance, but rather in his personality, gestures and mannerisms. Amedeo had also had an issue with the bottle as well as drugs, not coming home for days on end when he went on a binge. Yet Jeanne still loved him passionately, adoring him until her own dying day. Her love for Amedeo was so all-consuming, encompassing every aspect of her life, that she could not endure existing without him.

Her only regret was taking the life of her unborn child when she threw herself from the fifth floor window of her parents' home in Bagneux, Hauts-de-Seine in Paris in 1920. She'd left behind her firstborn child by Amedeo, a daughter also named Jeanne, who was then raised by Amedeo's sister in Florence, Italy, later dying at the age of sixty-six.

Jeanne sighed quietly as she finished the second portrait, the first painting still leaning against the wall to dry. Even in death, Jeanne was denied the comfort of Amedeo's arms. Since her own demise, she had not seen or heard from her beloved. Was he in hell, or was she?

Jeanne wafted over to Luca's bed, staring down on him with sad eyes. Maybe Amedeo had come back to her in the form of Luca Wolfe, a wine-soaked artist with armloads of potential talent. She *had* to help him, it was beyond her control. She was unable to stop herself. Perhaps if she did her very best and then some by Luca, she would be awarded with the enthralling presence of Amedeo.

She reached down and gave a feathery touch to Luca's brow. He moaned and moved his head, much like Amedeo used to do when she did the same thing to him in the past.

"Sleep well, my love," Jeanne whispered as her appearance began to fade. "I will see you soon. *Je t'aime.*"

THE CRYPT ARTIST:

Excerpt from Chapter Nine

ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS the clever Malachy O'Leary learned as a ghost, of his own volition, was how to float upward as far as he wanted to go. His first try, a scant four months after his death, shot him up over the Empire State Building and back again. Over the decades, he learned to finesse the movement, his first tries being somewhat clumsy and out of control, by going around and down many times. After some time, he employed it as a form of entertainment when he was bored. Which was often, for all he really had was endless time on his hands.

Quite by accident, one late evening in late 1954, as he was floating above the Ramsey Building, he drew images of farm animals with his hands. It might have been a fruitless effort on any normal day as it produced no visible results. However, that night in particular, as he moved his hands in a drawing motion, bluish-white streaks followed his hands, glowing and leaving behind a faint sparkle. The sight amazed the Irishman. He was transfixed, and remained so for days afterward. He practiced over and over with variations and locations, to wherever or whatever struck his fancy.

One time, he drew the glowing light behind him for miles, only to hear on the radio the next day that several people had reported seeing what they believed to be a UFO. It was then that Malachy realized others could see his handiwork. Humans could see what he produced with ghostly hands.

Another time, he floated along Broome Street on a warm night in July, following random people and listening to their conversations. A young man was berating a woman as they walked along, calling her unmentionable names which made Malachy's blood boil. The anger built inside of him until he could stand it no longer.

He shoved at the young man with both hands, figuring it would be a useless gesture. Therefore, he was surprised when the dolt fell over to the sidewalk, laying on the ground with a look of horror on his face. The recipient of his verbal assault, the girl by his side, sized up the situation and quickly bolted.

Malachy laughed his way back to the Ramsey Building, satisfied he had put another ghostly power notch in his belt. But the force only worked on occasion, and only when his anger toward the eventual recipient was beyond surmountable.

Teaching Jeanne the basic nuances of ghostly maneuvers was not as difficult as Malachy thought it would be. She seemed determined, bent on acquiring the skills to help Luca. Her intense focus made it easier.

Jeanne was able to master the flowing glow by hand within an hour, but moving objects proved a tad more difficult. Malachy took her to the Pegu Club on Houston Street, where he positioned her near to some middle-aged men making graphic sexual comments. She became incensed in short order, using all her anger to ram into them as they sat on barstools. One of the men fell off the stool and landed on the floor, while the other simply plunked his head down on the bar.

"Now you get it," Malachy told Jeanne as they returned to the Ramsey Building. "It's time we made a plan."

She looked askance at him.

"We entrap Willie and be done with his nonsense once and for all."

"What do you suggest?" she wanted to know.

"Whatever I tell you, we must keep it to ourselves. No Howard, no John, no Philip. Can you imagine what Howard would be like if he knew about these particular skills?"

Jeanne laughed. "The man is already beyond insufferable. With abilities such as these," she paused as she gestured in the air with her hands, a small glowing trail in their wake, "he would be a menace."

Using her gossamer fingers, she crossed her heart. "I will not tell him, never speak an utterance of it. I give you my word."

* * *

HOWARD'S INITIAL YET PREDICTABLE REACTION to Malachy's crazy story - after his instant irritation and incredulity - was to explode with an impatient roar.

"If what you say is true - *which I highly doubt* - why not tell us about it sooner, you poisonous little lucky charm?" he demanded angrily. "Our existence here is hell, pure hell I tell you. To have access to something to pass the time, or to at the very least entertain ourselves - and you just forget to tell us about it?" Howard's eyes were blazing. "You slimy mick bastard!"

Philip appeared bored by Malachy's revelation and the ensuing conversation, but paid close heed nonetheless. However, John was obviously highly curious over the matter, full of questions that he put on a temporary hold as Howard continued his tirade.

"It's not as easy as it sounds," Malachy cautioned, as usual unfazed by Howard's outrage. "Be that as it may, we don't have the luxury of learning everything right now. Luca is running out of time."

Howard rolled his eyes to the ceiling in disgust. "Everything continues to hinge on that loser, doesn't it? Our entire ghostly existence remains hinged on his every misstep. What do I care if he loses this place or takes a dirt nap? Maybe he'll join us in this cesspool, and I'll finally be able to give him a piece of what's left of my mind."

"*Mon dieu!*" Jeanne interjected, her soft voice uncharacteristically infused with anger. "Listen to Monsieur O'Leary, *s'il vous plaît?* When has he ever put you in the wrong direction?"

John stared at Jeanne, fascinated by her irritation. It somehow made her more alluring to him.

Howard glared at Jeanne. "And why Malachy introduced *you* to this new-fangled talent before the rest of us, I'll never know. You aren't exactly what I'd call a go-getter." He paused, a taunting gleam coming into his eyes. "Except when it comes to Luca Wolfe, if I'm not mistaken."

Jeanne lowered her eyes, but said nothing.

"Leave her be," Malachy warned softly, his eyes level with an unflinching Howard. Then he continued strongly: "All of this is moot, anyway. We need to keep an eye on the lad. Someone is very likely going to try and do away with him, and soon. It's much more important than trifles and fragile egos."

Surprisingly, Philip raised his hand, as if asking for permission to speak. "Agreed. I'll do my part. Whatever you need me to do. Luca is a nice young man, I do not want any harm to come to him."

Malachy doubted Philip had enough anger or passion to produce physical results, but he thanked the man anyway.

John spoke up. "Count me in as well," he said, his eyes on Jeanne.

Malachy looked at Howard. The old crosspatch was returning his stare, seemingly immovable. "And you?" Malachy asked.

Howard bristled slightly, then gave a great sigh as he mimicked shifting in his seat. "*For what ghost could actually shift in a seat?*" Malachy wondered to himself. "*The man is a complete eejit.*"

"I'm outnumbered," Howard finally said, refusing to meet the eyes of his fellow ghosts. "I'll do what I can, whatever *that* may be. But then, surely, that will be the end of it. Can we live in peace then? Aside from living in this pit of hell?" He sighed. "Maybe, if we do as you said before - a good deed or two - we can be released from this infernal cesspit."

Malachy grinned. "Yes, indeed. So let's get started, shall we?"

* * *

IT WAS A COMEDY OF errors of sorts, Malachy felt, teaching three male ghosts the skills of celestial movement. Instructing Jeanne had been a breeze, she was a quick study, but her trio of male counterparts were another matter altogether.

They practiced on the roof of the Ramsey Building that night, when the sky was dark and overcast with heavy clouds. He showed them the same steps as he had done with Jeanne, but Howard was the only one who seemed to get the gist of it quickly. This despite his first attempt when he went shooting off the building and across the road to the adjoining roof. Malachy could hear his profane exclamations of frustration all the way across the street. However, he mastered it for the next go-round.

John and Philip took awhile longer to teach a few fine nuances. At one point, the two male ghosts pushed at the same time and stumbled as one head on, and then collapsed on top of each other onto the roof, laughing all the while. To see the staid Philip Padwick chuckling out loud - for that was the full extent of his uncharacteristic mirth - was a rare treat indeed.

"This is quite fun," Philip declared after they had practiced a few more times. "I think I'm going to enjoy pushing people about."

"And the best part is they can't see us," John pointed out with a grin. His eyes went to Jeanne when she laughed softly at his remark. She averted her eyes when she saw him looking at her.

Malachy sighed. The ongoing fascination Quidor had for Jeanne had not abated one bit, but at least the man had not acted on his impulses, and Jeanne did not seem even lightly interested in him. Rather, her focus was on Luca Wolfe and most importantly, the task at hand.

As it should be, for the time being.

THE CRYPT ARTIST: Excerpt from Chapter Nine

LUCA DECIDED TO VISIT THE Marble Cemetery in New York City the next day, even though it was pouring rain. He was also still very much on edge about the possibility of a hit man coming for him around every corner. He left the Ramsey Building mid-morning, knowing full well Izzy would be busy with her patient schedule for several hours.

He stopped at the M&M Market Deli and purchased a simple arrangement of white daisies before catching a bus at the end of Broome Street. The bus was fairly empty that time of morning, with only a man in the back and a young woman a few rows behind Luca. The nine-minute bus ride did not give Luca much time to think, but he contemplated his reasons for the cemetery visit nonetheless.

Malachy O'Leary, although a ghost no one else could see, had come to mean a great deal to Luca. It wasn't just because the mouthy little Irishman helped him artistically, but rather he had grown fond of the man himself, for his unique presence, conversation and fascinating persona. In a strange way, Malachy felt like family to Luca. The fact that no one else knew of his ghostly existence did not matter to Luca. What mattered to him was Malachy, real or imagined in his mind, or whether he was sane or not.

Over the last few days, Luca had developed a strong urge to visit Malachy's burial site. He told no one, not even the ghost of the man, not even Izzy. He had no clue what he hoped to find by going to the grave, but fervently hoped it would give him solace that the physical remains of Malachy were safe, and resting in peace.

The New York City bus had almost reached Marble Cemetery when Luca felt a familiar cold presence next to him. With a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, he realized Malachy had found him. Without turning to look and confirm his suspicion, Luca spoke softly so the bus driver could not hear him. "Don't be angry with me, Malachy."

"And why shouldn't I be?" the Irishman responded evenly. "What the feck do you think you're doing, going to the bone yard where my rotting skeleton is housed?"

Luca sighed. He finally turned to look at Malachy, who sat to his right by the window. He looked highly displeased, his arms crossed against his chest. Luca also glanced behind him to make sure no one nearby was listening to him talk to himself. He saw the young woman who'd been on the bus when he boarded, but she was intent on her cell phone. The man in the back of the bus also appeared to be talking to himself, turning his head left to right and moving his mouth as if in heated conversation.

"*At least I'm not alone in my nuttery,*" Luca thought with a snort as he turned back to Malachy.

"I'm waiting for an answer, me boyo," Malachy said, his tone uncharacteristically harsh.

"I want to pay my respects to you," Luca replied quietly, averting his eyes again. "And to your final resting place."

"My final resting place?" Malachy asked, incredulity in his tone. Then his voice turned angry. "My final resting place is that ramshackle building you call home. I've been stuck there for sixty-two years now, through all kinds of weather." He pointed to the daisies in Luca's lap. "And what the bloody hell is that, may I ask? Please don't be telling me your

plan is leave daisies on my grave." He shook his head, eyes wide. "Jaysus wept!" He slapped his forehead in disbelief.

Luca stared at the flowers in his lap. "I wanted to leave something there at your grave, for you. To remind you and everyone else that you are not forgotten."

"Bullshyte!" Malachy spat. Then he went silent for a moment before speaking with a mix of irritation and - was it - hurt? "But I *am* forgotten, lad. No friends recall me, they're all dead, too. And whatever blood relations I have back in Ireland surely have no inkling about me, not with the progression of time and the loss of generations." His voice caught, causing Luca to sneak a look at him. The Irishman almost looked pained. "I'm perhaps best left forgotten. I wasn't too much to write home about while I was alive, truth be told."

"I disagree," Luca said strongly. "But I won't sit here and argue with you about it."

"I can't stop you from going to my grave, can I?"

"No."

"Then I'll take my leave of you, boyo. I've no desire to see it."

Luca experienced a twinge of sadness when he felt the cold evaporate around him, knowing Malachy had departed. For now, anyway.

The Marble Cemetery was established in 1831, constructed following an outbreak of yellow fever. The premise had been to bury the dead below ground to prevent the spread of disease, providing grave markers with corresponding vaults on the property, accessed by a gate on Second Avenue. A second graveyard, a block away and established a few months after the first, was also named Marble Cemetery and accessed by a gate on Second Street. Detailed burial records were kept by the cemeteries, from grave markers to various vaults. Luca found Malachy's burial record by doing an online search, visible to anyone who cared to look into it.

The cemeteries were a splash of beauty in New York City, their greenery well-cared for and envied by many. At one point in history, they had become fashionable final resting places. People often rented the gardens for special events, the splendor hardly matched anywhere else in the huge concrete metropolis, aside from Central Park.

Luca found Malachy's gravesite rather quickly, one of the few to actually be buried under the headstone and not in a vault, located just inside the inner gate facing Second Avenue. Luca approached it slowly, the daisies still in his hand. Surrounded by lush green grass, ferns and yellow daisies, the flat headstone was rather small and to the point:

MALACHY MICHALEEN O'LEARY

10th March 1888 (Dublin, Ireland)

14th July 1954 (SoHo, New York)

Luca stared at the headstone, now somewhat worn with age, and was suddenly overwhelmed with a wave of sadness. What had driven Malachy to commit suicide decades ago? A waning career as a poet? Or the drink? What had been the last straw to lead him to such a desperate, final act?

"*I should ask him about it,*" Luca thought, but then he changed his mind. "*No, the pain it must cause him is unthinkable. I couldn't do that to him.*"

The rain stopped for a moment. Luca used the back of his hand to wipe the moisture from his forehead. He felt his eyes tearing, and he rubbed those away as well. He stared at

the headstone one more time, touching the cold concrete with his hand briefly. Then he backed away slowly and turned to leave the cemetery.

On the bus ride back to SoHo, Luca felt his spirits lift somewhat. He was lucky. He had the friendship of the extraordinary Malachy Michaleen O'Leary in death, something that could never have been achieved in life.

Then a thought occurred to Luca, which made him catch his breath.

Who arranged and paid for Malachy O'Leary's burial at Marble Cemetery sixty-two years ago?

THE CRYPT ARTIST: Excerpt from the Epilogue

IZZY AND LUCA AGREED THEY should never rent out Malachy's apartment. They kept it as is after the remodel, as if waiting for the man himself to come home. Mrs. Peabody even put in her two cents, placing an empty cat bowl on the kitchen counter in honor of Hissy.

Surprisingly, lovers of poetry and literature, students, alumni and collectors heard of the semi-shrine to Malachy and visited the loft, mainly during summer months. Luca thought how fitting it was, and how much Malachy loved the notion as a spirit.

Luca knew the Irish poet was still in residence at the Ramsey. He heard and saw him on occasion, although his appearances became more infrequent with time. Luca knew he would be greatly saddened if the appearances stopped altogether. He had grown intensely fond of the eloquent man, who had quite literally saved his life in more ways than one. Luca wasn't certain if other ghostly manifestations were still about - namely in the forms of Howard, Jeanne, John and Philip - but he hoped so. They had all contributed in one way or another to the turning point of his life.

Luca suddenly felt a cold presence, and he knew Malachy was with him again. His voice was not long in following.

"You're among the land of the living," Malachy told him wisely. "And I am among the dead. You don't need me anymore."

"I'll always need you," Luca disagreed without hesitation.

"Spend your time with loved ones," Malachy advised him. "Never take for granted the time you have on earth, boyo. It will be over quicker than the blink of an eye."

"But *you* are part of all that," Luca attempted to argue. "*You* are part of my life. If it wasn't for you, and your friends, my life would have gone down the drain. I certainly would not be where I am now."

"Me and the motley crew of ghouls I hang about with aren't your only saving grace," Malachy replied firmly. "You did all of this of your own volition. *You* made it happen, not us."

Luca felt a surge of happy confidence, a happenstance that had occurred many times since the first day he encountered the ghost of Malachy O'Leary.

The pair of them did not need more words at the moment. Both smiled, exchanging a glance. They both knew what one meant to the other, so no verbiage was necessary. Alive or dead, their friendship would endure - beyond any moments in time.

With another smile, Luca turned and left the room, locking the door firmly behind him. A few seconds later, he heard the strains of *Shadows of the Night* playing from the old record player in Malachy's flat.

* * *

"WHY DOES HE DO THAT?" Howard demanded after Luca left the apartment. "He comes in here and looks around, and then leaves, only to lock us in here again."

Malachy laughed. "We're not technically trapped in here, Howard old boy. We can come and go as we please."

"I know that," Howard replied impatiently. "It was a just a figure of speech. Here we sit again. This time, it's in your newly decorated flat, which I must admit is a damn sight better than its previous hellhole state. But we are still and housed in this mausoleum for the rest of our ghostly days, apparently."

"Not such a bad state of affairs," Jeanne murmured from her spot by the window, rocking gently back on forth on the balls of her feet. "Luca has done a splendid job with this place. It's livable now."

John stared at her, his usual stance when she spoke or when he thought she wasn't looking at him. "We have more to amuse us these days," he said absently as his eyes followed Jeanne. "We can bring forth light and move objects. I can't tell you the fun I have in the subways at night." He snickered. "Humans are such pushovers."

"Leave it to you to invade the subways," Howard sneered. "At least I have the good taste to go to places like the Ritz. Pushing elegant yet arrogant people down on their asses is highly satisfying."

Philip coughed lightly behind his hand. "Really, Howard," he said reprovably.

Howard twisted in his chair to look at Philip. "And where do you go at night?" he demanded. "I notice you disappear on your own, just like the rest of us."

"Museums," Philip replied faintly. "Art galleries, and fine restaurants."

"To do what?" John asked, curious. "Do you just sit there and watch people? Or do you shove a few of them about?"

Philip coughed behind his hand again, averting his eyes. "Oh, I've shoved a few of them about. Usually surly men, or pretty ladies wearing short skirts."

Howard guffawed, waving his hand in Philip's direction. "Ladies and gentlemen, our closet pervert is revealed."

Philip appeared horrified. "I most certainly am *not* a pervert, whether in the closet or otherwise."

Howard snorted. "Remains to be seen, Philip my boy. Perversion is hard to hide in the long term. It will all come out eventually, so you might as well share it with us now."

Malachy only half-listened to their squabble, watching Hissy as she strolled in from the kitchen area. She met his eyes and twitched her tail. Then she walked over to Jeanne by the window and began rubbing against the woman's legs. Absently, Jeanne reached down and scratched the cat behind the ears, which elicited great purrs from her chest.

Malachy grinned. They were all in a happy place now, aside from being as dead as doornails. The Ramsey building was in the best hands, and life was moving along for Luca at a good and steady pace. He didn't need looking after anymore, and hadn't drank a drop of wine in nearly a year.

"*He doesn't need me any longer,*" Malachy reiterated in thought as he floated around the room, echoes of disagreement still coming from Howard and Philip. "*But I'll stick around for the time being. This is my home, after all.*"

Malachy floated over to the old record player on the round table near the fireplace. With a soft smile, he placed the needle on a vinyl recording of *Shadows of the Night*, using force with the palm of his hand.

Satisfied, he resumed floating around the room, Hissy now close on his gossamer heels.

THE CRYPT ARTIST: CAST OF CHARACTERS

* Denotes ghost characters.

- **Tommy Bradshaw**, doorman at the Ramsey Building (*epilogue*).
- ***Howard Russell Butler**, American painter (1856-1934), founder of the American Fine Arts Society; ghost.
- **Paul (Paulie) Cillizza**, patient of Dr. Izzy Richards.
- **Finn Collins**, hit man hired by Willard Petrie.
- **Calvin Doolittle**, foreman of the Ramsey Building (1926); Eunice Ramsey's lover.
- **Serena Eggar**, receptionist at the Ramsey Building (*epilogue*).
- **Edward (Eddie) Gilbert**, notary and loan officer; school chum of Willard Petrie's.
- **Elias Goldman**, real estate agent who often takes Luca's artwork on consignment.
- ***Jeanne Hébuterne**, French artist, also known as subject of Amedeo Modigliani (1898-1920); ghost.
- **Rana Liapakis**, Gene Ramsey's attorney.
- **Kevin McInerney**, detective on the New York City Police Department.
- **James O'Halloran**, detective on the New York City Police Department.
- ***Hissy O'Leary**, feline of pet of Malachy O'Leary (1944-1954); ghost.
- ***Malachy O'Leary**, Irish poet who haunts the Ramsey Building (1888-1954); ghost.
- ***Philip Hugh Padwick**, English painter noted for his oil landscapes (1876-1958); ghost.
- **Elva Peabody**, longtime resident of the Ramsey Building; also known as Mrs. P.
- **Carl Petrie**, father of Willard Petrie.
- **Malcolm Petrie**, son of Willard Petrie and Adelaide Martin Petrie.
- **Willard (Willie) Petrie**, Gene Ramsey's stepbrother.
- ***John Quidor**, American painter of historical and literary subjects (1801-1881); ghost.
- **Elsbeth Bayard Ramsey**, Gene Ramsey's mother.
- **Eugene Ramsey, Jr.**, Gene Ramsey's grandfather and first owner of the Ramsey Building.
- **Eugene (Genie) Ramsey III**, Gene Ramsey's father.
- **Eugene (Gene) Ramsey IV**, owner of the Ramsey Building; Luca's landlord.
- **Eunice Bell Ramsey**, wife of Eugene Ramsey, Jr. and Carl Petrie; grandmother of Gene Ramsey.
- **Isabel (Izzy) Richards**, court-appointed psychologist for criminal offenders.
- **Buzby Wolfe**, Luca Wolfe's pet rat.
- **Lukas Hans Wolfenbarger (Luca Wolfe)**, struggling artist who resides at the Ramsey Building in SoHo, New York.
- **Rembrandt (Remy) Wolfe**, Luca Wolfe's pet cat.
- **Vincent (Vinnie) Wolfe**, Luca Wolfe's pet cat.

HONORABLE MENTION

Mrs. Elva Peabody's six felines: Ebany, Elvis, Gary, Katie, Marmaduke and Pete.

BOOK INFORMATION

- ***The Crypt Artist @ Facebook:***

<https://www.facebook.com/thecryptartist/>

- ***The Crypt Artist official website:***

<https://deborahotoole.com/tca/>

TECHNICAL DETAILS:

- **Book cover design:** "The Crypt Artist" cover designed by Deborah O'Toole (*all sizes & related logos*).
- **Book Cover Photo:** Jeanne Hébuterne (1898–1920). Image source (*Galerie André Roussard, Montmartre*); date of image is unknown. The image is in the public domain in the United States of America, which applies to U.S. works where copyright has expired because its first publication occurred prior to January 1, 1923.

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Deborah O'Toole

Deborah O'Toole is the author of *Celtic Remnants*, a novel of enduring yet impossible love and betrayal set in the turbulence of Ireland, glamour of London and wilds of Scotland. She is also author of the paranormal/mystery/suspense novels *Glinhaven*, *Mind Sweeper* and *The Crypt Artist*.

In addition, she writes short-story juvenile fiction (*Short Tales Collection*) and darkly abstract poetry (*Torn Bits & Pieces*), and is the author of a series of historical essays, articles and book reviews for *Ambermont Magazine* and *Class Notes*.

Writing as Deidre Dalton, Deborah is author of the "Collective Obsessions Saga," which chronicles the extraordinary loves and dark obsessions between two families sweeping a span of more than one hundred years, all set against the backdrop of a magnificent seaside mansion in Maine. Books in the eight-part family saga include *The Advent*, *Quixotic Crossings*, *The Twain Shall Meet*, *Enthrallment*, *The Keeper's Journal*, *Hearts Desires*, *The Twilight* and *Megan's Legacy*. The novels were released by Club Lighthouse Publishing.

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