

THE SURVIVORS' AFFAIR

by

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Abstract

In this project, the opening chapters of a novel, a fifty-foot man falls to the ground in Athens, Ohio. He is pronounced dead at the scene. What begins as a bizarre happening in a small college town soon spirals into an event with global repercussions. The federal government puts together a team of four scientists: Peter, a biologist; Jonathon, an archaeologist; Alexa, a forensic scientist; and Carly, a geneticist. As politicians, the media, and religious figures latch on to the giant man, the scientists try to determine if the body is real. Meanwhile, a religious cult develops in Athens. The cult believes the body is the Judeo-Christian God because it resembles images of God in popular and classic works of art. The giant man came from up in the clouds, has a white, billowing beard, and is old. Cult members tie bandanas around their eyes because they believe humans are not meant to look upon the body of God. The novel is told from a third-person omniscient point of view and shows the far-reaching consequences of such a fantastic event in our contemporary world. The novel delves into the mind of the Pope, a mortician, a lawyer, clergymen, students at Ohio University, the mayor of Athens, and a four-year-old boy, among many others. These characters try to come to terms with what it means to have the unreal and the impossible happen in their ordinary lives.

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Dedication

For Jamie, my love

“A man's dying is more the survivors' affair than his own.”

Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*

Chapter One

It was hard to tell if the body was dead before it hit the ground. Was he dead and that's what caused him to fall from the skies, or had he merely slipped and fell, plummeting through the clouds down to Earth? Even if he were alive when he started falling, it's hard to know if he died on impact or, as often happens, the act of being in free-fall induced a panicked heart attack. One thing is certain, by the time the EMT's and ambulances, along with the fire marshal, several police officers, and a thousand or so students from Ohio University, got to ground zero, the man was dead. All fifty feet of him lay on the ground, still as a duck frozen on a lake. He had landed on his back and cratered and crumpled the ground beneath him. Sixteen feet wide and eight feet thick, the enormous, mysterious man lay naked in a grave of his own making. What had shortly before been a strip mall was now a giant divot in the land of buckeyes and bobcats. The Athens police and emergency officials did their best to set up a perimeter, and one officer took a few photos of the body with his phone. Nearly forty minutes after the body landed, a handful of EMT's attempted to take his pulse on his tree trunk of a wrist. While much was unclear, the man was definitely dead.

* * *

Trade-A-Tape was the only comic book shop in West Lafayette that Peter would step foot in. The rest were filled with cats and teenage boys reeking of onions, playing trading card games. Peter scanned the racks. He picked up a copy of *Goliath*, *Apache Chief*, *The Incredible Hulk* and *Detective Comics* along with four plastic bags to keep them in. He set them down on the counter.

“Hey, Peter,” Kevin said. “Leo doesn't believe you about Superman.” Kevin and Leo ran the shop, but they never seemed to be doing much beyond checking out *Playboys* from the

1960's. Kevin was 24, and Leo was 56. Peter could never tell what the nature of their relationship was. He knew they weren't father and son.

"Superman can't be indestructible," Leo said. "No one would want to read about a hero who can't get hurt."

"I never said he was indestructible," Peter said. "That isn't what I was talking about, Kevin."

"Tell him about the laser thing," Kevin said. He licked his lips and turned to Leo. "This is going to blow your mind. Tell him, Peter."

Peter was the go-to science guy. If someone wanted to know about antique porn, they went to Leo. If they wanted to know about the physics or biology of a hero, they went to Peter.

"I was just telling Kevin last week that Superman wouldn't even flinch at a laser being fired at him," Peter said. He looked down at his watch. He was running late. Why could Kevin never remember the actual gist of their conversations?

"He still feels pain, man," Leo said.

"Sure, everyone does, but think about this: Superman has flown into the core of the sun which has a temperature of over 15 million °C. Lasers produce their effect through heating the surface they hit. The hottest laser beam gets to around 1,800 °C. That means that the sun's core is 8,000 times hotter than any laser. Say Luthor got smart and invented some sort of super laser, it still wouldn't be enough to make Superman itch. Even plasma cutters only get up to about 25,000°C."

"See," Kevin said to Leo, "I told you it was awesome."

"Why do you have to be such a buzzkill all the time?" Leo asked Peter.

Peter shrugged his shoulders. “It’s what I get paid to do.” He put the comics in their plastic sleeves and left.

Peter sat in traffic as the light turned green and still didn’t make it through the intersection. As he waited once again for the light, he leafed through *Detective Comics* #872. The car behind him honked, and Peter stepped on the accelerator without looking up from the two-page spread of Batman punching Bane, one of his lamest archenemies, in the face. The problem with Bane was that he would inject himself with steroids and instantly grow five feet and become super strong. That wasn’t how steroids worked. When Peter raised his head, it was just in time to see his car smash into the back end of a silver BMW.

Traffic in the left-turn lane inched along and veered around Peter’s now-wrecked car. He crawled over the center console and got out of the passenger side door to avoid being hit. He surveyed both the wreck and the traffic jam he had just created.

Michael stared at Peter from the booster seat in the back of his mom’s huge, red truck. He pressed his nose up against the window, and his breath fogged up the glass. Why did the man look like he had just pooped his pants? His mom talked on her cell phone as *Spongebob* played in the background on the car’s TV screen. As his mom slowly pulled around the two cars now stuck together, he glanced at the TV and wished he could have a real Krabby Patty, just one time. The man smiled at him, and he responded by sticking out his tongue and pointing his finger at the man.

Even children were able to mock Peter. He walked to the front of his car to view the damage. As they were similar colors, it was hard to tell where his Prius stopped and the BMW started. Who would’ve thought that an accident at ten MPH could cause so much destruction?

Peter's mouth closed when an attractive blond woman in her forties came up to scream at him an inch away from his face. "Jesus Christ! Look what you did to my car." Her breath smelt like an amalgamation of coffee, cigarettes, and roses. She was pretty, in a dignified way. The lines on her face gave her mouth parentheses.

She was late to a divorce hearing, and her client was going to be pissed. The man still hadn't spoken. She backed away from his face and asked him, "You new to multi-tasking or new to driving?" When the man still didn't answer she said, "Are you okay? Do you speak English?" Maybe the man had been hurt in the accident. Maybe he had punctured a lung and was struggling to breathe. Maybe his indifference was just an act to cover up the fact that he was slowly dying or his guts were filling up with blood.

"I'm sorry," Peter said looking down at his feet and the black gum that spotted the sidewalk. "Let me get my information." He opened the passenger side door and dug around the various receipts and candy wrappers in his glove box until he found his insurance card. He flipped it over. On the back it said, "If you are involved in an accident: 1) Do not admit fault. 2) Do not reveal the limits of your liability coverage to anyone for any reason. 3) Exchange information and identify any witnesses and write down contact information." Peter looked around for witnesses. Where had that kid in the SUV gone? This was not how he had wanted to start his morning. He had a department meeting in an hour, and before that he had a few thousand earthworms that needed to be sprayed with somatotropin. Somehow he was going to get those things to grow.

He stepped back onto the sidewalk and handed his insurance card to the woman with the pant suit. He liked the way the fabric folded and tucked right where the ass met the leg. She looked at the front, then flipped it over and handed it back to him dismissively. "I have a pen and

some paper in the car. We should write down each other's information," he said. Peter went to the car again and pulled a pen and notebook out of his leather messenger's bag. The woman hadn't been wearing a wedding ring, and she was pretty good looking. She probably drank expensive wine, and Peter would rather spend his money on wine than old Superman lithographs whose value only seemed to depreciate. She might be a couple of years older than him, but it was worth a shot. While he wrote down her information, he tried to make small talk, but the only things that came to mind were worms and bones. He didn't like the Freudian implications of either of those topics.

"So, do you like driving a BMW? I mean, is it as fun as the commercials make it seem?" Peter asked. He had a bad habit of mumbling, and it didn't look like the woman had heard what he'd said. He gave her a big smile to make it less awkward.

"What the hell were you doing?" she asked, tapping her foot on the pavement. The guy just stood there rubbing the bottom of his shirt between his fingers, looking like a pedophile. Was he coming on to her? At a fucking car crash that was his fault? The way he drove made her doubt this was his first accident, but he had spent a lot of time staring at the back of his insurance card. "I can't believe you just ran into the back of me like that," she said. The guy's corduroys were wrinkled, his nostrils were ovals instead of circles, and his brown hair was combed but not styled. She liked younger men, but he smelled like musk that didn't come from a bottle of cologne. Besides, he had wrecked her car, and her client was going to have to sit alone in front of Judge Carter. Carter would fiddle with his goatee and mentally undress the stenographer while he decimated her client's custody, assets, and life. He wouldn't think twice to wait for her.

A young man across the street smoked an old-time pipe, shook his head, and let out a puff like he was on *Masterpiece Theater*. He didn't know who was stupider--the man for running

into the car, or the lady for letting him. Tobacco calms the nerves. It soothes the soul. Plus, it slowly kills you, and the quicker you can get out of this world, the better off you are.

“Do your brakes not work?” she asked Peter.

“My car works fine. I was glancing at an important article. I’m a researcher at Purdue,” he said.

Peter thought back to the card. Somehow he had to shift the blame from him to her. “Besides, it wasn’t my fault. You came screeching to a halt even though the light was green.” Peter’s phone vibrated in his pocket before she could respond. Might as well piss her off even more and answer it.

He didn’t recognize the number, but it was from the university, which meant it was probably important. He held up his index finger and walked a few steps down the sidewalk for privacy. He stood under the shade of a hackberry tree that had been planted and somehow managed to grow in a four-foot-square diamond cut into the pavement. You could actually eat the berries if you wanted. The skin was sweet, but the fruit was bitter.

“Hello?”

“Dean Davis’s office. Can you hold for a transfer?” Maria said for the eighth time in two hours. She hated her job, but it beat being on food stamps. Actually, the job gave her less money to spend on food, but it was better than the look the trashy cashiers gave her at Wal-Mart whenever she bought a bottle of vodka to go along with the cranberry juice the government was paying for.

“I can hold,” Peter said. What did the Dean want? Did he miss the department meeting? It’s not like it was even a working committee. It was a giant bitch-fest with the subtext that if your office was smaller than someone else’s, it meant the department respected you less.

“Peter, it’s Jerry. How are you doing?” the Dean asked.

“Good,” Peter said with a shrug of his shoulders that the Dean couldn’t see. He looked at his car instead of looking back at the woman. The front end was smashed, but at least the car still ran. He could afford the inevitable rise in his insurance rate.

“Have you seen the news?”

“You mean the whole Bin Laden thing?”

“No. No one cares about that anymore. This is bigger, both literally and metaphorically. I can’t believe you haven’t seen it yet. I thought of you the second I saw it. Are you on campus?”

“Umm, no. I was in the lab this morning, but I had to step out to run an errand.”

“Alright, well, can you get here as soon as possible? We’ve got a giant, Peter. A real giant!”

“Yes, sir. I can be there in fifteen minutes or so,” Peter said. Who was “we” and what is a “real giant”? He looked over at his car and then to the woman. She was on her cell phone as well. Probably calling the cops. Or probably not, considering that she was yelling at whoever was on the other line. She looked up from her conversation and made eye contact with Peter. Peter turned back to the hackberry tree and stared at a line of four small black and white bugs whose name he could never remember. “I’m on my way.” Peter closed his phone and walked back to her. She hung up her phone as he made his way over.

“The police said they’ll be here shortly. Are you going to pay to have my car towed, or am I going to have to sue you?” the woman said. The best thing about being a lawyer was telling people you were going to sue them and actually being able to back it up—the fulfillment of a thousand childhood threats finally realized.

“Sorry. I have an emergency. I have to go. You have my information?”

“Are you serious?” she asked. “The cops will write you up for leaving the scene of an accident.”

Peter shrugged and moved onto the street, toward his car. He hopped in, started it up, and put it in reverse. It took a little prodding, but eventually he freed his front end from the BMW and took off towards the university. Whatever damage was done was done.

He turned the radio on and tried to find a news station, but it didn't matter. Every station, even the local college radio WOUB, was talking about the same thing: a giant man landing in the middle of Ohio. A *giant* man. He looked at the comic still sitting open to the two-page spread of the Dark Knight pummeling Bane. Batman was right when he said that villains were a cowardly, superstitious lot, but so was the general public. Peter had one more myth to debunk and another notch to add to his belt. Time to send in a biologist. If there was one thing Peter hated, it was sensationalism. That and stupidity.

* * *

Tom saw Magdalena pull up and illegally park right in front of the bar. Though her orthopedist prescribed it for everyday use, Magdalena only used her walker on two types of occasions: prior to any rain when her hips began to ache and after Happy Hour at Tom's. On nights when Tom, the owner/bartender/waiter/occasional entertainment, was feeling contrarian or genuinely concerned, he would take Magdalena's keys and accompany her the seven odd blocks to the assisted living community where she resided. After seeing her to her apartment, he would wait until he saw the light turn on in the window of her living room. When she finally did croak, his business was going to take a dive. He would never say that aloud though, out of both kindness to the elderly and the fear that saying his bar was failing would somehow make it more real.

Things were different tonight. Tom could feel it. Instead of being dark and bare, the bar was full of people, even college students from the university who were generally discriminated against by the bar's older, more loyal patrons. Everyone was abuzz with the news of the giant man, but Magdalena just pushed several younger customers out of the way with her walker, sat down, and ordered her usual—Dewar's with two ice cubes.

"I assume you've heard the big news?" he asked.

"Just what I've overheard back at the old folk's home." She sucked down her first Dewar's in one big gulp, as was her custom, and pushed the glass forward for Tom to refill. "Bits and pieces."

"Well, it really is something," Tom started.

"Don't want to hear about it," she said with a wave of her hand. "Every time someone dies, this whole town fills with gossip."

"But you've got to admit, it is pretty extraordinary," he said as he wiped a rocks glass with a beer-soaked rag that left the cup streaky, sticky, and clean enough.

"People die everyday. My neighbor died last week, massive stroke. World didn't stop, just kept on going. I suppose this one will be more of the same."

"You don't know the full story, do you?"

"Nope, and I don't care to. Come here to get away from all that crap, not immerse myself in it." She closed her eyes and breathed in the bar's simultaneous smells of peanuts, bread, and sweat.

"Well, I think it's worth something. After we close, I'll walk you home, and we can stop by the site," Tom promised. Magdalena opened her eyes and nodded slightly at him. One of the college kids came up and leaned on the bar. He had a twenty dollar bill neatly folded in half

length-wise. Tom left Magdalena to her Dewar's and mixed up two vodka-cranberries for the kid—no tip. Tom didn't mind. Tips were tips. What he needed was sales, and he finally had some business to help bring his bar back from the edge. He would deal with Magdalena after the bar had closed.

* * *

Alexa usually dropped Becky and Hank off at the corner of William Howard Taft Junior High School. She told them that it was because she didn't want to embarrass them, but really it saved her fifteen minutes. Fifteen extra minutes she could work or sleep. Today she had to take them up to the school and tell the office that she wouldn't be able to pick them up after school.

"Here's money for lunch," Alexa said when they got out of the car. She handed each of them a twenty. "It has to last until the end of the week."

"Can't Dad give us more money? He is picking us up, right?" Becky asked.

"Yes," Alexa said. "I talked to your father this morning. He will be here to pick both of you up. So don't be late. Now give me a hug before we get close to the school and you refuse to acknowledge me."

"I love you," she whispered to Becky as she hugged her.

"Be nice to your dad," she whispered to Hank as she hugged him.

Neither of them made any indication that they heard what she said.

The limestone steps to the school were covered in cracks and chips. They were as old as Wrigley, something that Hank pointed out to her every time she espoused the importance of a strong public education system.

Hank was already smarter than she was, which meant he hated school. Alexa couldn't blame him. Boredom will deter you from most things.

Each of her kids veered away from her the second they stepped into the building. Becky turned around when she reached her pack of friends and gave Alexa a wave. Hank never looked back.

Alexa walked to the school's office to inform the secretary that her children would be riding home with someone new. The woman working the desk was sucking on the small silver cross of her necklace as she stared at her computer screen. Alexa interrupted her meditation and introduced herself.

"Oh," the woman said, "Becky and I have really hit it off. She had a hard transition from elementary school, but things are getting better. They always do. I'm so excited to meet your husband."

"He's not my husband anymore. He's just their father."

"But you were married right?" the lady asked.

"Yes, but we've been divorced for over ten years."

"Well, he's still your husband. God doesn't recognize divorce, only marriage. He'll be your husband until you die. 'Til death do us part'," the woman said. She smiled.

"So, you have my cell number," Alexa said. "He will be there to pick them up all week. If you need me, feel free to call."

She left the school and then left Chicago via O'Hare. In two hours, she was in Athens. For the first time in eight years, a man held her attention. It didn't hurt that he was dead and fifty feet tall.

* * *

“Twice your age and three times as smart,” Magdelina told Tom. She pushed her walker, complete with matching, faded tennis balls on the front legs, over a curb and into the street. Tom steadied her as she stepped down from the grass to the pavement.

A late fog had settled on Athens, and Tom couldn’t see more than two blocks. A pair of headlights appeared down the road. Magdelina didn’t look up. She kept pushing her walker forward as she teetered across the street.

“I need a cigarette,” she said.

“No, you don’t. Come on,” Tom said and crooked his arm around hers to offer her a little support and encouragement to cross the street before the car came barreling through. “And besides, all the stores are closed.” When they got across the street, Magdelina stopped, dug into the pocket of her oversized coat, and pulled out a plastic hair bonnet. She smoothed back her hair and tied the bonnet’s strings under her chin.

“This humidity is hell on my hair,” she said. Tom nodded, and the two kept walking. In fifteen minutes, which Tom could have covered in about half the time had he been alone, he could see the yellow and black tape the police had used to set up a perimeter around the body.

As they got closer, Magdelina could see dozens of other people lined up around the tape, mostly college kids. There were still five cop cars on the scene, and three officers were attempting to put a series of tarps over the body to protect it from the elements. Cataracts be damned, Magdelina couldn’t see clearly through the dense fog and wondered what the fuss was all about. Tom led her silently to the edge of the perimeter, nearest to the man’s head and his white, wooly hair.

“Holy shit,” she said as she got her first good look at the body. The two of them started following the tape down the side to the man’s torso. The wrinkles down the man’s abdomen were like ripples in a lake.

“Never thought I’d see a bigger one than my husband’s, especially at my age,” she said and lifted a hand off her walker to point to the man’s flaccid phallus. Even limp, it was as round as a fire hydrant and twice as long. They stood about twenty feet from the man. The cops had succeeded in covering the man’s feet with a tarp and went back to a patrol car to grab another. The police turned their backs, and Magdalena made a break for it.

“It’s gotta be a fake. I wanna touch it. Probably fake plastic, just like a Christmas tree,” she said. Tom put his hand on her shoulder to stop her. She turned her head and gave him a look that reminded him of his mother’s face after he killed that squirrel with a slingshot. He pulled his hand off her and held up the tape so she could slide under.

She left her walker at the tape’s threshold and drunkenly sauntered over to the man’s thigh. She pressed her withered hand against the hairy, wrinkled skin of the man. Dissatisfied, she pulled her hand back and gave the thigh a hard slap. She shook her head and made her way back to Tom.

“Well, fuck me,” she told Tom once she made it back to the legal side of the tape. She grabbed Tom’s hand and ran her thumb over the back of his hand, a little envious of its smoothness. “Feels as real as me or you.”

“Thought you would be impressed,” Tom said and smiled to himself. “Walk you home?” He offered his arm to her in a gentlemanly fashion. Magdalena ignored him, snatched her walker with both hands, and began trekking the twenty or so feet back to the man’s head. Tom followed

behind her, making sure she didn't lose her balance. He was trying to help, but he couldn't stop sneaking marveled glances at the man's gargantuan Santa-esque beard.

"You know," Magdalena started and Tom hurried forward to catch up to her "You really are your mother's son. Same hair, same eyes, same hands that haven't seen a day's worth of work. For every callous of yours, I bet I've got a dozen."

Tom's mom always taught him to respect his elders, so he stayed quiet. As they rounded the man's head, he noticed several leaves were caught in the man's long, wispy, white hair like fake Halloween cobwebs left out on a porch too long.

"We have done this," a man yelled out. They both turned to see who was talking. A tall man in a grey suit stood near the giant's left arm. A woman huddled close to his side out of fear or cold—Magdalena couldn't decide. A few of the other people bunched around the perimeter looked in the direction of the man as well. "We are at fault," the man continued, "and now we have committed the only act that might be deemed unforgivable. There is no one left to forgive. All we have left is those to blame."

A couple of the college kids yelled something at the man that Magdalena couldn't make out. She looked at Tom. His eyes were wide, and his eyebrows arched. "Don't usually see them go senile that young," she said.

* * *

When Peter got off the plane, a man in a black suit was waiting at the gate. He didn't have a sign. He just walked up, took Peter by the arm, and led him away.

"Come with me, sir," the man said after they had already taken a few steps. He dug in his back pocket and pulled out his badge. "Agent Rodriguez," he explained. "I will be your escort and driver while you are under the employment of the federal government."

“So is this real?” Peter asked. He noticed a few of the passengers from the plane looking at him.

“I’m just your driver, sir.”

Peter assumed this was normal protocol and continued walking. The man did not release Peter’s arm from his grip. They approached a door that said “Personnel Only” and the man flashed his ID at the guard without pausing for him to look at it. They walked down a hallway, through another door, and into a parking lot. In the first stall, a silver Lincoln was already running, with a different man in a different black suit and tie waiting in the back seat for Peter.

Peter got in the back passenger side door. The man held out his hand. “Dr. Schlesinger, I’m Agent Knox.” The man’s handshake was brief, concise, and felt like he’d rehearsed it a thousand times. On his lap were several manila folders, each stamped “Classified.” Without waiting for a response from Peter, the man handed him the top folder.

Inside were pictures of the “giant.” Hundreds of them: a glamour shot of his face with nostrils you could stick a fist in, aerial pictures that showed the sinkhole the man created when he landed, and a close-up of the man’s toenails, jagged and striated—a possible zinc deficiency?

“Somebody please tell me right now,” Peter said looking back and forth between the two men. “Does the government think this is real?” Rodriguez just kept driving. Agent Knox shifted in the seat and rested his elbow on the door.

“We were hoping you could tell us,” Knox said. “We have a few agents at the site right now, but they are mainly there to keep order and prevent the local cops from mucking anything up. We’ve been asked by Homeland Security to assemble a small field team to work on the body—to find out if it’s real, where it came from, who it is, what it’s doing in the middle of Athens, Ohio—that sort of thing. You’ll be led by Agent Foster, the forensic scientist who took

these pictures.” Knox pulled a photo out from one of the folders still resting on his lap. It was a cross section of the man’s hair; seen in profile, the hairs looked like bleached candlewicks.

“Foster is already at the scene. She will brief you further.”

Peter began to flip through the photographs as Agent Knox described the difference between Classified, Top Secret, and Special Access Programs, which were stamped with an X that vaguely reminded Peter of Professor Xavier’s logo. He was too busy scanning the pictures and attempting to do math in his head to listen.

Judging by the pictures, the man was eight times larger—eight times taller, eight times wider, and eight times thicker—than him, meaning he was 512 times the volume of Peter. If he assumed the man had the same density as a normal human then the giant weighed 512 times more than Peter, or around forty-six tons. It just wasn’t possible.

The car came to a stop, and Peter realized he was still nodding his head, though Agent Knox was no longer speaking. He looked up from the folder. “Why aren’t we at the body? Take me to the site,” Peter said and leaned forward over the seat in an attempt to convince Rodriguez to keep driving.

“This is your hotel. Check in and begin looking through these files. Agent Foster will contact you shortly.” Knox handed Peter the rest of the folders. Rodriguez parked the car and got out to open Peter’s door. Before Peter could leave, Knox grabbed Peter’s wrist and stared at him intently. “We will be here the whole time. If you need anything, don’t hesitate to ask, Dr. Schelsinger.”

Peter nodded and scooted out of the car. Was that supposed to be a threat or assurance? Rodriguez opened the trunk and waited for Peter to take his bags. Peter grabbed them, set one

duffel on the ground, and handed the other to Rodriguez, who proceeded to shove it back at Peter.

“I’m not your bell hop. Carry your own shit.” Rodriguez walked around Peter without looking at him.

“I’ll be back soon. Check in and don’t leave,” he said as he slid into the front seat and jammed the car into reverse. In a moment, Rodriguez and Knox were out of the parking lot, and Peter, a duffel bag in each hand, walked up to the hotel. The soil around the landscaping looked moist and well aerated. There were probably around eighty night crawlers beneath the surface. Given the size of the giant, there were 400 earthworms beneath him, eager to turn his flesh into rich, fertile humus.

Chapter Two

Marcus, Brandon, and Chad sat in the back row of the lecture hall. Marcus sat next to Brandon but left a seat in between him and Chad because Chad didn't shower before he came to class. Usually only one of them came to BIOS 245 and brought the other two's clickers to answer the questions for them and give them credit for attending class. Marcus had a serious hard-on for the professor so he usually went two out of the three days a week.

"Dr. Silverberg will not be able to make it to class today," a dark skinned man said at the front of the classroom. Marcus rolled his eyes. He sounded Indian. He might've been the TA. Marcus felt like he had seen him before.

"In the mean while, I will be filling in. My name is Karthik Murthy. We will begin class by reviewing the differences between the endocrine and exocrine systems. Please take out your data-entry devices and refer to the projector screen for your first question."

"Where's your girlfriend?" Brandon whispered to Marcus. Chad laughed and lifted his foot up before stomping it on the ground. Marcus ignored them. He answered the question.

"What's the answer?" Chad asked. He lifted up his arm and smelt his armpit. He had to stop working out in the mornings. "Is it C?"

"No," Marcus said. "It's the presence of ducts. B." He scanned the rest of the class to see if any of the girls he frequently fantasized about were there. The girl who wore yoga pants and a tank top even in winter was gone, but that sorority girl with legs made for skinny jeans was sitting in her usual spot. She had a little bump on the end of her nose, but other than that she was perfect.

"You think she's getting time with the big man out there?" Brandon asked.

"Yeah," Chad said, "That's the only reason I even came to class today. I wanted to hear

some info on the body. You figure she's got to know something we don't, right?"

Marcus nodded. If anyone was going to work with the body from OU, it would be Dr. Silverberg.

"Well what the hell are we doing here then? I can get the PowerPoint online. I don't need to listen to Karty-wuzzits read word for word from it. Let's go see the body," Brandon said. He started shoving his crap back into his book bag.

"What if Karty knows something?" Chad asked. He looked around the lecture hall. Everyone in the building seemed to be fidgeting in their seat. He reached across the empty seat and poked Marcus. "You should ask him what's up."

"I'm not saying anything. We can go to the body in 45 minutes when class is over," Marcus said. He flipped open his notebook and started writing down word for word what was on each slide. Somehow writing things down made them easier to remember.

Brandon stood up and raised his hand. It took a few seconds for the teacher to realize what was going on. There aren't usually questions in a lecture-style course.

"Please save your questions until the end of class," Karthik said.

Brandon ignored the advice. "Sorry, just have one quick question," he said. "Any chance we can talk about the body. I mean, this is an anatomy course, right? There's got to be something we can learn from talking about the body. You have to know something about it that we don't."

Chad yelled, "Yeah," and a few other people in the class murmured in agreement.

"Please sit down," Karthik said. "I know as much as you all. It's fifty feet long, and its proportions are all in tune with a normal person. It is an anomaly like nothing I've ever heard of. It is, perhaps, the greatest biological discovery of this millennium. It is much more likely a hoax—a rubber dummy thrown from a plane as a practical joke. Rest assured, when we know

something, you will know something.”

“Is Dr. Silverberg working on the body? Is that where she is?” a girl at the front of the class asked. Marcus had never noticed her before, but she was cute. She had curly, strawberry-blonde hair. She was like a younger version of Dr. Silverberg.

“I can not speak to the whereabouts of Dr. Silverberg. Now, let us continue,” Karthik said.

“Screw this,” Brandon said to Marcus and Chad. He slung his book bag over one shoulder and addressed the class. “Well, I’m going to the body. Anybody else who’s more interested in the fifty foot man who crashed down near campus than this boring lecture is welcome to come with me.” Chad followed Brandon on his way out. About three fourths of the class followed them.

Marcus looked around at the remnants of the lecture. Karthik was leaned over the podium in front, staring at the ground. Maybe Marcus would see Dr. Silverberg at the body. He grabbed his bag and left.

* * *

Peter tried to imagine he was simply checking in to attend another conference or symposium. The hotel itself was three stories tall. It looked to be about twenty years old and the carpet about thirty. The edges of the hallways were navy blue, but the middle pathways had faded grey. The check-in counter was on his left as he walked in, flanked by two trees of an unknown species, which made Peter suspicious.

At age 36, Peter had discovered three truths about the world and arranged them in an Asimovian-robotics sort of way. The first was that the mind was always right and therefore should be his primary reliance in decision making. The second was that his eyes were always

right, except when such observations were in conflict with the first rule. The third was that his gut was always right, except in such instances when emotions contradicted the first and second rule. When he had told this all to his Lindsey, she had suggested he use the word heart instead of gut. Peter had nodded in agreement but knew she was wrong. Perhaps her inability to distinguish between the two was why their relationship never hit its stride.

Peter's gut told him it was a tree. His eyes told him it was a fake, though from twenty feet away it was hard to tell. His mind studied the tree, and while he couldn't put his finger on what was off, he trusted his eyes over his gut and concluded that it was plastic.

Peter shifted his weight back and forth between his right and left legs as he waited in line to check in. The man in front of him was speaking with the clerk. He was a large man. Half a foot taller than Peter and easily a hundred pounds heavier, though he looked minuscule compared to the giant man that continually floated around Peter's head. He had an Eastern Wild Turkey feather in his long, jet-black hair. His physique made him look about the same age as Peter, but when he finished up with the clerk and turned, his dark face made him look much older. He smiled at Peter and nodded his head as he walked down the right corridor. Peter stepped up to the counter.

Peter gave the young woman running the desk his driver's license and started the check-in process. He rocked back on his heels every few seconds as she hunted and pecked at the keyboard with her index finger.

"Alright, Mr. Schlesinger, everything is all ready for you. Your room is on the second floor. Would you like me to have someone run your bags up for you?"

"Yes," Peter said. He pulled his gaze away from the trees. At this distance, it was much easier to tell they were fake, but he still couldn't put his finger on why he had known when he

entered. “And actually, I won’t be headed to my room. If you could just have them leave my bags on the bed, that would be great. Can you tell me where the computer lounge is?”

She pointed down the right hallway. No one was ever interested in her, or maybe they thought she was just working and didn’t want to be bothered. She always fantasized about going up to some businessman’s room, undressing, and waiting for him in the bed, but she never did it. She never did anything.

Peter thanked her and followed the direction of her finger. He walked by the tree with its perennial greenness and shook his head in frustration. He passed three doors before he came upon an open lobby with three computer stations. The man who had checked in before him was sitting at the middle computer, and Peter was forced to sit next to him.

The man moved his girth to the left to make more room and smiled politely again. Peter opened up the web browser and searched for the intersection he had seen when he rifled through the files Knox had given him.

The giant body was only two miles away, and Peter was stuck in a business-class hotel. Peter started to get up from the chair, preparing to walk to the site if he had to.

“Know where you can get a cab in this town?” the man asked. Peter turned to look at him and had a hard time distinguishing the man’s dark brown irises from his pupils in the dimly lit lounge. The man’s nose was large and hawkish, though his smile made you forget the fierceness that the rest of him displayed.

“Sorry, I’m new to town. Haven’t a clue.”

“Me too. I bet that fine-looking lady at the front desk could clue me in, though,” the man said. Peter thought back to the woman and tried to remember if she was good looking or not. The fact that he couldn’t even recall indicated to Peter that she was ordinary at best.

“I’ll come with you,” Peter said. “I could use a cab as well.” Peter and the man stood up together.

“You trying to catch a glimpse of that behemoth too?” the man asked. Peter nodded. “Seems the whole world will be descending on this place in a day or two. We’re lucky to get here this soon.” He paused for a moment. “Jonathon,” the man said. Peter shook his calloused hand and told him his name.

“So what brings you to town? Reporter? Sightseer? Curious knave?” Jonathon asked. The guy looked like a rube. He looked like the kind of person who went to Arizona on vacation and came back with a suitcase full of turquoise.

“Actually, I will be working with body. Soon, I hope,” Peter said. His thoughts turned to Agent Knox, and he figured he had said enough.

“You’re Peter Schlesinger?” Jonathon asked but started up again without waiting for an answer. “I’m Jonathon Ringer. I’m the team’s archaeologist. You’re the, wait let me think, you’re the forensic scientist?”

Peter looked at him with the same disdain he reserved for humanities professors. “Biologist, actually.” The two walked down the hallway with Peter half a step ahead of Jonathon in order to give him enough room.

“Jesus, man. You must feel like you just shit out a golden egg. This is like finding the missing link or Bigfoot or something. This must be every biologist’s dream. Unless you guys have a secret giant man preserve you’re hiding from the rest of us. I never did trust anyone in the hard sciences.” Jonathan didn’t trust most people, but scientists were the worst. They were all secretive, covetous, and so damned boring.

Peter shook his head as they approached the front desk. “No, no secret preserves. But I

wouldn't get too excited. It has to be a fake.”

“Yeah, yeah. I took physics in college too. I know what you people have to say about giants. But I'm telling you, from everything I've heard and all the pictures I've seen, I'm having a hard time pegging this one as a hoax.”

Jonathon turned his attention away from Peter and onto the clerk. He leaned the best he could over the counter and flashed his teeth at the girl. She looked up the number.

“Is there a water fountain in here?” Jonathon asked.

“No, sorry,” the lady said. “There's bottled water in your room.” Jonathon sighed and shook his head. “I'm sorry, sir. Is that a problem?”

“No, I just wanted to run some tests on the tap water here. I wanted to see what it is that makes you so good looking.” Jonathon could see the blood pooling in her cheeks. That is what it was all about: laying a good foundation so that if you needed it, you could come back and pick things up where they left off.

Peter groaned and studied one of the fake trees. He ran one of the leaves through his hands. It was dusty and made of cheap vinyl. Its edges had slight serrations as they should have, and the venation was also correct.

“Be here in ten minutes,” Jonathon said. Peter looked up from the leaf for a second. “What are you looking at?”

“I don't know what it is, but something is wrong with this tree.”

“Hmm,” Jonathon said and walked around Peter. He bent over as much as his belly would let him and imitated Peter by grabbing a leaf. “I've got it!” Peter raised both his eyebrows and looked at Jonathon. “I know what's wrong. This 'tree' is actually made out of plastic.” Jonathon let out a bark of a laugh and elbowed Peter in the ribs gently. Peter smiled politely.

“I’ve got to sit down,” Jonathon said. “Somehow the seat on an airplane just isn’t as comfortable as an ordinary chair.” He walked over to a plush green chair that sat opposite the front desk.

Defeated by a plastic tree, Peter walked over to Jonathon and sat in the other identical chair. “So what brings a young’un like you to a fancy assignment like this?” Jonathon asked.

“Well, I have a PhD in biology, and I’ve received fellowships in Copenhagen, Tokyo, and now at Purdue, but I suppose the real reason is my dissertation,” Peter said and paused. Jonathon nodded his head, indicating for Peter to continue. “It was interdisciplinary, but largely biological in focus. I examined almost every ‘giant’ hoax over the past 200 years. I got to examine the Cardiff Giant. Looked at P.T. Barnum’s giants who purportedly lived right beneath us under the earth’s crust. I even went to Saudi Arabia recently to examine the giant skeleton they supposedly found there. All fake. I live somewhat close to Athens and like I said, I have a fellowship so I’m not teaching right now. I guess that makes me a good enough candidate. They called and I answered.”

“What a fine patriot you are. Always ready to heed the call of your government.”

Peter brushed off the mocking tone and turned the question around to Jonathon.

“Affirmative action. They couldn’t just have a team of white guys, so they brought me in.”

Peter leaned forward and peeked out the lobby doors to see if their cab had arrived. It hadn’t. “You seem to know much more than me about what’s going. Who else is on the team? Any big names?”

“None that I’ve ever heard of. I spend most of my time out in the Hills.”

“The Hills?” Peter asked. He ran his hand up and down the chair’s upholstery. It felt like he imagined the carpet did—worn, but coarse.

“The Black Hills. I figured that if someone was going to be making money digging up old Indian bones, it may as well be an Indian. I’m an archaeologist, don’t know if I mentioned that or not.”

“You did,” Peter said with waning interest. He turned his attention back to the trees.

Jonathon continued talking to fill up what space around them wasn’t already taken by his six-foot-seven-inch frame. “To me, life is all about the angle you take. You can sit around for lifetimes and debate right or wrong, or you can find what the best angle of approach is and do it. You all have turned every Indian in the States into a pragmatist.”

“That’s it,” Peter said and stood up from the chair.

“Hey, I didn’t mean anything bad by it. I didn’t even really mean to say ‘you all.’ Force of habit,” Jonathon said.

“No, not that,” Peter said and waved his hand at Jonathon while his eyes fixated on the closest plastic tree. “The tree. I know what’s off.” Peter walked over to the tree and fingered a leaf, much in the same way as before. “It’s the leaves. There’s no pattern to them.”

Jonathon, never one to ignore another’s passion, walked over to indulge Peter. “What do you mean? The shape and veins and everything look fine,” Jonathon said. Peter seemed like the kind of person who could study anatomy but still be terrible at sex. He did have enthusiasm though, and that was something Jonathon admired.

“The leaves themselves are alright, but the angle of each leaf is off. They’re just thrown onto the branch haphazardly.”

“So?” Jonathon said. He picked between two of his bottom teeth with his thumbnail. He made a note to himself to avoid cheap airport pork.

“It’s like you said. It’s all about the angles. Every plant puts forth its leaves or petals on a

geometric pattern that forms a helix. Some go clockwise, some counterclockwise, but it doesn't matter. Each puts its leaves at distinct angles to the previous leaf. It's one instance of the golden ratio in nature."

"Math really wasn't ever my thing," Jonathon admitted, still picking at his teeth. "Now if it were women or bones, or women and bones," he said with an impish smile, "I could tell you all about it." Maybe he could even teach this guy a thing or two.

"In a way, it does deal with bones. All across nature, from the leaves of trees, to nautilus shells, to bones, to DNA, this same number comes up. Some people think it is how we define aesthetic beauty. Others see it as the hand of God in all things he created. I just think it's interesting."

"Well, I'd love to give you my thoughts on beauty and God and the lack of beauty in God, but it looks like our cab has arrived," Jonathon said and motioned towards the lobby doors. Peter, finally satisfied by using his mind to justify what his eyes and not his gut saw, backed away from the tree and followed Jonathon out the door.

"Now, if you wanted me to calculate your blood-alcohol content, I could do that," Jonathon said. "Just give me your weight, what you've been drinking, and about three seconds, and I'll be able to tell you."

The sun outside made Jonathon sneeze. He blessed himself and entered the backseat via the driver's side door. Peter walked around to the passenger's side and sat down next to him. Peter started to tell the driver the intersection they sought, but the cabbie cut him off before he could finish.

"Yeah, yeah. Everyone's got to get a glimpse of the body. Only way I'd be surprised is if you wanted me to take you somewhere else." The cabbie shifted out of neutral, cut off a car in

the parking lot, and in five short minutes was stuck in a sea of National Guardsmen, traffic barriers, and idling vehicles.

* * *

“Don’t mean to be a son of a bitch, but I can’t give you more than few pictures of the body,” Ken said. “Complete anonymity, of course.” His office was spacious, largely unadorned, and he hoped it was also soundproof. He was standing behind Kayla zipping up the back of her dress. Her hair smelled like Froot Loops and sex. Ken had found himself in the exact same position only moments ago, although then his pants, shirt, socks, shoes and boxers were strewn across his ebony desk. His tie had stayed on, but he was going to have to adjust the knot.

“I didn’t expect a miracle like full access, big boy,” Kayla said. She turned around to look at Ken and was forced to hold back a shudder. She gently slapped his cheek and walked over to the bookcase near the office door. It had glass doors that were now streaky from her fingers. She looked at her hair in the reflection and ran her hands through three times to get out any tangles. When she was done, her blond hair hung down just above her shoulders. She looked nearly identical to how she had when she walked into the DARPA office not more than twenty minutes ago. “What I really want is the okay from you that I’ll be able to walk around that town unharassed. I’ve got work to do, and I don’t have time to deal with all that brownish, bull-shit-tinted red tape. I’ll have my press credentials, but I want your word, too.”

Ken was struggling to put his black dress socks back on. He hopped around on one foot fighting with the left one. He finally hooked it on and paused to catch his breath. He wiped his brow with the back of his hand and looked at her. “You have my word and a caveat to go with it. You don’t mess with us, we won’t mess with you. If I hear that you’re messing around with the team down there or with anyone else, you’ll have a hard time crossing the street without having

to consent to a strip search.”

“Oh, Ken. You were always such a charmer. You should be proud. For all the overweight, old white men I’ve slept with, you’re not the worst.” Kayla bent down to fix the strap on her right heel and to offer a glimpse down her dress to Ken as an insurance policy. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a plane to catch and stories to write.” She left without waiting for Ken to fumble around an awkward goodbye.

* * *

The whole situation was fucked. Alexa was supposed to be in charge of the team investigating the body, but in the absence of any of her superiors, she became the *de facto* head of all operations. While she wanted to be running the blood tests herself and looking at hair follicles, she was stuck trying to track down the head of the National Guard’s demolition crew and trying to ignore the town’s chief of police.

Much of the ground around the body had been dug out, but there was still a lot of work to do. Alexa was hesitant to put a demo squad in charge of something as delicate as excavating a site, but at this point, she had no other option.

She made her way out from under the plastic, blue tarp that covered the body and was momentarily blinded by the brightness of the surrounding area. She blinked several times until her pupils adjusted. Below the tarp there had been frustration and a distant roar, but above and beyond it, there was utter pandemonium in the full Miltonian sense of the word. She saw at least fifty guardsmen doing absolutely nothing. Those assigned to crowd control were leaning on their riot shields and standing with their backs to the crowd that had gathered that morning. Yellow tape and orange striped barricades were scattered everywhere. The majority of the crowd was gathered around the giant man’s head. When the wind blew hard, the tarp would raise a foot or

so and everyone would take pictures of the man's Cadillac-sized cranium. Occasionally a wisp of bleached white hair would escape and a National Guardsmen would have to run over and tuck it back in.

Alexa jogged around the man's body, passing by his pair of paddle-boat-like feet. She was looking for either the captain of the demo crew or someone responsible enough to hand the bureaucratic reins. The first face she recognized amidst the chaos and crowd was Carly's.

"Blood tests," Alexa said. She touched her middle finger to her thumb and bobbed her hand back and forth to emphasize the importance. "Get me the results now."

"I'll say this one more time," Carly said. She imitated Alexa's hand gesture. "I'm not. Your. Daughter. Don't talk to me like I'm 13 years old."

Alexa sighed. She had abandoned her daughter and son, hopped a two-hour flight, and had spent the entire night and day up to this point running around the site giving orders. She pinched the skin between her index finger and thumb and held it, though she doubted whether it really relieved stress. "I'm sorry. I'm in a hurry. Have you seen Knox?" Carly slanted her eyebrows at her. Alexa slowly exhaled a deep breath and tried to regain her composure. "Agent Knox. About six feet tall, wearing a black suit, dark hair. The guy who briefed you and brought you here. Have you seen him?"

Carly let out a laugh. "I live three blocks away. No one brought me here. I have no idea who Agent Knox is. I have seen about twenty guys who fit your rather vague description though. Most of them are huddled over there," she said and pointed at a tent with several wires and poles jutting out of it.

Alexa nodded and started to walk away. She took two steps and turned back to Carly. "Please get me the blood tests as soon as possible. And whenever Schlesinger and Ringer arrive,

send them directly to me. Do not let anyone near that body without my authorization.”

Carly held her right wrist with her left hand and jutted her shoulders out. “Yes, ma’am. Whatever you say. I’d be ever so lost without your guidance.”

Alexa ignored her and walked off to the tent. She had enough to deal with without having to put up with some hotshot 28 year old geneticist. The only reason Secretary Wilson even picked her to be on the team was because she taught at Ohio U. That and she was the best at what she did, even if she did it with a smartass, narcissistic attitude.

Alexa burst into the tent like a doctor walking into the ER. Computers, small dish satellites, a TV, and thousands of wires littered the inside of the tent. Eight men, all from the Bureau and all dressed in black, were scrunched around the table looking at each other’s laptops. “Where is Knox?” Alexa asked. No one looked up or acknowledged her. Alexa walked over to the first bundle of wires she could find and yanked on it. Nothing came unplugged, but a desktop on the end of the row of computers crashed to the ground.

“Jesus Christ, lady. What the hell do you think you’re doing?” one of the men said.

“Where is Knox?” Alexa asked again, this time more forcefully. There were two things she had learned early on when she transitioned from literature to forensics: life was not like CSI, and all conversations with men needed to happen twenty decibels louder than they should.

“He just got back from picking up that biologist you had to have. He’s probably stuck in traffic just like half the town.”

Alexa stormed out of the tent with the same dramatic flair as her entrance. She walked over to the head of the giant man in order to get a look down the street. She looked at her watch. School would be getting out in about five minutes.

“Show us the man. Show us the man,” an idiot in the crowd started chanting. Alexa

picked out the voice and flared her nostrils at the man as she widened her eyes and rubbed the enamel of her teeth together. Despite her icy glare, he kept chanting, and soon others followed. Alexa felt someone tap on her shoulder. She turned around to see Carly standing with a 30-something white guy and a rather large Native American.

“Ma’am, I done brought them to you just like you asked,” Carly said in the same mocking tone she had used earlier.

“Enough,” Alexa screamed. She gave Carly the same look she had used on the idiot in the crowd. “What is that? Some amalgamation of Anne of Green Gables and Uncle Tom? Knock it off. Act like a fucking adult.” The wind picked up again, and Alexa had to brush down her shirt. “Who are these people?”

The Native-American-looking man stepped forward and said, “Jonathon Ringer, at your service. Would you like me to dispatch of the young’un?”

Alexa shook her head. “No, she’s part of the team. Nice to meet you, Dr. Ringer.” She shook his hand and turned to the other man. “That must mean you’re Dr. Schlesinger. Nice to meet you both.”

By now the whole crowd was chanting, “Show us the man. Show us the man.” Alexa saw a twenty-something kid being hoisted up in the air. He started crowd surfing. She rubbed her temples with both hands. “Jesus Christ. They act like they’re at a football game or something. We need to go somewhere we can talk and touch base.”

“To the tent,” Carly said and held up her index finger, trying to make the gesture emphatic and comical.

“No,” Alexa said, thinking back to the scene she had just caused in there. “We need somewhere quiet.”

“I know a great little dive bar that will be virtually abandoned at this time of the day. We can get some awful fried food, and it’s only five or so blocks away,” Carly said.

“Perfect. I need to relax anyway,” Alexa said.

“I like this,” Jonathon said. He rubbed his hands together. “This is my kind of team.”

Alexa looked towards Dr. Schlesinger to get his input, but he was staring at the man, unable to take his eyes off of the body.

* * *

Seedy. Jonathon had never heard that word to describe anything but a bar, and it definitely fit Tom’s. Jonathon followed Carly into the bar and was struck by the contrast in brightness. The outside world was bathed in light, but the inside of the bar looked like midnight. A small, lone light bulb hung above the pool table in the back right corner. It was paired with a Schlitz and Pabst neon sign as the bar’s primary sources of light. The only other distinguishing features of the near empty establishment were a dusty Christmas tree leaning against the wall and the withered, old lady tipping back her drink at the bar.

Brandish. That was another word Jonathon had only heard with a single connotation. No one ever brandished anything but a weapon. Carly gave the bartender a friendly wave and smile and led the group to a seat adjacent to the pool table. They all sat down. Jonathon leaned forward to speak, but Alexa cut him off before he could get a word out.

“Two things I want to make clear before we start talking about anything,” she said and looked at Jonathon, then Peter, and then let her gaze rest on Carly.

Jonathon sensed an edge in her voice that indicated she needed to get laid soon. He was happy to volunteer. Alexa had short, sandy blond hair brushed to one side, thin eyebrows, and a nose so round that it would be impossible for her to flare her nostrils.

“First things first,” Alexa continued, “I’m the leader. What I say goes. Anything you want to do, any test you want to run, goes through me. The results come back the same way: through me. Homeland Security is all in a fluster over this whole situation and they stand firmly behind the ideal that loose lips sink ships. You want to say anything to anyone who isn’t sitting at this table, you come to me first. Understand?” Peter nodded, and Carly just kept picking at the wood finish of the table.

Alexa glanced down at her watch before she started up again. It was nearly four o’ clock. School was out. “Second: I want each of you to keep an open mind about this body. Whatever we may think going in to this, no one really knows what the hell it is, where it came from, and whether or not it is real. Now each of you was picked by me to be on this team for a reason. Everyone’s been introduced, but why don’t we give each other some background information so we know everyone’s area of expertise.”

Not waiting for a lull, Jonathon spoke up. “Name’s Jonathon Ringer. Archaeologist by training, trickster by blood, and wanted in two states for ridiculous accusations of trespassing. I can tell a fifty year old’s hips from a sixty year old’s at a glance, and I bet I’m the last man in America who still believes in chivalry.” He had never heard of any Native American knights, but it was probably just another case of history being written by the killers. The group paused for a moment for Jonathon to continue his bio, but he simply interlocked his fingers and rested his hand on his belly.

Carly and Peter looked at each other. Peter scooted forward in his chair and was about to speak when the bartender made his way over to their table.

“How’s everyone doing today? How are you doing, Carly?” the bartender asked.

“Hi, Tom. Don’t usually see you when it’s still light out. I think we’ll take a round of

drinks and some menus,” Carly said. She looked around at everyone else to see if they had an opinion. Only Jonathon gave any reaction, slowly and definitively nodding his head up and down.

Carly ordered a gin and tonic. Peter got a pale ale. Alexa asked for a water with a handful of lemon wedges. Jonathon ordered a Sprite. Peter looked at Jonathon with slanted eyebrows.

“What? Just because I’m the Indian means I have to be the group’s drunk?”

“No, nothing like that,” Peter apologized. “I just thought you would have a drink being how you can calculate someone’s BAC on the fly and you seemed pretty excited when Carly mentioned going to a bar.”

“I feel comfortable in a bar, especially a dive like this one. The daycare at my reservation was in a bar. I spent my formative years either in a church or watching people fall off of bar stools. It makes me nostalgic to be in a place like this.” Jonathon leaned back on the rear legs of his chair and spread his arms wide. He shifted his weight forward and the chair came back to the ground with a dull thud. “Just don’t make me go to church, please.” Once his chair was back on solid ground, Jonathon put his elbows on the table and then rested his chin on the top of his hands. “Carly, I believe you’re next.”

“Carly Silverberg. Geneticist.” A spider was slowly making its way down the cord from which the light bulb hung and onto the pool table. “I received my B.S. when I was twenty. My PhD when I was twenty five, and I’ve spent the last three years here in Athens studying regeneration in plants, which was the focus of my dissertation.”

“Sexless reproduction,” Jonathon said. “Just the thought of it gives me the creeps.”

“Plenty of plants send out seeds. Where do you think we get the phrase ‘sowing wild oats’?” Carly said.

“Yeah, but where is the fun in that? I just don’t get how you can spend a life studying plants. Besides, I thought Mendel figured that all out for you a long time ago.”

“There’s more to genetics than just matching little x’s with big X’s.”

“I’ll take your word for it. For my part, I’d rather get out of the lab every once a while and study my fellow man,” Jonathon said. He wanted to stick his tongue out at Carly. She had spunk, something Alexa and Peter seemed in dire need of. Carly could have been his little, white daughter.

“Well, I guess it’s my turn,” Peter said and ignored Jonathon and Carly. “I’ll keep it brief since I seem to be the only one who has any interest in getting out of this bar and back to the body of a fifty foot man that mysteriously crashed to the ground.” Jonathon looked down at his gut in a way that made him think about the nun’s tobacco stained teeth. “Dr. Peter Schlesinger. Biologist. I’ve studied gigantism in all its forms. From dinosaurs, to rogue pituitary glands, to the myriad of hoaxes that are out there. That’s why I’m here.” As Peter finished, Tom brought them their drinks. Carly told him they still needed a minute before ordering.

“I guess that just leaves me. My name is Alexa Berringer. I work for the FBI as a forensic scientist. I’m the team leader. I received my PhD in Literature a lifetime ago. I was recruited by the CIA and worked for them for several years. Eventually I landed a job at a land-grant university, got tenure, hated it, and left. I went back to school to become a forensic scientist. I’ve been to campus shootings, babies left in dumpsters, and your run-of-the-mill murder-suicides, but this is something different,” she said and gestured wildly to the world around her. “Despite whatever pride we may have, no one has experience in any thing like this. So, like I said from the start, I don’t want anyone going in to this investigation with their mind already made up.” She looked at Peter and Carly but ignored Jonathon. Carly was twirling her hair around a finger the

same way Becky did whenever she got lectured.

“Now, I’ve asked for clearance to move the body to cold storage, but it’s been denied. There isn’t anywhere near that has enough space to house something that big, and Homeland Security is uneasy about moving anything until we are clear as to what it is we are dealing with. The body is still in the fresh stage of decomposition and rigor mortis has set in, but we have now idea how quick things will stay this way. I have had the most time with the body. Carly has also been here almost from the start. I realize you two,” she said and gestured at Peter and Jonathon, “only had a few minutes with the body. First who has questions, and second, what is everyone most interested in looking at?”

Jonathon’s hand shot into the air. Alexa nodded at him. “I think I speak for everyone when I ask, ‘How big is the phallus?’”

Alexa closed her eyes for a second and then opened them. “Everything about the body is big, including his dick. We are basically looking at a factor of eight for all his features. We haven’t been able to get an accurate measure of the man’s mass, but using eight as our baseline would put it at roughly 512 times heavier than the average male. So we are estimating that he weighs somewhere around 46 tons. To put that in perspective: he weighs as much as six full grown African elephants. Now does anyone have any real questions?” Peter raised his hand. “This isn’t a classroom. We’re all colleagues. Just talk.”

“I want to see this thing’s bones. One look at those, and we will be able to tell if it’s real or not.”

“I agree, Peter. The problem is we aren’t currently able to start cutting into the body. Right now all we’ve been cleared to do is extract some blood and pluck a few hairs. Though I expect the okay will come from higher up any moment. Agent Knox is our liaison for anything

bureaucratic in nature.”

The door to the bar opened. Jonathon saw the light flood in, almost reach his seat, and then retreat back to where it had come from. Three young white guys walked in. They looked like the same three young white guys he had been seeing his entire life. They surrounded the old lady at the bar, two on her left and one on her right. The man on her right put his hand on the lady’s back and she immediately brushed it off. The bartender walked over to the guys and got their drink order, three Coors Lights. “What type of DNA analysis will be running?” Carly asked Alexa.

“Well, we certainly have enough to run RFLP’s, but I don’t think we want to take the time. I am going to suggest we run standard STR analysis. If we don’t like the results, we can shift our methods,” Alexa said.

Jonathon knew what the acronyms meant, but that was where his knowledge and interest stopped. The hard sciences and empiricism never left him enough wiggle room to feel comfortable. They denied the art of science. Peter might agree. He had talked about beauty and creativity in science, but he seemed just as data-obsessed as the rest.

Jonathon heard all three of kids at the bar laugh in unison. He turned away from the conversation and toward the bar. The bartender pointed to the area opposite the old lady, and the man who had put his paw on her shuffled over and sat next to his friends on the left. The man now closest to the lady leaned in and whispered something to her. She set her rocks glass down and pushed the boy with her frail arm.

Jonathon stood up. “Excuse me,” he said. “Chivalry calls.” He trounced over to the kids. He stood with his belly touching the back of the middle one and put an arm on each of the other two’s shoulders. “Can I help you gentlemen?” Jonathon asked.

Marcus felt a gentle push on the back of his stool and nearly fell off of it. He spun around in the seat and stared at the giant guy who had somehow snuck up on them. It had been Brandon's idea to go grab a drink. Marcus wanted to stay at the body, but Chad was quick to follow. Marcus had no choice but to go with them.

"You the new bouncer here or something?" Brandon asked the man. "Tom," he called out, "you've got to stop confusing big with strong."

Jonathon wanted to crack a pool cue across his freckled face, but this wasn't the rez. "You must not be a physics major. Big can be strong. It's all about leverage."

Marcus enjoyed confrontation as much as he did gay porn. "Look, we're not doing anything. Go back to your table and let us have our beer," he said. He looked over to the table the man had come from. Jesus Christ. Dr. Silverberg was sitting over there. Should he go over there and say hi or would that be creepy?

"It looks like you're bothering my friend here," Jonathon said and pointed to the old lady. She slowly spun her rocks glass without lifting it from the bar.

"Ma'am," Jonathon said to the old lady, "Are these men bothering you?"

"More like flies on a cow's ass than an actual nuisance." Jonathon smiled at the lady.

"My name is Dr. Jonathon Ringer," he said and held up her hand to give it a kiss. "Very pleased to make your acquaintance." She finished her drink before she looked up at him.

"Magdelina. Likewise. Though before you go get any ideas, I'm afraid I'll have to stop you. I'd be crushed to dust underneath that chamber pot you call a stomach," she said and spun her now empty glass on the flat countertop.

"Playing hard to get? Don't worry; I've never minded chasing a lady when she was worth running after."

“Looks like you’re the one bothering her now, Chief,” Brandon said. “Don’t you know when someone is out of your league?” Chad laughed at his joke. Marcus just kept looking over his shoulder at the man’s table.

“Will you excuse me?” Jonathon asked Magdelina. She nodded and then waved Tom over to fill her drink.

“Son,” Jonathon said to the one with the permanent smirk, “I would like to beat the shit out of you, but there is a lady present, and I am a gentleman first, fighter second.”

Marcus decided it was time to leave, but he didn’t want Dr. Silverberg to think he had anything to do with this. He got up and walked over to the table.

Carly saw the kid walk over and had to squint to make out his features. As soon as she heard his voice she remembered.

“Dr. Silverberg, hi. How are you?” Marcus asked.

Carly had to squint in the darkness to make out his features, but it didn’t really matter because his voice gave him away. The first three times he had come to office hours, she had assumed he was just looking for a letter of recommendation. When she offered to write him one he had seemed confused, and he kept coming every to office hours. Some students are like a semester-long case of scabies.

“Hello, Marcus,” Carly said. “I’m a bit busy now.”

“I understand. I just wanted to make sure you were alright. You weren’t in class today,” he said. That was stupid. Of course she already knew she wasn’t in class.

“I’m doing great. Thank you,” Carly said trying to end the conversation.

“So are you working on the body? Have you got to see it?” Marcus asked.

“Yes, but,” Carly said.

“Alright then,” Alexa said. “Time to go.” She stood up and walked over to Jonathon. “We’re leaving.”

Jonathon shook her off and fished his wallet out of his pants. He pulled out a fifty and slapped it on the bar. “That should cover our drinks and hers,” he said to Tom. He turned to look at Magdalena. “I apologize for the disturbance. Again, it was a pleasure to meet you.” He bowed to her and back stepped to the door and out of the bar. Alexa and Peter followed him out. Carly stayed behind to tell Tom goodbye.

“My God,” Alexa said, “Are we going to have to sequester you all in your hotel rooms?” She started power-walking back toward the body. “What the hell is Carly still doing in there? Doling out more classified information?”

Jonathon did his best to keep pace with Alexa and Peter, but they were walking like the world was about to end.

“Hey, Alexa,” he said between breaths. “Since you’re the English nut of the group, can the word ‘seedy’ be used to describe a person?”

Alexa turned her head back toward Jonathon. She held her hand up in frustration for a second and then put it back down. “Yes it can. To quote Twain, ‘He was soiled and seedy and fragrant with gin’.”

“Man, those were some seedy motherfuckers,” Jonathon said. He elbowed Peter in the ribs for the second time that day. Peter looked at him with eyebrows arched as high as they possibly could be and then let loose a wild laugh. Alexa was already speeding ahead of the men. Jonathon and Peter picked up the pace.

“Now that I’ve restored order to the universe, let’s go and solve ourselves a mystery,” Jonathon said. He turned and saw Carly jogging towards the group.

When she finally caught up to the group she paused for a second to catch her breath and then said, “I guess we’ll just have to order take out. You think they’ll be able to deliver to a giant corpse or do we have to give them an actual address?”

Chapter Three

Michael sat at the table while his mom whirled around the kitchen. His dad had just gotten home and was in a really good mood. His dad sold insurance, which was also good. Whenever bad things happened to people, his dad would help them out. Like that man who hit the other car with his car. His dad was good at helping people like that out. His mom worked in a day care, helping babies. But it wasn't the same day care he went to because he wasn't a baby anymore. Hadn't been for quite some time. Dad walked across the living room, kicked his shoes in the general direction of his room, and strolled over to Michael. He gave Mom a kiss and Michael a high five before he sat down at the table.

"Business is booming," Samuel said to his wife. "Whenever crazy sh—" He stopped himself and glanced over at his son. Michael had become something of a parrot in the past few months, and they had already received several notes from the day care. "Whenever crazy stuff like this happens, people start to get scared, and when people get scared, they buy insurance."

"Mom, Dad? What happened? Why is it so crazy? Is it like the time my angelfish disappeared and no one knew what happened?"

Samuel looked to his wife, who was much better at tackling these kinds of things. She had a squirt bottle out and was spraying the burgers with something. She went over to her chopping board and started slicing a tomato. As Samuel was the one who brought it up, it looked like he was responsible for putting it down. "No, it's not like the time with your fish, Mikey. That, that was a mystery. What's happening here is just...different."

"Well what happened? Nephy at school said it was raining men, but Miss Debbie said that wasn't nice. Do people really just die? Is it like an airplane? How come planes can fly and people can't?" Michael said as he stared down his dad.

Jesus Christ, four years old was truly the age of questions. Samuel looked over to see if Lisa could help him deflect some of this onslaught. She was putting the finishing touches on the burgers and ripping up a head of lettuce. What did it matter? You can tell kids just about anything, and they will believe it. It's easier to flush a fish and make up a story than tell your only son that it died because he went a week without feeding it. "Sometimes people do die, Mikey. And that isn't anyone's fault. In fact, we'll all die someday, but it's nothing to worry about."

"Then why are people scared? Is it because it looks like Grandpa?"

That was another story as well. Lisa's parents died when she was young, and Samuel had run away from his drunk, abusive father shortly after learning how to run. When Grandparents' Day was impending at the day care, Samuel had made up a story to appease Michael. He pointed to one of the gigantic stained glass windows of West Lafayette Methodist as they slowly passed by in the car. "That's your grandpa," he had said to Michael who at that point was still in his car seat, too small for the booster he rode in now. "He can't come to day care though. He's very busy." And that ended that.

Until two weeks later when Michael began seeing Grandpa everywhere. In a book of art at the day care, he found Grandpa painted at the top of a ceiling. His friend Rosa, her mom had a picture of Grandpa hanging in her car. And every time he went to church, which wasn't that often, Grandpa was there. Michael could understand why Grandpa couldn't make it to day care, but why did everyone like him so much?

"I don't think he looks like Grandpa," Samuel said. "Do you, Honey?" He turned toward his wife. Thank God, she was finally done with dinner and could come to his rescue. She had

placed several hamburgers on a tray and brought them over to the table. Samuel bulged his eyes out at his wife. *Help me*, he signaled.

“No, not really,” Lisa said. “And don’t worry about dying; only old people can die.”

“Well, I don’t want to get old then. How do I not get old? Grandpa’s old, doesn’t that mean he can die?”

Lisa ignored the barrage of questions. “Look what we have here,” she said and gestured to the tray of hamburgers. “They’re real-life Krabby Patties!” She lifted the bun off of one to show Mikey the red flesh of the meat. She had to spray each burger with plenty of red food coloring throughout the cooking process to change the beef from dark brown to red, but it had worked. Maybe now the kid would actually eat for a change. He was nothing but bones, and it didn’t help that carrots and milk were all he would eat at day care.

Michael lunged towards the tray and snatched up the nearest Krabby Patty. He examined it carefully. Bun, Krabby Patty, cheese, mayonnaise, onions, tomato, lettuce, ketchup, mustard, and pickles. It was a real Krabby Patty! A slip of drool went down the corner of Michael’s lip. He lifted the Krabby Patty up to his mouth and took a gigantic bite. He mulled the food over and over with his tongue. As soon as the food was into small enough proportions in his mouth, the smile on his face faded away. It had looked like a Krabby Patty, just like they did on TV, but it didn’t taste any different. Michael began to understand something. That even though you see something, it doesn’t mean... Well, what did it mean? It didn’t mean much just to see something, that was for sure.

* * *

Peter had an erection. Something like this had happened before in a peach orchard in Georgia. Surgation was the result of perceived pleasure by the body. Usually it was sexual, but for Peter the sight of the giant man was enough.

He had read the specs on the man: 48'7" tall, approximately 51 tons, Caucasian, white hair, 60-70 years old, and he had gotten a good look at it yesterday before they went to the bar and spent the rest of the evening debriefing. Today was the first day he got to put his hands on the thing. It was soft like the plastic they used to make baby dolls. Everything about the body was in proportion to a regular man. Peter could see over the top of the body only because it had sank into the ground like an asteroid. It still had to be a fake, but it was so well constructed compared to anything he had studied that he felt a sort of reverence toward the body. Jonathon, Alexa, and Carly were standing behind him on top of the ridge.

Peter crawled up the ditch to stand next to them. While they were still waiting for permission to begin hacking off chunks of the body and drawing blood, Alexa had an idea. She had performed more autopsies than the rest of the group together, which is probably why she was the team's leader. That and she worked for the government already. Since they couldn't cut into the body, Alexa looked for a way in that didn't involve incisions. Any normal human will have fecal matter in their bowels at the time of their death. Often it spills out when the body goes through the shock of dying. There was no stool at the site, which Peter took as a sign that the man was a fake. So before they had a chance to cut into the body, they tried getting a good look up the man's anus. Alexa had sent one of the Agent underlings to the Athens Fire Department to retrieve the Jaws of Life. It looked like a giant, metal earwig.

The Guard had cut away a trench that led underneath the man so they would have access to the rectum. Peter stared up at the man's sphincter. The brown eye of God stared back at him.

He had to use both hands on the Jaws of Life to hold open the giant man's sphincter. As soon as he had the orifice open a few inches, shit and blood began pouring out onto Peter. It was thick and runny at the same time. It smelled like a dog's breath after it had eaten its own shit, died, and rotted, but before its stomach exploded from the expanding gases. Explode wasn't really the right word. Ruptured fit what actually happened. The stomach ruptured; the smell exploded. He felt like the Dutchboy at the dam if it had been a sewage lagoon instead of the sea that was being held back.

Peter dropped the Jaws and ran to the chemical shower to douse himself before he became contaminated and threw up in front of everyone. As he climbed out of the trench and made his way out from under the tarp, the crowd gathered around the body let out a cheer. Fifteen seconds later when the wind picked up a bit and the smell started to seep into the crowd, the cheering died down. Peter walked out of the shower and threw up. He could still feel the layer of grime and muck on his skin, so he went back to the shower. He made some of the National Guardsmen scrub him down hazmat-style before he got out. They ended up getting some decent samples.

* * *

Pastor Edgemont blindly felt his way to the pulpit. He walked across the carpeted floor with his left hand held out as a guide. He reached the stand, gripped each side of it with his hands, and then centered the microphone where his mouth would be. The black bandana covering his eyes was firmly tied at the back of his head, so there was no way of knowing how many people filled his congregation today. He knew they were there though. He could sense their presence and hear the shuffling in the plush seats. He felt for the Bible and pulled it open to

the page with the largest ribbon streaking down the side. Not that it mattered for he both had the reading memorized and couldn't see the page even if he hadn't.

Pastor Edgemont cleared his throat and then began. "A reading from Exodus, chapter three, verses two through six. 'The angel of Yahweh appeared to Moses in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed.'"

Tyler tried to stifle a yawn in the third pew from the front. He only went to church when his wife made him. He would rather be at the body with the rest of the town. Besides, if his wife has right and it was the body of God, then going to Church and listening to Bible stories didn't make much sense. Dead men didn't tell stories, and they didn't listen to them either. If the body wasn't God, well, it still shot the theory of God and mankind being special down the crapper.

His wife was nodding incessantly as the Pastor read from the Bible. Which was weird because he had a blindfold on. Every time Tyler went to church, he had to think long and hard about why he loved his wife. He liked the way she took care of him, and he liked the way she laughed at his jokes whether they were good or bad. He wanted to whisper to her either a burning bush joke or about how hairy bush is never consumed, but she would pinch him and that meant no bush for Tyler that night.

Edgemont could feel the divine inside himself wriggle and confirm its existence. He continued reciting from the Bible: "Moses said, I will turn aside now, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt. When Yahweh saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the midst of the bush, and said, 'Moses! Moses!' He said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Don't come close. Take off your sandals from off your feet, for the place you are standing on is holy ground.'

Moreover he said, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look at God.'

"Let us look towards Moses for guidance. He has experienced what we have. He has suffered at the hands of unjust, ungodly governments. He has suffered and prevailed. We shall do the same."

Tyler had been hearing the same talk since he was six years old. Probably even before that, but he couldn't remember. He had heard this speech; he had seen *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. He had caught a glimpse of the body yesterday, and his face hadn't melted off. Tyler never understood what happened in the movie. Were the stone tablets supposed to be God? How come no one's face melted in *The Ten Commandments*? Weren't they looking at the same thing? If that was what he spent his time in a church doing, he would rather be at the body. And it didn't matter if the body was God's or someone else's. If it was real, it meant God was dead in one way or another.

"Moses was a man, like you or me," Edgemont said. He felt that a good sermon was like rolling a barrel down a hill: the longer it went the more speed and momentum it built up. This was a good sermon. "Moses had weaknesses, like pride and curiosity, just as we do. Later on in Exodus, Moses asks the Lord, 'Please show me your glory.' And God tells Moses, 'You cannot see my face, for man may not see me and live.' But God is not some dictator up in the heavens. He is fair. He tells Moses, 'Behold, there is a place by me, and you shall stand on the rock. It will happen, while my glory passes by, that I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you will see my back; but my face shall not be seen.' So spoke the Lord to Moses and so speaks He unto us."

The shuffling in the seats continued. This time it sounded more fervent to the preacher. He heard a wail from an older woman in the congregation. Mrs. Glenn perhaps? “Fear not! For though we are wicked, the Lord will forgive us. All of us gathered here are sinners, myself included. But we have gathered here seeking the Lord’s mercy. Take up your bandanas,” he said. He felt around the bottom shelf of the pulpit until his fingers brushed against the stiff cotton. He held up the bandana for all except himself to see.

Tyler’s wife grabbed his hand and gave it a squeeze. She picked up two bandanas from the pew. The fuck if he was going to put that thing on and walk around in public. When she tried handing it to him, he let it fall to the ground in between them.

“Tie it around your eyes. The hand of the Lord will protect us,” Edgemont said. He heard knots cinch, a hundred or so pulled snugly around the eyes of his flock—blinding them. It was harsh and drastic, but it was necessary. He did not doubt the dedication of his parishioners, but he could not expect them to do as he had done. “Take off your shoes. Take off your socks. We now trek to holy ground.”

“Pastor,” a voice spoke from the dark. “Why have we not been saved? Why haven’t we been subsumed into the heavens? Are we not to be spared the punishment of the end of the world?”

It was Mrs. Glenn. She had read all of the *Left Behind* books and was a better Christian than anyone in town, save the Pastor and his wife. Why hadn’t she been assumed into Heaven? She had even ordered a special DVD from a televangelist in Florida about the Rapture. Yesterday, she had watched the news reports about the giant man, and while they were full of speculation and stories about the body, she had yet to hear a single report of a man or woman gone missing. Raised into paradise, their clothes left in a pile on the ground. This troubled her to

no end. Wasn't she good? Wasn't she deserving? Didn't she give and give her time and money until she was too old to help and the Social Security checks became too small? Maybe that was the problem: she had relied upon the help of the godless government and not the Lord. Was this to be her punishment?

Even though he could not see, Pastor Edgemont could tell uncertainty was creeping into his flock. "Fear not, for the Lord is good and will save those who are deserving. The Rapture was mere speculation and has no basis in the bible. We follow the true way, the way of God's written word." He held up the Bible to emphasis his point before he realized that no one could see it. "Our path to salvation is the same path that will take us to the body of the Lord. Grab the hand of the person next to you. Form an unbreakable chain that will demonstrate our bond with the Lord." Pastor Edgemont stepped down from the pulpit and shuffled his way down the two steps towards the pews of the church. He groped blindly until he found his wife's hand. He took it in his. It was clammy, though he was sure he had heard his wife wipe it several times on her black blouse.

"Mr. McElroy will lead us. We will not waver. We will show the world that there are still those who follow God. Through the death and resurrection of his Son, we were saved. It is now our turn to save and to be forgiven. Our Lord has died, his body fallen to us wicked sinners. This crime is ours. The blood is on all of our hands," Pastor Edgemont said. He squeezed his wife's hand and could feel the perspiration leak out between their conjoined fingers. Or was that blood?

"In all things, the Lord has preached forgiveness. We must show our sorrow so that we too will be forgiven." The parishioners began making their way out of the pews. Slowly, as if they were some massive centipede, the line snaked in and out of each row of benches. Pastor

Edgemont was at the end, and Mr. McElroy was at the front. Someone needed to lead them after all. Edgemont could only take them so far.

McElroy held the harness of his seeing-eye dog in one hand and a random parishioner's in the other. He led them out of Athens Baptist. McElroy smiled. The blind was truly leading the blind, though he was not blind by choice. The Lord had a plan after all. McElroy had often wavered in his faith, and when he was a boy he would spend hours out in his father's pastures alone, screaming at God at the top of his lungs. Now though, he could see why God had done this to him. It was his job to lead them through the town. To the body, to their homes. The blind leading the blind.

Tyler's wife got up, ready to go. She tugged the sleeve on his shirt, urging him to get up. She couldn't see his lack of a blindfold and the ensuing lack of faith that it must have meant to her.

"Nope," he said.

"Honey?"

"You want us to be seen out in the streets like that? You won't even let me go a week without cutting the grass for fear of what the neighbors will say. Now you expect me to dress like a freak and walk around town holding hands with people I don't even know?"

"It's not about that. It's about our souls. I need you by my side."

Tyler jerked his shoulder and freed his sleeve from his wife's grip. She reached out for him, but he scooted down the pew just out of her reach.

"Go," he said. "If that's what you want."

His wife walked away and joined the chain of people leaving the church. He could see her taking deep deliberate breaths. Was it possible to cry with your eyes closed? He looked

around. He was alone. He put his feet up on the pew's book rack in front of him. After a couple of minutes, he stood up and stretched. He picked up the hymnal his wife had been holding, looked at the front and back of it, and then chucked it across the church. It skidded to a halt in front of the pulpit.

It had taken nearly ten minutes for the procession to make its way outside. By the time Pastor Edgemont and his wife exited the church, whispers were already making their way through the line. The sun was bright, or at least it seemed that way. Edgemont's skin and heart felt warm. He could hear a crowd gathering around the line of people as they walked down the sidewalk. He stepped down from a curb into the street. He heard a series of cars honk as they made their way across. They could wait. This was a funeral procession.