

The Mortician's Apprentice

Bogard's Mortuary and Better-Than-Average Pet Taxidermy was the sort of place you would go to make the final arrangements for your racist great-uncle if you were unlucky enough to be saddled with that obligation. The tissues, when they were remembered on the supply orders at all, were always rolls of single-ply toilet paper stuffed under tissue box covers as if no one would notice the difference. Unclaimed and dust-covered canaries could be found nesting in a random assortment of mismatched floral arrangements, all in various states of decay.

What you could hope was a plaster skeleton leftover from Halloween and not someone's unclaimed relative was still perched, teetering somewhere between laziness and poor taste at the front counter in early June.

And the fact that it backed up to a certain fast food establishment that hadn't passed its most recent health and safety inspections raised more than a few eyebrows in the local community.

Mal decided her uncle's business earned at least one more accolade that wouldn't appear on the signs and promotional materials. It was the worst place to scuttle after failing to secure better employment elsewhere.

Phrased in a catchier way—Bogard's *Mortuary: Where Career Dreams Go to Die*.

As Mal ran a rag between the skeleton's fifth and sixth ribs, dust sprinkled over the toes of her previously dark boots. Grimacing, she scuffed her foot against the counter to shake the dust off the suede. The shift of her weight sent creaks through the floorboards. The door opened, and the bells overhead chimed a grating, frantic little melody loud enough to wake the dead.

An unsettling concept at a mortuary.

Mal made a mental note to stuff the chimes with tissues the next time someone bothered to order them. She managed a polite smile for the mail carrier and scribbled her name on the screen with a stylus that she tried to pretend wasn't sticky.

Swiping her hand against her apron, she listened to the door swing shut and a dull thud from somewhere behind her in the parlor that couldn't have been a coincidence. Mal rolled her eyes. The curtain of beads behind the desk slid along her shoulder blades, clacking in her ears as she scanned the dim visitation room. Her eyes settled on a dark lump.

Mal yanked on a frayed pull-string to cast a pale yellow light over the room. Glass eyes glinted, peeking at her from between limp leaves of the foliage. She swallowed and wished she hadn't as stale air settled on her tongue and rolled down the back of her throat. With the new lighting, Mal could see that the dark lump had been one of the unclaimed cats. A fluffy, gray, and particularly rotund cat whose faded tag said his name was Mr. Timmons.

She scooped up the fallen cat by his mount and heaved the display back inside its dust outline. Back on his shelf, Mr. Timmons seemed to have survived his fall with minimal evidence of it happening in the first place. A whisker or two were bent, but Mal had her suspicions they weren't the originals in the first place.

The cat's fur flattened on one side in a way that seemed less than their proclaimed *better-than-average* services. Biting the inside of her cheek on one side in concentration, Mal gently coaxed and arranged the gray tufts of fur back into their appropriate states of fluffiness. Satisfied, she examined her work and decided it was passable. Besides, it couldn't have looked worse than before the fall. In all likelihood, she had improved Mr. Timmons's appearance by at least a little bit.

Shoving the bead curtain aside again stirred up a new round of clacking, loud enough that Mal almost missed the beginnings of a new sound in the otherwise silent parlor—an unexpected but unmistakable one.

Meow.

Mal's brows wrinkled. The mortuary boasted its own range of strange noises from time to time, of course. There were wet laughs and even wetter sneezes that the single-ply tissues couldn't begin to mop up. Beads clacked, bells chimed, floorboards moaned, and the occasional display thudded to the

floor. Nothing ever meowed—at least it wasn't supposed to. Without a good reason for why she did it, Mal turned back toward Mr. Timmons.

Where Mr. Timmons used to be that was.

The glossy piece of pale wood that served as the mount was missing its occupant. Mal stared dazed at the spot, but no matter how long she stared at the mount, the dead cat didn't reappear.

Another meow sent Mal whirling around. Her scan tore through the shelves of lifeless eyes and drooping leaves until her gaze landed on a set of bright eyes that squinted back at her. Hairs rose on Mal's arms as if the stuffy room had dropped several degrees. Despite every fiber of her being that wanted to bolt back through the beaded curtain and right out the door, she found herself edging forward.

She waited for a warning hiss, but the dead cat only tipped its head to one side as he oversaw her progress. His ears flicked, like he was beckoning her closer. A deep rumble that shouldn't have been possible with the amount of stuffing the cat had in its neck came from Mr. Timmons's throat.

A purr.

With more confidence that she was doing exactly what the dead cat wanted, Mal took the steps that almost brought them together. She held her breath and before the more rational parts of her brain could take over reached out one of her hands. She didn't know what to be more afraid of. Afraid this

was all somehow a strange and fragile construction in her head—an illusion that would shatter back to normalcy with the wrong puff of air from her lips. Or that it wasn't.

Dried petals whispered against the edge of the shelf and drifted to crunch beneath her boots when Mal closed the final bit of distance between them. The pads of her fingers brushed through tufts of fur that sprang back to find their shape again after the weight of her hand left them. Gentle heat, which should have been lukewarm at best, rose from the body of the increasingly obviously not-dead cat.

More purring sent a thick puff of wood shavings and dust out of the cat's mouth. Mal's nose crinkled. She fought off a sneeze that threatened to disturb their delicate truce. Or worse, end the moment altogether. Mal craned her neck, balancing her weight against one of the shelves and standing on her toes to scratch the top of Mr. Timmons's head. She clicked her tongue for him as loud as she dared. Mr. Timmons, who she was beginning to think should have been named Mr. Schrödinger, let out more rumbles of pleasure.

Loud enough rumbles that Mal missed the groaning of wood as the shelf gave way under her weight. She didn't, however, miss the sharp crack as her perch separated from the rest of the built-in, tumbled to the floor, and knocked Mal to the ground with it. All the air rushed out of her lungs and flooded back in again at a rate that made her ribs ache from the rebound.

Whether it was caused by the noise or the sudden lack of ear scratches, Mr. Timmons yowled. It was an awful noise, only made worse by the series of choked sounds that followed it when the previously dead cat proceeded to hack up a ball of wire and wood shavings.

The wad landed inches from Mal's left ear. She wrinkled her nose, craning her neck to distance herself from the thing while she caught her breath. Wide, cool green eyes stared down at her again. Mr. Timmons's head tipped side to side. It was clear to Mal he was weighing his options. For what, she couldn't be sure. That was until, in a single bound, Mr. Timmons launched himself off his perch, and his entire weight slammed into Mal's chest. Dusty petals cascaded around them. For the second time in minutes, Mal was breathless.

"Any chance you want to be dead again," she muttered to the cat when she found the air to speak. Neither of them seemed convinced she meant it if the shameless butting of his head against her hand and her willingness to comply were anything to go by. Mal gave his ears an absent scratch.

If that commotion hadn't scared him off or shattered any lingering illusions, Mal couldn't begin to think of what would. She tucked the cat under one arm and scrambled to her feet. Her eyes gave an uneasy sweep of the shelves and plant decay for more signs of life. From what she could see, nothing peered back at her beyond their typical inanimate stares. She let out a

shaky laugh, breathing easier with the idea that Mr. Timmons's return to the land of the living was an anomaly, not the beginnings of an epidemic spreading through the mortuary.

Mal stood stroking Mr. Timmons until he grew restless in her hold after a while, yowling at the ground.

"Fine," Mal relented, "Just stay out of trouble."

Part of Mal hoped he would scamper back to his mount and stiffen up again like a *Night at the Museum* statue at dawn when she let him plop to the floor, but no such luck. Instead, Mr. Timmons pounced on the nearest bird, knocked it to the floor, and proceeded to bat its lifeless frame around with no respect for the term rest in peace.

"Knock it off," Mal scolded. She dove for the crow, snatching it from Mr. Timmons's clutches before too much damage could be done.

Smoothing down ruffled feathers, Mal returned the bird to its perch beside a wilting bouquet of carnations. She turned her attention back to Mr. Timmons. Mal scooped him up again, ready to give the cat a more thorough scolding, when a muffled chirp forced its way into the parlor.

She paled. Even before Mal turned, she knew what she would see. The very much alive crow had hopped from its perch to peck between the potpourri of petals on the table. Another chirp sent a fine misting of sawdust into the room right before it launched itself, on somewhat stiff wings, into the air. It

dove at Mr. Timmons and Mal, who had placed herself unwittingly in the unfortunate position of holding the crow's target.

Mal launched herself and Mr. Timmons through the beaded curtain, ducking behind the counter and the skeleton for cover. All three of them were appropriately rattled when the door swung open, and the chimes of grating little bells became the most beautiful symphony Mal had ever heard. A blur of black swept over their heads as the crow flew toward the open door.

"You can come out now, Mallory," said a low, familiar voice between throaty chuckles.

Releasing Mr. Timmons from her death grip and easing herself back to her feet, Mal's eyes widened at the sight of her uncle with the crow perched on one of his bony fingers. The other hand stroked the feathers on the bird's head as if it was the most normal thing in the world for him to do. Mr. Timmons wandered over to the little scene, winding himself around her uncle's legs and leaving a trail of fur behind on the hems of his pants.

"Uncle Bo?" Mal asked, though she didn't know where to begin. Really, she knew the answer that mattered most without him having to say a word. She stared down at her hands and looked back at her uncle again.

"Well, didn't I say having you around here would make this place more lively?" He asked with a wink and resumed stroking the crow. "I'm sure Monty agrees."

Stiffer than any of the displays, Mal couldn't force herself to turn, but she could hear the clicking of bones as the skeleton nodded.