

THE DAILY MIRACLE

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Chapter One

The first thing Reggie Lancaster noticed was the sudden, icy stares from the people gathered at Lakeside Cemetery. One by one, like a school of fish responding identically to unseen vibrations, they raised their heads and stopped what they were doing. He bent low to make himself smaller and trudged up the small hill toward them.

He should have been used to the reaction by now, Lancaster told himself. This may have been his first assignment for the Revere River Daily, but not the first time that a group of white faces blanched as he drew near. He thought people in Massachusetts would be used to seeing a black man. Wasn't the North supposed to be less prejudiced?

He sighed to himself and drew his coat closer. The frigid reaction was matched by the cool October breeze sifting through the markers and monuments of this sprawling graveyard. He reached up and tugged his stocking cap over his ears and forced a smile on his face.

He began to take mental notes of what was decidedly an unusual gathering. An older woman in the billowing red dress tip sideways as the Massachusetts' wind toppled her like a small Christmas tree. She scrambled to her feet, but was nearly skewered by an almost-toothless man practicing some moves that involved poking the air with a worn, serrated sword. A man in a Cossack uniform was hopping up and down, kicking, all the while sternly staring straight ahead with his arms folded.

Not that far away, neatly arranged around several crosses, a four-man band — dressed in what looked like Swiss yodeler uniforms with thick suspenders and small,

green, feathered hats — were trying to coax some cohesive notes from the combination of an accordion, tuba, bugle and recorder. The resulting mix seemed to encourage the wind to howl. The quartet only managed to get in a few bars when the October gusts sent several hats — as well as a thin musician or two — caroming across the gravesites.

Several people edged back as Lancaster reached the summit of the hill. One old man, his face gray and grizzled, did not move. Lancaster walked up to him.

“Hi,” he said cheerily, offering a gloved hand. The old man timidly took it.

“Are you here for the ceremony?”

The old man nodded. “Da.”

“I’m a reporter from *The Daily*,” Lancaster continued, trying to make himself small. At 6’2”, he towered over the old man. He knew that could be intimidating, and usually liked that impression. But, as a reporter, he wanted to blend in and not be conspicuous. An idle thought, he decided. “Can you tell me about what’s going on?”

The old man brightened. “Da, da,” he continued with an obvious accent.

“Count Leo Tolstoy is going to be buried today.”

“Not him, Vladimir,” a woman nearby corrected him sharply. Her face was beat red from the cold and still did not match her flaming, thick lipstick. “Ach, men,” she sighed, stepping quickly between the old man and Lancaster. “Leo Tolstoy,” she amended sharply.

“Da,” the old man said with a smile. “Him.” He quickly walked away.

The woman introduced herself as a Eunice Klomvitzky. As a child, she had studied Tolstoy, teaching his works as an adult and feeling honored to be invited to

participate in such a grand moment. “I would have even gone as far as Rhode Island,” she said grandly, “if that would have meant honoring the son of such a great man.”

Tolstoy, she said in almost a whine, was not being buried here. He’s still in Russia. His eldest son, also named Leo, had migrated to the United States and been buried here. A professor from Revere River Community College had arranged for this little gathering to honor the son, whose grave had not been properly marked.

Her voice carried widely and created a small opening in the wall surrounding Lancaster. Lancaster quickly approached a lady woman clad in red, then the swordsman, both of whom also had thick accents. A few others edged away, however. Lancaster pretended not to notice. He took notes on his small pad, ignoring his numbing fingers and trying to appear professional. That was important, he told himself. He had to earn respect.

He noticed an open grave and walked over to look at it. It had been dug several feet deep and carefully squared off. Lancaster decided the open grave must be for the younger Tolstoy. He bowed his head respectfully before looking for more people who seemed open to questions.

Here and there on the slope of the hill, like dark shadows against a gray sky, more people in odd outfits wandered about. Hands in pockets, vacant expressions on aged faces, they mingled silently, occasionally gesturing with a head or shoulder toward the small male coven and its sheet of paper. From the sounds emanating from beyond the crest of the hill, more people were coming. Car doors slammed in the distance like the vacant clang of church bells.

Lancaster went to each person in turn, carefully introduced himself. Some

pretended not to hear him and walk away. Others kindly spelled out their name — one woman took his notebook and wrote her tongue-twister herself — and answered questions. Lancaster filled his reporter's notebook with scribbled comments — no one here actually knew anything about Tolstoy Jr. — counted heads and wondered why nothing was happening.

He hoped that the people were beginning to accept him. As the only black man, he couldn't blend in, but, perhaps, they were starting to see him as a reporter. He maintained the smile and the serious expression.

A long, white limousine crept in a line along a narrow road to his left. It had been newly washed, and gleamed in the pale light. The wind buffeted it, adding to the polish.

The crowd in the cemetery quieted. The band even stopped torturing their instruments.

A uniformed driver emerged in a thick overcoat and furry ushanka hat. He professionally opened the door for his passengers. One man stepped out and stood ramrod straight. The only one without an overcoat, he wore a tuxedo. Rhinestone studs brazenly extending down the front of his black coat reflected the spare afternoon sun.

No one spoke above a whisper, if they spoke at all. Even the wind seemed to calm, as if respecting the scene. The far off sound of traffic on Waverly Street, always jammed with vehicles, faded, muffled by the chill and the mood. For a few moments, no one moved as a sense of the time and place spread across the participants.

Lancaster, too, stood still, feeling the awe sweep numbly across him.

Then, sounding as if out of control, a large, black, hearse-like Cadillac wheeled