

Ashes

Vic pushed himself upright from his leaning position and nervously worried at the cigarette pack in his hands.

Of course, Vic always became nervous at this point.

This was not the first time he had done this. He had long since stopped counting how many evenings he had made such an exchange.

And he was still jittery at each and every one.

Still, this evening was worse than usual.

The moonless night, the opaque fog, and the lonely wail of a distant foghorn all conspired to increase Vic's heart rate.

He knew that what he was doing was immoral and probably even illegal. He was not stupid, after all. *"But who the hell would ever know?"* he rationalized to himself. *"The bodies are cremated. Who the hell can tell whether the pile of ash is Great Aunt Matilda or some homeless bum? Not like Old Man Mathers pays me enough for working at his damn crematorium, anyway."*

Vic lit another in a long line of cigarettes and stared down the street, nervously shifted his feet, and waited.

"What the hell does he want with fresh bodies, anyway? Is he some kinda vampire? Could he be into that voodoo shit? Making zombies or somethin'? Maybe what he's doin' is even worse?" Vic could conceive of only one thing even worse; he shuddered.

Vic's anxious eyes finally spotted a pair of headlights appear from around a far-off corner and slowly approach through the thick fog. Presently, the lights resolved into a glossy black van that came to a silent stop beside Vic. The driver's window slid down to reveal the pale, blonde man that Vic knew only as Greg.

"Good evening, Victor," Greg's smooth voice greeted him. "I understand that you have another one for me?"

Vic nodded tightly. "Yeah. Another heart attack."

"Excellent," Greg responded in a satisfied tone. "Let us conduct our business, and we can be on our way, then." Greg stepped out of his van, thin and towering over the scrawny Vic.

Victor scurried around to the back of his old, beat-up brown van, and Greg followed at a more sedate pace. Each man took one end of the unmarked body bag, and between them they easily carried it to the other van.

When the body was secure, Greg pulled a small duffel out of his vehicle and handed it to Vic. "As agreed, Victor. Do let me know when you have another unfortunate soul, will you?"

"Yeah, of course."

Greg gave him a polite nod and moved back toward the driver's seat.

"Hey, wait," Vic's voice said to his own surprise.

Greg turned around and raised a dark eyebrow in query.

"What do you do with 'em?"

A slight frown marred Greg's face. "Pardon?"

"The bodies I've been selling you. Look, I don't care all that much, but . . . I mean, you're not doing anything . . . sick with 'em, are you?"

Greg blinked once before his lip twitched. Without any warning, he started laughing.

Vic nearly jumped out of his skin in fright.

Greg calmed down quickly and smiled at Vic.

For the first time, Vic realized that the other man actually had a very pleasant smile.

"I am terribly sorry, Victor. I failed to tell you the first time we talked? My abject apologies. I thought I had. I am an unofficial purchaser for the medical school. The students need a supply of fresh cadavers to practise upon, you see. Certainly nothing 'sick', as you phrased it."

Vic exhaled a relieved breath and smiled. "Thanks for clearing that up, Greg. I was havin' all kinds of crazy thoughts.

"I'll call next time I have one. You have a good evening." Now whistling cheerfully, Vic climbed back into his van and drove off through the clearing fog.

Greg watched the other van pull away without expression. When it was out of sight, he pulled a cell phone out of his pocket. "Greetings, Master; this is Gregorie. I have just received the latest body without a problem, but my supplier is starting to ask questions. He may become a liability." Greg listened for a moment before answering, "Yes, he is young and in relatively good condition." Another, longer pause before Greg gave a sharp nod. "As you wish, Master. I will begin making inquiries immediately."