

The Next Coming Race

by

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Chapter 1

We'd arrived on site too late.

I surveyed the marred landscape, barely able to breathe, mired in the horror of it, unable to look away. Craters the size of meteorites; random piles of dirt peppered the grass like shrapnel. A gentle hand on my shoulder broke the trance. "Oh, Moll," Palmer, my husband, said, barely above a whisper. "I'm sorry." He squeezed my shoulder. Numb, immobile, unable to manage even the slightest nod, I said nothing.

"You okay?" he asked. I felt the warmth of his breath on the back of my neck, imagined his words edged with a fine cloud of mist hanging in the air between us. He placed his other hand on my other shoulder, and attempted to draw me near. Though I longed for solace in the shelter of his embrace, the shock of the potential archaeological site, ruined, kept hold.

One by one the members of our failed rescue attempt muttered their goodbyes until there were only Palmer, Michael and myself left.

I turned to face Palmer. He smiled. Those were his scruffy years. Clean shaven and hair close cropped since I'd met him, he'd taken to wearing his beard grown, but marginally so. His hair had grown in salt and pepper, and wavy. He kept it long, just this side of needing a cut. I'm not complaining, mind you; I've always liked a man in a beard. Combine that look with his dark, watery eyes, add a billowy shirt, and Palmer'd be at home on the cover of any romance novel, I used to think. I worried the look was a sign he was in the throes of a mid-life crisis, but God-forbid I'd ever say that to him—at more than fifteen years' my senior, Palmer was a little touchy about his age.

That night he wore a dark pea coat, the collar hiked up around his neck as if about to head asea. He shoved his hands into his pockets, shoulders raised nearly to his ears, and asked, “Timmy’s?” Michael, Detective Constable Michael Crestwood of the Metropolitan Toronto Police Department, nodded his assent.

“I need something with more caffeine,” I said. “Second Cup anyone?”

The warmth of the coffee shop proved more welcoming than the warmth of the drive over there. Though my soul found momentary solace in the latte cupped between my palms, my brain insisted upon returning to the debacle of our night’s work.

For months I’d been monitoring online threaded discussions and bulletin boards frequented by pot hunters. Modern day pirates, if you asked me, people who felt it was their job to plunder unregistered archaeological sites and sell their booty on eBay or at travelling antique shows. The idea to stalk them was hatched by a number of archaeologists including myself who, after closing out a rush-job salvage gig in construction’s way, began to discuss, in an exhausted and half-drunken stupor, the consequences the law should evoke should a pot hunter ever be caught in the act. When we finally agreed that neither castration nor dismemberment was the answer, someone suggested vigilantism. This, too, was laughed away at first, but then a professor from a neighbouring university revisited the idea and it stuck. As the most technologically agile member of the team, I was tasked to fetch my computer and troll the web to determine if the devils left a digital trail.

It didn’t take long to discern they did.

We divvied up the sites, agreeing to log in using pseudonyms we created on the spot, each of us code-named after various and sundry sci-fi archaeology-types, sobered as we gorged on pizza and potato chips and dispersed thereafter.

The next morning, unsure if anyone had actually meant it, I nevertheless did my part and forayed out into the World Wide Web to gather intelligence on our collective nemeses. What I discovered was an eye-opener.

Pot hunters held rave-type, secretive, pic-nic-style parties, complete with bar-b-ques and beer, on little known or overlooked archaeological sites. They socialized, ate a good meal, and then broke out the shovels, leaving behind a landscape so littered and cratered you'd think you'd landed on a mock-up of the moon.

I suppose what happened next was my fault. Goaded by the wealth of my online data mining and the voracity with which we'd hatched the previous night's plan, I emailed the others with my findings, urging them to follow through with our stratagem.

It got exciting two months later. One of the pot hunters suggested they get together and investigate an abandoned and soon to be demolished property south of Stouffville. They used SurveyMonkey to determine the best date and settled on having a tailgate-style dinner prior to the dig. Undaunted by the sheer gall of what the pot hunters had suggested, I emailed every one of the original archaeologists. None of us had the slightest clue as to how to proceed. We knew that prosecuting the buggers would be a difficult task—to date, there had been only one case of successful prosecution documented. The solution, we all agreed, was to be on hand to disperse the rave and then hightail it to the Ministry of Culture to register the site.

So we'd have some official capacity, we'd enlisted Michael's assistance whose job it would be to flash his badge and look menacing, no grand feat for Michael who had the physique of a well-padded football player and the sombre, stoic gaze of a Terminator on a mission permanently tattooed onto his face.

On the date in question, we caught the looters with their metaphoric pants down, munching on ribs and chicken, guzzling beer and Coke by the cans-full. We drove up the dirt access road at dusk, circled them with our vehicles and parked with our brights on. Mesmerized to paralysis at first, the looters presently scrambled, Hibachis and shovels clanging as they were thrown into the beds of their pickups. One by one they snaked between our cars and drove away.

Our group had participated in no less than three such raids since.

To have that power, to be able to do something to protect our passion from marauders, was exhilarating, if not entirely legal. To that end, we swore each other to secrecy, vowing only ever to meet clandestinely, and only when dictated by the slightly lesser legal activities of our pot-hunting nemeses.

The ghost town of Ballycroy in the northern GTA was our first failure. I'd been monitoring online chatter for weeks, trying to pinpoint the message containing the exact date and time of the party. Once I'd found it, I'd marked it on my smart phone's calendar. Busy at school, I hadn't gone back to check for revisions. At some point between entering it into my calendar and the scheduled date, the pothunters had changed their meeting and I'd missed it.

After a few minutes of uncomfortable silence between us I said, "I fucked up big."

"Come on, Moll," Palmer said, "you had no way to know."

"I need to put Wash's email on my cell," I said. Wash, the archaeologist-slash-profiteer character from *Star Trek: the Next Generation*, was the pseudonym I adopted in the pot hunting chat rooms. "If I'd thought of it sooner, I wouldn't have missed the time change."

"Hindsight is 20/20," Michael said.

"Really, Michael?" I said. "Platitudes? Now?"

"Say, is there any cream?" Michael asked. He left the table and took his coffee with him.

"You need to calm down, Moll," Palmer told me. "Stop beating yourself up." I looked deep into his dark eyes and saw the calm I sought. How was he able to slough off what had happened so easily? Probably because he wasn't on point for plan-making. "Crestwood means well, you know he does." Palmer reached out and pried my hand from the near death-grip it had around the coffee cup, and squeezed.

When Michael returned to the table I apologized.

We agreed I would be the one to go to the Ministry office first thing the next day and register the site. Not that it would stop future looters from spoiling the archaeological record, but if we were ever going to see these guys prosecuted, it was the first step.

The ride home was long, made longer by the silent wall of self-loathing I'd built between us. Once inside the house, the silence was broken. "I'm going to take a shower and finish my rendering," Palmer said. Palmer is a forensic anthropologist, which means he studies dead people. Unlike a coroner, Palmer is a bone specialist. He can tell you practically everything there is to know about a person based on markings on a skeleton. Besides being the head of the Archaeology Department at The University of Toronto (which technically makes him my boss), he freelances for the Metropolitan Toronto Police Department. When I'd drafted him to come along on Molly's Bogus Journey, he'd left behind the makings of a computer-assisted sketch based on measurements he'd taken from a recently discovered skull. It was interesting work—so far he could tell the skeletal remains had belonged to a teenaged girl. Once his drawing was complete, he'd have an approximation of what she'd looked like in life, which would go far to help the police ID the remains.

It was getting late. I couldn't sleep. My brain kept turning and returning to that night's screw up, blown to colossal proportion in my mind. I'd watched Egypt's crotchety Head Archaeologist cut junior fellows off at the knees on *Chasing Mummies*, marvelled at the wonders of hidden artifact caches in the Royal Ontario Museum on *Museum Secrets* and was having difficulty swallowing the evidence for a Loch Ness-type monster in a flooded Chinese volcano on some other pseudo-science program, awaiting Palmer's arrival. When the second commercial break hit and I was still alone in bed, I sought him out.

True to form, he was right where I was most likely to find him—in the spare bedroom-cum-office we shared, staring at the computer monitor. I locked my arms around his shoulders from behind and snuggled my cheek against the crook of his neck. He smelled of spent cologne soured by freshly applied deodorant. His hair, still damp from his earlier shower, tickled my ear with a chill. Impulsively, I kissed the soft skin stretched taut across his clavicle, then nipped at the spot with my teeth. He said my name, his tone only slightly welcoming, severed the grasp I held on him, swivelled his chair to face me and then pulled me onto his lap.

I resumed my hold on him, resting my ear on his shoulder. He took my hand in his, kissed the palm, then held it close to my heart and sighed. “I’m nearly done,” he said. He exhaled mediciney peppermint.

“Can’t it wait ‘til morning?” I asked. My lips brushed his neck as I spoke.

“It’s the facial reconstruction. Just a few more coordinates and I can set it to rendering.”

“It’s late,” I told him, “and boring.” I kissed where my lips were pressing; his stubble scratched my cheek. “I’m miserable and I miss you,” I said, softly. I kissed once more, this time allowing my tongue to brush between my lips. He stiffened in his chair and shuddered. “I could use a little TLC.”

“I’ll be there,” he said, reassuringly. He broke the hold I had on him once more. “Soon.” He let his hands fall to the wrist-rests on his chair. “I promise.”

I leaned toward him and let my lips brush his; he pulled away. “You need to go, Moll, while I still have the willpower to resist.”

The bed was so cold and he was so warm...I considered protesting, breaking him down until he could no longer contest my advances, but let it be in the end. If I’d won the battle, though his body would be with me, his mind would be on the reconstruction and he would be in melancholy spirit.

He kissed me then, and I regretted my decision to let him be, but forced myself from his lap and back to bed where I fell asleep before the end of the program.

When I awoke nearly two hours later, the television was still on and Palmer was still in the office.

I turned off the TV, rolled over and slept ‘til morning.

I awoke to the hum of Palmer’s electric toothbrush around six and began my morning stretches. When I was done and Palmer was still in the bathroom. I slunk out of bed, aiming to turn on the automatic drip in the kitchen, but was sidetracked as I passed the office.

Palmer’s computer monitor was on, but dark. I shook the mouse to wake it up. The face of a young, dark haired girl lit up the screen. Palmer’s facial reconstruction. I couldn’t shake the feeling I knew her, or knew *of* her, at least, and then it hit me.

“Hey,” Palmer said. He was leaning with his shoulder propped against the doorjamb as he wiped his hands dry on the bathroom towel.

“I know her, don’t I?” I asked.

Palmer straightened up, dropped his towel on the easy chair just inside the doorway and nodded.

“It’s Maria, isn’t it? Maria Makarov?”

“It is.” He wheeled his chair from under his desk, sat, and hugged me around my waist.

I broke from his grasp and leaned my behind against his desk. Maria (pronounced Mar’ ya) Makarov was a girl of sixteen when she’d disappeared almost two years ago. On the morning of her vanishing, she’d walked to school with her brother, leaving him to enter through the back door while she went to meet friends at the front; she never arrived. Because she had a history as a runaway, and due to her age, there was no Amber Alert called. The citizens of Toronto heard about her on the news however, and each and every one of us was on the lookout for someone, anyone, matching her description. Sightings were reported from as near as the Timmy’s around the corner to as far away as Georgia, Tennessee.

Her family had originally immigrated to Toronto from Florida. Perhaps she was homesick for her pre-teenaged friends and was making her way back home? A week passed and no one from her life in Florida had seen or heard from her yet.

Prior to immigrating to Florida, her family had come from Russia. Perhaps she was homesick for her childhood friends and was making her way back to that home? Still, no one from her life in Russia had reported having seen or heard from her in the first week after her disappearance. Or since.

“So she’s dead?” I asked, stupidly. I’d never given more than a passing nod to previous missing children, Amber Alerted or otherwise, at least, not until a few years ago. Since then, each and every one had stuck in my mind for some reason. I knew all there was to know about each of their disappearances, about their families, the status of their recovery. I could recite each of their names, in the order of their disappearance. It wasn’t a very healthy obsession, I know, but it was a meaningful one.

So what was the catalyst, the precipitating event that heightened my awareness of these events, I often ask myself. The answer, I think, the one thing that made my heart bleed for the missing children and

their families was the talk Palmer and I had about that time with respect to one day having children of our own. With each missing child, I told myself that I could not possibly bring another child into the world to fall into harm's way like that. With each sighting, I told myself it would be okay, there was hope yet. With each child found alive, I embraced the notion of the pitter-pat of little Mollies and Palmers up and down our bungalow's central hall.

Though I'd never discussed this morbid obsession with Palmer, somehow, I think he knew.

He placed a hand on my hip. "Are you alright?" he asked.

I managed a nod. "Her poor parents," I said.

"Crestwood called while I was washing up. We're going to tell the parents. He's on his way."

"We?"

"Yup," he said.

"You and Michael?"

"Yup."

"Why are you going?"

"It's my reconstruction that ID'd her. Plus I think Crestwood would appreciate the moral support."

I nodded whilst fighting back tears.

"Do you want to come?"

"No," I said, emphatically. I'm not good with death. I go to funerals when duty calls, but I never know what to say when I do. 'I'm sorry,' sounds lame, but it always does in a pinch. I also can't bring myself to eat food at a wake and I hate it when people try to convince me otherwise.

"No," I repeated again.

Palmer's cell rang. "Richardson," he said, by way of salutation. This was followed by a couple of uh-huhs, and then he made arrangements to meet after the Makarov interview.

“That was the MTO’s archaeologist,” he said to me after he disconnected on the cell. “The Ministry of Transportation broke ground for the subway expansion this month. They found a site complete with human remains. You interested?”

Did he even have to ask?