

DEAD  
INVESTIGATION

## CAPPED

Living in the cemetery lawnmower shed turned out pretty well. Murray had gotten used to the uninsulated prefab and its peculiarities. Sure, the concrete floor leached warmth from anything that touched it and the place reeked of motor oil and industrial cleaners. The window rattled when a city bus passed on the street. The little hut was an iceberg during cold spells, and yes, its seams made an eerie whistle when the wind gusted. Nonetheless, it had only one serious drawback.

The shed sat atop a foundation that had been mistakenly poured eighty or ninety years ago over an old woman's grave, and she complained nonstop to anyone who'd listen. It was enough to drive a person crazy.

If you parked the riding mower under the front utility shelf, there was room in back for a cot and a milk crate that held a battery lantern so you could read yourself to sleep. Murray preferred it to home and was very grateful to Pearl for suggesting it, and to her dad, the cemetery caretaker, for making it available.

Saturday morning was chilly but not shivery. Murray washed his face in a metal basin, put on jeans and pulled a hoodie over his sweatshirt, grabbed an apple from the grocery bag he kept on the tool bench. Breakfast. He'd get something at 7-Eleven for lunch. Candy bar, orange, something easy. What was cheap and built muscles? A banana? Murray noticed his T-shirts were tighter. But he wasn't fat. He might be getting some muscles. Made him wonder why. All the walking he did? Genes from whoever his father had been?

And he'd grown taller in the last few months. He could

tell because his pants were too short. Time to visit Salvation Army. And his face? Pimples were rare now. His messy hair almost fit current styles. His nose was still too big, but his face wasn't actually frightening. No horns. No fangs. Girls looked at him sometimes.

In February nothing needed mowing, but there was always trash to be bagged, stuff that visitors left behind, plus cups and wrappers the wind blew in off the street. Murray was picking a fast food sack out of the hedge at the cemetery's north border when he heard somebody jogging through the leaves and downed branches behind him. Unusual. Most people were somber and dignified in cemeteries. He looked up and was surprised to see Pearl. Ordinarily she was quiet. She'd been known to sneak up and startle him just to watch him jump. So . . . in a rush today. Why?

Pearl didn't seem like a cemetery caretaker's daughter. Her skin wasn't pale green, her head didn't do three-sixties. She looked . . . well, gingery blond hair, tight curls, a decent face that didn't need makeup; medium tall, a girl jock with muscles and the start of a figure. Actually, Murray thought she looked kind of pretty. But dangerous. Smart and stubborn. Went after what she wanted like a torpedo. Could get you to do things you'd rather not. Murray braced himself.

"Hey, Ghostbuster. I need your help."

"I'm busy."

"You'd rather pick up trash than talk to me?"

"Um . . ." At least half the time Pearl came around she had something she wanted Murray to do that was borderline

risky. He'd learned to be careful about what he agreed to.  
"What kind of help?"

"Your special thing. Like the others." Pearl held out a dirty wool stocking cap.

Murray didn't get it. "What others?"

"Others with the gift. Clairvoyants."

Murray stepped back onto the garbage bag and heard it rip. "Dang it, Pearl, don't use that . . . I don't . . . Leave me alone."

"You just probably haven't tried it before." She pushed the cap toward him. "They hold something that the person wears or handles a lot and they get information."

"What information?"

"Tell me where to find that down-and-out guy who walks around outside the gate all the time."

"Try outside the gate."

Pearl stuck out her tongue. Glared. "I have stuff for him."

"Uh, why?" Murray couldn't imagine.

"You know the ratty sleeping bag he carries? Dad and I got him a new one and a coat and some canned meat. I'm pretty sure he sleeps up in these hedges sometimes."

Murray nodded. Both Pearl and Janochek did kind things for people all the time. Murray was one of them. "Okay, I'll tell him."

"Have you seen him lately?"

Murray tried to remember. "Probably not for a week. Ask at the mission."

"I did. Nothing. They didn't recognize him."

"How would they? You don't even know his name, right?"

“That big red bump on his forehead? Like an infected boil? Pretty hard to miss. They said they’d never met him.”

“Yeah, so, what could I do? I’ll tell him you have stuff when I run into him.”

“No, you could actually find him.” Pearl held out the stocking cap again.

“You’re nuts. Even if that’s really his, you want me to read the label and tell you where he bought it or something?”

She stuck the cap out closer to his hand. “Just hold it and tell me what comes to you.”

Where do you even start with a request like that? Murray had never done anything like it. Would never do anything like it. Felt queasy just thinking about touching the smelly thing.

“I’ve been reading,” Pearl said, rummaging in her backpack like she was searching for a book. “Clairvoyants can hold somebody’s favorite pen and know where they’re hiding.”

Murray retreated another step, hearing paper and cans crunch under his feet.

Pearl shook her head, pursed her lips. “Don’t be such a pussy. Give it a shot.”

## TALKS TO THE DEAD

The last time Murray had helped Pearl he got shot, literally. Spent days in a hospital and got hauled into the police station to explain how the two of them found a missing cheerleader's body. And then, somebody talked. Maybe a cop told his family at dinner or a reporter leaked it. Something. Somehow. The story got around school that Murray Kiefer thinks he can talk to dead people. He went from being a mostly invisible loser to a well-known certifiable wacko.

Big problem: it was true. He *was* friends with a lot of dead people, and he learned things from them. The cheerleader, for example. "A lot happens in your last second. You're so mad that you're dying, and so scared, but there's also this relief . . . and it hits you all at once like lightning. I couldn't say anything quick enough before I was gone."

Maybe Murray could have guessed the fear and anger part, but relief? That was a surprise . . . and then it wasn't. Living is probably hard for everybody.

"When you realize it's really the end, everything gets clear," Blessed Daughter told him. "In that moment I knew who I really loved and who I didn't, what I was proud of and what I wasn't. It was surprising. I loved my dog as much as I loved my parents. I don't know why. Riley was always bouncy and happy. Didn't understand how quick I was dying away. I didn't have to watch his face crumple."

As far as Murray could tell, Blessed was as sharp and sensible as a lot of adults even though she had died of a brain tumor when she was only eleven.

“And the school grades I worked so hard for? I was prouder of my swimming medal, ’cause they said the tumor would wreck my swimming but I made the team anyway. And I won a fifty-yard backstroke before the cancer messed my timing.”

His older friend, Dearly Beloved, told him she didn’t miss her family very much. “It was back in the fifties. Mom and Dad mostly paid attention to my brothers. ‘Stay a virgin till you’re married.’ That and ‘Wear clean underwear when you go to town’ was the only advice I ever got. I wish now I’d moved out before the darn car accident.”

Dearly had gone through the windshield when her date hit a tree.

“When I croaked, what I missed was the life I’d saved money for. I’d earned enough to bus to San Francisco. I thought if I winked and smiled I could maybe get a job at a bookstore in North Beach.”

Dearly was lighthearted, and wise for her twenty-five years. Almost like a mother to Murray.

“Don’t worry about me and the others,” she said. “The grave isn’t uncomfortable or cold or anything. Really, you don’t even feel it.”

That was good news, because Murray couldn’t imagine being an adult. What would he do? He didn’t drive, didn’t have money, couldn’t think of a job he could hold except caretaking this cemetery, and Janochek already had that. So Murray was pretty much ready to die. He had his tombstone picked out, charcoal granite with silvery flecks. He was paying for it by keeping the lawns and hedges and grave sites free of trash. And he had his words:

MURRAY KIEFER  
MAY 12, 1997—  
FRIEND TO THE DECEASED

He knew he'd miss Pearl and Janochek. That's why he hadn't died yet. Well . . . and there was one more reason. He was happy in the cemetery. Mostly. Except it had started again. Voices. People he didn't know and wasn't talking to. Moaning. Mumbling. Hurting. East, just past the back fence, probably on the hill between the rodeo grounds and the rear hedge. He'd heard them last week and again this morning when he was picking up trash. More than one person at the same time. That hadn't happened before. He knew they were dead. But they were outside the cemetery. Not his people.



## SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT

His son's birthday was drawing nearer, this day, a month from now. Deputy Roman Gates sat apart from his peers, quiet and reflective during the morning briefing. At the head of the room, the duty sergeant straddled a corner of the desk beside the county map and read from his clipboard without so much as a hello or good morning.

Petty crimes were mostly confined to Cypress Street, five blocks on either side of the freeway. Convenience store / gas stations open all night and vulnerable. Next, a DUI chase ending when the fifty-seven-year-old local realtor fled the wrecked car and made a run for it but was easily apprehended when she staggered unclothed into a barbed wire fence. That got Gates's attention because he knew the woman. Played blackjack with her at the local casino during the time he'd burned down his marriage and job with the gambling.

Main news: a third home robbery in the Garden Tract. To date, total property losses were under two thousand dollars, but if this pattern continued there was a high probability that a homeowner or family friend or, god forbid, a child returning from school would interrupt the burglary, and injury or death could result. Riverton Police Department was currently busy with a heroin sting operation involving a local gang and La EME Mexican Mafia from the San Diego area, so the Sheriff's Department drew Garden Tract responsibility and Gates was lead investigator.

As the briefing drew to a close, the community liaison asked for a minute. A stocky gray-haired woman named Pittman made eye contact with each of the five officers present

before speaking. “Both Good Hope Mission and Faith Be Saved House have repeatedly contacted me about missing homeless people. Lately they believe the numbers are increasing. I know this is easy to dismiss. I know many of the homeless are transient, and I also know this population has been a low priority in the community for years. Chamber of Commerce, city council, county supes all have economic and political pressure to downplay the number of Riverton’s homeless along with the social and medical problems they present.”

The woman looked at a manila folder she held under her arm as if she was considering reading from it.

A relatively new female deputy used the pause to respond. “No way we’re ignoring the homeless. The majority in shelters? Decent folks, horrible life. Bad upbringing, bad education, bad breaks. Just saying. We get it. We look out for them. But the troublemakers? Maybe 25 percent? We bust them day-in, day-out for petty crap and they’re free before dark. No jail room. I’m not sure what else we’re supposed to do.”

Gates had not personally met this woman deputy, never heard her speak before. Built like a fullback. He thought her name was Faraday. She was a recent hire from Alameda County, where he guessed they knew a thing or two about street people and poverty. Anyway, he agreed with her. Was glad she spoke up.

Pittman nodded, acknowledging the woman’s point. Moved on. “There’s a disturbing thread to the recent reports. At least three of the missing had jobs within support agencies, had a motel room or low-income apartment. They disappeared for no discernible reason. Agency staff is concerned

someone could be targeting these people and that possibly several less visible homeless have similarly vanished with no one to report it.”

She stopped for a deep breath, more like a sigh, and once again made eye contact with each deputy. “I know this is not a glamorous concept. Some may feel that Riverton would be better off if all the homeless vanished or moved to another town. I’m sure that viewpoint isn’t shared by the officers in this room, and I’m asking you to begin paying more attention to the library, parks, and shopping centers where transients and dispossessed tend to congregate. Particularly, whether an individual or group of predators might be monitoring them.”

Now the woman opened the folder, ran a finger down a typed page, and stopped near the bottom. Looked up and continued. “Recently a local homeless man’s gone missing. David Payne. Before his life fell apart he was an auditor and financial planner for an engineering firm here in town. The mission reports the disappearances of its other clients have increased since that event. They believe it is possible a person or persons is . . .” She stopped and swallowed.

Gates got the impression the woman didn’t want to say the words that had entered her mind.

“They’re wondering if someone might be hunting these homeless for sport.”

## DEADWEIGHT

When Murray turned the corner on Continental Street and walked through the main gate, the cemetery looked empty—no funerals, no families, Janochek off working somewhere. That was good. A chance to meet some of the new kids nearer the street without being interrupted. In the west section, three rows over, a plaque marked a fresh site. A boy he hadn't met. He sat in front of the marker. Relaxed into a long breath. Read the information.

MALIK FEATHERS

SEPTEMBER 23, 1994 — JANUARY 24, 2014

GATHERED TO THE LORD

Murray introduced himself and the guy piped right up like they knew each other.

“Shoulda knowed better to ride with no white boys. I'm front seat, drifting on tar, new stuff from L.A. They just plain drunk. We highballing 'cross the river get on 5. I'm slayin' on the water an' the moon an' shit and Bobby slides the damn Chevy off the road, down some hill, and we bangin' into shit and my door flies open and I'm out an' the damn car rolls over me. You believe that? Nineteen, got a damn job, and Feathers is gone. Not a scratch on nobody else.”

Murray pushed back from Feathers's gravestone. Couldn't think of anything to say. *Thanks for telling me* seemed dumb . . . *Oh*. He scooted forward again and touched the headstone. “It's not so bad here. Hang in there.” He leaned back again. *Hang in there?* That was totally lame.

Getting to know someone brand-new was hard because nobody young wanted to be dead. Except maybe the new suicide. Murray hadn't met him yet. Maybe he didn't want a friend. Right?

"Hey, Ghoullbrain, I think I figured it out."

Murray knew it was Pearl without turning around. Wished he'd heard her footsteps. Hated being surprised.

"Who's that?" She sat beside him, breathing hard like she'd been running.

Murray didn't say anything. Pearl could read the plaque if she was really interested. He, on the other hand, was trying to concentrate.

"Will you hold the old guy's cap?"

"I told you no. Give it a rest."

"Want to hear my theory?"

"No."

"Did you see *21 Grams*?"

Murray had no idea what she was talking about.

"The movie? About how much the soul weighs?"

God, the girl could be irritating.

"I don't watch movies." Pearl knew that. And soul? He had no idea what to think about that word.

"So people weigh twenty-one grams less when they die. Mass has energy and that's the weight of the energy. A guy measured it. But what if that's not all the energy? What if that's just the energy that leaves? What if there's still energy remaining and that's what you're reading when you talk with the dead? What if some of our soul's energy sticks to things we touch and sometimes clairvoyants can access it?"

"God loves a duck!" Murray whirled on her, borrowing

one of her father's favorite expressions. "That's . . ." He couldn't find the right word. Ridiculous? He settled on "just plain nuts."

"Wait—"

"I'm not reading energy. I don't even know what that means. I don't know anything about a soul. Dead people talk and I hear them. It's as simple as that."

"You're fooling yourself. Nobody else hears them. Explain that."

"There's nothing to explain."

"Dad even says you're clairvoyant."

"He's being nice. That's a fancy word for crazy."

"Come on, Murray. You're not dense. You wonder what's going on." Murray pushed himself to his feet and jogged away toward the cemetery gate. He wasn't going to have this conversation. She wouldn't believe him, had never believed him.

## LETHAL SOLUTION

Deputy Gates caught Pittman, the community liaison, on her way to the parking lot. “Mission admin might be watching too much television.”

“Got your attention.”

“But why hunting? Why not random hate crimes, or rape, or even gang initiations?”

“I talked to several agency staff,” the woman said, tapping the file. “The missing told no one they were leaving, took no belongings. Several had worked for months to achieve their jobs and benefits. A few made pocket money by begging around town. Fifteen dollars was a good day, so robberies gone wrong doesn’t make any sense.”

Gates, thinking along with her, couldn’t see a useful pattern.

Pittman pulled her coat collar closer together against the chill February wind. “What’s the predator’s motive? Not money. Probably not sex. Kidnapping a workforce? That’s an even crazier idea. If it’s different predators, why would each one hide the body after killing? Only someone who didn’t want law enforcement to notice the extent or the method of his crimes would go to the trouble. With no payoff or discernible purpose for the disappearances, serial killing or sport hunting were the only things the staff could think of. Otherwise, the vanishings make no sense at all.”

Gates considered how pistol sales had skyrocketed in the county after all those movie theater and school shootings in the national headlines. He knew local men had been taking

both marksmanship classes and private training in outdoor armed engagement. What if one of these men was practicing with live targets, or perhaps taking it on himself to reduce the number of homeless in Riverton?

“What can you tell me about this Payne?” Gates asked, wishing he’d put on his own coat before rushing outside.

“I met him at the mission. Nice man, soft-spoken, self-effacing. His counselor told me Payne was the first exec fired from his company in last year’s building downturn. Apparently that started a chain reaction, the man’s marriage, home, money, all down the drain within a few months.”

“Not bitter? No chip on his shoulder? Not likely to start a fight?”

“More like deflated. If he’d ever had any confidence, it was missing in action. That’s part of why it’s hard to understand. The Payne I met wasn’t likely to provoke anybody. He was barely comfortable with eye contact. More, he was supposedly getting back on track, training the mission’s peer-client staff. He had no reason to take off.” Pittman shook her head, frustrated, gave a quick look toward her car like she was ready to leave.

“What about family?” Gates asked, himself ready to get indoors. “Couldn’t they help? Send him someplace for a fresh start?”

“From what I understand, wife had a substitute waiting in the wings. Local contractor. She and her daughter moved in with him almost immediately.”

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Once back inside, Gates poured a coffee and carried the brimming cup across the squad room to his desk. Sat to find the interview sheets he'd requested on the Garden Tract robberies. Before he began reading, made a mental note to visit the mission himself. Get his information firsthand.