



"That looks like a tough job," a male voice called out. "Can I be of help?"

Twenty-two-year-old Mavis Doonan jammed the point of the mattock into rocky ground and wiped sweat from her forehead. She squinted at the man walking toward her. "Do I know you?"

"Thane Atos," he said with a sure nod. His khaki slacks were worn, but clean. A brown patch-pocket vest, the type fishermen wore, topped his black-plaid shirt. His face was nothing special, any man's face except for a pleasant smile, capped by a flat, short-brimmed hat.

Tall for a woman, Mavis looked down slightly as she studied him. "I'm Mave. You from around here? I don't recognize your name."

"It's Greek." He stared at her mattock, lines creasing his forehead. "I'm curious

... is there a reason you're mining the gravel in this driveway?"

She glanced at the Oklahoma sun, pulled a bandana from her coveralls, and rubbed her neck. "With all the boys being returned home now, it was decided that the cemetery needed to look more comforting. My church volunteered to put in a flowerbed."

"Fine idea, but why at the edge of the drive? There's probably fifty years of gravel embedded in this dirt."

"The sexton wants it right up front to greet everyone." She nodded at the rectangle scratched in rocky dirt as she flexed her gloved hand open and closed. "Told me to dig here."

Thane studied the driveway. "If the sexton is so gung-ho to landscape, he should be out here mining these rocks. I'll help if you want."

"I'm not the best of company, but ... suit yourself if you don't mind mannin' the shovel and movin' dirt. The rest of my group will be here tomorrow. I can't come then." Pulling the mattock from the ground, she heaved it above her body. With a full swing, she plowed the pick into clods and stones.

They worked without talking, her stabbing the gravel, him hauling the debris to a pile several yards away. At the back of the cemetery, a man pushed a wheelbarrow of dirt past a row of cedars. "Morning!" he shouted across the acre of gravestones.

"That's the sexton." Mave gave him a wave. "You wanna tell him to get over here and help?" Thane didn't reply. She readjusted her grip on the mattock and plunged it into the ground again, making pebbles bounce from the impact.

"You seem to know how to wallop that dirt," Thane said.

"I grew up doing hard work." Her mouth held a mirthless smile. "I pretend I'm knocking a few of Death's teeth out each time I swing this."

"Does it help?"

She gave him a sideways glance. "Just what is it you do?"



"Anthropology." He scratched fine dirt and loose rocks into a pile, using the blade of the shovel. "The study of human characteristics and their evolution."

"Are you over at Panhandle A&M? I didn't know professors were exempt from fighting Hitler."

"They're not. There are several reasons for military deferment."

"Sorry." She looked away. "I've lost all trace of manners." Her next swing, a half-hearted loop, skittered sideways off a rock. She paused, staring

at the rows of headstones lining the hill. Finally, she pointed. "See that tall marker with the stones on top of the ground? That's my brother, Jeff. Several years ago, when he and I buried our parents, we had to top their spots with flat rocks or their dirt blew away. It just left pine boxes in holes. There aren't a lot of dust storms anymore, but I paved Jeff's grave anyway so it'd stay put."

"Some people won't go near a graveyard or acknowledge death. It's good you still take care of your family and Jeff's spots."

"He shoulda never been allowed in the army. He was too skinny, all bones cinched together with sinew. Hardly any muscle on him. Growin' up, every seed we stuck in the ground flew to Kansas or was baked by the sun or eaten by rabbits. The coney and grasshoppers were the reliables of life—and the dirt. Sometimes there was as much grit in the air as underfoot."

Several mourning doves flapped across the sky, their wing feathers shining in the sunlight until the birds tucked themselves into the shady branches of the cedars. Mave mopped the bandana across her neck. "On Sundays, when skies were clear, there were rabbit hunts. Big celebrations."

"Really? Go on."

"Well, folks came from all over. Men drank by the trucks. Women bunched up on somebody's porch, trading recipes and gossip. We kids kicked a can around or played baseball— if anybody had a ball. Folks were glad to be doing somethin'. We couldn't fight the weather, but we could wage war on the rabbits."

Thane paused, stoop-shouldered, one foot leaning on the shovel, listening.

"When it was time, everybody clanged pans and buckets, yelling till we were hoarse, herding rabbits toward strung-up fences. Us kids had to stay behind the adults. It was our job not to let any rabbits get past."

Her face pinched up. "It was a sea of brown fur and big ears, hopping and jumping. Rabbits, three-deep, climbing over each other. Then the clubbing started. Ball bats, rocks tied to broomsticks, canes, boards, it didn't matter. Nobody aimed. They just started swinging at the ground. If they whacked 'em in the ribs, it slowed 'em down."

She squinted, staring at her footprints in the dust. "I didn't know rabbits could scream. Hundreds of shrieks cutting up the air. Men whooping and hollering. Kids running willy-nilly around the edges, scarin' rabbits back into the fray. Blood everywhere and little white clumps of rabbits' teeth all over the ground. It stuck to our shoes if we were wearing any."

"One time, my brother, Jeff, and Joe Dawson got into a fight, rolling in the dirt, punching each other. Jeff said Joe beaned him with a stick, on purpose.

None of the adults did anything about the boys. Everybody was too busy smashing rabbits.

"When it was all done, Jeff had a black eye and a goose egg on the side of his head. Thousands of rabbits were piled up. I was a big ten-year-old, and the bloody mound of fur, eyeballs, and ears was even taller than me. Once a month, if the sky was clear after church, everybody'd jump in the back of trucks and go to the hunt. It was the same at each round-up. About six thousand dead coneys in a square mile."

Mave blew air from puffed cheeks, seeming to realize where she was. "I'll never eat another rabbit in my life. At least we didn't starve. I guess that's one blessing that came out of it."

Thane didn't say anything.

She shook her head as though clearing it, then gripped the mattock and used the blunt end to chop the packed dirt. "Dad moaned that we'd broke the land. 'It'll never be the same!' he'd say over and over. 'Course, Jeff and I just looked at each other. We hadn't done nothing 'cept kill rabbits. It was Dad and the men who'd done all the breaking and plowing and farming. We kids didn't make the air into dirt and didn't understand why the adults had.

"Sometimes Dad dragged an old wood chair to the garden and sat through the night. He said he was scarin' away varmints trying to eat the potato sprouts, but we knew he was out there so we couldn't hear him. He'd pulled into his thoughts, crying, watching his life's work die and blow away."

Thane squinted against the glare of the sun, looking at her. "And yet you stayed here."

"Mama and us kids didn't have a choice. Dad inherited the land. We had to work it. One day Dad decided it'd be cooler on hundred-degree days if we lived in a dugout instead of the tarpaper shack. Our whole family wore out our backs digging that dirt den. Mama and I wall-papered it with newspapers so clods didn't drop off the ceiling into our food. It wasn't any cooler.

"Usually, Jeff and I fought like two turtles in a bucket, but one day he and I agreed to ease the heat. Together we hauled water from the windmill and poured it over the dugout's roof. The dirt sucked up water like the Sahara. Then the sun rose and turned it into a steam box. If Dad had the energy, he woulda whipped us for wastin' water." She glanced at him, then focused on chopping dirt. "I'm not usually gabby, but you sorta seemed interested. Sorry," she mumbled. "I'm goin' on too much."

"It's fine. I like hearing people's stories." He studied the cedars a moment longer, then shoveled loose rocks into the bucket. "It seems the conservation efforts are working. The erosion is beginning to get under control with the shelterbelts." "Just in time for the war. Hooray." She goggled her eyes.

"Jeff coulda got a farm deferment, but there was nothin' left 'round here to work or plow. Skinny boys like him and Joe Dawson signed up looking for three squares a day. Now he don't need anything." She swung the mattock, the thud sounding like an exclamation point to her words.

Thane nodded. "His battle is over. He's with his God and parents now. That's a happy reunion."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?" She shot him a dark look. "You're educated. Tell me why my brother had to die. For that matter, tell me why anybody has to work his body into an early grave, fighting dirt and poverty and wars."

Her stare bored into him. "Explain to me why my mama had only one possession worth anything—a Singer sewing machine. She kept that old treadle moving, patching together most everything we needed, even making a few cents sewing for others, until the dugout caved in and the machine got buried. It never worked the same after that. Tell me why'd that have to happen? Didn't we have enough hardship?"

"All the stories in the newspapers were about men facing big battles of financial ruin. But to me, it was the

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day-to-day losses that strangled hope. And nobody wrote about the women accepting defeat and making changes so we could endure. While Dad wilted and buckled, Mama picked up a needle and sewed till her eyes didn't work anymore. She taught me how to make food outta what little we had, like canned rabbit, pickled tumbleweed, and vinegar pie. She kept the rest of us going when she couldn't even keep the child inside of her alive. She worked herself into a nubbin. How's that right? Why'd any of that happen?"

Thane looked her in the eyes, his voice quiet. "There are some questions you don't get answers to on this side of life."

She glared at him. "All your knowledge and that's all you got? You don't have any idea what livin' and dyin' is about, do you?" She plunged the mattock into the ground. *Thud.*

"Every culture has a myth trying to answer that question," he said. "In Indonesia they say god offered the first humans a choice between a banana and a stone. The humans chose the banana. Of course, who wouldn't want a banana? So, their god tells them, 'Your life will be like this fruit. When the tree has offspring, the stem dies. When you have children, you'll die, so they can step into your place.'"

"Good grief. So they think we do all this to make room for the next folks? That's as depressing as Eve, the serpent, and a life of labor." *Thud* again.

"Isn't that why you have a Redeemer? To ransom you from the mistakes made here? Or are you saying you *want* to live this mortal life forever?"

She didn't answer, continuing to work. He shoveled dirt into the bucket. A fog of dust ballooned around their feet. Wings buzzed as grasshoppers jumped through patches of yellow grass between the graves.

Mave paused, her voice full of barbed wire as she scowled at him. "Aren't you hot?"

"Nope."

Silent minutes passed. Finally, she jammed the pick-end of the mattock into the ground and wiped her forehead. "All right. I don't wanna live till I can't remember where I put my teeth, and I can't see to find them."

He turned, giving her a serious look. "So, when do you want to leave?"

"I don't know!" Her voice pitched higher. "Only the Almighty knows the day and the hour. Every morning, Mama would wheeze, 'This is my last day.' It was the pain talkin'. A year later, she finally passed. Her soul was ready to go long before the rest of her."

"Studies show most people don't worry about their soul, it's their body that distresses them."

"Studies. *Pfffft.*" She pulled a face.

"You know about Charles Lindbergh?"

Her eyebrows pinched with the question. "The guy who flew across the Atlantic, non-stop. Alone?"

Thane nodded. "Three years after that 1930 flight, he teamed up with the smartest man in the world, Alex Carrell, Nobel Prize winner. They tried to invent a machine that extended life forever. Obviously, it didn't work. The search for man-made immortality still continues." He went back to filling the bucket with gravel.

Mave considered his words, watching the wind ruffle the tops of the cedars, wishing the breeze would travel lower to where they were working. "Okay. Maybe ignorance is better. I suppose if we knew when we were gonna die, we'd spend all our time worrying about the end, instead of enjoying the now—like we are at this minute." She rolled her eyes.

"At least you're confronting death, talking about it, punching it in the teeth," he said.

"I guess it helps." She wiped her upper lip with the side of her glove. "I suppose I wanna know when the end is coming so I don't get caught dying naked or doing something embarrassing."

His laugh shot out like a cough. He cleared his throat and resettled his hat on his head. "There're a lot of strange deaths. A guy set himself on fire while holding his cigarette and gluing on his toupee. Then there's the stripper who was waiting to leap out of an actual cake and suffocated inside the giant pastry. In France, a golfer had a tantrum, threw his golf bag in the lake, then went in after it, and drowned. There are thousands of stories like that. Things happen. When it's time—it's time. Speaking of which, I'll have to go soon."

"Oh." Mave's face registered disappointment. "Okay, professor. You haven't given me the answers I was looking for, but I appreciate your help."

He nodded and carried the bucket to the pile. She plowed the mattock into the ground. A frown crossed her face. She cocked her head, listening.

A *sssssssst* escaped from the dirt. Several seconds later, like a fist, shock waves punched the air with a BOOM! Mave toppled backward. The mattock flew from her hands. She watched the long-handled tool turn end-over-end in slow motion above her, clods and pebbles blowing past it.

Within seconds, it stopped raining dirt and rocks.

He was at her side, his voice quiet, each word deliberate. "Don't get up."

"I'm fine." She shook off a glove, quickly covering her nose and mouth with her hand. "What's that stink? What happened?"

"Sit still. The mattock is pinning your leg down."

"What?" She glanced around. Nothing had changed. The day was as bright and sunny as it had been all morning. Cicadas whined their *reeeee-o, reeee-o* chorus from the trees. Grasshoppers clicked and buzzed between graves. Perhaps the air had turned a skosh cooler, and her

back didn't ache anymore, but those were good things. It seemed strange that the point of the tool was piercing the inside of her right pants' leg. Gently, she pressed her hand against the area. "It doesn't hurt."

"Leave it alone. Don't look at it. Your body is taking care of itself," he said quietly, "shunting off your pain sensors. The sexton will have heard it. He'll come. He'll call an ambulance. Don't be afraid. I won't leave you."

"What is that gut-wrenching stench?" Her face twisted. "Did I hit a gas line? Are we safe here?"

"Your sense of smell will fade soon. It's gas from a decomposing body. You hit a sealed, unmarked coffin and it blew."

"Mother Mary and Joseph! Is that possible? Why's there an unmarked grave?"

"Not everyone was welcome here years ago." He stood and peered down into the eight-inch-wide hole blown in the ground.

"She's young and dark-skinned. Her hair is in perfect braids. Fifty years ago, her family would have sneaked in at night, dug a shallow spot, and laid her to rest with a miserable little ceremony without candles or music. They would've had to eventually move away if they didn't get any acres in the land run."

Mave frowned. "How would you know? And how would they get a casket?"

"Mail-order. Montgomery Ward's mortuary division. Land rush towns sprang up overnight. The depot is only a mile away."

"You've got a smart-pants answer for everything, 'cept what's important—like why we're even alive. And where's that sexton? He's gonna get a piece of my mind. Telling me to dig here." She shook her head. "He needs to put a marker on that grave."

"Why do you care?"

She looked at him as though he were a mashed rabbit. "So this won't happen again! And it's the right thing to do! There should be a mark on the world to show a person existed."

"Do you mean you want a remembrance greater than the patch quilts you've made for the homeless and TB patients?"

She gave him a hard look. "What do you know about that?"

"I know you help at church, mostly working by yourself so folks won't notice the holes in your education or how gangly and out of place you feel. I know you use part of your egg money to buy Christmas presents for your neighbor kids and food for their grandparents. But you secretly leave it at their door because you don't want them to feel embarrassed taking it."

"Who told you that—and it's none of your business."

"You take cabbage soup to the rummy who sleeps in the train shed. Sometimes you leave socks."

"Are you spyin' and reportin' to the government? I'm just sharing a few blessings I've received. Besides, the socks are ugly. I'm a bad knitter."

"You plant extra vegetables in your garden for rabbits—but you don't want anyone to know." He smiled at the scowl on her face. "You are who you are, showing unconditional love by your actions. You're not as hard-hearted as you pretend to be. That's one of your memorials—the kindness you leave in others' lives. It travels further and to more people than you'll ever know."

"Who are you?" Her hand shot up, fingers spread, signaling stay-away. "Oh!" She blinked, staring at the blood covering her fingers. Crimson streaks ran past her wrist. Her focus slowly moved along

her arm to her leg. "Maybe I'm hurt worse than I thought. I'm lyin' down." She eased her upper body back until she was flat on the ground. "I don't wanna work on this flowerbed anymore. Somebody else is gonna have to finish it."

He kneeled beside her, talking softly. "They won't. They'll install a fountain instead—with your name on it."

"How—wait a minute." She frowned. "That would make this all for nothing."

"Kindness is never for nothing." His voice resonated like the harmonies of a hymn. "You touched a lot of lives as you lived."

"I blew up a grave. How's that right?"

He cocked his head, giving her a concerned look. "Who told you life was fair or logical?"

Mave looked at him, her face young and old, sun-spotted and lined by experiences she'd never asked for. Her expression matched her somber words as though she'd been pondering them

for years. "I know life doesn't always make sense ... but I figured anything that takes this much work ... must be important and taken care of."

The slant of a smile crossed Thane's mouth. "Maybe you'd like to know you're providing one more kindness. Because of you, Rebecca's grave will be marked."

"Who's Rebecca?"

He pointed to the hole in the flowerbed.

"What happened to her?"

"In life, you don't always get answers. You know that already." He spoke softly. "But you can ask when you see her."

Mave was quiet, her eyes searching the cloudless sky above, then finally his face. "You're not a professor at A&M, are you?"

"I didn't say I was. I teach, but not at a college."

"I guess I won't be going home tonight."

"Actually, you will. You'll be back where you came from." He smiled then glanced across the cemetery. "The sexton is running. He'll be here in a moment."

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"Do you hear bells? Peals of bells?"
"There'll be a feast when you arrive."
"Will I get answers?"

He nodded. She studied the blueness of the sky. "I'm gonna ask God why bad things happen. And what are we here for. And why is there war." Her eyes widened. "Mama! I'll see her, won't I?" She gripped Thane Atos' fingers. Small lines tracked from the corner of her eyes. "I'm a little afraid of ... making the trip."

He closed his hand over hers. "You never make any journey alone. Not the one here. Not the one there."

"All this work," she breathed. "Mom. Dad. Jeff. Everybody. We went through all this pain, worry, striving, and tears. It's gonna take an eternity to explain what it was all for."

"Just the blink of an eye," he said quietly.

"You think?"

He nodded.

A smile crossed her face. "Imagine that. Only the blink of an eye." She released a long sigh.

A gust stirred the top of the cedars. The breeze curled through the cemetery, passing the sexton as he hurried between grave markers. In a few moments he reached Mave. The bucket, shovel, and rocks were scattered around her.

She lay unmoving, alone in the rectangle of the flower bed. The ground, thirsty as the Sahara, soaked up her blood. The mattock pinned her body to the earth.

In the air, wisps of dust still swirled from the passing breeze.

They lifted, turned, and rose, fading from sight, joining the wind rolling onward.

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