

**The Terrorist Plot
at
Gopherville**

by

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The Terrorist Plot at Gopherville
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Any resemblance between characters in this story and real persons is a coincidence. Honest.

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Chapter the First the Dead Body

Bradshaw was on his usual early morning search for road kill when he found the wreck.

It was a lovely spring morning, with plants about to blossom and deer running in the woods. Only two days before, Bradshaw had found a treasure, enough meat to keep him fed for weeks. It was a young doe, not fully grown, small enough to carry home on his shoulders in one piece, but with plenty of fat. The guts he had fed to Melchizidek the Cat. The hide he had stretched out and scraped dry for tanning; the meat that he couldn't consume in a day or two was slow-smoked over charcoal. All in all, a profitable and honest day's work. Oh, of course Bradshaw knew that eating road kill was technically against the law. But then, so were a lot of other things. And there weren't many cops in this part of the woods. This road was remote

enough so there wasn't much traffic, but people drove fast on it, especially tourists headed for ski lifts. Bradshaw patrolled the road for a mile or two every three or four days. There was hardly a time he didn't find something edible. Certainly, he preferred to take stuff before the buzzards found it, which was why he got out before dawn. In the winter he didn't find as many animals, but what he did find lasted longer.

And then, he often ran across stuff besides edibles. Every now and then, something good would fall off a truck, or somebody would drop something out a car window. Over time, he had constructed a whole other room on his cabin with lumber he'd found on the road, pieces of plywood, two-by-fours, even sheet-rock. Early on a spring day, on a country road, you just never know what you'll find.

This was Tuesday, or at least he thought it was, he didn't really keep track. When he came around the bend at the bottom of the hill, he saw the wrecked car. This wasn't the first time he had encountered wrecks. Usually they were just fender-benders. People drove fast on this road. Two years before, he had saved the lives of a couple tourists by riding his bicycle into town to call an ambulance.

This was the first time he had found someone dead.

There was only one vehicle: a late model BMW, piled up against a tree. The front end didn't look too bad, in fact hardly dented. But as Bradshaw came up around the driver's side, he saw the dead driver. He was sitting up straight, head back, hands in his lap, eyes wide open. There was blood all over. Bradshaw noticed the collapsed air bag in the man's lap. He wondered what had caused all the damage. Then he noticed the bullet holes in the door.

Bradshaw looked all around, taking his time. There were bullet holes in the side, and several in the roof. One of them had gone down through the roof of the car into the man's head. Strange. He tried the car door: It opened, unlocked. The man was middle aged, wearing a sport coat, slacks, no tie. Good quality clothes, expensive shoes. Bradshaw went

through the man's pockets. The only thing he found was a wallet. It contained several credit cards, a driver's license, some cash. Bradshaw pocketed the cash without bothering to count it.

"Don't guess you'll be needing that," he remarked. The license said the man's name was Mark Tiller. There was one other item - a blue card laminated in plastic with Tiller's picture and fingerprint. It identified him as an employee of some outfit called Faustus Laboratories, Inc. The card had a magnetic strip down one edge. Bradshaw put the wallet, minus cash, back in Tiller's pocket.

"That you, Oscar?" he said, having just heard a familiar clearing of throat behind him. He turned around. Oscar was standing there watching him. Oscar rarely spoke, unless he had something really important to say.

Oscar was a gnome. He usually wore brown-colored bib overalls and work boots. His black beard hung to his waist. Sometimes he carried a hammer or a pick. One day he had followed Bradshaw home from the old mine shaft up in the hills. He had been hanging around ever since. His head came up to about Bradshaw's chest.

"Tell you what we're going to do," Bradshaw said. "There's no point in getting the Sheriff all upset about this. But this fellow does deserve a decent burial. So we're gonna go on back to the cabin and fetch Bozo." Bozo was the mule.

"We're gonna take this poor fella up on top of the hill and bury him right. I'll even make him a little head stone that will say, 'Mark Tiller, RIP.' How's that sound?"

"But before I do that, I'm gonna bring Bozo back here, hitch up the car, and tow it on up to the barn. You know that Mr Samuel Goody, down in town? No, I forgot, you hardly ever go in town. Anyhow, Sam buys good used auto parts from me, stuff I find on the road. I bet he gives me twenty bucks easy for the stereo. I think I can get ten for just the ignition module. I'm gonna take that vehicle apart and

sell her one piece at a time. No point in letting her go to waste, is there? Why, I can winch out the engine block and have Bozo haul that into town on the donkey cart.

"Now, don't go giving me that look. It's not like I'm greedy for money. I don't even need money. Do I ever buy anything, except clothes at the thrift store now and then? And maybe some books. It's not the money, it's just I hate to see things go to waste, and you never know... Oh, forget it."

Oscar was silently shaking his head. Bradshaw noticed something else just then. A small black object sticking out from under the driver's seat. He reached down and picked it up, just as he heard the sound.

"Uh-oh." He knew that sound. A distant clop-clop sound. Helicopter.

"Better make ourselves scarce," he said to Oscar, but the gnome had already vanished. Bradshaw tucked the black object under his arm and slipped into the woods. He didn't go far, merely climbing the hillside a ways, until he could conceal himself behind a bush and observe without being seen.

The helicopter came down in the road, in a wide space not far from the wrecked car. The chopper was black and unmarked. Two men got out; they both wore black suits and mirror sunglasses. One of them shouted to the other, across the road:

"Are you sure they got this road shut down?"

"Sheriff swears to it," the other answered. "There's not much traffic this time of year anyway. Nobody's been here."

After that, the two men stood closer to each other. If they said anything, Bradshaw couldn't hear. They messed around the wrecked car for awhile, apparently looking for something. They even pulled out the back seat.

After a few minutes, a tow truck pulled in. It was the regular AAA truck that Bradshaw recognized as belonging to Sam Goody.

"Well, not much point in hanging around," Bradshaw said. He said that to Oscar, but Oscar seemed to be gone. Bradshaw wasn't quite sure. Sometimes he could see Oscar only out of the corner of his eyes. He shrugged and started up the hill.

* * * *

One of the men from the helicopter was named Carl. He spoke in low tones so the tow truck driver wouldn't overhear.

"I still don't see why you couldn't land last night. We woulda been home by now."

The other man was named Jim. At least that was the name he used.

"I explained that," he said. "If I hit an overhead wire or a tree branch in the dark, that's all she wrote."

Carl glanced overhead.

"I don't see no overhead wires."

'Yeah, well I didn't know that in the dark. Wires don't always show up in landing lights. Look, I'm the pilot, you're the shooter. You stick to your job, let me do mine, okay?"

Carl got a body bag out of the chopper; Jim helped him zip up the victim.

"The item isn't here. Somebody might have grabbed it before we got here."

"No way," Jim snorted. "There's nobody out here. Not another house in twenty miles, I checked the database. We had this road closed five minutes after the hit. Road blocks at each end, nobody came in or out. He must have concealed the item somewhere in the car, maybe inside the gas tank or something. We'll find it."

"Wonder what's so important about it anyway?" They loaded the body into the cargo compartment of the helicopter.

"The item?" Jim said. "Hey, if I told you that, I'd have to kill you. I always wanted to say that. Damn if I know, don't care, don't wanna know. Faustus Labs and Homeland Security both want it back real bad, that's all I know. They'll

find it, they'll take the car apart one bolt at a time till they do. Go, take off now. I'm riding back with the tow truck so I can keep an eye on things."

* * * *

Bradshaw made his way up a concealed deer trail that crossed a path that led up to his barn. He made sure Bozo was happy, then walked around a bit to make sure the critters were not getting into his vegetable garden. Then he went inside his cabin. The cabin had begun life long ago as an Airstream trailer. Then Bradshaw had got hold of some lumber and built a room attached to the front door. Then, later he had built a bigger room onto that one. This room he called his study, or den. With a wood-burning stove, it was the warmest room during the winter. Bradshaw had figured out how to use old newspapers soaked in baking soda as insulation. He was currently working on yet another room, unattached to the others. He was beginning to think of the place as more of a rambling mansion than a cabin.

Bradshaw went into the study, tossing the thing he'd found in the wreck onto his dining table/desk.

Melchizidek was curled atop a bookcase, his favorite perch. He said, "You went off and forgot my breakfast again, Brad."

Everyone who knew him never called him anything but Brad. His real name was Dr Thomas Aloysius Bradshaw III. Not many knew his first name, and hardly any the Doctor part.

"I know, I know," he said to the cat. "Give me a break, nobody's perfect. Matter of fact, I'm hungry myself. How about some of that good leftover squirrel stew? Hey, don't complain, if you were living in town you'd be getting canned Kitty Feast every day."

"Yum," Melchizidek said.

The stew still smelled edible, so Bradshaw fired up some wood in the stove and put a kettle on to simmer. While it was heating, he told Melchizidek all about what he had seen that morning.

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