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Grave Oversight



Grave Oversight Book 1

Lena Brassard

Monday



I have become one with my favorite haunt. I am the smell of onions, the creak of vinyl, the gossamer film of grease that coats every surface no matter how much solvent and scrubbing are applied. I am the indigestion that keeps men awake at night.

If Drexler doesn't bring me a job soon, I'll have to make good on my threat to conscript the neighborhood ghosts into an a cappella group before this place steals my will to manifest as anything other than a cheeseburger, double pickles. I can't exactly post an ad and pick up freelance work.

Ghost detective for hire. Finds everything from lost keys to murderers. Fifty years of experience.

Reasonable rates. Make a summoning circle and call today!

I haven't left the River Street Diner since I oversaw the arrest of Charity Ormond's killer. That rancid pusbag got cuffed by Maker Falls PD on his front lawn next to a plastic Santa that should have been put in storage weeks before. Judging by the amount of sweat people currently wear like the latest trendy accessory, the city must be in the grip of peak summer now.

The TV mounted on the wall behind the counter spurts news bites like malignant spores, so I know the living haven't stopped killing each other to extend my vacation for so many months. They must have been sloppy enough to get caught through normal channels.

I sit in the third booth from the back of the diner, my spine to the wall and leather-clad legs stretched along the bench. Boots, pants, and jacket are all the same inky, light-devouring black. I'm aware of the temperature but unaffected, so the weather can't force me into pastel shorts and tank tops like the stream of wilted petunias trudging past the window in search of air-conditioned respite.

The only color I wear is a blue jewel dangling like a tear below a pendant that resembles an ancient coin, its carved surface too timeworn for identifiable

markings. I got only one glimpse of the original from which I made my copy. For all I know, it came out of a gumball machine, but I manifest mine with so much value and gravitas, sometimes I can feel it as if I have skin for it to rest upon.

Albion News at Noon competes with the sizzling and banging coming from the kitchen. The meteorologist predicts rain Wednesday will provide relief from the record-breaking heat. The anchor who follows the weather forecast announces, in an identical cheery tone, “Salmonella outbreaks are reported in thirty-three states two weeks after federal loosening of food safety regulations.”

The lunch crowd clogging the entrance in homage to the cholesterol they’re about to consume ignores the warning. There’s no artfully undercooked meat on the menu here, and most of the vegetables are breaded and deep fried. Why let food poisoning ruin their appetites when the daily death segment will be on after the commercial break to assure them they’re more likely to die from bullets?

Most of the faces awaiting seats are familiar. The diner’s youngest regulars—Brad and Colby, a pair of stoners barely old enough to vote—bicker about a movie like an old married couple. Behind them, the diner’s elder statesman, Simon Gardner, coughs into

the crook of his elbow. He'll tell anyone who asks it's just allergies, but that wasn't the diagnosis that prompted him to get his affairs in order.

He'd be dead on the floor right now if the lacerating glares from the two women at the front of the line translated to physical damage. They're fifty trying to pull off thirty-five, with the overprocessed blonde hair culturally designated appropriate for their level of spray tan, each wearing a blouse worth a week of blue-collar pay, never mind their jewelry. The TV and general chatter mask the content of their hissy whispers, but I imagine their discussion goes something like *Remember the good old days, Drusilla? Indeed, Cressida, how I long for the golden era when our travel agent booked our slumcations without exposure to diseased peasants.*

Not a chance they'll leave without invoking their right to speak to the manager.

The waitress who started this morning realizes the trickle of breakfast patrons was the only job training she's going to get. The strain shows in the dwindling supply of friendly banter for each customer she serves. She's as jumpy as every other new hire who stops showing up before making it through a whole week. The tips are good and the manager is a pushover, but something about the place drives them away, one after

another.

Vera, on the other hand, has persevered here since she was younger than the new girl and has a cloud of gray hair to show for it. She bustles past my booth in a wide arc, as if there's an invisible VIP rope separating me from the rabble. She points a wrinkled brown finger once at the man stepping through the door and again toward the counter, silently directing him to skip the line.

Drusilla and Cressida hiss some more at the preferential treatment the new arrival receives. They ought to be accustomed to coming in second place after middle-aged white men, but where they're from, there's probably a clause in the social contract dictating designer handbags get faster service than an off-the-rack suit.

John Drexler has aged more than the few months that have passed since I last saw him, but I have yet to meet a homicide detective able to hold onto youthful vitality. He's red-eyed and unshaven. It will take something stronger than the coffee he orders at the counter to keep him upright for the rest of the day.

A boy I've never seen before is glued to his hip.

The waitress whose name I won't bother to learn blocks my inspection of the kid. She brought Drusilla and Cressida to *my* booth.

Vera wedges herself between the invaders and the toes of my boots. "I'm sorry, ladies, but this table is reserved."

"We've been waiting forever!"

These two aren't even going to get to the Flamboyantly Wiping the Seats with Napkins level before calling for the manager.

Vera maintains her civility like a hardened pro. "Another table should be free soon."

Cressida's eyes glitter like her birthday wish just came true. "I demand to speak to your manager."

Amateur.

"Yes, ma'am." A sweep of Vera's arm indicates an empty corner near the entrance. "Wait right over there, and he'll be with you directly."

The ladies flounce to the end of the line they were at the front of a minute ago, matching triumphant smirks on their faces.

Vera grabs the new waitress by the elbow before she can follow suit. "Never seat people here, Ashley."

The younger woman twirls her hands to indicate the remainder of the diner. "There's nowhere else to put them."

"Then they wait."

"Fine. Don't blame the new girl when they leave a bad review online."

“It’ll be better than the one they leave if they sit here,” Vera mutters before pushing through the employees-only door to brighten the manager’s day.

Even when a line of customers extends onto the sidewalk, my table is off limits. Some people say the owner keeps it reserved in anticipation of the return of a lost love. Others speculate the booth is haunted by the ghost of a diner who choked on one of the cook’s notoriously tough pork chops.

The rumors are entertaining, but even the closest to the truth is way off base. I’ve been haunting this spot since there was nothing here but weeds, and my death was far more violent than asphyxiation by pig.

On May 17, 1974, a construction worker named Wallis Lovell found my bones while excavating what was then a vacant lot. The news went wild over the new discovery of an old crime, particularly salivating over the detail that my skull was missing all the facial parts that might be used to identify me—sliced clean off like the killer ran my head through a bandsaw. The highest ratings went to programs that found anyone with access to such a tool willing to use it on bones so forensic experts could point out how the edges didn’t match the marks on my skull. There arose a hot debate about the blade’s effect on a clean, dry skull versus one that still had meat on it.

Before the conflict could be settled live on air with fresher specimens, there were new murders with which to titillate viewers. I was forgotten long before my bones went wherever unidentified, unclaimed remains go.

Mostly forgotten, anyway. Wallis showed up every so often to place one of those memorials with fake flowers and a stuffed animal that I usually see on the side of the road. He eventually stopped leaving the shrines. I don't know if he moved away or died or if the diner's owners threatened to charge him with vandalism the next time he left junk on their property.

Maybe he finally lost interest in me, too.

Drexler brings his coffee to my table and slips onto the bench across from me. Ashley opens her mouth to object like a good booth guardian, but Vera silences her with another quiet lecture.

At this rate, the *Help Wanted* sign will be back in the window before Drusilla and Cressida see a menu.

Those two do a passable impression of hot teakettles upon witnessing the shabby man get special treatment twice while they're still waiting for theirs.

The boy with Drexler hovers at the edge of my territory, more respectful of the boundary than the living. He's about the right size for ten years old, straight black hair, dark eyes, polo shirt and navy

trousers like a school uniform.

Back when public schools were out of session during the summer, that outfit might have been a clue to when he was murdered. Since the government acknowledged the primary purpose of public education as they see it is providing full-time daycare for working parents, it's simply what children have worn most often, year round, for the past decade or so. For families who can't afford both a school wardrobe and a personal one, uniforms are often the only clothes a child has.

His attire is unlikely to prove more noteworthy than the fact that he's coated head to toe with dirt.

He isn't obligated to look like his corpse, but he hasn't had time to figure that out. New ghosts have a scent, a combination of petrichor and the sea, and his is the strongest I've ever smelled. Somebody woke him up today, not long before Drexler got a call that dragged him out of his much more comfortable resting place.

I fold my legs to clear a place for the kid. "Have a seat."

He perches on the bench next to the detective instead.

Smart boy. Trusting strangers is no safer now than when he was alive. His body is beyond pain, but *break*

their spirit has essentially the same meaning for the dead. Since we have nothing else and can't get therapy to repair the damage, our spirits break until there's nothing left of us.

Drexler shudders at the boy's proximity and scoots from the center of the bench until his shoulder touches the wall.

"You look like shit," I tell the man now seated directly across from me.

He shows no sign of offense, but not because my grudging affection softens the insult. Drexler can't hear or see the incorporeal manifestations of the dead, but some extrasensory receptor is open just enough that he knows when we're near. Death is the detective's business, yet he shivers when his customers cling to him like cobwebs.

His awareness can't be good for his blood pressure, but it gives him stronger motivation than most officers of the law to provide excellent service. A satisfied ghost never returns. An unhappy one... well. Let's just say the dead have unlimited free time to complain about substandard service.

Drexler reaches inside his blazer and pulls out a small notebook. A paperclip fastens a third of the pages to the cover. One flip of his thumb opens the book to his most recent notes. He lays the notebook on

the table halfway between us.

The customers in the booth behind me get up to leave. Ashley beckons the stoners forward on her way to clear the table. The boys look back and cackle at Drusilla and Cressida, who will be lucky to get a seat before the pre-dinner lull.

Colby passes my bench, makes a sound like squealing tires, and shuffles backwards. The necklace his sister made for him before she died shifts with each step until the yellow plastic cheese pendant is near his shoulder. “Dude, are you practicing for an eye exam?”

Drexler drums his fingers on the table, drawing attention away from the fact that the text is upside down from his angle as well as remote. “A little distance helps me think.”

“Ha ha!” The teen speaks the syllables separately, like he’s typing them on his phone. “That’s my whole philosophy in life, bro.”

Drexler repels him with an emotionless stare. When he has grave dirt on his shoes, the man has absolutely no sense of humor.

He never comes to visit me with a shine on his Rockports, so I can’t say if he’s capable of laughter under better circumstances.

I bend over the table to read the notes written in his tidy architectural print. Last night, a camper named

Jason Gantry was digging a fire pit when he unearthed a hand belonging to our filthy wraith. Unenthused about spending the night in the vicinity of a shallow grave, Gantry backtracked in the dark to a convenience store and called the police. He wasn't carrying a cell phone, in the interest of creating an authentic nature experience.

Those last three words are underscored with thick black lines that suggest Drexler has an uncharitable opinion he's too diplomatic to commit to words.

I have no way to tell the detective I've finished reading the current page, so I test my own diplomacy on the boy. "They call me Tess." The name doesn't sit quite right with me, but two otherwise reliable mediums came up with it independently and I have no memory of one I prefer. "What's your name?"

He compresses his lips until nothing remains but a slit the width of a dime.

Damn. The uncommunicative ones make my job unnecessarily difficult.

Drexler turns to the next page in the notebook. At first light, the camper led the police to his abandoned camp. Some kind of animal came across the exposed hand during the night. The arm was partially excavated and chewed to the elbow.

The boy isn't manifesting that insult to his flesh in

his present form. Either he doesn't know about the gnawing or other priorities are inspiring his chosen self-expression.

An investigator from the medical examiner's office evaluated the body at the scene. The official autopsy report won't be available for weeks, but preliminary verbal assessment indicates an approximately ten-year-old male, white or Latino, no apparent wounds or ligature marks to suggest cause of death. Because rigor mortis has subsided and discoloration and bloat are minimal, time of death is estimated to be three to five days prior to exhumation.

No missing child reports filed locally or nationally within the past week match the boy's description. He's been lost longer than that... or the person who should have frantically reported a recent disappearance put him in the ground.

A deeper search is underway at the station. On the bright side, they don't have to delve more than a decade into the archives due to the victim's age.

On the side Drexler and I are more familiar with, the further the searchers have to go back in time, the less resemblance the photos on file will bear to our boy and the harder it will be to obtain a positive ID.

The next page is blank. Drexler scowls at the paper as if willing more information to appear, but if wishful

thinking solved murders, he wouldn't be sitting at my booth.

The news segment changes. The chyron at the bottom of the screen insists the accompanying footage of benign-looking trees is a "grisly murder scene." The video cuts to the police chief providing fewer details than Drexler shared with me, concluding with an appeal to call the tip line with any information that might help identify the victim or his killer.

I'm Drexler's last resort when he has absolutely no leads left to pursue. He never comes to me on day one of an investigation. His higher ups must be pressuring him to wrap up this case before the media creates too much of a frenzy about the danger to their viewers' precious children while the Maker Falls PD is busy gassing disabled protestors at city hall, arresting second graders for behaving like children, and wasting millions of taxpayer dollars settling civil suits that arise after the prosecutor declines criminal charges for all the murder, rape, and property damage the police commit in the line of duty.

Ashley stares up at the screen with wide eyes, a plate of food forgotten in each hand. "How could anyone do that to a little boy?"

"Some people are pure evil," Vera states as matter-of-factly as she would report table two is out of

ketchup. “That TV isn’t for our benefit, you know.”

Ashley flinches at the reprimand and scurries to the other side of the diner on urgent meatloaf and chicken-fried steak business.

Drexler tucks the notebook inside his blazer once more, signaling our meeting is over.

My lungs are no more real than my boots, but for an instant, yearning suffocates me. A homicide detective can’t sit in the middle of a diner talking to himself without attracting career-ending attention, but after all these months of isolation, I’m starved for words, for acknowledgment, for a brush against life.

For a *taste* of it.

I keep my hands politely clasped in my lap while he slides across the bench.

The kid hasn’t had time to lose his alive instincts and scoots out of the way. He moves to follow Drexler to the door.

With a thought, I’m standing at the boy’s side with my fingers clamped around his grimy wrist. “You’re staying with me.”

He lunges toward Drexler’s retreating form as if the detective is his only hope of salvation.

Ultimately, that may be true, but the law helps the dead who help themselves.

That’s where I come in.

The wisp of a tether connecting the boy to Drexler stretches, frays at the detective's end, snaps. The boy's resistance leaves him like a broken sigh. Solemn onyx eyes swivel to stare up at me.

I shift my grip to his hand, more like a friend than a jailer. It's a lie, but until he transfers his baby-ghost clinginess to me, he's a flight risk. "The sooner you tell me your name, the easier it will be for Drexler to punish whoever did this to you."

The coin slot of his mouth twitches and widens, stretching until I could fit my fist in the opening if not for the avalanche of dirt pouring out.



END OF PREVIEW