



THE UNDERTAKER'S

Oath



“O Lord, guide me to an understanding in your ways of grief, sorrow, and death. To let me know that it is You who hears our final breath. And I will do my best to prepare souls departing unto You, and to comfort friends and family as they know not what to do.”

- The Undertaker’s Oath

“**H**E WENT COMPLETELY NUTS,” Sophie said, pressing her gloved finger into the corpse’s sternum, leaving behind a dimple in the blue-tinged skin. The body had just been delivered that morning, although it was obvious to me that the man had been dead for longer than that. “His wife told me he started trying to make soup from the *cat’s* food.”

“Maybe he just had strange taste,” I said, arranging my tools on the wooden stand behind the embalming table. In front of me, I had everything I needed to prepare the man for his journey to the next life. Whatever that was.

Far more likely that he would just journey into the ground.

Sophie, the coroner and my coworker, had already performed the autopsy and determined that Mr. Bittersworth had indeed ingested a poison foul enough to end his life. She had thought it great fun to point out that while Buttersworth was a common surname, Bittersworth was not, and the sour face the man made even in death seemed to identify him as his namesake.

“I don’t know if I buy that story the wife gave us,” Sophie continued, examining the man’s neck. She frowned. “Yes, he was poisoned, but that doesn’t mean he tried to kill himself. I don’t think we should rule out the wife *murdering* him, do you?”

I pulled the straight edge razor from the lineup and inspected it. I ran my finger—which is regularly, and rather unflatteringly, compared to the size of a sausage—across the blade and caught the reflection of my square, gray-tinged face in the steel. My shaggy black hair fell in messy curls across my rather wide forehead. I know I’m not the most well-groomed of men, but when you work with the dead, you don’t have anyone to impress. However, you must maintain an air of professionalism for the sake of the families, and it was not very professional to allow my hair hang

loose like that. I supposed I'd better tie up the mess in a rag before I began shaving Mr. Bittersworth's face. I replaced the razor and selected a bright red bandanna from coat hooks above the stand. As I tied it in a secure knot, I turned to face Sophie.

"Perhaps not. But that's not our concern. You identified the poison. The authorities will do with that information what they please."

Sophie sighed, her shoulders slumping dramatically.

"But don't you ever wonder?" she said, rolling her eyes in a melodramatic arc. "Don't you ever wonder what *really* happens to these people?"

I shrugged.

"Of course. But it's not my job to solve a crime." I picked up the razor again, feeling prepared this time. Sophie always asked me these odd questions. I suspect that working with dead bodies so intimately for so long had warped her perception of her own mortality. She was always questioning the meaning of things, and had even taken up reading philosophy to quench her thirst for answers. I've tried to listen to her talk about the "inherent meaning" in life, or the lack thereof; or whether people exist in the sense that we think we do, or if people were just on the planet to be horrific boors with no purpose whatsoever, and I finally got fed up with trying to understand all those crazy notions. Now I let her talk as much as she wants, but I can't be bothered to give her my opinion on those matters.

"You don't have any curiosity about you at all," she pressed on, wrinkling her nose at me. She reached a gloved hand up to her head and scratched her scalp through her rag, squinting grumpily. "I don't understand how you can't think about this stuff."

I lathered up the shaving brush and walked over to Mr. Bittersworth. The man's chin receded so far into his neck that it was buried in several layers of bristle-covered skin. I sighed and pried up Mr. Bittersworth's head, moving the brush over the stiff flesh in slow circles, taking care to do it just as I would if I were grooming myself. Once I had him wearing a full beard of lather, I touched the blade to his face.

"Morris?" Sophie asked, stopping me before I could begin.

"Yes?" I asked, looking up at her. She stared at me with her bright hazel eyes, her milky skin smooth under the light from the oil lamps. Sophie was a petite girl, probably no older than twenty-two, and she had ashy blonde hair that she normally hid under a secured rag to do her work. But tonight she looked like she'd done

something differently. Perhaps it was the candlelight that made her look so... soft. Normally, we would do this job during the daylight hours under harsher lighting, but Mr. Bittersworth was a rather special case, and now here we were shaving the man just before midnight by the scant light of oil lamps. Sophie pressed her hands into the table's top and leaned forward, closing the gap between us. Her lips parted slightly as she fixed her eyes on mine.

"Do you ever think about me?" she asked quietly.

Oh, those were loaded words.

I stood up straight, my 6'8" frame dwarfing her meager 5'4". I calmly placed the brush and razor on the table and removed my apron.

"I'm going outside for a cigarette," I said, pretending not to notice as Sophie's cheeks began to redden. She pushed her palms to her face and turned her back to me, not saying a word as I quietly exited the room.

I lingered under the awning. Rain poured down, flowing in miniature waterfalls from the eaves, and the wind blew the little wooden sign that read *Lakesworth Funeral Home* so that it creaked and screeched angrily as if it objected to being left out in the storm. The street lamps were glowing, casting just enough light for me to locate and pluck a cigarette from my trouser pocket. A few horses pulled carriages through slushy streets, their hooves briskly clapping against the stone as they carried passengers to their unsavory nighttime destinations. I pressed the cigarette between my lips and struck a match. Using my hands as a shield against the wind, I managed to get a light. I took a deep drag as I leaned back against the wall, listening to the sound of the rainshower around me and feeling the smoke caress my anxious lungs.

What kind of girl was Sophie, anyway? She was strange, with her obsession of solving the riddles that vexed all humankind. But why bother? Even if she could figure out the answers her questions, what would she do with them? Would it even affect how she lived her life? She didn't seem like the kind of person who would ever *stop* thinking. Or scrutinizing.

And besides, who tries to flirt with someone when there is a corpse in the room? Or, for that matter, when there is a corpse on the table *directly in front of her*?

I frowned. Now I *am* thinking about Sophie. And all of her philosophical ramblings, all the quirks of her personality, all the ways she's just... Sophie. I shook

my head and flicked some ashes to the ground, where they mixed with the water flowing past the walkway and spilled into the gutter, disappearing into the streets. It was all so unceremonious. Insipid. Here I stood, smoking a cigarette in the rain outside a funeral home, while a beautiful young woman—thoughtful, introspective, passionate, talented—stood inside, warm and truly alive (pun intended), one who shared my life's work and genuinely enjoyed my company, and I felt *nothing* for her. Respect for her intelligence and training. Grateful for her help. But nothing for her heart or her desire to gain my affections.

I was pulled from my thoughts by the sound of the front door closing. I looked to my right, where Sophie now stood, her back against the door, her hands folded behind her.

“Morris, I’m sorry,” she said, looking over her shoulder at me. “It’s just—” she sighed, shifting her gaze to the night sky, “—just that, I don’t want to be invisible. Or forgotten. It scares me, you know?”

I lifted my cigarette to my lips again. Invisible? Forgotten? What was she on about?

“I don’t follow.”

“Well...” Sophie said, hesitating. She took a deep breath. “I always talk to you about this. I always tell you how... how I want to understand what it all means. Life, that is. I wanted to know more about you, and...” She looked back at me sheepishly. “I wanted you to really see me. I’m right *here*, you know.”

“There’s nothing to know,” I replied, shrugging. It was true. There was nothing to know. I was truthfully a very dull man.

“I’m sure there is. You just don’t want to share it with *me*.”

I flicked more ashes into the streams of water flowing by my boots. Perhaps she was right. But I just couldn’t bring myself to care.

Silence hung in the air, making the space between seem to grow larger, almost like it would engulf us in an air of pathetic introspection and brooding. I felt I should address this.

“Sophie, listen. You’re...” what was I thinking before she came out here? Of all the ways I *should* be attracted to her, but am not? I cleared my throat and let my cigarette burn between my fingers as I considered my words.

“What, Morris?” Something about the way she asked, said my name, sounded like pleading. I didn’t want to look at her and see her eyes searching for something that wasn’t there, and never would be.

“You’re a kind woman,” I continued. “You’re smart and talented at your job. You have my utmost respect, and I do enjoy working with you.” I nodded and even smiled a bit, satisfied with my statement. But to my surprise, I heard Sophie gasp, the kind of gasp you hear when someone sees their dead relative for the first time, but naturally, on a much smaller scale. I turned my head slowly and looked at her.

“I can’t believe it, Morris!” She cried, jamming the heels of her palms into her eyes and rubbing furiously, groaning like a wounded animal. “I just can’t stay here anymore! You’re fucking killing me!”

I was so blindsided by her outburst that I didn’t know what to say.

And then it clicked.

She talked to me about her life and her thoughts on the subject because she wanted to force that cold feeling of death away from her. Everyone in this profession has to find some way of processing the finality of it. It’s horrible—the effect of grief on families, the effect of working with the dead yourself. I couldn’t blame her for defending her sanity.

But she also did it because she felt comfortable sharing it with me. Because she thought she loved me, and because she was desperately trying to get me to love her, too.

She was so young. And so stupid for it, as we all are when we haven’t yet been burned by the cruelty that life will inevitably bring.

I opened my mouth to respond, but a woman’s lilting voice broke through the roar of the rain and drew my attention away from my weeping coworker.

“Hello! Hello, there! You!”

I looked through the sheets of rain pounding against the orange-tinted streets, and I saw her running, holding up her skirts with one hand, waving her other in the air to garner our attention. She was slick with water, her red dress clinging fast to her pale white skin, not leaving much of her figure to the imagination. She wore a wide-brimmed hat topped with an oversized bow, all of which obscured her face quite effectively.

“Here,” I called, raising a hand. She agilely skipped over puddles and hurried up the walkway. When she reached us, she collapsed forward, gripping her knees with her hands, trying to catch her breath. I remained still, while Sophie tried to discreetly make sure her tears were cleaned away. The tension was still hanging over us like one of the nearby rainclouds stubbornly looming over the city.

“Are you alright, Miss?” I asked. I tossed the cigarette onto the stoop and put it out with my boot. “Rather strange hour to be running in the streets, isn’t it?”

Sophie shot me a look of disdain.

“Oh, I’ve had a day,” she said through heavy breaths, and righted herself again. She removed her hat and smiled. I couldn’t help but linger on her face. It was round but proportional, and she had bright cherry lips to match her dress. Strikingly red hair clung to her face and neck in slick swirls. I was so used to seeing people in black that she stood out in the dreary night like a peony among the mourning lilies.

Sophie’s look of disdain evolved to utter seething.

I offered a smile.

“Please, Miss, you can come in if you need assistance. We do have a hearth where you can warm yourself. I should make you aware, however, that it’s located in the sitting area of a funeral parlor. I hope it doesn’t make you... uncomfortable.” I gestured to the sign still swinging in the harsh wind.

It was perhaps not the most orthodox decision to take a stranger in to my place of work, but part of the oath I took as a mortician was to comfort those who needed it. I would not feel terribly proud of myself if I left a woman out in the rain on such a night. I may or may not have also been swayed by her beauty and the fact that I didn’t want to be left alone to deal with Sophie’s fury and burned heart. I guess I only helped certain people.

I guess I am a hypocrite after all.

“At least I won’t have to worry about noisy neighbors,” she said with a laugh. It was peculiarly charming.

I cast a glance at Sophie, who still blocked the door, her face pinched into a scowl. She grimaced and moved to the side, begrudgingly opening it for this lady in red. I gestured for her to enter.

“Do you have a name?” I asked. When she stepped past me, she reached out and took my hand. Her hand was cold and wet, and so small that the entirety of it only covered my palm. I felt like I might crush her if I reciprocated, so I just stood there like a giant dolt.

“Vertiline,” she answered brightly. She leaned into my arm, standing barely as tall as the center of my torso, and looked up at me with her deep brown eyes. Squeezing my hand tightly, she whispered to me.

“And I have a proposition for you, Morris Kernaghan, *undertaker*.” And with that, she released me and disappeared into the parlor, leaving me on the stoop even more perplexed than before. I stared down at my hand, still feeling the pressure of her palm on mine. Did I know her somehow? I would think I would remember *that* face.

Sophie balled her hands into fists and shook her head at me, then stomped in after Vertiline.

I squared my shoulders and adjusted my shirt, ensuring it was properly tucked in, and followed the women inside. I had a feeling tonight would bring about a change in the dullness of my life. It was all too odd.

But I had my oath to stand by. And a change would be most welcome.