

It lie in wait.

Below the green-grey water of the Bay. Below the murk and the muck. Below the dumped  
detritus and tossed trash.

It lie in wait.

Under the thick muddy clay that coated the Bay's floor, a sludgy silt that somehow gradually  
solidified the farther down it went. Under the crust the mud became, a layer that somehow found  
a way to grab onto the true earth.

It lie in wait.

Deep in the ground, trapped thousands of years earlier, unable to move, weakened by the passage  
of time, fed by what nutrients there were in the surrounding area.

It lie in wait...

## Chapter One

The morning sunlight found the lone crack in the blackout curtains, the thin beam cutting through the relative darkness. It slowly wafted across the bedroom along its path of minutes, illuminating millions of motes, pulled toward its destination as if magnetized. The light crept up the bed, rising and falling over the landscape created by comforter and human body. Eventually, it found its target, coming to rest across the closed eyes of Bryan Pantoga.

He screwed his eyelids tighter, and when he realized that wasn't going to help any, rolled over onto his other side and pulled the sheets up around his head. He'd only been in bed a couple hours, so far, and he wasn't about to let the world win. It had been a rough night. Not actually that much rougher than others, but it was one of those nights where there was just something about it that made it *feel* rougher. Only five minutes into his shift, he and Jacob had responded to

a call about a man who had fallen from a third story balcony, and it went onward and downward from there.

Lauren came into the room and kissed his forehead, her perfume, a gift from him two Christmases ago, delicately cutting through the acrid, coppery scent of blood. At least three out of five days, the smell lingered in his nostrils, clinging to the tiny hairs and mucus membrane like a newborn kitten to the teat. She only wore it on special occasions, and its odor triggered his internal calendar to remind him about her job interview. His memory was neither detailed enough nor working at full capacity to fill in the name of the politico she was hoping to work for, though he thought it had to do with a run for mayor. He could also detect a hint of eggs and hot sauce from her breakfast.

Lauren didn't say anything after the kiss, fearing she might wake Bryan from the precious sleep he needed. Yet, right after she turned around to leave, he said, "Mmmrrmghhhallla?!" She looked back and saw his arm was pointing to the window. It was then she noticed the tiniest part in the curtains.

"Oh, gotcha." She folded the edges of the dark fabric over each other, trying her best to create a pseudo-interlock. "There. That should hold."

As she was exiting the bedroom, he called out again, "Honey?" Bryan had lifted his head from the pillow and, without opening his eyes, was looking straight at her. "Good luck. Love you."

She smiled and replied, "Love you, too."

Lauren stood in the doorway, watching as her husband lowered his head back to the pillow. It took no time for his breathing to soften, and she knew he was finally on his way to

Dreamland. She enjoyed watching Bryan sleep. Every time she did, her heart swelled with warmth, its beating quickening, just like it did during those seconds before he first said he loved her. Somehow, she'd known what he was about to say, was certain that was going to be *the* moment, and she burned every little detail into her memory. The background sounds of light jazz, cutlery against plates and, further in the distance, kitchen staff going about their routines. The smells of her veal parmesan mingling with his shrimp scampi. The way the candles illuminated his face. The shape of his lips as they formed the words.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, a shiver rippling through her body. Filing this feeling away to carry the rest of the day, she grabbed her purse and left for her interview.

## Chapter Two

When Daniel Miller entered the chapel, he saw the sun had just reached that magical point of biblical irony that always made him smile. He had first noticed it during his second week at St. Ignatius, all those many years ago: At some point in the mid-morning hours, the light would come through the stained-glass window depicting Moses on Sinai just so, and the image of the tablets would come to rest upon the confessional. It was always different due to the planet's movement, of course, but he found he could time it right and catch it most days.

He stopped and surveyed the room. The usual suspects were already in house. Mrs. Grandel, the seventy-six-year-old widow who was inevitably going to ask for forgiveness because she allowed herself to hear some objectionable word in a TV show last night. Mrs. Slattery, the eighty-three-year-old widow who made up sins to confess in order to have some human interaction. Finally, there was Mrs. Billis, the sixty-eight-year-old housewife who came in to “pray” (read: hide a sudoku book in her bible), killing time so she didn't have to be in the

house while her retired husband puttered around it all day, complaining about the neighbors' yards or the neighbors' kids or the lack of talent in today's sports.

It had been eons since his time in a collar, yet Daniel could still remember, within a year either side, the ages of the daily-going members. He never could explain it, beyond always being good with numbers—hence his current job—and it never failed to amaze even himself. Maybe it was like how some people could still recall their childhood phone number or high school locker combo despite being unable to remember some of their co-workers' names.

In the back corner of the pews, as far away from the rest of civilization as possible, sat Cans. While not a “regular,” per se, he came in from time to time, usually for shelter from the weather, occasionally just to have somewhere to be. St. Ignatius was one stop in the rotation mix that was Cans' Place of Worship Tour: Sacred Heart, St. Pius, New Hope Congregational, Faith Baptist and even B'nai Jacob all got visits from Cans. He had been a common sight around the neighborhood since the recession, maybe even before. It was hard for Daniel to remember how long he's been seeing Cans pushing his shopping cart containing a few personal possessions, with the rest of the space filled with redeemable cans. Hence his name.

Daniel didn't know Cans' story, never felt it was his place to ask. The homeless man never seemed troubled, which when he was a priest he used as an opening to approach someone who might be hesitant about entering the confessional or pulling a man of the cloth aside to talk. He'd only ever exchanged small pleasantries with Cans, who always seemed to be aware of his appearance to others, as well as his odor, and was the one who kept conversations short. In fact, his mindfulness of his malodorous state was the reason he sat so removed from everyone else. The church had never asked him to do so, he simply took it upon himself.

Cans met Daniel's gaze and gave a nod. Daniel returned the gesture and made his way to his regular pew. Fifteen minutes later, Fr. Anthony Calibri poked his head out of the confessional as his latest penanced parishioner exited and the next sinner entered. The priest held up five fingers to his friend, who simply smiled and nodded. He knew how things could get, sometimes. A "Pssst" came from behind and to his right. When he looked, Mrs. Billis held her sudoku out to him. "Thank you, Mrs. Billis," Daniel responded, with a polite wave, "but I'm good."

Several minutes later, just as he was beginning to wonder if he should have accepted the puzzle book, Fr. Calibri was relieved by a harried-looking priest. Daniel thought he remembered the young man's surname was Fitzgerald but couldn't recall the first name. He watched as the men exchanged "Sorrlys" and "Don't-mention-its" before the younger took his place in the confessional. Fr. Calibri rolled his eyes as he walked toward Daniel, who caught himself before he laughed out loud. When she playfully "Tsk-tsked" him, Fr. Calibri responded, with a smile and a wink, "You didn't see anything, Mrs. Billis."

Daniel stood up and gave his old friend a hug. Fr. Anthony Calibri had been the first priest to greet him when he was assigned to St. Ignatius. With a hearty handshake and the phrase, "Call me Tony," a lasting friendship was born. Tony was only ten years older than Daniel, yet that still made them the two youngest priests in their church. They bonded through similar backgrounds, a love of sports, both watching and playing, and a hatred of politics.

They had both been raised by mothers who had remarried after divorce. Both of their natural fathers hadn't been in the picture much, with the major difference between them being that Daniel loved his stepfather while Tony never connected with his. The man could never understand his stepson's obsession with the Bible and his excitement over attending services, and on Wednesday's, too, for crying out loud. What kid does that? It's weird.

Daniel's stepdad encouraged him no matter his chosen path, and there were many. When he was six, the boy wanted to be an astronaut. Then astronaut gave way to astronomer. Astronomer gave way to police officer. Police officer gave way to Army soldier. Army gave way to sports car designer. Car designer gave way to shortstop. Shortstop didn't necessarily give way to architect, but it did help provide scholarship money so he could pursue a degree.

It was his sophomore year in college when Daniel discovered his calling. During freshman year, Daniel had felt homesick by the middle of October. His family had only ever been moderately religious, attending slightly more frequently than the C & E crowd. Yet, being far from home for the first time in his life, he began to find solace in the church. Of course, it started because of a girl: Betty Freemont.

She was a member of his Psych 101 study group. Around the third or fourth session they found themselves staying in the library to chat, long after the others had gone. Betty was the only person he felt safe confiding in about his homesickness. The guys in his dorm would've just called him a pussy. She not only understood, she empathized. She told him she had struggled during the first couple weeks, almost dropped out, even. Then she went to church for the first time since she'd come to school, and it made her feel so much better.

She invited him to join her that Sunday. The experience was, for lack of a better term to Daniel's young brain, life changing. It helped him, it healed him and it opened his eyes to a power within religion he had never known could be there. They attended every Sunday mass together for the rest of the school year and spent almost every night together, the other six days. By the time summer vacation rolled around, they were in love.



They stayed in touch all summer, something his parents surprisingly encouraged. They liked this new version of their child they'd gotten back from the university. He was a new man, changed for what seemed to be the better, and if it was because of a girl, then how bad could this young love be?

Daniel and Betty's love deepened over that summer and through the first semester of their sophomore year. When he attended Christmas mass during the winter break, Fr. Gattis announced that, after almost a decade of fundraising, they could finally open a mission to help the ever-growing homeless population. To celebrate, they even invited some of the homeless from the surrounding blocks to spend the week up through New Year's Day in the church's basement.

Daniel volunteered every single day. He helped cook the meals, serve the food, clean the bedding. He aided the various doctors who came in to give free physicals however he could, filling out paperwork, labeling containers, sterilizing implements. He even helped a few of the homeless fill out job applications, put together resumes, clean up for interviews. Once again, Daniel came out the other side of an experience with the church a changed man.

When he returned to school, the first thing he did was sit Betty down and tell her he decided to follow his heart and become a priest. Rather than be disappointed, she was encouraging. They had talked on the phone every night of break, alternating who called so to keep their parents' bills lower, and she had been getting a sense something like this was coming. The way he talked about helping all those people, she could almost feel the heat from his beaming face over the line.

Daniel changed his major, worked hard through his summers to make up for the lost year and a half, attended a top seminary and eventually had his Master of Divinity. St. Ignatius was his second church, after a three-year stint at St. Francis of Assisi. It was also his last church.

“So,” Tony began, once the hug broke, “for a change of pace I was thinking Palmer’s. How does that sound?”

Daniel drenched his words with sarcasm as he replied, “Sounds like such an *amazing* change of pace they just might have a table already waiting for us.”

Tony laughed, wrapped an arm around his friend and the duo walked the two and a half blocks to their usual lunch spot.

A table was waiting.

### Chapter Three

The midday sunlight coming from the mirrored windows on the building across the street caromed off the secretary's reading glasses as she glared over the top of them. Again.

Lauren knew the nervous energy bouncing of her right leg was annoying, but it couldn't be helped. In situations such as this, it had a life of its own, and there wasn't a thing anyone could do about it. When they were waiting for her father to get out of heart surgery years ago, Bryan tried to sit on her leg to stop it, but she bucked him off like a toddler playing horsey on grandpa's knee. He'd done it partly out of irritation, partly out of a sense of keeping her mind off the situation and completely out of his devoted love for her.

Once again, a thought of her beautiful husband made her smile.

She also noticed her leg had eased its bouncing, too.

The secretary's computer dinged. She glanced at the screen and said, without glancing at her, "You may go in, Mrs. Pantoga."

Howard Kline's office was almost a high-priced lawyer stereotype, all mahogany and dark hues, with thick pile forest green carpet. The presidential desk sat regally at the far end, which was much farther than Lauren had expected, if she had expected anything at all. No one was behind it, though, making her think the old bat on the other side of the door was pulling a prank, getting back at her for the leg bouncing. Once she heard the sound of someone washing their hands come from an open door to the left of the desk, she understood.

The man who stood in the bathroom doorway, casually drying his hands with an ivory hand towel, looked every bit the privileged son of old money, with his perfectly coifed do, fancy barbershop smooth shave, meticulously matched expensive shirt and slacks. The corresponding jacket was draped over the back of a chair by the window and, surprisingly, so was the meticulously matched silk tie. He probably thought his open collar gave a relaxed vibe to visitors, but it only enhanced his Ivy League fraternity brother/secret society member look. Same went for the perfectly straight, perfectly white smile he flashed as he said, "Hello. You must be Lauren?"

"Yes," she replied, extending her hand, "Lauren Pantoga."

Kline tossed the towel back into the bathroom and crossed the short distance to shake her hand. "Howard Kline. This is indeed a pleasure. I've been an admirer for quite some time. Please," he said, gesturing to the chairs in front of his desk as he took his own.

This startled her a touch, just enough she had to force herself not to show any reaction when she sat. "Oh? I didn't know I was on anyone's radar."

“On the contrary. I’ve been keeping an eye on many people handling the various campaigns around the city.”

“Well, I haven’t really *handled* any campaigns, per se. I’ve worked for several over the years, in various capacities. But, I wouldn’t say...”

“Don’t be modest. Sure, you were mostly in a communications position, writing speeches and press releases. And, sure, you could wave them off as,” he air-quoted, “‘small local elections,’ but you did standout work for them. Let’s face it, I know the way Sheldon Morrow runs campaigns, so I’m well aware you did all the work on Barbara’s re-election bid last year.”

She felt her face flush. “Well...”

“It’s a good thing she won. Trust me. If she’d lost, Shelly would’ve thrown you, and any others you worked closely with, under the bus. He’s the biggest prick in the business.”

Lauren was stunned by this candor. So much so, all she could manage was a nod of agreement.

“In fact, whenever I see his name attached to a candidate, I know to look past him to his immediate staff. Hence why I wanted to meet you.”

She tried to thank him for the kind words, but her throat had suddenly gone dry. As if psychic, Kline got up, headed over to the wet bar midway down the wall opposite the windows, got a bottle of water from the minifridge and offered it to her. She took a large swig while he returned to his chair.

“Better?” he asked, flashing that winning smile again.

“Much, thank you.”

“Good. To the reason for this meeting, now. You may have heard through the political grapevine I’ve been exploring a run at mayor? Long story short, the exploration’s over and I’m planning to announce next week. Of course, if you’re as smart as I think you are, you’ve figured out, by this point, I want you as my campaign manager.”

“Wow. Um...I wasn’t expecting *that* offer. Maybe more communications work, or something along those lines. Don’t you already have a team?”

“I did, but most of the people who helped in my city council run moved on to other campaigns. Those who’ve stayed were on my staff here at the firm, anyway. Besides, I feel I need some fresh eyes and, as I said, I like what you’ve done.”

“That’s very kind, and very generous of you.”

“I can’t think of a better way to advance in my aspirations than to help others do the same. So, what do you say?”

“I’d love to say I’d have to think it over, talk with my husband, and all, but...” she paused for effect, “...that would be a lie. I say yes!”

“Great! Speaking of your husband, I understand he’s a paramedic?”

“Yes. You’ve done more homework than assigned.”

“All part of my vetting process. There will be more to come, I assure you. Anyway, back to your husband. What type of shifts does he work, because I’d love to take you two out for a celebratory dinner this week.”

“He does work mainly at night, but he’s off Thursday and Friday.”

“Thursday will be perfect. Jen—my wife—will love to meet you. I’ll call you with the details. Sound good?”

Lauren left Kline’s office riding a cloud, knowing this was going to be the start of a new and wonderful chapter in her story.