

## THE TOMBMAKERS VILLAGE

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### Dead

The last thing you'd expect to do as you walk to the podium to give the keynote speech at a prestigious conference is drop dead. The timing on this occasion was dreadfully unfortunate as well because Professor John Wainright's life ended just before he had a chance to eat a magnificent lunch on this, the first day of the International Conference on Life Research being held in Kingston, Ontario, Canada.

The irony.

Before the chatter and dark humor set in among the three hundred and fifty conference delegates there were shrieks and screams and yells and cries for help when – and it happened very quickly – he stopped talking, gasped for air, stumbled into the lectern and then crashed off the stage onto the delegates' floor below.

Professor John Wainright had just started his speech. He knew it was going to be a good one. A really good one. Great, in fact. This would be the most momentous day of his life had he not died at such an inconvenient moment. That said, dying is quite momentous in one's life.

He was about to tell a secret: a secret so big that he didn't write anything ahead of time in case his notes were discovered. He was a knowledge keeper, but on the verge of announcing something to the world that would change everything – forever.

Of course, this being a really good secret, only he knew about it. The whole secret, that is. John Wainright had taken just one precaution with his secret in case he was hit by a bus or something hard and death-making like that, or he was murdered. He made it possible for the secret to be passed on, even if he was dead. If it was meant to be, he had convinced himself one night after several drams of Scotch, then it will be.

None of this was on the mind of Tom Carrott as he watched his boss tumble off the stage. Tom was the Associate Director of the Life Research Group – the LRG – at King’s University where the conference was being held, and at this moment he had no idea that his future, and possibly the world’s, was going to change.

Tom ran from the back of the conference room to the crumpled professor’s body at the foot of the stage. He squeezed in among the others hovering over John Wainright and knelt down beside his lifeless mentor. Tom’s first thought was how much the lumps and cuts on his mentor’s head would be hurting until he realized the professor was dead. It seemed to take forever for an emergency response team to arrive, but everyone knew it was already too late. It may have been the broken neck hinted at by the professor’s head lying at a right angle to his body that gave it away. That, and the blood flowing out of his mouth. And the bone sticking out of his neck.

Professor John Wainright. Aged 65. Died spectacularly. Cause unknown. Heart? Accident prone? Untied shoelace? Bad genes? Murder?

Death.

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‘Imagine if you no longer existed El,’ Tom said to Eloise, his girlfriend and colleague in the LRG, as they stood watching Professor Wainright’s body being wheeled passed them to the ambulance. ‘Tomorrow the world would still carry on. And the next day. And the next day after that. Days would turn into nights which would turn into days, people would go to work, kids would go to school, news would keep occurring, and friends and family would think about you from time to time. But you would no longer exist.’

‘We all know we’re going to die, Tom, but no-one really thinks about it. It’s just hard to imagine that we’ll no longer, you know, ‘be here’. But if we’re not here, could we somewhere else? And if we were, then how?’

As of 12:15pm on this sunny September Tuesday, just before a splendid lunch, Professor John Wainright was officially no longer here.

But something didn’t seem quite right.

And it was about to get even less right.

## The Previous Night

It was the opening night of the International Conference on Life Research, an innocuous title that meant everything, but nothing in particular. It was the formal dinner event preceding the three-day conference that Tom and Eloise and their Life Research Group – the LRG as it was known – had painstakingly organized.

Eloise had convinced Tom to rent a tuxedo for the event and in exchange she promised to wear her satin navy-blue slip midi dress. They seldom *dressed fancy*, as they put it, but when they did, they looked like royalty. They were both twenty-nine years old and still had their youthful slim figures. At six feet Tom sometimes looked like he towered over Eloise's five foot-seven frame. Eloise was almost unrecognizable tonight because she typically wore baggy clothes and glasses, never wore make-up, and never did anything to style her shoulder-length brown hair other than to make sure it was clean and combed. Sometimes parted from the middle, sometimes from the left or right sides. She really didn't care, which was consistent with her overall disdain for the societal expectations still being placed on women.

Tonight, however, they looked like modern-day Barbie and Ken dolls.

This evening, most of the delegates from around the world gathered to talk about important things and to mingle with genuinely important people, the number of whom was actually very small. Many delegates were the young upwardly mobile early career researchers trying to secure tenure track positions anywhere across the globe.

Most of the delegates had been on the conference circuit for decades, taking advantage of research funding that promoted the use of grant monies to present their work at conferences; a paid vacation for many. Other delegates meanwhile, shocked the event because their presence provided clear evidence that they were still alive; several younger scholars sheepishly admitting after a few wines that they thought doctors Tiddlesburg, Davies, and Prince were dead.

To look at them, you'd think they were.

The formal dinner was coming to an end, which was a great relief as it was a snoozer.

Tom and Eloise's work on the conference was, at this point, pretty much done. They were thrilled, and now with a sense of freedom, spurred in part by fine alcohol, they felt on top of the world.

They sat at their round dinner table with six other delegates and looked at one another as their colleagues sipped their coffees and teas and enjoyed the crème brûlée and fruit. With the slightest nod of agreement and mischievous smiles Tom and Eloise got up from the table, wished everyone a wonderful evening, and snuck out of the ballroom.

They held hands as they skipped down the concrete stairs from the stately, limestone Trudeau Building to the sidewalk.

Eloise said, giggling, ‘Let’s go dancing.’

‘You had me at “Let’s go”,’ Tom replied.

‘SyncPit?’ replied Eloise.

‘Of course,’ said Tom, ‘could it be anywhere else?’

Despite being one of those *serious academics*, when Eloise let her hair down – which wasn’t often – she was the life of the party. She was *the party*.

Tom loved her, would do anything for her. He lived for these moments.

They took a taxi downtown to the SyncPit on Ontario Street, which looked onto Confederation Park and the Basin Marina, at the edge of Lake Ontario. The SyncPit was famous for its round dance floor surrounded by seating booths on one level, above which was another level in the main bar where patrons could watch the dance floor, and yet another viewing level higher surrounding the pit below.

Eloise and Tom found some friends who were sitting in one of the booths that framed the SyncPit. Minutes later, Tom’s song request was called – ‘*Eloise*’ by Barry Ryan. As was custom with any patron’s special request, the Pit was now all Tom’s. When the song started, he leapt to the floor. He put on a dazzling display of *Tom-foolery*, as Eloise called it, lip-synching to the song with his unique choreography wowing the audience, and most importantly, wowing Eloise.

Eloise, in her blue satin dress, alternated between laughing, singing along, and dancing in the booth, which very effectively encouraged Tom to make even more of a fool of himself. It was her song after all. She never got tired of him being an idiot ... *her idiot*.

The place was packed. The crowd loved it.

As the song came to an end Tom slid across the floor on his knees to a waiting Eloise and cheers from everyone at the bar. He pulled off his rented bow-tie and threw it into the crowd. He stood up, bowed, and lifted Eloise off her feet with a huge hug and twirled her around. Another song came on and they danced with everyone else who had now streamed on to the dance floor.

It was an epic night for Tom and Eloise.

They reveled in that perfect moment in relationships when two people are in absolute harmony, and nothing is more important than simply sharing the time with one another.

Magic.

They glided and gyrated all over the dance floor with one another. The music was brilliant; it was one of those nights.

They smiled, they laughed.

Perfect for Tom. Perfect for Eloise.

They did not know, in this frenzied moment of laughter and music and dancing, that tomorrow would bring with it a change in direction that would seem impossible. Ridiculous even.

Sometimes life is like that.