

A fictional mystery involving the natives of Newfoundland.

The Third Coffin

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# **THE THIRD COFFIN**

# 1

*June 12, Stephenville, Newfoundland.*

Dr. Jim Sinclair was late. It was 4:15 in the afternoon, and Julius Morgan, the bookstore owner, had told him to return around 1:30 for the books he had ordered. He tried to open the door of the bookstore but found it locked. He looked at his watch. The store was not due to close until five o'clock, and it was only 4:15. He thought the situation was odd, and he peered through the glass door. There was a light on in the rear, so Jim knocked on the door. He could hear voices and other noises behind the stacks. He knocked again and listened. What sounded like a gunshot resounded from inside the store.

Jim immediately feared that something critical was happening in the bookstore, possibly a robbery, and he considered that immediate attention may be required - perhaps immediate medical attention. He began banging loudly on the door but got no response. He pressed firmly against the door and found that the latch gave a little. He thought that a firm push or two might break the latch away from the door jamb. He took a step back and rammed the door with his shoulder.

After taking nine or ten solid punches from Jim's bruised left shoulder, the latch of the bookstore door suddenly gave way, and the door flew open with a bang. Two seconds later he heard the rear door of the store slam. He ran around the front book stack to the rear of the store where he saw the crumpled body of Julius Morgan lying in the center of a pool of blood. Julius' right hand was holding a gun. Jim picked up Julius' right arm and turned him onto his back, and the gun fell across the dead man's chest. Jim saw that Julius had a bullet wound in his nose that disfigured his face. He had hemorrhaged massively from his nose and his mouth. He was not breathing; he had no pulse, and his open eyes had the glassy stare of death.

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Jim used his left hand to lift the gun from Julius' chest, and he was about to rip into the front of Julius' shirt in order to check for a heartbeat when Officer Collins ran breathless into the room. The officer took one look at the dead man and the pool of blood and quickly drew his revolver. He held it steadily with both hands and pointed it at Jim's face. "Freeze!" he commanded. Then he saw the gun in Jim's hand and panicked. "Drop that gun!" he screamed with his fingers twitching on the trigger of his revolver.

Jim dropped the gun he had not realized that he was holding.

"You're under arrest!" the excited officer shouted.

## 2

Five months before Jim's arrest for the crime he did not commit, he had been standing in the small graveyard behind St. Bernard's Church in Wamego, Kansas. It was then that he had decided to return to Newfoundland. It was a cold, gray day in January, and a drizzling rain had saturated the ground. A few large, wet snowflakes had begun to appear in the misty air. He could feel his feet getting wet and cold in spite of his umbrella. The funeral and burial service for his mother Elizabeth had been lightly attended because of the weather and the fact that his mother was a relative newcomer and had few friends there. She had few friends anywhere.

Jim had driven all the way from Ohio to Kansas to come to the funeral. He and his wife Carol stood with their umbrellas touching, but they were apart from the handful of other people who attended, who were mostly friends of his sister Sylvia.

Actually it was the weather more than his mother's death that reminded Jim of Newfoundland and his desire to return someday. He had not seen his mother for three years, and earlier he had looked upon her in her casket as a stranger. In her youth Elizabeth had been a beautiful woman with long dark hair and laughing blue eyes. Now he scarcely recognized her. On this day of her burial the only emotion he felt toward her was pity.

Sylvia told him little about their mother's final illness, only that God had chosen to take her, and that she had died peacefully. John, Jim's brother-in-law, told him that she was on a lot of pills, and the Doctor had told them that she had an electrolyte imbalance.

Elizabeth had not approved of Jim's marriage to a non-Catholic, and she had essentially cut him out of her life twenty-seven years ago. Jim's father had been an air force pilot who was killed in a helicopter accident when Jim was nine years

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old, and in his youth Elizabeth held a great deal of influence over her son. With the estrangement her influence waned, but he still upheld some of the stronger taboos that she had inculcated in him, and her death did not immediately release him from those taboos. What her burial had done was cement a desire of his to revisit the place of his childhood and recapture the memories of that time of his life when the world was simple and relationships were strong. He had good memories - pleasant memories - of the first decade of his life, but there were ghosts lurking in the closet of his mind, and he longed to know if they were real. Yes, he had definitely decided to return to Newfoundland.

When the service was finished, Sylvia turned and caught Jim's eye. She approached him and took his arm and squeezed it.

"Thanks for coming," she said with a pinched lip smile.

Jim was expressionless. "She was my mother, too."

Now it was April and they were sitting at their evening meal at their home in Ohio. Jim had procrastinated too long in telling Carol, because he dreaded her reaction. He toyed with three small potatoes on his plate pondering how to broach the subject.

"I've told the girls to reschedule all my June appointments. I've decided to take the Titanic and go back to Newfoundland. You're welcome to come along." He purposefully said it all in one breath, thereby reducing the number of questions she would ask.

She looked at him with a surprised glare. "When did you decide this?" she snapped. Her anger was predictable.

"I've wanted to go for a long time. Mother's funeral reminded me of that. It was never possible until Hugh joined the practice, but now it is. I've got a lot of memories of the

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place, and I have some questions. I want to go back and see it again. My father died there."

"I'm not going in that thing," Carol fumed.

'That thing' was the Titanic, an old motor home that Jim had purchased used fourteen years ago. He, Carol, and their sons had previously taken frequent short trips in the Titanic, but now the boys were grown, and it sat neglected in the driveway.

"I'm taking the Titanic because I want to see things along the way, and frankly I enjoy camping out." Jim explained.

"Well, I don't." Carol threw her napkin on her plate and stormed out of the room.

That evening she entered the living room while Jim was sitting by the fireside going over the literature that he had collected about Newfoundland.

"When are you leaving?" she asked tersely.

"I want to get away the first weekend in June."

"I frankly don't think you want me to go. If you did, you wouldn't take the Titanic. Why don't you fly?"

Carol was well aware that since their father's death, Jim and his sister Sylvia had catered to Elizabeth's phobia about flying. It was one of the sources of contention in their marriage - a marriage that had seen happier times. Jim had limited his flying to the highways where he had raced his motorcycle before their sons, Lawrence and Brad, were born. At those times he pushed his cycle to its limits. He was a reckless menace, passing on hills and curves and squeezing between vehicles. He had accidents, but he was never injured seriously. Racing became a sport and an addiction to him. The exhilaration he received from the wind striking his face and his body at ninety miles an hour became a release valve for his frustrations.

"I'd like to stop and see the sites along the way," he reminded her.

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"I'm not going. You'll have to go by yourself," Carol said. "I called Ellen. We're going to Puerto Vallarta in June, and Sarah is going with us."

Ellen and Sarah were Carol's sisters. Ellen and her husband owned a condo in Puerto Vallarta. Puerto Vallarta in June is hot and humid, and the condo was not air-conditioned. The last time Carol had gone to Mexico she was sick with gastroenteritis for ten days.

Jim looked at her and smiled. "That should be fun," he said.



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