

FOUR BULLETS

By

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Death is boring.

That was about the size of it, Landon thought. The screaming, the crying, and the somber mood was really more than he could tolerate.

He looked over at Daniel, who stood by the back passenger side of the Hearse. Daniel, dressed in an identical black suit, met Landon's glance and quietly rolled his eyes. Yep, Landon thought, Daniel was bored too.

Slowly, the procession of pallbearers made its way to the waiting Hearse. They had to stop about ten times because the grief-stricken widow threw herself at the coffin. As always, some member of the funeral procession would peel her off the box and on it would go. That old lady, the Window Hensley, had fainted three times already.

God, how I want to get to the beach. The surfboard's sitting in my truck right now.

"On behalf of the Warnisher Funeral home you have our deepest condolences." Landon summoned all of his strength to look like he gave a shit, with a gusto that belied his twenty-something years on this planet.

Get me the fuck out of here!

"Thank you young man," the widow Hensley said through her sobs. "Please look after my Bertrand."

"Of course," Landon said.

Slowly - far more slowly than Landon thought he could stand - the pallbearers loaded the coffin into the Hearse. Sweat was beading down Landon's head. It was getting hot in his monkey suit.

It was with no small satisfaction Landon shut the tailgate and climbed into the driver's seat. The smell of hot leather and cigarettes filled his nose as he felt the door shudder closed.

Jesus! It's finally over!

"Is your window up?" Daniel asked as he slammed the passenger-side door.

"Yeah," Landon said. He loosened his tie a little.

Daniel took off his sport coat. "Let's get the fuck out of here. It's hotter than anything in this penguin suit."

"Jesus, I know," Landon put the car in gear and headed down the driveway. "I thought that service was never going to end."

"I expected half those old dudes to drop while carrying that coffin," Daniel said. "And that blue-haired old bag. God! What a drama queen!"

"No shit," Landon looked in the rearview mirror as he rounded the corner down the street. "Okay, we're far enough away."

Daniel turned on the radio, and the sounds of Rob Zombie filled the vehicle. The windows came down and the ties came off. Landon stepped on the gas, bringing the hearse into the center lane.

"Did you see that chick in the front row?" Daniel struggled to unbutton the first few buttons on his shirt.

"Not bad," Landon recalled. "The rest of the that funeral was like a Geritol ad, though."

"Hey," Landon said as Daniel changed the radio station.

"I want to hear more about those weird people walking all over the place," Daniel hit the seek button.

"Bunch of bullshit, man," Landon spit a hocker out the window.

"Fuck it. Let's just get the stiff back to the home," Daniel said. "The sooner we dump the old codger off the sooner we can hit the waves."

Funerals always took so damn long, and this was his second one today. They could never keep on schedule. Sometimes too many people showed up, and of course they always had to take turns paying respects to the poor slob that died. Someone needs to put a limit on the time for that, he thought. All the crying and speeches seemed to take an eternity and they all sounded alike after you'd been on the job as long as he had.

Landon turned onto an old paved driveway at the faded and chipped sign that read Warnisher Funeral Home. Overgrown hedges scraped against the Hearse as they passed by. Landon carefully maneuvered around the potholes and bumps in the pavement. He'd gotten used to them, although he was at a loss to figure out why he bothered avoiding them at all. Daniel didn't mind if they hit a hole and the old coot in the back wasn't about to complain. The funeral home boss was likely

to start bitching about having to replace the shocks or something if he saw them, but he rarely ventured outside anymore.

Landon brought the hearse to a stop at the front entrance. As usual, the old parking lot was full of weeds, cracks and protruding roots, but little else. Even from outside, the musty smell invaded his nostrils. The front awnings were at one time white, Landon supposed, but were now so coated with grime and dirt they looked gray.

What were once easily recognizable as cherubs and angels over the front entrance were now so choked with soot they couldn't even be made out as such. All this wonderful architecture was supported by four cracked, chipped, and stained ionic columns that somehow managed to hold the whole lazy affair up.

Both Landon and Daniel stood out front, kicking the loose stones across the asphalt and picking at the cracked and missing tiles of the front walkway.

"Where the hell is Igor with the wheels?" Daniel asked. "I ain't carrying this old fart all the way inside."

"I don't know," Landon said. "Probably in the back masturbating or something. It's your turn to go get him."

"Hey," Daniel held up a fresh cigarette, then shrugged.

"Fuck it," Landon said. This wasn't the first time that had Igor failed to show up with the cart when they arrived. He laid on the horn. "Morgan! Get your ass out here!"

Morgan, or Igor as the staff called him, hurried the squeaking cart down the bumpy ramp. "Sorry, sorry," he mumbled in a nasal tone as he sniffed back a runny nose.

"Just help us get the damn coffin," Landon said.

Landon, Daniel, and Igor pushed the coffin up the ramp. The elegant patterned carpet, once rich and thick, was now sun-bleached and frayed with a heavy track of dirt running down the center. The carpet in the main lobby wasn't fairing any better. Landon often thought the dump might make a great haunted house for Halloween, but the rest of the year it was just ugly. The only reasons Landon could tell this dump was still operating were a combination of cheap prices and bribes to the Health Department. It had been untold decades since anyone had pumped a dime into this place, and the latest owner wasn't likely to do any more.

Landon helped guide the coffin past an older woman at the front desk.

"Do you have an appointment?" Dora said. She looked at Landon like she had never seen him before.

"Dora," Landon held his hands out in front of him, palms up. "It's me, Landon. I've been working here for eight months."

"Oh," Dora looked at Landon with a blank face. The Boss' mother, she owed her position for it being close enough for him to keep an eye on her. "You're Edgar's friend. Go right ahead."

The smell of embalming fluid and ammonia greeted his nose as he stepped into the back room. The boss man, Edgar, was there, working on another stiff, this one an attractive female. He always took the time to work on any good-looking female cadavers that came through. The rest were Igor's responsibility. Boss man didn't even look up when Landon walked in.

"We got the one from the Hensley funeral," Landon stood in the doorway, not really wanting to venture any further into the morbid embalming room.

"The crematorium," Edgar said and pointed, without even looking up from his work.

Landon, Daniel, and Igor guided the coffin down the hall to the double metal doors stenciled 'Crematorium.'

"Don' go in there!" Igor said as he pushed the coffin along. "Ya can't! Insurance ya know."

"Alright, relax," Landon said. Igor and the Boss guarded the crematorium like it was Fort Knox. They didn't want anyone going in there and kept it locked with keys only Edgar had. Insurance. Since when did they care about the insurance company, or the Health Department or Better Business Bureau or anyone else for that matter? Whatever, Landon thought, and they parked the coffin next to the doors and set the brakes on the cart.

"We need our paychecks," Daniel stuck his head into Edgar's room.

"Wait in the break room," Edgar's muffled voice echoed into the hall. "I have to sign them."

Typical, Landon thought. Edgar had to control everything around here, right down to manually signing the paychecks. He would lord those over his employees. The man was so tight. As a shrine to Edgar's stinginess there was the break room. This retrofitted bathroom was scarcely bigger than a prison cell and was half filled with boxes of embalming fluid and formaldehyde. Entertainment consisted of an old television jury-rigged to a DTV conversion box and a few out-of-date issues of Mortuary Management left on the broken chairs that passed for furnishings.

"We could be here a while," Landon said. "Let's see if there's any more stories on those guys walking all over the place."

The aged television crackled to life. The anchorman struggled to hold back his brow sweat as his nervous voice read and shuffled the papers in front of him. "No one knows how this happened or what's causing it," the anchor said. "In a scene reminiscent of Dawn of the Dead it appears as though corpses are coming back to life. . . "

"Get the fuck out of here," Landon said in disbelief.

The television switched to an image from a helicopter, showing shambling forms working their way down the streets of a city. Hundreds of people ran away from the shuffling, stiff figures, their fluid motions in sharp contrast to the lumbering forms that pursued them.

" . . . we have reports coming in from all over the county of disturbances at city morgues, mortuaries and hospitals. This just in, we have learned that the authorities have closed all the medical schools in the county."

"Shouldn't we be worried about this?" Daniel pulled another cigarette from his pack. "I mean, we are right in the middle of cemetery country out here."

"Nah," Landon waived the possibility away. "Think about it. Those stiffs are buried under six feet of dirt in a burial vault. You know that cement thing that the coffin goes in before they bury it? And the coffin is hermetically sealed on top of it all. Nothing could get out of that. Besides, all we do here is cremate stiffs. What, are the ashes going to come after us?"

"What about the one we just brought in?" Daniel took a heavy drag on his cigarette.

"I don't know," Landon replied. "Let's go check it out."

The coffin was right where they left it. He carefully placed his ear to the side of the coffin.

Nothing.

"This is bogus," Landon pulled his ear away from the casket. "Let's get our paychecks and get out of this place before we go nuts. There won't be any walking dead at the beach."

"Help!" Igor came running into the room, his face white with fear. "It's alive! The damn thing is alive!"

"This I have to see," Landon said. He could hear footsteps of the other two slapping on the tile behind him as he raced to see what was going on in the embalming room.

He rounded the corner and saw it.

It's lifeless eyes bored into him as it writhed and struggled against the straps that held it fast. What pierced Landon's soul was the inhuman wail it let out. Through it all, Edgar stood a few feet away, just watching it.

Landon came in closer. The thing lashed out at him but with the straps, that was a futile exercise. At this angle, Landon could make out surgical openings in the thing's abdomen, held open by clamps. The instruments and steel bucket lying on the tray nearby were all the evidence he needed to see what was going on.

"What the fuck?" Landon asked. "You've been harvesting organs?"

"They were just homeless picked up by the city," Edgar's eyes never left the creature. "No one was going to miss them! Look at it! It knows what I was doing to it!"

"Calm the fuck down," Landon said. Sure, a good-looking woman like that with finely-manicured hands was a homeless cadaver the City brought in. Landon didn't even want to know how this woman got here. "That thing is strapped in. She's not going anywhere."

"Edgar," Dora came to the doorway. She clutched the left side of her neck as blood oozed out of a massive wound and cascaded down and stained her dress. If she was in pain, Landon couldn't tell, even

as she slid down the side of the wall. "There is a Mister Hensley to see you."

Behind her, Hensley appeared. His pale skin contrasted with his black burial suit as his bare feet smacked against the tile floor. His mouth was wide open, spilling Dora's blood through his teeth and down his chin. His pale, colorless eyes set on the four men as he shambled forward.

Landon's heart thumped in his throat. To his left there were empty shelves. To his right he saw only an embalming pump. With nothing to defend himself with, he felt naked. His boss must have been thinking along the same lines, as the stingy old bastard produced an old, wild-west style pistol from a drawer. Edgar fumbled around with the weapon.

"Shoot that thing," Landon yelled.

"It won't fire," Edgar pulled the trigger to no effect. "I think the safety must be on."

"It's a revolver," Landon said. "It doesn't have a safety."

"Then how do you work it?"

"Look, just give it here," Landon reached over and snatched the handgun. I don't have time for a firearm's education course, he thought.

Landon pulled the hammer back, just like they did in western movies, and aimed at the shambling form of Hensley. He took a deep breath and pulled the trigger.

The old weapon belched a cone of smoke and flame as it jumped in Landon's hands. The bullet hit Hensley square in the chest. A geyser of embalming fluid shot out of the bullet hole and the morbid form staggered back.

It shifted forward again, this time straight at Landon.

"Shoot it in the head," Daniel cried out from across the room as the echo of the gunshot receded. "That's how you kill zombies."

Like in the movies? Landon wasn't sure, but with a zombie shuffling towards him, he was not about to get into a debate on the subject.

Landon stared down the sites of the old gun, drawing a bead on the thing's soulless eyes. At first he saw them as blank, lifeless. But now he saw an almost carnivorous glint in them, like a tiger eyeing a gazelle. It looked hungry and it looked like it wanted to eat him.

Not going to happen.

Landon fired again. The shot hit the Hensley zombie right between the eyebrows. It sheered off the top portion of its head in a splatter of grayish-red goo. The animated corpse contorted and shook, then fell backwards on the tile floor.

"How did you know?" Landon was shocked his friend's call had worked.

"The only way to kill zombies is to shoot them in the head," Daniel said. "Every movie I've ever seen, that's what happened."

"I guess George A. Romero knew something we didn't," Landon looked at the semi-headless form of his target. It was creating an expanding pool of puss and grayish-pink fluids on the cracked tile floor.

"Okay," Edgar assumed his usual air of authority with his hand extended. "Give me the gun."

"Fuck you," Landon pulled the weapon close. "I just killed that damn zombie with it. You couldn't even figure out—"

Landon stopped his tirade. A rhythmic pounding was getting louder. How long it had been going on he didn't know. The moans. The shrieks. More banging.

The crematorium.

Gun leading, Landon cautiously crept towards the banging sounds. They grew louder with each passing step. Looking behind him, Landon saw that Daniel, Igor, and Edgar followed single-file behind him.

Sure, the old man is not about being the boss now, Landon thought. Soon as the shit hits the fan he lets all of us go into danger first.

The thumping and wailing got louder and louder, until at last Landon peered around the corner. The double metal doors were locked, but they vibrated and shook, holding back whatever was in there. But at least they held.

"How many stiffs are back there?" Daniel asked Edgar. "You were supposed to cremate them."

"The furnaces haven't worked in years," Igor said.

"Shut up!" Edgar yelled.

"No," Igor offered up a hesitant, unsure tone. "We just store them in there. Then at night we dump them in the woods by the river."

"How long has this been going on?" Landon grabbed Edgar with his free hand. "First you harvest organs, now this?"

"I told you that would come back to haunt us," Igor shivered. "You can't treat the dead that way. Now they're coming back to take revenge on us! It's the Day of Reckoning."

"Shut up," Edgar screamed. "Just shut up! You damn fool!"

"How many," Landon asked. "How many have you dumped out back?"

"Well, I-, I-," Edgar struggled, glancing around.

"How many?"

"This has been going on for a while, yeah."

"How many?"

"Do you know what it costs to replace all ten of those burners? I couldn't afford it."

"How many?" Landon grabbed Edgar and shook him.

"Three hundred."

"Oh my fucking God," Daniel said.

"You son of a bitch," Landon ran to the front lobby and looked out the main entrance. In the tree line and brushes, he could make

out the lumbering, shuffling forms as they plodded towards them. Several more of the animated dead were walking up the driveway. They came from all angles. Soon they would be in the parking lot. Soon they would be at the funeral home. How much did they remember? Did they know how Landon and Daniel treated them? How many of those things were stiffs they drove to the home? Most would be out for Edgar and maybe Igor, but how about he and Daniel?

Landon checked the pistol. Only four bullets left.

END