

# The Mausoleum

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**John Boston**

I took the job simply because I needed money. Good paying jobs are few and far between out here. Vermont is a beautiful state, but it can be a very tough place to make a living. I had been out of work for six months when I drove down to the mausoleum just outside of Bennington. I had never even heard of the place before. I didn't know Vermont had a functioning place like this. The ad said they were looking for a nighttime watchman and handyman. I'm handy.....and pretty good at watching too.

*Twenty bucks an hour plus free room and board? How the hell do you say no to that?*

I didn't like the thought of being away from my wife for weeks on end, but things were getting desperate around here and I had few good options left. I called and spoke to someone named Morris. He told me to stop by tomorrow morning and he could do the interview. I figured the worst he could say was no, that was worth the gas and my time. I worked for a few years in the home building industry, which had taken a big hit here in Vermont during the recession. I needed some cash quickly, or the wife and I were going to be out on the street.

My name is Jeff by the way. I'm not sure if that even matters. I just want my story to be told.

The mausoleum was on a sprawling campus just outside of Bennington. The place was pretty massive, but it was obvious it had fallen on hard times. There were some other buildings and cottages further on down a dirt road, as well as a large barn out back. It would take considerable work and money, but it could be a showstopper. The kind of place that gets featured in country-themed magazines and newsletters.

I had no idea where to park. I walked into the building and was immediately struck by it's beauty. The marble and slate floors reflected almost every sound, no matter how minute. The inside had been well kept. It had a small chapel with a prayer room. I lit a candle and sat down to say a prayer for my recently deceased grandmother. I looked up and saw a small man standing in front of me.

"Can I help you?" he asked cheerfully

"I'm Jeff. I have a ten o'clock appointment with Morris."

"Ah well, I'm Morris. Please, follow me."

I was led down a massive hallway lined with tombs. Some of them were over two hundred years old. He led me into his office, which looked like something straight out of 1955.

*The old bastard didn't even have a computer.... ..like nothing.*

"Please.....have a seat," he said sitting down.

"So.....Jeff. I read your application. Everything seems in order. I just have some rather unusual questions for you, if you don't mind."

"Fire away."

"I'm curious to know your thoughts on the afterlife."

"Well, what you to like to know?" I replied.

"Everything. What do you think happens to us when we die?"

"I'd like to think we go to a better place, but that's just a belief, not a fact."

"So, would you say you are a religious man?"

"I'm a Catholic. I go to mass every now and then. I went this Easter. I even gave up watching basketball for lent."

"What does the church say about the afterlife?"

"Not really much different than any other religion I would assume."

"Do you ever think they got it completely wrong?"

"I suppose we don't really know until we leave the Earth. I guess they kind of need it to sell their religion. No point in following all these rules and avoiding sinning if there's no afterlife."

"The reason I ask Jeff is that the funeral business sells death. You have to be comfortable with the idea of it. Our previous employees thought they were, only to discover they were completely unprepared for it. They imagined they heard things at night and one even thought they saw a ghost. I feel that if one is perfectly comfortable with the idea of death and knows they will be dead one day, it's much easier to work here."

"Well, I don't like to think about it, but that doesn't mean I haven't thought about it. I'm perfectly aware of the fact that I'll be dead someday. I just hope it's much farther down the road. I kind of like being alive.

"That's exactly what I wanted to hear. When can you start?"

"Whenever you like."

"How about right now?"

"Right now? Well, where am I going to stay?"

"In that cottage right over there. I hope it's to your liking," he said handing me a set of keys.

"I'll have dinner delivered right to your door."

"How do I say no to that?"

"Just one more thing Jeffery. The previous night's watchman, he um.....well, this building can play tricks on you. Sound can echo through this entire building. It's easy to imagine things in your head. Don't let your senses fool your mind. Now, let me give you the tour."

I called my wife and told her I was starting immediately. Morris certainly didn't waste any time and for obvious reasons. He showed me a tomb that had recently been vandalized. Someone had smashed the cover plate. The porcelain pieces were all over the floor.

"Some people have no respect for the dead. Those remains were over fifty years old. I now have to find the family and give them the bad news. You can understand why I need someone here immediately. I can't be everywhere."

"Morris, this is odd."

"What?"

"Well, the pieces are all on the floor. If they smashed it in, the pieces should all be inside the tomb, not outside. It's like it was smashed from the inside out."

"Who knows what these vandals were doing. You are comfortable carrying a firearm, aren't you?" he asked.

"You really think that's necessary?" I asked somewhat surprised.

"These vandals are getting more brazen and more destructive. Violence seems to be the only language they understand. One has to be prepared for all eventualities, as unpleasant as they may be."

"If you think it's best."

We walked around for some time. He told me he does all the floor work and dusting.

"I have a caretaker here five days a week and it just isn't enough. If you have any free time and see something that needs to be taken care of, I expect you to just take care of it," he said.

"Of course."

"This was quite a place once. We had families come from all over New England to bury their loved ones here. I was a much younger man then. We can bring this place to its former glory, but it's going to take a big infusion of funds, that's why I'm going to Florida tomorrow to meet with some potential investors. This could be the big break we've been waiting for. Here are your keys. Now, should you encounter any undesirables, I expect you to handle them with the utmost care. The last thing we want is the police around here. Word gets out about vandalism here, it could ruin us."

"Sure. No cops. Not a big fan of them either."

"Good. Well, get some sleep. You start this evening when the sun goes down. I took the liberty of having some food delivered to your cabin. I have to leave for the airport shortly. If you have any questions, don't hesitate to call. I know this is all very unusual, but I'm in a pinch here. Don't think of this place as a job, think of it as your new extended family." said Morris.

"I can do that."

"Good. Don't let me down. This place has been in my family for generations. You'll never know what kind of pressure I'm under trying to keep a business running that has been in the family for generations. It's like my father and grandfather are still standing next to me, screaming at me all the time from the other side."

"Not a problem Morris. I was at my last job for twelve years before I got laid off."

"Look, Frank is my handyman. He's a good man and a good worker when he's not drunk. His father worked here for decades, so I guess you could say he's legacy. If you have any questions, feel free to hit him up. I've got to get going. My flight leaves at midnight."

*Here I was thinking it might be a week or two before I heard back from them about the position. Morris's behavior was odd.....perhaps a better word would be desperate. Like a mouse trapped in a corner with no place to go.*

The cottage was run down, but still very livable. I figured it had been decades since any real renovation or upgrades had been done to the place. It was very *1970sish* in terms of appearance. It had a kitchen and a bathroom. I didn't really need anything more than that. The bedroom had a bed with clean sheets and blankets on them. The blankets were still in the packaging.

An hour later, a pizza delivery showed up at my front door. I didn't have to pay a dime. Morris was making this job pretty hard to turn down. He never even asked me if I accepted it.

He also left a few hundred dollars in an envelope for *sundries*, as he put it. I knew he was eager for me to start, so I went down for about an hour. I knew I had to call the missus and tell her what was going on.

She wasn't pleased about the situation, but we had little choice in the matter. Things were getting pretty dire for us. I was on my last unemployment check. This job was in many ways a life preserver for us.

I ate a few slices of pizza and then took a shower and walked around the buildings and grounds. At one time, this must have been quite an operation. The building was gorgeous. It was set to handle funerals and wakes. It had a full kitchen and bathroom. I had zero experience with the funeral business or the cemetery business. I figured I was hired to keep an eye on things and not to involve the cops unless it was absolutely necessary.

Morris told me where to find the gun and holster. It was like something right out of 1950. He had some bullets with it. I assumed it fired. I felt a little absurd wearing a gun and holster around a

mausoleum, but that's what he wanted. I surmised that Mr. Morris had gotten a little *up close and personal* with some of these vandals. Probably just locals that were drunk or high, looking to have a little no-cost entertainment for the evening.

I just couldn't bring myself to carry the gun. How would it look if someone were to come here to pay their respects to the dearly departed and they see me walking around like John Wayne? No, I had to put my foot down. That was not the kind of impression I wanted to create.

The doors closed at eight PM every night and opened at eight AM the next morning. I supposed I could open them whenever I desired, but no later than eight AM. I was to be the babysitter for this place for those twelve hours. I figured this was a cakewalk.

*I was responsible for babysitting the dead. How hard could it be?*

I made a pot of coffee and sat down at my desk in the reception area of the mausoleum, right in front of the chapel. Mass had been held here on Sundays, but it didn't look like it had been done here in years. I had no idea what I was doing. I locked the doors and decided to make sure there was no one in the building. I had my good walking shoes on and was amazed to hear the sound of my footsteps echoing throughout the building. The sounds seemed to bounce off the walls in every which direction. It was unusual.....*and kind of creepy.*

I walked around the building, even checking the chapel and bathrooms. I checked the kitchen and checked the emergency exits to make certain they could only be opened from the inside. I walked and checked and observed. It was my first night on the job. I turned the corner and saw an elderly woman staring at a gravesite on the wall. She was crying and had her hand on the grave site. It was hard to watch.

I walked up to her. I offered her a Kleenex. She took it and blotted her eyes.

"I know it's closing time. I just had to see my son one more time. Do you have any children?" she asked.

"No ma'am. I was never blessed. Certainly wasn't for lack of trying." I said.

"No parent should ever outlive their children. Lowering him into the ground was the hardest thing I've ever had to do. He was only twenty-six when the Lord took him. Time doesn't heal all wounds. Some of them just scab over." she said wiping away the tears.

"I'm sorry for your loss. I can't imagine what it must be like to go through something like that." I said.

"Every day since then, I've wondered why God just didn't take me instead. I wouldn't have protested," she said.

"I wish I had an answer for you."

"You seem like a nice young man. Much nicer than that douche bag that worked here before you."

"It's my first night."

"I know I have to leave. Walk me to the door if you would."

"Of course."

I held her arm as we walked slowly to the front door. She told me her name was Helen Price and her son's name was James."

"He was going to be a dentist. He only had a year left of dental school and he was done. We were so proud of him. I remember this place when it was the pride of Bennington. We used to go to mass here on Saturdays. That was so long ago."

"Morris is doing his best to keep the place afloat," I said.

The look on her face instantly changed. I could tell I had hit a nerve.

"Be wary of Morris. He's not what you think he is. He is a desperate little man and desperate little men sometimes do terrible things. I would hate to see anything happen to a nice young man like you."

I led her out the door and watched her disappear into the darkness. Her comment kind of struck a nerve with me. I didn't know a damn thing about Morris or the history of this place. Maybe I should have taken a few days to consider, but then he just would have given the job to the next guy he interviewed and I'd be right back to square one.

I was pouring my coffee when it hit me: *where the hell was the old lady's car? The parking lot was empty!*

I walked back outside and looked around. I walked around the back and out onto the road to see if I could find her. She was nowhere to be found. That was odd.

*Maybe she took an UBER or something? Where the hell did she go?*

I figured she must have had her car parked somewhere on the property and I just didn't notice. That was really the only viable option.

I walked back inside and continued my rounds with my coffee. It might not be a bad idea to keep the pistol on my desk at reception.

*Those tweakers can be mighty unpredictable.*

I kind of worked out a routine over the next few days. I checked every window and door in this place. I did not have a key for the basement, but the door was locked. I would take walks around the grounds and make notes. Morris was going to need some serious funds to keep this place going and to bring it up to code. Some of the electrical work had not been grounded properly and the roads were going to need to be graded to remain drive-able. I would take naps throughout the

day until I could sleep for six or seven hours at a time and make it through the night. I hadn't worked graveyard in years and my body did not like it.

I had yet to meet Frank. I saw him one day in the barn, but I was so tired that I just went back to the cottage and fell asleep. Dreams during the day can be unusual. Mine were no different. In one dream, I could see the building simply floating away in space, with me inside. Very weird.

I would occasionally see people walking around the buildings. I smiled at them. Most didn't even acknowledge me. I did come upon a woman one evening during an intense rainstorm. She didn't even have an umbrella with her. She stopped and stared at a grave site. She put her hand over the marker stone. She looked like a punk rocker with purple hair. Maybe a little old to dress that way, but she looked like something right out of 1985. I noticed she was barefoot. I didn't say a word to her at first. I probably should have just kept on walking.

"I did so much coke at a Motley Crew concert, I almost died," she said putting her hand on the grave site.

"Hell of a storm we have here," I said trying to change the subject.

"Do you ever wonder what it's like, to die I mean?"

"I try not to think about it."

"No one does, but everyone on Earth is going to die at some point. I wonder if I died at that concert and everything after that has just been a dream."

"I didn't see your car in the parking lot."

"I don't drive. I walk everywhere. Keeps me in shape." she said.

"This person a friend or relative of yours?"

"Neither. Just someone I knew a long time ago. They liked coke too. Maybe a little too much."

"I can call a taxi for you if you like?"

"Why?"

"It's pouring rain outside."

"I'm not leaving here. Not yet anyway."

"Look, uh.....we close in an hour. We don't have very many rules around here, but that is one that we do take pretty seriously." I say.

"You're new here, aren't you?"

"Yes, this is my first week?"

"Have you met the others?"

"What others?"

"The other people like me that hang around here."

"No."

"You will. Milton, Sharice, and Lauren. Nice people."

"Do they have family or friends here?"

"No."

"Well, then why would they hang around this place?"

"Where are they going to go?" she replied.

"Well, this isn't the mall, you can't just hang out here, this is a place of business," I say.

The woman just chuckled. That made me rather angry.

"We've been having some rather serious problems with vandalism around here. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

"No."

"What's your name?"

"Bianca. what's yours?"

"Jeff."

"You kind of look like a Jeff."

"Well, Bianca.....if you aren't here to see family or friends, I'm going to have to ask you to leave. What business do you have here?"

"You still haven't figured it out, huh?"

"Figured what out?"

"We can't leave," she said looking right at me.

"Why not?"

No sooner had she said that than I heard something fall in an adjacent hallway. I ran over and saw that someone had knocked over an expensive trash can in front of the restrooms. I walked inside and didn't see anyone in either bathroom. When I went back to Bianca, she was gone. I



walked around the rest of the grounds looking for her but didn't find her. No way was anyone going to walk back to town in this rain. She had to be here somewhere.

Now, it was beginning to make sense. Bianca and her little group had to be hiding out somewhere on the property. I looked at the gravesite she was standing in front of. It read: *Milton Smith, beloved husband, and father. 1955-1986. RIP.*

I didn't know if these people were real or just existed in Bianca's head. Either way, I was determined to get to the bottom of it before Morris got back. I wanted to have this little mystery closed by the time he returned. I had to half wonder if that's why he left in such a hurry. He wanted me to put the pieces of the puzzle together. I wanted to show him his money was not being wasted.

The worst part of the job was around three in the morning. I would occasionally doze off. In one of my dreams, I could see people trying to get out of their tombs, clawing frantically to try and escape. One of the people that managed to break free was Bianca.

*"Where the fuck am I?"* she said

I immediately woke up and sat up in my chair. I had to wait a moment to completely wake up.

*What if these people I'm seeing are ghosts? What if they're not alive?*

I now see what Morris was talking about when he asked me my thoughts on the afterlife. This place really can play tricks on you. It's so quiet in here, you could hear a mouse fart. A few times, I've been sitting in my chair at reception and thought I heard people talking and laughing. I'd get up to investigate, walk around the entire building and find nothing. Is it just your mind playing tricks on you? Or are there really people hiding out in here?

Morris did have a surveillance system in place. The cameras were older, but you see pretty much every inch of this place. Unfortunately, the monitor was in his office, and I had no key to his office. I'm not sure why I checked. I was trying to stay awake. I had to keep moving. There was a directory of everyone who was buried and interned here at the Green Mountain Mausoleum. I checked the list and sure enough, there were listings for all of the names Bianca had given. I did not find a listing for anyone named Bianca.

Sharice Gardener died in 1978. Lauren O'Neil died in 1982. I got the grave site listing for them and walked over. Sharice's grave site was untouched. Lauren's had recently been smashed in. someone had removed the debris. Her remains had been removed.

*This was getting creepier by the minute.*

I searched and searched all over the buildings and grounds, looking for Bianca and her friends. I checked the barns and the other cottage. The only place I didn't check was the basement. I couldn't imagine a bunch of people living in the basement of a mausoleum, but I suppose desperate people do desperate things.

If people were living in this building, why vandalize it and draw attention to yourself? These probably weren't the best thinkers in the world, to begin with.

Eight o'clock seemed to take forever. I opened the doors and saw Frank pull in. His little pick-up truck was so rusted, that I was amazed the body was still on the frame. I waved at him as soon as he stepped out.

"You must be Jeff," he said.

"You must be Frank."

I shook his hand and could smell alcohol on his breath. Barely eight o'clock and Frank had already hit the bottle. This guy was more of a liability than actual help.

"Morris told me you'd be starting. I hope you turn out better than the last guy that was here. He was a dick."

"Did he get fired?"

"Nope. He just took off one day. Cops found his car at Logan Airport with a note to his wife. The son of a bitch was so much in debt, that he figured he'd be better off in another country. Never said a word to anyone. Left a wife and two small kids. What a piece of garbage."

"Hey, do you have a key for the basement?"

"Yeah, what do you want to go down there for?"

"I ran into Bianca yesterday. Have you met her?"

Frank's face went very pale. He stuttered before speaking.

"Yeah, yeah, I've met her a few times."

"I just want to make sure she's not hiding somewhere in the building."

"Yeah.....hey, I got to go. It's been nice meeting you."

"Hey, could you show me where the breaker boxes are inside?"

"Morris didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"I don't ever go inside that place.....ever."

"Um, ok. I guess I'll find them myself." I said and walked away.

Needless to say, I was less than impressed with Mr. Frank. He was probably just a charity case for Morris. I didn't think he was going to be much help.

I was almost asleep when Morris called. I don't know how he got my number. He says I gave it to him. I don't remember giving it to him. I just wanted to get a few hours of shut-eye. My body was screaming for sleep.

"Good news my boy. I've got some big-time investors lined up down here. I just have to get a few more ducks in a row and we're done. I'm going to turn this place around, you just wait and see."

"Glad to hear Morris. Can I go back to sleep now?"

"Yes, this evening, there will be a delivery. I trust you can take care of things until I get back in a few days?"

"What kind of a delivery?"

"Remains. Husband and wife of almost seventy years. They wanted their ashes to be mixed together. Just keep it in the bay until I get back."

"Not a problem. See you in a few." I said and hung up.

I thought he must have just remembered it on the application I filled out, except I got a new number shortly thereafter. I just kept the old phone around in case someone called me for an interview. Guess it paid off.

You can have your remains Fed Exed. I was unaware of that until this evening. I guess I was expecting someone's charred remains to be delivered on a more personal level. All I had to do was sign on the bottom line and the remains of Fred and Julia Silver were all mine. I left them where Morris wanted. On my way back to the office, I ran into Bianca. It was an hour past closing. She was wearing the same outfit she had on last night. Needless to say, I was not amused. She didn't even try to run when she saw me.

*Guess I'm just one of her gang now as well.*

"Bianca, you can't be in here after we close. I'm sure a pretty young lady like yourself has better things to do with her time than hang around dead people."

"I was just leaving."

"You could have left an hour ago. You don't seem like a vandal. Perhaps you could clue me in on what's really going on in here?"

"Oh, Mr. Jeff. You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"At this point, I will pretty much believe anything," I say walking her to the back doors.

"Sometimes I wonder If I'm dead too," she says

"No, you're very much alive."

"I'm not sure. Sometimes I get lost in this place for hours. The marble hallways just go on forever and ever. There's no way out for us. We're trapped in here by Morris. He did this to all of us." she says softly.

"You want to tell me what the hell is going on in this place? I'd like to think you're a decent enough person to at least do that for me." I say.

"Morris isn't who you think he is. He's a horrible person. The worst kind."

"So I hear. You're going to have to give me more than that."

"What more do you need to know? You made a little deal with the devil and you don't even know it."

"Cut the crap, Bianca. Look. I may not be the smartest person in the world, but even I can spot a junkie a mile away. Your pupils look like eight balls. I don't see any needle tracks on your arms, so I'm guessing they're on your feet?"

"Nobody's perfect Jeff."

"That doesn't mean they shoot up heroin either. Bianca, I'm going to ask you nicely to stay the hell out of here. The next time we meet in here after hours, I'm not going to be so pleasant."

"Jeff, the problem with dead people is that most of them don't even know they're dead. I just hope you figure it out before it's too late. I guess they already own you too," she said, putting her hand over one of the gravesites. She had tears in her eyes. I took a clean tissue out of my pocket and gave it to her. I walked over to the back door and unlocked it. It couldn't have taken me more than ten seconds. Somehow, in that time, Bianca just vanished. She wasn't wearing shoes, so you couldn't hear her walking or running. I spent the next hour looking for her. I checked everything. The only place she could be was the basement or Morris's office. I doubted she would be in there. I walked over to the basement door and took a good look. It was dead-bolted and it was a metal door. I thought that was kind of odd. Why put a very expensive metal door here? What was on the other side that was so important? I had to get a hold of Frank and find out where that key was. She had to be in here. I checked all of the buildings outside and they were all locked. I was now very worried. I mean, *how in the hell did she just vanish like that?*

I walked back to the exact spot she was standing when I left her. She must have taken off down the hallway, but it led right to the front doors which were locked. I used my flashlight to look at some of the gravesites. I nearly shit myself when I saw it. It was the one she put her hand on.

*BIANCA WHITE*

*JUNE 1959-APRIL 1988*

*GONE BUT NEVER FORGOTTEN*

I just had a conversation with a ghost. At least that's what I thought. Now I understood why the previous night's watchman just got up and left. This place was creepy AF. I didn't believe in

ghosts before I started working here. I thought it was just people wanting to believe they were there. After tonight, I'm not so sure they don't exist.

I waited for Frank. He showed up an hour late and hung over. As soon as he saw me, he knew exactly how this was going to go. He was so drunk that he could barely get out of his car.

"You're a real ball of fire, aren't you?"

"Get out of here man. Leave me alone," he says.

"Frank. I need some answers here and you're going to give them to me."

"I ain't telling you shit."

"Do you want me to call the cops? I might get fired, but my guess is that Morris would be even more upset with you."

"I knew you were going to be trouble as soon as I saw you. You're screwing up a good thing here. You're still too young to know how good you got it."

"Who is Bianca?"

"Who?"

"Cut the crap. You know exactly who I'm talking about."

"She's nuts. She thinks she's a dead person. She believes she died in 1988 or something. The girl is certifiably insane."

"So, why don't we have her eighty-sixed or trespassed?"

"She and Morris are friends or something. I don't know. He won't do anything about her."

"What's going on in there? There's a hell of a lot more than meets the eye."

"Leave me alone. I got work to do."

"You're too drunk to do anything. Just level with me, Frank. I'm not going to say anything, I just think I deserve to know what's really going on inside that building."

Frank stopped and sat down on the bumper of his car. He lit up a cigarette. I thought I might finally be getting somewhere.

"Kid, I got a year left until I qualify for Social Security. Nobody in this town is going to hire me. What the hell am I supposed to do? A guy like me doesn't have many options. I never started drinking until I worked here. I've seen too many things in this place. Things nobody should have to see."

"I don't understand, Frank. This is a mausoleum? What the hell is going on in there? What's in the basement?"

"Kid, you stay the hell out of that basement, you hear me? You ain't got no business sticking your nose in places it don't belong."

"What the hell did you see in here that caused you to turn into this?" I ask

"Sometimes the dead people are the lucky ones. We all make our choices. I made mine and you'll make yours. I just hope you make better choices than I did. There are two Morris's. You've only seen the nice one. The one he puts on for the public. You haven't met the other Morris."

"What other Morris?" I ask. I was going to ask more questions, but I saw a car approaching us from the gravel road.

We watch a hearse pull up. Two men dressed in black get out. They look right at us.

"The hell do they want?" I ask

"They're here to pick up a body. Morris is a mortician as well. The body will be in a casket in the garage with a green tag on it. Whatever the hell you do, don't look inside."

"Right."

I walk over to the men. They don't even say hi or anything. One of them backs the hearse up to the garage. I open the door and they seem to know exactly what to do. They wheel the casket over to the hearse and load it inside off the wheel rack. They get back into the hearse and just drive away. They certainly weren't very talkative.

*Yessiree Jeff, you've really gone and done it good this time! Some jobs just aren't worth the money.*

I wasn't too different from old Frank. I couldn't afford to walk away either. Morris had us both. I just wanted to know what the hell was going inside this building I was supposed to be watching over. I was relieved to find out Bianca wasn't a ghost. I was just dealing with a very elusive basket case of a human being. There were too many questions and very few answers. Just what exactly did he mean by: *You haven't met the other Morris? How many Morris's were there?*

I got to work early that night. I was hoping to run into Bianca. I wasn't there for more than five minutes when Morris called. It sounded like he was at a cocktail party.

"Landry will be someone coming over this evening. He helps me out every now and then. I'm sure you will be available if he needs any help." he said.

"He's coming over tonight?"

"He keeps some rather unusual hours. Very good at what he does."

"What does he do?" I ask.

"He helps keep the place running smoothly. Kind of like the oil for our engine."

"Sounds like fun."

"Have you had any trouble with the hooligans?"

"No, except for Bianca."

"She's harmless. A sad case, really. Such a wayward soul. I'll be back within a day or two. You're doing a great job, keep it up."

"Will do."

Landry showed up within five minutes. He rang the doorbell and I let him in. He was dressed in all black and wore a hat. He looked like a man who belonged in this business. I got the sense he was a straight-to-the-point, no-nonsense type of individual. Too many elderly people seem to lose their sense of humor. It's a casualty of old age. He had a briefcase with him.

"I must get started right away," he said.

"Sure. Just holler if you need anything."

"Keep the disruptions to a minimum. You can do that, can't you?" he said picking up his briefcase.

"Whatever you say."

I didn't even follow him. I figured if he needed anything, he would ask. I really didn't want to know what he was doing. I just assumed he was a mortician as well. I just couldn't imagine working on a corpse. No matter how pretty I made them look, it just wouldn't feel right to disturb the dead.

I watched him on the camera. Much to my dismay, he headed straight for the basement. He had his own key with him and shut the door behind him. I decided to keep an eye on him without keeping an eye on him if you catch my drift.

I walked around the buildings and halls for a while. I was half hoping to run into Bianca and maybe she could fill me in on what this guy was doing.

I walked down A wing and looked at some of the grave sites. I noticed that the most recent burial was in 1999. No one had been interred in that wing since 1999. I checked B and C wings. The most recent burial there was in 2004. In fact, that was the last time anyone interred here. That was eighteen years ago! How in the hell was this place making any money? Morris needed more than just investors, he was going to need a real-life money tree to keep the doors open in this place.

I passed by Landry in the hallway. I got the impression he was done doing whatever it was he was supposed to do in that basement.

"My business here is done."

"Okay. Do you want me to walk you out?"

"I know where the door is."

"Right. Well, have a good night." I say and start to walk away.

"Jeff?"

"Yes?" I say as I turn around.

"My partner is sometimes a little too trusting of people. I'm not nearly as trusting. If you want to work here, you need to earn my trust as well." he said.

"Trust is a two-way street, isn't it?"

"I suppose so."

"If I don't really know what's going on in this place, then how can you know I can be trusted?"

"Morris said you were a good fit for us. I guess only time will tell."

"I don't like being kept on the outside. You wouldn't have brought me in this far if you didn't trust me."

"I thought we could trust the last guy who worked here as well, but he got greedy. He had to be terminated, literally," said Landry.

"Whatever Landry. When you're ready to bring me in, let me know." I say and walk away.

"Do you want to see what's in the basement?"

"Sure," I say somewhat surprised.

Landry looks at the wall and just starts laughing.

"What's so funny?"

He points to a grave site on the wall. I walk over. My stomach was in knots when I saw whose it was.

*JEFF CARPENTER*

*APRIL 1976-AUGUST 2022*

*MAY HE REST IN PEACE*

"What the hell is this? Who put this here?"



"It's always been here, Jeff. You belong to us now. You still want to see the basement?"

"Yes. Yes, I do."

Landry led me to the giant metal door. He opened it and we walked down some stairs until we got to the bottom. It was here where Morris did his mortician work. I was surprised to see him sitting on a stool eating some pizza.

"Hi, Jeff. Glad you could join us."

"What the hell is this?"

"Jeff, can I ask you something?"

"Fire away."

"Are you tired of being poor?"

"What?"

"Did you not understand the question?"

"Yes, I understood and yes, I am tired of being poor."

"I know. I'm quite familiar with your financial situation. I'm here to help. See, you can make peanut money shoveling shit and being a good slave, or you can step outside the box and make some real money. It's up to you. There's no turning back from this point. This isn't the type of decision you make and then get to change your mind, am I clear?"

"Yes."

"Good. Take a good look inside Mrs. Frisbee over there. She died of a heart attack two days ago. Go on, have a look."

I walk over and see Mrs. Frisbee cut open. Inside her body are several large bags of heroin. Landry walks over and begins to sew her up.

"We move a lot of merchandise in here. We make millions and all of it belongs to us. We don't give the goddamn government a slice of our pie. I'm sure you can figure out the rest."

"Well, where do I fit into all of this?"

"Jeff, being a drug dealer, you kind of have to adapt quickly and make some split-second decisions. Sometimes, this job can be very unpleasant, but the rewards far outweigh the risks. I need to know if you're in and being in means you belong to us. You follow our orders at all times and you'll be taken care of for the rest of your life. No more nine to five shit jobs and idiot bosses. No more crappy health insurance or working on Christmas. You are in charge of your own destiny from this point on. You're building something, rather than just skating by."

"What do I have to do?"

Landry and Morris looked at one another.

"Frank is going to retire soon. He's a good man, but he's a drunk. We can't leave loose ends. Frank is a major loose end."

"Jesus, you want me to kill the guy? No, look.....I draw the line at murder. I can't kill someone."

"We're not asking you to like it. In this business, you sometimes have to do some very unpleasant things. This is one of them."

I sat down and put my head in my hands. I cannot believe this is what my life had come to. It really had come down to this.

"Frank has a bad heart. He's already had a heart attack. Just shoot him full of this. He'll be dead in less than a minute." said Landry, handing me a syringe.

"Jesus, you guys are really serious? How do I know you're not just going to set me up and call the cops?"

"You think we want cops here? With all of the heroin we have in this place?" asked Landry.

"Go back to your cottage and sleep on it. No one asked you to like it, just to do it. That's all we ask. You need to show us your loyalty."

"What in the hell makes you think, I could do something like this?" I ask in disbelief.

"Your grandfather ran a gas station in Rutland, did he not? Your father was a bricklayer and mason. They both died in their sixties from diseases that could easily have been prevented if they had decent doctors and health insurance. You can be the first one in your family to make it big. The first one who doesn't have to worry about where their next meal is coming from or how they're going to keep the lights on. This world is rotten to the core. You deserve a slice of the pie too." said Morris.

"All I have to do is kill a perfectly innocent human being. Seems like a fair trade."

"Just think about it. I know you'll work for us. I was just like you many moons ago. I know what it's like to be poor. I'd rather be dead." said Morris.

"You knew when you asked me about the afterlife. You knew I would do it, didn't you?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Goddamn, you two. Goddamn, you two for what I have to do." I said starting to cry.

Neither Morris nor Landry said anything. There really wasn't much to be said.

I didn't sleep at all that night. I met Frank the next morning in one of the barns. He looked right at me.....*and he knew. He knew exactly what was going to happen, cause he had to do the same thing many years ago to prove his loyalty to Morris and company.*

There was no point in involving my wife in this. The less she knew, the better. She just wanted me to bring home a paycheck. How I did it was not her concern.

I didn't sleep that night, knowing what I had to do. Frank showed up and began his mostly pointless routine. I waited until he went to get the tractor from one of the barns. He walked in and I followed him in, closing the door behind us.

"Hey, what's up?" he asked.

I didn't say anything. His smile quickly evaporated. He went from zero to a mess in about four point five seconds.

"It's time, isn't it?"

"Yes," I said softly.

"I always knew this day would come. I just didn't think you'd be the one to do it. Have you really thought about this?"

"I slept on it."

"Well, that's more thought than I gave it. Guess there's no point in trying to talk you out of it."

"Come on, Frank. I sure as hell don't like this any better than you do." I said.

"Kid.....do you have any idea what you're doing? Once you do this, you belong to them.....forever. You think you're just going to wait them out till they're gone and then it will be all yours? I thought the same thing. They don't age, Jeff. I'm not sure who or what they are, but they don't ever get old. Morris looks the same now as he did the day I started. Once you cross this bridge, there ain't no going back. You will belong to them forever. You're a slave. Maybe a well-paid slave, but just a slave. This place is pure evil. I hoped you would have seen that and just walked away." he said with tears running down his cheeks.

"Where am I going to go? What am I going to do? This world shits on poor people. Always has, always will. I'm tired of getting shit on. I want to know what it feels like to do the shitting for once."

"Even if it means losing your soul?"

"Could we just get this over with? I hate doing this, Frank."

"You don't hate it that much or you wouldn't do it."

"I got no choice!" I said loudly

"You always have a choice. So, how are we going to do this?" he asked.

"I shoot you full of this. It's quick and painless. It will be over before you know it." I said holding up the syringe.

"Yes, Mr. Morris, always so thoughtful of others' feelings. Just give me the damn syringe."

"What? No, I have to do it."

"No, you don't. I'll do it myself. I don't want you to turn into what I am. Just give me the damn thing!" he ordered.

I reluctantly gave him the syringe. I was shaking so badly, I didn't want him to see.

"You think this is a place where people bury their loved ones? Not a chance. Every headstone, every urn marker, every grave site is somebody they've hooked on heroin. They aren't mourning the dead.....*they're just showing off.*" he said as he stuck the syringe into his arm and squeezed.

"It's not.....too late.....you can still walk away and forget you ever saw this place.....you still have a choice," he said as he began breathing hard. He knew it was game over. He tried desperately to maintain his composure as his vital organs and signs began to fail. He fell to his knees and looked up at me."

"They aren't human.....they....." he whispered as he collapsed on the barn floor. I waited in silence, not even moving for several minutes. I walked over to him and checked his pulse. He was gone.

I walked back to Morris's office. I didn't even knock, I just let myself in. He and Landry were sitting down, along with another man I had never met. I tried to put my best game face on.

"How'd it go?" asked Morris's

"He's gone," I said softly.

"Where is he?" asked Landry

"In the barn."

"Jeff is our newest associate. He was just taking care of some neglected housekeeping. I can only hope he works out better than the last guy we hired." said Morris.

The man got up and smiled at me. We shook hands and I sat down next to him.

"I figured we'll wait about half an hour, then call the authorities. I had such high hope for Frank when he started here. He's been quite a disappointment. Any who, Jeff, we feel it's time for you to be brought into the operation. As part of your compensation package, you get a company vehicle. Yours is parked outside the cottage. I hope you like it."

"I just want to thank you for this incredible opportunity.....*I can assure you, I won't let you down.*" I said smiling.

For the first time in my life, I felt as though I had made the right choice. I was finally in a place that felt right.

*I was finally in a place where I belonged.*