

Welcome

The purpose of this website is for me to share my new novel, "The Butler Did It", with YOU! Whether you are a casual reader or a professional publisher, I hope you enjoy my story.

You can find the novel, divided into chapters, on the navigation bar to the left, as well as information about me and the novel above. Please provide me with some comments after you have read the story.

Respectfully,

Gregory Darone
"The Author"

News!

January 16, 2005: It has recently come to my attention that "The Butler Did It" is already the name of several novels already in print. "The Butler Did It", by P.G. Wodehouse (published in 1957) and "The Butler Did It", by Kasey Michaels (published in 2004). Oops! I guess I forgot to do my homework before I titled my own novel. I'm not looking to attract the wrath of other (published) authors, so I guess I will need to change the title of my novel. In the mean time, it will stay as is.

Chapter Summary

Perhaps you are a very busy publisher looking for a new manuscript to publish and you want a quick rundown of "The Butler Did It"... If this is the case, look no further! I've summarized each chapter for your browsing convenience.

If you are a pleasure reader, however, I must warn you that reading the chapter summaries will definitely ruin the surprises contained in my novel. Pleasure readers can be busy too, though, so maybe this will give you a good idea of some choice chapters to read in your spare time.

Chapter 1: Monica surprises Jared with a train ticket and invitation to a weekend writing retreat hosted by the famous mystery author, Tracy Gold. Jared protests, but eventually gives in to Monica's powerful negotiation tactics. Jared takes the train from Boston to Newark, then takes a taxi from Newark to Chesapeake City and arrives at the monstrous Gold Mansion.

Chapter 2: Jared is welcomed by the butler, Percy, and is escorted to the lounge. Here he meets the maid, Claudine, as well as the other guests. Once everyone has arrived, Tracy Gold makes a glamorous appearance and invites them all to the dining room for dinner.

Chapter 3: The guests take their seats at the table and make small talk while waiting for Tracy. She arrives and soon the cook, Zhang Shifu, begins serving dinner. The topics of murder and dead bodies arise, causing Estelle to get sick. After dinner, Tracy instructs the guests to accompany her in the study to take care of some legal technicalities. On the way to the study, Claudine grabs Jared and pulls him aside.

Chapter 4: In the hallway, Claudine warns Jared that he is in danger, but refuses to speak further on the matter. Jared joins the rest in the study. Tracy distributes release forms for all the guests to sign. Reluctantly, everyone signs the forms, and then Tracy explains that they have all been locked in the mansion until 8am on Sunday by means of time-locks bolted to the outside doors. Upon realizing that she is sealed in the mansion, Silvia faints and the Doctor revives her. Tracy then requests that all the guests join her in the lounge.

Chapter 5: Tracy lectures about the difficulties of writing a good mystery novel, then challenges the guests to come up with very creative methods of murder. After everyone has described an interesting murder situation, Tracy distributes gifts of weapons to each guest: A samurai sword for Charles, an antique revolver for Estelle, a Hutu war-club for the Commodore, a candlestick for Jared, a

scalpel and bottle of chloroform for the Doctor, and a bottle of cyanide tablets for Silvia. Tracy gives herself a noose. Tracy then instructs the guests to each write a short mystery story that makes use of the mansion and their own particular weapon.

Chapter 6: The guests spread out in the lounge and begin writing. Estelle leaves to explore the mansion. Jared has writer's block and also leaves to find some inspiration. He walks across the hall to the music room and finds his muse. He quickly returns to the lounge and starts writing his story.

Chapter 7: (Jared's Mystery Story) Inspector Perrot Le Fou and Doctor David Quincy arrive at the Banks' Mansion to investigate the murder of Mrs. Banks. After finding several clues that implicate him in the lounge and music room, Perrot confronts Mr. Banks in the study. Banks confesses and is arrested by Captain Tenneil and the other police officers on hand. Jared finds himself alone in the lounge. He decides to go to sleep.

Chapter 8: Jared realizes that he has misplaced his candlestick and goes to the music room to search for it. He doesn't find it there, and asks Percy if he has seen it. Unfortunately, Percy hadn't, and shows Jared to his bedroom. Jared takes a shower and prepares for bed, and then discovers Claudine waiting for him in his room. She explains that Tracy is crazy and that her intentions for hosting the writing workshop is to have one of the guests kill someone so that she can write about it in her next mystery novel. Jared and Claudine agree to help protect each other. They succumb to desire and their passions rise as the lights fall.

Chapter 9: Jared awakes in the middle of the night and finds that Claudine is gone, then awakes in the morning and discovers that he is covered in blood. He washes off the blood then goes down to breakfast with the other guests. Jared's appetite is nonexistent and soon he feels sick and excuses himself to go to the bathroom. He meets Claudine on the stairs, but she has to go wake Tracy. Jared throws up in the bathroom and hears a scream.

Chapter 10: Claudine runs down the stairs screaming and collides with Jared. The other guests find them covered in blood and Claudine explains that Tracy has been murdered! The Doctor makes a rough diagnosis of the cause and time of death. Charles decides to leave the mansion, but is unable to open the front door. Percy suggests they try looking for a key in the safe in the study. Percy and Charles find the safe open, and the keys along with the 9 million dollar Gold fortune missing.

Chapter 11: All the guests convene in the lounge to discuss the murder. The guests begin accusing each other. Then, they realize that there is one more person in the mansion, the cook. They rush to the kitchen and find that the cook has been murdered, too! The guests all return to the lounge.

Chapter 12: Since they were all together while the cook was murdered, they decide that there must be another person in the mansion. The Commodore suggests that they try to apprehend the killer. Several of the guests don't have their weapons with them, so they all creep back to the kitchen to find some knives and other weapons.

Chapter 13: Upon returning to the lounge, the Commodore suggests they begin searching the mansion. Jared points out a flaw in the Commodore's plan, and they realize they must split up and search the mansion all at once. Jared, Charles, and Percy dash to the study to retrieve blueprints of the mansion. Jared learns about the missing money and is upset at Charles. While those three are gone, the Doctor serves drinks and gets Silvia drunk. When they return, Charles tells everyone about the 9 million dollars. The Commodore divides the 8 of them into 4 search parties to cover each of the 4 floors of the mansion.

Chapter 14: The Doctor and Silvia prepare to search the basement, but decide to try to avoid the killer instead. Estelle and Charles argue about who will go up the stairs first. Jared and Claudine stay in the lounge and discuss why Claudine left him the previous night, and why he awoke covered in blood that morning. The Commodore and Percy open the door to the attic and the Commodore shatters his own kneecap with his war-club.

Chapter 15: The Doctor and Silvia find a chest full of dresses and a jukebox. They make out on a couch in the basement. Estelle and Charles retrieve her revolver from her room, then go to Jared's room to do some snooping. They discover blood in the sink and bathtub, then decide to take a nap in Estelle's room. On the way there, they notice that Tracy's room has been cleaned, and that Tracy's body is missing. Jared and Claudine go to the kitchen to make some dinner for everyone and discover that Zhang Shifu's body is gone as well. They rush back to the lounge with a picnic basket full of Mexican food. The Commodore and Percy search the attic but don't find the killer. Percy notices something but doesn't tell the Commodore. The electricity goes out in the mansion, and everyone rushes back to the safety of the lounge.

Chapter 16: The guests all discuss their failures in finding the killer and Percy serves them all the food that Jared and Claudine brought from the kitchen. The food has been drugged and everyone, except Percy, falls asleep. When they awake, it is already 8:10am, and the front door to the mansion is open and the killer has escaped.

Chapter 17: The food has been poisoned and everyone, except Percy, falls asleep. When they awake it is 7:50am, and they rush to the front door to find Percy with the 9 million dollars and Estelle's revolver. He admits to killing Tracy but is confused as to who killed the cook. At 8am, the door opens and two police officers attempt to arrest Percy. He shoots one with the revolver and runs for the car. The Commodore brings him down with his war-club. The guests rush over to the police officer and discover that it is Tracy. The other officer is the cook, Zhang Shifu. Tracy explains that she faked her own death so the guests would have something to write about, then distributes pen and paper for them to start writing.

Chapter One

“I don’t want to go,” Jared muttered. He tossed the brochure for the writer’s workshop on the coffee table and flopped onto the black leather couch. His long, thin fingers massaged his black goatee. Jared looked at his girlfriend, Monica, sternly as she stood over him, arms akimbo. “Damn, she is beautiful,” he thought. The way the light from the Dilbert lamp on the end table caught her features stirred something deep in his soul as he gazed at her.

“You have to go. I’ve already paid for your train ticket,” Monica protested.

“Okay, first of all, I don’t have to do anything. I can sit here and not go. Second of all, why did you go ahead and buy me a ticket without even asking me first?”

“Because I knew you wouldn’t go if I asked you first. That’s why.”

“Well, you’re right.”

“Look,” Monica pleaded. “Just go. I’m sure you’ll have fun. Besides, what else are you going to do this weekend? I won’t be back from the conference in New York until Sunday evening. Leaving you alone for three whole days could be a recipe for disaster.”

“You say that like I’m gonna burn the place down while you’re away,” Jared said with a sneer. Monica’s research lab at Boston University sent her to a symposium or conference almost every other month. As the leading researcher in the effects of injecting rattlesnake venom into the root systems of soybean plants, she was somewhat of an icon among her colleagues. As much as he loved her, however, Jared really didn’t appreciate her work. In his eyes, the cure for cancer was still out there, and his brilliant girlfriend was busy poisoning tofu plants. “I’m perfectly capable of finding something fun to do while you’re gone on your big conference in the Big Apple, thank you very much,” he countered.

“Yeah, right. Just like last time, right? The last time I left you home for the weekend I came home and found you passed out under a pile of pizza boxes.”

“Hey, I had a great time that weekend. And did you know that if you give the delivery guy an extra dollar or two, he’ll even bring the pizza right to the couch? Of course, you have to leave the front door unlocked so he can come in. One time he even woke me up when he delivered the pizza. Of course, I’m not really sure I ordered anything tha...”

“Jared, sweetie. You’ve gotta get out of this funk you’re in. It’s been how many months

since you lost your job?”

“I did not lose my job. I quit. They lost me. Okay?”

“Well, while they are mourning the loss of Jared Price, computer programmer extraordinaire, we’re mourning the loss of that nice income you used to bring in. I can’t support us forever, sweetie.”

“I know. And that’s exactly why you shouldn’t be buying me train tickets to go on some stupid writer’s workshop retreat. We need to save our money.”

“Sweetie, when you quit your job at Gore you said you wanted to focus more on your writing. You said you wanted to finally pen your magnum opus. Your epic story. Well, it’s been three months and what have you written? I haven’t seen you write anything.”

“I’ve got a title. And I’ve worked on a few character outlines. And I’ve got an idea for the plot. It’s going to be a murder mystery. You’ve seen me working on it,” Jared retorted.

“I’ve seen you playing solitaire.”

“Which is how I clear my head between my fits of creativity!”

“Sweetie,” Monica cooed as she slowly straddled his reclining body on the couch. Her long blonde tresses fell seductively across his chest as she gently leaned forward. With one hand, she grasped the waistline of Jared’s blue jeans. The other hand combed through his wavy black hair. She leaned in closer and closer until her lips were barely touching his earlobe. “Sweetie,” she whispered in her most sultry voice. “If you don’t go on this weekend, you’re going to be playing a lot more solitaire. And I don’t mean the card game.”

“Ouch,” Jared thought. “She means business.” There were two ways to Jared’s heart, and both of them resided in his pants. Monica was a wonderful cook, and Jared’s love of food was how he met her. While he was studying at the University of Delaware for his master’s degree in Management Information Systems, he would often spend his afternoons relaxing at the HomeGrown Café. Unlike the rest of the coffeehouses in Newark, with their standard selections of coffee and biscotti, HomeGrown catered to the more refined palette. All organic-grown vegetables, exotic fruits, and robust coffees from far-off vistas comprised the menu there. The prices were steep, but it was worth it to a real connoisseur like Jared. To make the atmosphere seem even more inclusive, the kitchen was enclosed with huge windows so that the customers could see the chefs at work. Monica had been working as one of the chefs there while at the same time working on her doctorate in Botany

at the university. After several months of glimpsing her as she fluttered back and forth in the kitchen, Jared finally got up the nerve to ask the Aphrodite-like beauty out. Surprisingly, she agreed. A romance filled with a passion for food, and a hunger for passion quickly grew between them.

The second, more direct way, to his heart, however, was in jeopardy now as Monica threatened him with a sexual drought that could last who knows how long. The last time he had gotten her this mad, she wouldn't even let him touch her for three weeks.

"Oh, baby," Jared whimpered, suddenly becoming eager to acquiesce to her whims. "You don't really mean that, do you?"

"Jared," she said in a firm, motherly tone. "Do you remember last August?"

"Yes, baby," Jared winced, distinctly remembering those long nights alone on the couch. His back still ached from sleeping on that three-cushion torture rack.

"Well, I was just playing around that time. I'm serious this time," Monica warned. Her violet eyes pierced his with cold sincerity. He knew the game was up. There was no avoiding it now. He would have to go on the weekend retreat.

"Baby, you know I love you," he tried in one last vane attempt to wriggle out of going to the writing workshop.

"Jared..."

"All right. All right. I'll go. But I won't like it," he mumbled dejectedly.

She was suddenly filled with bubbly enthusiasm, and Monica planted a sloppy kiss on his defeated face and embraced him with amorous vigor. "Oh, I knew you'd come around eventually! And, because you're so excited about going, I've even got a present for you." She dismounted Jared's prone body with catlike grace and sauntered over to her purse on the kitchen table. From the depths of the bottomless pit she called her 'purse', Monica withdrew a small wrapped package and tossed it to Jared. It hit him in the chest and fell to the floor. "Look, I know you hate surprises, so I'll spare you the horror of wondering what it is before you open it. Actually, I wouldn't have wrapped it, but it was free gift-wrapping day at Borders. They are really getting an early start on the holiday season this year."

Jared bent over and picked up the mystery gift. "It's a book," he said flatly.

"See, your murder mystery writing brain cells are starting to work already!"

“If you bought me Tracy G...”

“It’s Tracy Gold’s newest book! I figured if you were going to go to her mystery writer’s workshop, you should read her latest bestseller.”

“Christ, Monica! I’ve already told you I’ll go on the writing workshop thingy. Don’t make me read this trash,” Jared pleaded with exasperation.

“You don’t like it?” she said feigning disappointment. Actually, Monica was acutely aware of Jared’s dislike for Tracy Gold and her canon of mystery novels. On their first Christmas together, she bought him one of Tracy Gold’s then-popular mysteries. After reading the first three chapters, he declared it unfit for consumption by the human eye and promptly deposited it on the bookshelf to collect dust. Since then, as a joke, she has bought him another of Gold’s novels each Christmas. As a result, the bookshelf has since accumulated a sizeable Tracy Gold section, much to Jared’s dismay and Monica’s amusement.

“Monica, her writing is absolute crap. It’s too predictable. Every one of her stories reads like a game of Clue. The butler did it, with the monkey wrench, in the lounge.”

“She seems to be selling a lot of this crap, though, doesn’t she? Maybe you can learn something from her. Her weekend seminar promises to bring out the hidden mystery writer in you.”

“She sells a lot of books because the American public is a bunch of idiots that will read anything,” Jared countered and ripped off the Christmas wrapping paper. His jaw dropped as he read the dripping blood red words on the black cover of Tracy Gold’s latest masterpiece. “Jesus, do you see what I’m saying?” he said holding the book up for Monica to see.

““The Butler Did It”. I think it’s a catchy title. You see, then you don’t suspect the butler, because that would be too obvious. And if he did do it, and you do suspect...”

““The Butler Did It”. Who names a book, “The Butler Did It”? Honestly. You know, I’ll bet you a hundred dollars that the butler did do it, and that Tracy Gold has finally lost the last shred of creativity she had as a writer.”

“Well, you’ll never know unless you read it. And, I guess you’ll have plenty of time to kill on the train to Newark tomorrow morning. I think we should leave here around seven if we want to be at the station by seven-thirty,” she said biting her fingernail.

“If you’re gonna torture me with this, couldn’t you have at least gotten me the paperback

version?”

“Why?”

“That way I could’ve at least used it as a moderately comfortable pillow,” Jared smiled as he got up and pulled her into the bedroom.

Monica shifted the car into park and turned to look at the glum-faced Jared. He looked like a boy who had just been told that Santa Claus wasn’t real. “Cheer up. I’ll meet you here at the station Sunday night.”

“There’s really no way of talking you out of making me do this, is there?” he tried again for the fifth time that morning.

“Nope. I’m going to sit here, watch you get on the train, and watch it leave the station. If you want, I’ll even get out and wave a pink handkerchief as you pull away. It will be so romantic,” she chimed with sarcastic gleefulness.

“You don’t trust me! You think I’d get off the train before it left?”

“You’re damn right I don’t trust you. Now get out of here!” Monica leaned over to the passenger side of the car and kissed Jared on the lips. Her strawberry lip-gloss mingled with his mint-flavored Scope breath in an intoxicating brew of saliva and air that made Jared forget his sadness for the moment. She pulled away. He sat there breathless, eyes closed in sweet ecstasy. “God, I love this woman,” he thought. After a minute, he came to his senses and looked at Monica. She was pointing to her watch.

“All right. I’m going already,” he said as he opened the door, climbed out of the Honda Civic, and hefted his bag onto his shoulder. He walked around the front of the car and came around to the driver’s side. Monica rolled down the window.

“Yes, sweetie?”

“Why is it that I’m taking the train and you get the car again?”

“Well, I have this little thing called a job, sweetie. See, I work, and I buy gas to put in this car. So, because I love you so much, I’m going to brave the horrors of New York traffic while you nap comfortably on the train. Isn’t that so kind of me?” she said with a smile.

“So kind. I keep forgetting how much you love me. How about another kiss for the road?”

Jared asked as he leaned in towards the open window.

The window nearly chopped Jared's head off. He withdrew his head just in time as the glass began rapidly rising as Monica pushed the button on the door. "Sorry, there's a one farewell kiss limit in this parking lot. I saw the sign over there by the ticket booth. You'll just have to wait until Sunday when you come back," she said coyly.

"Well, then you'd better be ready on Sunday, because I'll be thinking about you all weekend," Jared said in his sweetest voice.

"Oh, I think I'm getting a tingle in my bottom already. Just try to learn something this weekend. Okay, Don Juan?"

"Okay," Jared turned and walked towards the platform. It was November, and the cool Boston air chilled his face. He stroked his goatee and climbed aboard the train. Within minutes, he was seated in the dining car sipping a mug of piping hot Arabica coffee. He didn't even notice as the train started moving and pulled away from the station.

The fiery red and golden leaves of New England whizzed past the window of the train as it traveled south. Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, and Pennsylvania became just memories as the tracks led further south. Finally, the train crossed over its final state line into Delaware and thirty minutes later it rolled to a stop at the Newark train station. Jared opened his eyes and glanced at his watch. It was nearly three forty-five. He fished around in the front left pocket of his black leather jacket and pulled out the brochure.

"You are cordially invited to dinner at the Gold Mansion this November 4th, 2004 at 5pm sharp," he read aloud. Printed beneath the text was a gold embossed drawing of a revolver and a magnifying glass. "Jesus, it's enough to make you want to shoot yourself in the head," Jared grumbled, rolling his eyes. "Well, I guess I'd better get moving if I don't want to be late for dinner."

With his duffle bag in hand, Jared hopped down the steps of the train car and inhaled a deep breath of the brisk Newark air. Wearing black leather boots, blue jeans, and an ivory colored knit-wool sweater underneath his button-down black leather jacket, he felt quite comfortable despite the light breeze. Standing slightly under six feet tall and weighing about one hundred and eighty-five pounds, Jared was definitely not the pinnacle of fitness, though he somehow managed to stay in

relatively good shape. He ate everything he saw and rarely exercised, but never seemed to pack on the pounds. Monica, of course, mock despised him for this genetic blessing. “It’s just not fair that someone as lazy as you can stay thin, while I have to bust my butt every day at the gym to look this good,” she would tease. After five years of living together, Jared had learned to avoid this topic when possible, as it usually ended with Monica throwing away all of the junk food in the house in some sort of house-cleansing ritual.

“Ah... It’s good to be home,” Jared sighed as he took in the Newark landscape. A Delaware native, he had grown up in Newark as a child before his family moved south to live below the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal in Middletown. Later, he had returned to Newark to go to college at the University of Delaware for both his bachelor’s and master’s degrees. He called a cab and within a few minutes was riding through Newark on his way to Chesapeake City.

The city of Newark was a true college town. During the school year, its population nearly doubled as twenty-five thousand students flooded its streets and low-rent apartment complexes. The University of Delaware sprawled across the city, reaching its blue and gold fingers into every corner and alleyway. The focal point of Newark was Main Street, a mile-long strip of pavement lined with countless pizza parlors, bars, coffeehouses, and clothing boutiques. Students bustled up and down Main Street, shopping, eating, and walking to class. Jared fondly remembered the late night runs to Cluck-U for hot wings with his roommate, Brian, and the early mornings spent at Newark Bagels for bagels with lox and coffee. Although he hadn’t been in Newark for almost a year, Jared was comforted to see that the house band, Corduroy, was still playing every Thursday at the Deer Park Tavern, that Monday nights were still “80’s Night” at Klondike Kate’s Bar, and that the old three-screen movie theatre he used to work part-time at was still in business.

“I guess some things never change.”

“What’s that, kid?” the cabdriver asked, interrupting Jared’s nostalgic reverie.

“Oh, nothing,” Jared replied looking more closely at the octogenarian driver. “He might be the oldest cabdriver I’ve ever seen,” Jared thought. “I just used to live here. That’s all.”

“What’s that, son? I’m a little deaf in my right ear.”

“This is my alma mater,” Jared answered, raising his voice slightly.

“Huh? Speak up, son.”

“I’m having sex with your daughter,” Jared called back with a devilish grin.

“Oh, that’s wonderful. I’m from Newark, too,” the driver smiled back at Jared in the rearview mirror. His toothless grin and squinting wrinkled eyes reminded Jared of the pumpkin that he and Monica had carved just days before for Halloween.

A twinge of regret filled Jared’s heart as he rode past all his old college haunts and he wished that he had time to stop and visit his old friends and professors at the university. But, there was no time, Jared thought, as he looked at his watch again. It was four-fifteen. Luckily, it was only a twenty-five minute drive to Chesapeake City from Newark.

The busy suburbs of Newark soon gave way to the sleepy suburbs of Elkton as the cab crossed over the state line into Maryland. Geographically, Newark and Elkton are directly adjacent. Culturally, however, they could not be farther apart. Crossing the state line was something Jared had done plenty of times in his college days. Mostly, it was to make beer runs to Elkton’s StateLine Liquors, which sold beer on Sundays while all the Delaware liquor stores were closed. But, he had never really noticed the stark difference between the two cities. Newark was a fast-paced college town with students, fraternities, and nightlife. Elkton was a small town with a Wal-Mart. Jared almost made a comment about this new observation to the driver, but decided that while he could probably have some more fun with him, any real conversation would be impossible. The rest of the drive proceeded in silence.

As they neared Chesapeake City, Jared felt a pang of homesickness. His family had moved to Middletown when he was in middle school to escape the dismal school system in Newark and enjoy the relaxed life of country living. His parents and little sister lived on a farm only two miles from Chesapeake City, just across the state line in Delaware. Since moving to Boston for Monica’s research at Boston University four years ago, he only came to visit his family during the holidays. He didn’t have time to visit them now, but perhaps he would stop by on the way home. “The train back to Boston wasn’t scheduled to leave until noon on Sunday, and this ridiculous retreat was to conclude sometime Sunday morning. Maybe I can drop by the house and get Mom to make me some cream-chipped beef for brunch,” Jared thought with a hunger growing instantly in his growling stomach.

If Elkton was Newark’s country-bumpkin little brother, then Chesapeake City was Elkton’s gaudy seafaring little sister. Built on the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal, Chesapeake City

reminded Jared of the small fishing villages that lined Cape Cod in the north. It was split into two sections, divided by the canal and joined by a narrow two-lane bridge. The north section contained some houses and a huge Presbyterian church whose steeple stretched up into the sky. Besides that, there was nothing interesting except for the over-priced seafood restaurant, Schaffer's Canal House. The south section contained a large marina filled with fishing boats and luxury yachts, sheltered from the huge container ships that traveled the canal from Baltimore to Philadelphia. The houses in the town were all nearly two hundred years old, and the residents of Chesapeake City found great delight in painting their homes the most god-awful shades of pink, purple, peach, and puce. There was only one traffic light, and it was located right in front of the Town Hall. This tiny building served as not only the Mayor's office, but also as the post office, the police station, and the jail. There were no real businesses to be found in Chesapeake City, just a few small bed and breakfasts, some craft shops, and a handful of bait stores. In his high school days, Jared would often ride his bicycle to Chesapeake City on the weekends and go fishing from the docks in the marina. On Sundays, the Bohemia Inn, a small diner located across the street from the Tap Room bar and package store, had a bottomless cup of coffee and all-you-can-eat breakfast buffet with the best pancakes Jared had ever tasted. But, for all the visits Jared had made to Chesapeake City in his youth, he had never known that the millionaire author, Tracy Gold, held a residence there.

The cab made its way across the steep bridge to the south section and the driver drove slowly through the fifteen mile-per-hour streets. At Front Street, he turned right and started down a small dirt road leading away from the center of town and toward its western edge near the canal. Jared had never been to this part of town, and decided that this wooded area could easily hide a mansion. "That's probably why I never knew about this place," he thought. After a five-minute drive down the tree-lined dirt road, they came to a clearing and found themselves before the Gold Mansion.

"That'll be \$18.50, son," the cabdriver announced as he put the car in park. Jared stared out the window in disbelief and fumbled for his wallet. He gave the driver a twenty and climbed out of the cab. As the cab pulled away in a cloud of dust, Jared stood riveted. He couldn't take his eyes off the mansion.

The Gold Mansion was huge. It was huge, and it was ugly. It was a three-story behemoth whose architect must have decided to change construction plans halfway through building it. The

front of the mansion was a decidedly Victorian style. A long covered front porch graced the entrance. Massive windows with crosshatched windowpanes dotted the front facade. The roof was home to several decorative rectangular chimneys. On the western corner, a tall spire with a conical roof stood like a beacon for lost ships sailing down the canal in the night. The back of the mansion, or at least what Jared could see from his vantage point, appeared to be some sort of gothic revival. Flying buttresses held an enormous pointed roof aloft, while the classic pointed gothic-style windows lined the gray granite walls. Ivy climbed up the walls and stopped just before reaching the menacing gargoyles that stood watch over the mansion from the rooftop. The front yard was decorated with lovely topiaries and rosebushes along the walkway to the front door. A perfectly manicured lawn surrounded the slate walkway and small lanterns were positioned at ten-foot intervals on either side. In the rear of the mansion, Jared saw a large dead oak whose branches reached out, swaying in the breeze. Although it was still daylight, the backyard seemed colder and darker than the front, and he thought he spied some gravestones peeking above the high stone wall that separated the two yards.

“Man, I don’t know whether to laugh, or be scared,” Jared whispered to himself. “This place is creepy.” He walked up the path to the front porch and ascended the white marble steps. There was a set of huge double doors centered at the top of the stairs and a long chain hung beside the left door. The handle of the chain was a tarnished copper hand. Hesitantly, Jared grasped the handle, as if he were shaking the green hand, and pulled down. A soft ringing could be heard on the other side of the door. After a few moments, the left door opened and an old man emerged. He was dressed in a coat and tails, and his wispy white hair and sunken face indicated that he was approaching seventy. “This must be the butler,” Jared thought. “He did it. That’s the name of her latest book,” he thought, remembering the ridiculous new paperweight that Monica had given him the night before.

“Master Price, I presume. So glad you could join us tonight. Please, come in,” the man beckoned. Jared nodded at the butler and stepped into the foyer.

Chapter Two

As peculiar as the mansion's exterior was, its interior was equally as impressive. Jared stood at the doorway and took in its grace. The main hall was elliptical with a floor finished with black and white parquet tile in a spiral pattern. Deep mahogany paneling rose from the floor terminating in a waist-high ledge that circumnavigated the room. Marble busts of obscure historic personages rested upon the ledge, giving Jared the feeling that a dozen eyes were staring at him. The left and right sides of the room were constructed identically, with two sets of equally spaced double doors breaking the continuity of the mahogany ledge on each side. They obviously led to other rooms, though Jared could hardly imagine what each contained specifically. Occupying one focus of the hall, a massive staircase led to the second floor. At the top of the staircase was a large opening that led to the master bedroom, Jared guessed. On either side of the staircase, a hallway led further back into the house. The staircase's graceful curves drew the eye upward to the second floor and then to the vaulted ceiling which was painted to resemble the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. At the apex, where God and Man met finger to finger, hung a crystal chandelier. The second floor was laid out much like the first floor, though with more of a horseshoe design. Extending from the top of the staircase railing was a balcony that nearly encircled the whole room, only ending above the main entrance where Jared stood. The same mahogany paneling and waist-high railing adorned the balcony to prevent someone from strolling leisurely off the second floor to their doom. Like the first floor, two hallways flanking the master bedroom extended to more distant rooms. With so much dark wood, the mansion would have been quite dark were it not for the dozens of gas-fueled candelabras mounted on the walls of the main hall at regular intervals. They cast a warm, steady glow over the entire hall.

"May I please take your coat and bag, Master Price?" the old man inquired in a lilting British accent.

"Sure. Uh, but you can just call me Jared," Jared responded in a daze, still impressed by the elegant luxury of the mansion. He had seen mansions on TV and in the movies plenty of times, but had never had the opportunity to visit one first-hand. "So this is what it's like to be filthy rich," he thought. "I have got to get me one of these."

"As you wish, Master Price."

"I'm sorry. I didn't catch your name," Jared said as he shrugged off his jacket and handed it

and his duffle bag to the man.

“My name is Percy, and I am Madame Gold’s butler.”

“Of course. Well, it’s nice to meet you, Percy.”

“I assure you, Master Price, the pleasure is all mine.” There was an awkward silence for a moment as the two men stared at each other.

“So, what exactly do you do, Percy?” Jared asked breaking the silence.

“I maintain the mansion’s interior and keep all the rooms neat and tidy. For this special weekend, I will also be seeing that all of our guests are properly accommodated and taken care of. If you should need anything, please don’t hesitate to ask me, Master Price,” answered Percy with the same lilting tone.

“Will do.”

“Now, if you would be so kind as to accompany me to the lounge. You can warm yourself and get acquainted with the other guests there.”

The second set of doors on the right of the hall turned out to be the lounge. As soon as Jared entered, he was immediately accosted by a tall, thin man, ramrod straight and dressed in the red uniform of a naval officer. Gold braids adorned his shoulders and several medals hung from his chest. The man addressed Jared squarely, looking off into the distance above Jared’s forehead, then clicked the heels of his perfectly polished black leather oxfords and raised his right arm in a stiff salute.

“Commodore Bernhard Griffon, her Majesty’s Royal Navy, 6th Corvette Division, the pride of her fleet and nation, a true son of England,” he sounded off with a booming British accent. Like a statue, he stood there, immobile. He was waiting for something.

Jared stood transfixed for a moment, then regaining his cool, he popped to attention and gave an exaggerated salute in return.

“Colonel Jared Price, his apartment’s chief vegetable chopper, 3rd 5th Mustard Regiment, skilled with a paring knife and envied for his chocolate chip cookies, the only son of his parents,” he called back with mock-seriousness while trying to contain a smile.

“Good. Good. It’s so nice to have another military man in this adventure. Why you look

positively chilled to the bone.”

“Actually, I’m quite fine,” Jared responded.

“Nonsense! I’ve seen wharf rats in Liverpool with more meat under their hides. You’re nearly shivering. Let’s get you a drink, shall we?” Commodore Griffon raised his hand aloft then grasped Jared by the shoulder and led him closer to the roaring fire that was burning in the great fireplace on the left side of the lounge.

Jared wasn’t exactly sure whether being compared to a wharf rat was a compliment or an insult, but he didn’t have time to contemplate it for very long, because his thoughts were interrupted as his nostrils detected a sweet vanilla scent emanating from behind him. He turned around and nearly knocked over the tall woman standing behind him.

“Would Monsieur care for a drink?” the woman asked in a coquettish French accent. She stood nearly six feet tall, with emerald eyes and luxurious ruby hair pulled back in a bun. In her hair, she wore a frilly white cap, and her chest was nearly bursting out of her uniform. The black and white outfit ended in a short skirt that barely concealed a ruffled slip and the longest legs Jared had ever seen. Remembering to close his mouth, as it had dropped open at the sight of this heavenly visage, he flashed a debonair smile.

“Only if I can have your name first,” he said in his most romantic voice.

“My name is Claudine, Monsieur.”

“Well, Claudine, would you happen to have some Crown Royal handy?”

“Oui, Monsieur. Would Monsieur like that neat or on the rocks?”

“On the rocks, if it’s no trouble.”

“No trouble at all, Monsieur. Please wait just a moment,” Claudine said as she turned and tottered away to the wet bar in her stiletto high heels. Jared never took his eyes off her and watched her jiggle across the room with delight.

“Wonderful service here, Price, though I’d be careful with that one,” the Commodore whispered, lowering his voice uncharacteristically. Jared turned back to the Commodore, but kept smiling as his mind’s eye continued to watch Claudine totter away again and again. “She’s got a face like a pearl, to be sure, but a heart of ice, I’d bet.”

“Oh, I’m sure she’s a peach,” Jared sighed.

“She reminds me of a Singapore whore I once rescued from a gang of ruffians in the slums of Johannesburg,” he continued, unphased by Jared’s comment. “A heart of gold, but filled to the lint-trap with the clap. You see, the secret is...”

Claudine returned with a glass of whiskey and ice on a silver tray.

“Crown Royal on the rocks, Monsieur.”

“Thanks, Claudine,” Jared said as he picked up the glass and took a small sip. “It’s perfect.”

“I wish only to please you, Monsieur,” Claudine replied in a more seductive voice. As she turned to walk away, Jared could have sworn that she winked at him. “Oh man, I have got to get Monica an outfit like that. I wonder if she’ll let me call her Claudine,” Jared wondered wistfully.

“Now, Price, as I was saying, the secret is...”

“Oh Bernhard, no one cares about Java, or Ivory Coast, or whatever you’re blathering on about now. Outta the way. You’re keeping me from meeting the most interesting person at this little shindig,” a petite woman with a lyrical southern accent interrupted and deftly positioned herself between Jared and the Commodore.

She was about five and half feet tall and wore a shimmering backless black evening gown. Her blonde locks fell in curls around a cute, childlike face. A beauty mark graced her face above the left corner of her crimson lips. Her blue eyes peered deeply into Jared’s and she smiled seductively.

“Hiya, sweetie. What’s your name?”

“Jared. Jared Price,” he answered, slightly stunned by the beautiful woman and her forward demeanor.

The woman raised her hands as if she were holding a pistol. “Bond. James Bond.” She lowered her hands and pretended to shoot Jared in the heart, her fingers barely touching his chest. “I like you. You’re cute.”

“Uh, thanks. You’re not that bad looking yourself,” Jared responded, regaining his confidence, and then wincing as he contemplated his lame response. She looked vaguely familiar, he thought.

“Well, darling, it comes with the work, so to speak. I’m Estelle, but you can call me Tilly if you like.”

“All right. So, what do you do, Tilly?” Jared inquired.

Estelle struck a modeling pose and leaned in close to Jared. “I’m a movie star. But don’t tell anyone else or they’ll all be begging for autographs.”

“Would I have seen anything you’ve acted in?”

“Well, that all depends on your preference in movies, now doesn’t it, sugar. You see, I specialize in the adult film genre, if you know what I mean.”

Sudden realization flashed in Jared’s mind. Now he knew where he’d seen her. This was Estelle Ellis. He had definitely seen some of her work.

“My two latest films were called “Ellis’s Pelvis” and “Tilly’s Titillations”, but I don’t know if they were widely distributed nationwide,” she mumbled ponderously.

They were certainly widely distributed in every men’s dorm at the University of Delaware, Jared thought as a smile crept upon his face. “I must have missed them,” he lied.

“Well, that’s too bad. But, if we get some free time here,” she whispered in his ear, “maybe I can give you a sneak-preview of my upcoming attraction.”

Jared sighed and silently thanked Monica for forcing him to go on this retreat. “Not only am I in an amazing mansion, but I also have a famous pornstar propositioning me,” he thought, subconsciously adopting the “What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas” mindset.

A coughing fit erupted from the opposite side of the lounge and all three of them turned to discover its source. Seated on a plush crushed velvet sofa a portly, balding man coughed violently into his purple handkerchief. Estelle walked over to him with Jared and the Commodore in tow.

“There. There. Freddy, don’t have another heart attack,” she said jokingly as she patted the fat man’s broad back. After a few more explosive outbursts, his coughing subsided and he lowered the handkerchief. Tiny round spectacles pinched the bridge of his bulbous nose and pressed the sides of his round face. He was dressed in a purple three-piece suit that was two sizes too small.

“Oh, thank yyyyyou, Miss Ellis. I needed that,” he stuttered as he removed his glasses and wiped them clean with the handkerchief, then pressed them back onto his face. Beads of sweat dotted his red forehead. As he replaced the handkerchief in his left jacket pocket with one hand, he simultaneously withdrew a box of Djarum unfiltered ’76 clove cigarettes from his right jacket pocket with the other. His hands shook as he lit the cigarette and took a long drag.

“You know, Freddy, those things will kill you. If they didn’t smell so damn good, I’d snatch

that box of cancer away from you,” she teased.

The man closed his eyes and Jared thought he might have gone to sleep, but then he opened them languidly and stared directly at Jared. “And you must be?”

“I’m Jared, and you are?”

“My nnnnnname is...”

“Freddy, we’ll be here all day if you keep this up,” Estelle interrupted as she continued rubbing the man’s back. “This lovable teddy bear is none other than Doctor Frederick Payne. He may not be much to look at,” she said planting a tender kiss on the crown of his sweaty bald head, “but he’s the sweetest little thing you’ll ever meet. And pretty handy with a scalpel, so I hear.”

Just then, a tiny bell hanging beside the mantle of the fireplace jingled. All four of them stopped talking and paused to watch the small bell ring. A few moments passed and it rang again.

“Looks like whoever it is caught Percy napping. That’s the front door bell,” Estelle pointed out. “I’ve never seen him take this long to get the door. And he calls himself a butler!” she laughed.

From out in the main hall they could hear the front door open and close, and then muffled voices. After a minute, Percy appeared at the door to the lounge and stepped in stiffly.

“May I present Madame Blackstone and Master Nash,” he announced with a slight bow. A man and a woman entered the lounge as he spoke and stood together silently. Percy exited and closed the door behind him. The six guests stared at each other.

The man, Mr. Nash, was short, but built like an ox. Beneath his black ribbed sweater and khaki slacks, a strong muscular body was evident. He had wavy blonde hair parted on the side and sideburns. His face was tanned and ruddy. There was a slight twinkle in his baby blue eyes behind the thin wire framed glasses he wore and a mischievous smile sat happily on his face.

The woman, Miss Blackstone, was a study in opposites with Nash. She was short, also, but the similarities ended there. She was plump and clad head to toe in black. Her straight black hair, obviously dyed, fell nearly to her waist, framing a pale face set in an expression of sour sadness. She wore heavy black mascara and deep, blood red lipstick. Her large bosom was discretely hidden by a frilly black lace blouse and her larger bottom was somewhat less discretely hidden by a long black pleated skirt. Black leather boots with pointy toes completed her outfit.

Not wasting any more time, Commodore Griffon marched over to the couple in his brisk

military fashion and launched into his booming introduction.

“Commodore Bernhard Griffon, her Majesty’s...” he sounded off, as everyone else in the room pretended not to hear him.

“There hhhhhe goes again,” Doctor Payne laughed in staccato efforts. He took another long drag of his cigarette and blew the smoke in little rings which floated towards the ceiling.

Miss Blackstone managed to slip away from the Commodore’s firm grasp as he pulled Nash toward the roaring fire. Despite her weight, she moved with catlike grace as she quickly skittered across the room and planted herself in one of a set of matching armchairs in the corner of the lounge. Perhaps it was the cool whiskey, or the warm fire, or the flaming hot pornstar standing beside him, but Jared felt uncharacteristically amiable and decided to go over and greet the shy new guest.

“Hi,” he said as he plopped down comfortably in the armchair across from her.

“Hi,” she whispered.

“I’m Jared. I guess you’re here for the writing workshop too, huh?”

“Uh huh.”

“So,” Jared paused, thinking of what to say next. “This was going to be difficult. Maybe a little humor,” he thought. “So, are you a writer, or are you just a lazy bum like me who doesn’t have anything better to do but bang away at the keyboard?” He picked up one of the white crystal chess pieces from the board on the small table situated between them and spun it in lazy circles on the chessboard’s checkered marble surface.

“I’m a writer,” she replied with the same depressed expression on her face.

“Damn, not even a smile,” he thought. “In fact, it looks like she’s gonna cry now. Maybe I should just leave her alone.”

“Uh, what’s your name? Madame Blackstone is way too formal, I think. If we’re gonna be here together all weekend, we should be friends, right?”

“I’m Silvia.”

Finally, she’s opening up a bit. “Silvia. That’s a lovely name,” he replied in a soothing voice.

“Is it?” she cried and burst into tears. She hid her face in her hands and wept uncontrollably.

Everyone in the room turned to look at her, and then stared at Jared. He raised his arms in a gesture of helplessness and silently mouthed the words, “Was it something I said?”

Estelle rushed over and shooed Jared out of his seat. She pulled the armchair closer to Silvia and tried to console her. “There. There, sweetie. It’s all right.” Jared looked at the rest of the group and shrugged his shoulders. The Commodore motioned for Jared to come join him at the hearth with Nash. Claudine was just walking away from Nash after having deposited a frothy glass of Guinness in his hand. As she tottered past Jared, she winked at him. “That was definitely a wink,” he thought. “I am so getting lucky tonight.”

“Price, look here, we’ve got another battle hardened commando among us. Top notch, I’ll say,” the Commodore boomed.

“Actually, I just did a couple of semesters of Air Force ROTC in college. Nothing special really. We mostly just marched around the parking lot in front of the athletic complex,” Nash bashfully replied with a thick Bostonian accent.

“Nothing special? Horsefeathers. Why, in my days in the jungles of Burma, it was the ability to march in formation that decided life and death! Lieutenant Killdeere, my second in command, a good man and a good sailor, was mauled by a tiger when he strayed off the path in that sweaty mess,” the Commodore twisted his handlebar mustache, a distant look in his eyes.

“I’m Jared,” said Jared as he extended his hand.

“Charlie. Pleased to meet you,” he replied and grasped Jared’s hand firmly. Jared let out a wince as he felt the bones in his hand being crushed by Charlie’s Goliathian grip. “Sorry about that,” Charlie apologized and quickly released Jared’s hand. “Sometimes I don’t realize my own strength.”

“Don’t sweat it,” Jared shook his hand to coax the blood to return to the fingertips. “So, Charlie, what is it that you do?”

“Well, actually, I’m sort of between jobs right now. I’m taking one of those online correspondence courses to become a private detective, though.”

“A detective. Pretty cool.”

“Yeah, you know, I grew up reading all the Sherlock Holmes stories, watching “Columbo” and “Diagnosis Murder”. I think being a detective would be pretty fun. Finding clues, deductive reasoning, catching the murderer red-handed.”

“Oh,” Jared nodded in agreement.

“See, that’s why I came to this writing workshop. It’s all about murder and mystery and that

sort of thing, right? So, I can get into the criminal mind and find out how it works. Then, I can be an even better detective.”

“Well, it seems like you’ve got it all figured out.”

“And you? What do you do, Jared?”

“Oh, I’m out of work too, right now. I used to do some computer programming, but that didn’t work out. I’m thinking of writing a mystery novel, so I thought I’d come here and give my writing muscles a little exercise. That’s all.”

“Are you from around here?”

“Yes and no,” Jared said with a laugh. “See, my family lives about two miles down the road, but I’m living up in Boston right now.”

“Boston? Get out. I’m from Boston,” Charlie cried out with joy.

“Really, I had no idea,” Jared said feigning ignorance.

“Yeah, small world, huh.”

At that moment, the lounge door opened suddenly, and Percy entered. “Madame Gold,” he announced with a bow then backed away from the door.

She waltzed into the room with an air of sophistication. Her red satin evening gown seemed to float above the floor as she glided across the room and stopped in its center. She stood on the tiger-skin rug and held her arms at her sides in a victorious pose, then turned her head slowly and gazed at all of the guests. She swished her long brown hair back and forth a bit, then removed her horn-rimmed glasses and bit the earpiece. In a slow, seductive manner, she sauntered over to Jared and placed her arms around his neck. Slowly, she moved her lips close to his left ear and nibbled it. Then, she whispered softly in his ear so that only he could hear.

“See, what I’m doing is creating the mood. Now, to all of these people here, we are romantically connected. You can deny it, but they won’t believe you. Do you see how I can control their minds like that? How I can get them to think exactly what I want? That’s called good writing. Remember, you can’t control the reader. But the characters... well, you are their God. You create them, you give them life, and you can destroy them. Now, that’s your first lesson, Jared,” she said as she slowly backed away from him. Tracy walked back to the center of the lounge.

“Welcome, all of you, to my home. As you probably know already, my name is Tracy Gold.

You can call me Tracy, or Tracy Gold, or Miss Gold, or whatever you like. But, we're all here to become better writers, not biographers, right? Well, good writing comes from inspiration. I hope I can inspire you all to become better writers this weekend. But, we can't do anything productive without a full stomach to keep us warm and happy. Right, Doctor?"

"Agggggreed," he stumbled back.

"So, I suggest we all meet in the dining room in five minutes. I must take care of something first, but Percy will be happy to show you there," she turned and walked briskly from the lounge and disappeared.

"Say, I didn't know you knew Miss Gold," Charlie winked as he jabbed Jared in the ribs with his elbow. "Save some of that for the bedroom."

"Uh, actually, I don't really know..." Jared tried to explain.

"No need to explain anything, Price," the Commodore whispered. "Loose lips sink ships, and all that."

"No. Really, it's not what it seems," he pleaded.

"Of course not, honey," Estelle said as she walked over to Percy. "Percy, darling, where the little girl's room? I'm going to take this little one to get washed up," she said pointing to Silvia. Black mascara stained her face in long black tear trails. Her eyes were bloodshot and snot hung from her small button nose.

"I can take you," Claudine offered, tottering over to Silvia. "Let me help the lady up." Claudine tried to lift the hefty woman to her feet and strained ineffectually. "Oh! Mon dieu! Perhaps the lady can help moi?" Estelle came over and the two of them managed to tug Silvia to her feet and out the door.

"Well, gentlemen, it looks like it's just us stouthearted fellows left. I suggest we clear out of this area and secure the dining room," the Commodore suggested.

"Sounds good to me," Charlie said. "I'm starving." The four men followed Percy out of the lounge and across the hall to the dining room.

Chapter Three

The men arrived in the dining room before the women had returned, and circled the table as they took their places behind the chairs. The table stood in the center of the rectangular room. The same mahogany wood paneling encircled the room. Instead of marble busts, the ledge in this room played host to several very fragile looking Ming Dynasty vases. The blue and white enamel with cracked eggshell fractures was highlighted by red and green striped wallpaper. A large jade dragon lay slumbering at the table's center. Small name cards were placed beside the upturned soup bowl at each place setting. At the head of the massive table was a place setting for 'Madame Gold', then to her left was 'Commodore Bernhard Griffon', 'Madame Silvia Blackstone', and 'Doctor Frederick Payne'. To her right were places for 'Master Jared Price', 'Madame Estelle Ellis', and 'Master Charles Nash'. There was a place setting at the opposite end of the long table, but no name card beside the soup bowl. Percy stood in the corner with hands folded at his waist.

"Mmm... something smells delicious," Estelle's lyrical voice wafted in from the hall moments before she, Silvia, and Claudine entered the dining room. "I don't know what's cooking, but I already know I'm having seconds, that's for sure."

The men all unconsciously stared at Silvia as she took her place at the table. The streaks of black mascara were gone, and had been delicately replaced with glittering foundation, hastily penned on eyebrows, and a more conservative shade of red lipstick. Sensing the eyes on her, Silvia bowed her head and stared at her feet.

"Now, isn't she just the sweetest little thing now, fellas? I dolled her up a bit in the little girl's room."

"A true vision of beauty, I'd say," the Commodore offered as he turned to his left and patted Silvia on the shoulder with a strong hand. "Why, she reminds me of Portuguese pearl diver that I once had the pleasure of befriending in the bush of the Congo. She was terribly lost, about five thousand kilometers from the nearest pearlbed, but that didn't stop her at all."

Jared gave the Commodore a quizzical look.

"I wonder who else is coming. You see the extra place setting?" Charlie pointed to the vacant seat at the end of the table.

"I got the impression that we were all here. At least, that's the way it seemed when Miss Gold

greeted us just a few minutes ago,” Jared offered.

“Maybe it’s for Mr. Gold?” suggested Estelle.

“Mr. Gold? I thought she was still single,” Charlie replied dumbfounded.

“Perhaps nnnnnot for much longer,” Doctor Payne smiled at Jared as he wiped his sweating brow with his purple handkerchief.

“I know what you guys saw back there in the lounge, but really, I have never met her before tonight. Honest.”

“I believe you,” Silvia whispered as she continued to examine the carpet underneath her feet.

Like a breath of fresh air puffed into in the staling conversation, Tracy Gold glided into the dining room with her characteristic flair and grabbed the back of her chair with her tiny hands.

“Well, it looks like you all are warming up to each other nicely. Now, I suggest we warm our bellies a bit. I’m famished!” she said and stood back as Percy pulled out her chair. She sat down and he pushed her closer to the table. From his vantage point, Jared could see that her feet didn’t even touch the floor as she sat in the chair. “Please, let’s all sit down and get more acquainted.”

They all took their places and Percy and Claudine poured some red wine in each of their goblets. The Commodore picked up his glass and swirled the crimson liquid around, lifted the glass to his nose and sniffed. He nodded in satisfaction.

“I hope you all like the wine. It’s a personal favorite of mine, made right here in Chesapeake City,” said Tracy as she took a small sip from her own glass.

The Commodore took a sip and savored the bouquet. “A distinct, yet flavorful brew, Miss Gold. Positively first rate.”

The sliding doors in the rear of the dining room slid open silently and a burly Asian man entered pushing a large silver cart holding a steaming tureen.

“Oh, shark-fin soup. My favorite!” Tracy announced with the excitement of a child on Christmas morning. “Zhang Shifu, you really have outdone yourself this time. The soup smells even more wonderful than usual,” she complimented the man as he ladled some soup into her bowl.

“Thank you, Madame,” he said with a slight bow and then moved on to serve all the other guests.

“I hope you all brought your appetites, because Zhang Shifu here is the best chef I’ve ever had the pleasure of employing. He’s a master in Shandong, Sichuan, Hunan, and Guangdong cuisines and

graduated with top marks from the CIA here in the US.”

“You’re too kind, Madame,” Zhang Shifu replied turning a little red with humble embarrassment. He wore his jet-black hair short underneath the floppy white chef’s hat atop his round head, and a long Fu Manchu moustache hung from the corners of his upper lip. His round body indicated that his expertise in the kitchen might stem from a deeper passion for eating food, and not just a passion for making it. After filling all the bowls with the golden brown shark-fin soup, Zhang Shifu pulled the silver cart back through the sliding doorway and disappeared into the kitchen.

The guests lifted their spoons in unison and sampled the soup.

“Delicious, Tracy, though shouldn’t we wait for the last guest?” Charlie asked pointing to the still-empty chair at the end of the table.

“Oh, that? Don’t worry. We’re all here. I always have Percy set one extra place setting in case someone shows up unexpectedly. You know, wouldn’t want a guest to feel unwelcome at the table.”

“Who would show up here unexpectedly,” Jared wondered. They all ate in silence, occasionally punctuated by the slurping of soup. Finally, Tracy spoke.

“You all got a chance to meet each other in the lounge, but I must admit that I have yet to have the pleasure of getting to know you all more. So, Doctor, tell me a little more about your practice.”

“Well, I used to work at Bethesda in the orthopedic department at the Naval Hospital. But, lately I’ve been helping with forensics in the Annapolis Police Department with their violent crimes unit. Mostly it’s just rape, but occasionally we get a real juicy mmmmmurder,” he said, his face wincing as he said ‘murder’.

“So, you’ve seen a dead body before?” Estelle asked with a look of disgust on her face.

“Sure. Ppppplenty. It’s not so bad after a while. They all start to look alike after you see your hundredth corpse.”

“That’s awful!” she gasped.

“Unfortunately,” the Commodore interjected with a tinge of sadness in his voice, “the Doctor is quite right. While stationed in the Killing Fields of Cambodia, I had the opportunity to witness the aftermath of the horrific slaughter of thousands of women and children. Positively gruesome. But, after a few weeks, once you get used to the smell, the bloating bodies seem to look more like stuffed Christmas pigs than rotting corpses.”

At just that moment, the sliding doors opened again, and Zhang Shifu emerged with the serving trolley. Its top was overflowing with an enormous roasted pig complete with apple stuffed in the open snout. Estelle made a gagging motion, covered her mouth with her napkin, and ran from the dining room.

“Maybe I should go see if she’s all right,” Jared suggested as he began to slide his chair back to get up. He felt a strong hand on his left thigh under the table.

“Nonsense. We’ve got much more to talk about here, Jared. Claudine, please go see that Miss Ellis is taken care of,” Tracy requested pointing to the doorway.

“Oui, Madame.”

Zhang Shifu carved the pig with the practiced hand of a kungfu swordsman and Percy helped him serve portions to all the guests.

“Now, Charles,” Tracy said turning to her right, “I understand that you are studying to be a detective.”

“That’s right.”

“Have you ever seen a dead body?” she asked placing a forkful of pork in her mouth and chewing daintily.

“Well, no. Not yet. Though when I was in college I came home from the lab one night and found my roommate lying on the floor next to a bottle of Grey Goose vodka. There was blood all over his shirt, and I thought he was dead. But, it turned out that he had just spilled some ketchup from his cheese steak on himself when he passed out,” he said with a chuckle.

“There’s nothing more embarrassing than a man who can’t hold his grog, now is there?” the Commodore chimed in.

“And how about you, Silvia? Have you ever seen a dead body?” Jared asked, trying to get her to open up a bit. “Perhaps she had another funny anecdote like Charles,” he thought.

“Yes,” she responded, looking Jared dead in the eye for the first time.

“Wwwwwell, do tell,” Doctor Payne pressed as he wiped the sweat dripping from his chin.

“My first husband shot himself in the face on our wedding night,” she replied without a hint of emotion. Charlie dropped his fork. Everyone sat motionless.

“I’m... sorry to hear that,” Jared apologized, immediately sorry that he had tried to get her to talk more.

“No, it’s okay. That was a long time ago.”

Claudine and Estelle returned and Estelle looked radiant again.

“Did I miss anything?”

“No!” they all responded in unison.

“Oh, good. So, what are we all taking about now? I’m eager to hear something interesting.”

“Uh... ponies. We were talking about ponies,” Charlie lied trying to lighten the mood.

“Ponies? I love ponies! I even did a movie with one once. It was a war movie called “All My Privates and Ponies on Parade”, though I don’t think it saw a wide release. It catered to more of a specialized audience,” she remarked offhandedly.

“You work in Hollywood?” Charlie inquired with interest.

“I used to, but now I’m working in Las Vegas mostly.”

They ate and talked for a long time. Zhang Shifu came and went several more times; each time depositing another delicious dish on their plates. They had spicy mutton with peppers, Peking duck, beef with garlic and broccoli, mushrooms and greens, sweet and sour fish which was deep-fried and looked like a blooming flower, and a sweet glazed fruit dish. After the last course was served, they all felt full and leaned back in their chairs.

“Top rate. Absolutely top rate fare, Miss Gold,” the Commadore complimented.

“Don’t tell me. It was all Zhang Shifu’s work,” she said as she patted her lips with her napkin. Percy began clearing the table. “Now, if you would all join me in the study, we’ve got some business to take care of before it gets too late. Nothing too important, but we’d best not dally,” she said glancing at the large grandfather clock tucked in the corner of the dining room. Its hands read seven forty-five. Percy pulled out her chair and Tracy Gold got up and struck a pose. “Dinner is done! Off to the study everyone.” She floated out of the dining room and into the relative darkness of the main hall.

“She is one peculiar woman, that’s for sure,” Charlie commented.

“You can say that again,” Estelle agreed.

Everyone got up slowly. They felt the massive meal settle in their stomachs and lead by Claudine, they began the short trek across the hall to the study. Percy stayed behind. The study was located directly to the right of the lounge, nearest to the front door of the mansion. Claudine stood

beside the door and held out her left hand beckoning them to enter. They filed slowly into the study with Jared bringing up the rear. As he got to the doorway, Claudine pulled Jared against her with one hand and closed the door with her free hand. A look of surprise was on both of their faces.

Chapter Four

When they assembled in the study, Tracy was already seated behind a large oak desk that stood in the rear of the room. She paid no attention to them as she shuffled papers vigorously on the desk's top. A stuffed raven stood perched on a small bit of wood on the corner of her desk. Its eyes seemed to twinkle in the light coming from the banker's lamp that stood on the opposite end of the desk. Two large bay windows with plush blue velvet curtains and small blue velvet cushions on the windowsill were behind the desk letting in the yellow moonlight from the full moon in the night sky. The room décor in the study departed from the rest of the house slightly in that the familiar mahogany paneling ended at knee-height. The mahogany continued, however, in the form of a beautifully carved bookshelf that extended to the ceiling. Except for the wall immediately to the left of the doorway, which was bare except for a massive life-sized painting of Death, complete with black robes and scythe, the bookshelves continued around the whole room. Even the back of the door was home to books, and seamlessly fit in with the rest of the bookshelf. Only a small handle nestled in a gap in the books betrayed the door's location. Three leather couches were arranged in a semi-circle in front of the oak desk.

“What are you doing?” Jared whispered as he looked into Claudine's eyes. Their lips were just inches apart.

“Monsieur must be careful!” she whispered back. Her bosom pressed against his chest and Jared could feel her heart beating wildly.

“Careful of what?”

“Non, I cannot speak now. Things aren't what they seem here. You are in danger!” She furtively glanced down the hall.

“Danger? Danger from what?” Jared inquired, confused and slightly afraid now.

“Find me tonight, Monsieur. I'll explain more then, if it's not too late already,” Claudine leaned forward and kissed Jared firmly on the lips. At first, he stood there passively, but as her kissing grew more intense she began running her fingers through his hair, and he responded in kind. Suddenly, she pulled away, straightened her apron, and walked back across the hall to the dining room. Jared stood there for a moment and watched her totter away. Just before she disappeared into

the dining room, she turned and held a finger up to her mouth in a signal for silence, winked, and then entered the room.

Tracy looked up from her desk and pushed her glasses back up onto the bridge of her nose. “Oh, I didn’t even notice you come in. Please, sit. Sit. We’ve got a lot of material to cover, and not much time to do it in.” She glanced at the small cuckoo clock built into one of the bookshelves on the far wall.

Everyone walked over to the couches and sat down.

“Where’s Jared?” Charlie asked, noticing for the first time that Jared hadn’t entered with them. They all looked around briefly, then the bookshelf creaked and the door swung wide open. Jared stood in the doorway. He looked at them as they stared back.

“Uh... sorry. I had to, uh... use the bathroom,” he apologized as he rushed over to the couches and sat down next to Doctor Payne.

“The bathroom, huh?” Estelle smirked. She pointed to her cheek. “I think you missed a spot.”

Jared wiped his cheek with the back of his hand. Red lipstick came off on it. His face turned red to match the lipstick smeared all over his cheeks and lips.

“Here,” the Doctor said as he pulled his sweaty purple handkerchief from his pocket and held it out for Jared.

“Uh, no thanks,” Jared declined as he remembered all the liquids that the damp purple cloth had absorbed in just the last three hours and instead reached for a box of tissues he spied on one of the small tables in the room. It took four tissues worth of wiping before his face was clean. He stuffed the red tissues in his pocket, sat back in the comfy couch, and closed his eyes. “This is awkward,” he thought. “First, they think I’m Tracy’s lover. Now I’m sure they think something is up between me and Claudine. Well, let them think what they want. I only have to spend the weekend with them, not marry them.”

“I have got to visit this bathroom,” Charlie said with a smile.

“Well, now we are all here. One, two, three, four, five, six. Yes. All here,” Tracy counted pointing around the couches. “And it’s just about the magic hour!” At just that moment, the cuckoo clock struck eight o’clock. Two little wooden men popped out of two small doors on the cuckoo

clock and moved to its face. Once there, they took turns hitting each other with tiny wooden mallets in rhythm with the eight chimes from the bell hidden within the cuckoo clock's inner mechanism. After the eighth bell sounded, the two little men bowed, turned, and retreated back within the clock. "Excellent." Tracy held six papers aloft in her small hands. "I bet you're all wondering what these are. Aren't you?"

"I'll bite. What are they, Tracy?" Estelle smiled curtly.

"These..." she said, inserting a dramatic pause. "These are your release papers."

"Release papers? What for?" Jared asked.

"Whenever I host one of my little writer's workshops like this, my lawyers always insist that I have the guests sign these little waivers. Really, it's nothing special. But, you have to agree and sign them before we can continue. Just a technicality, I assure you," she said as she got up from her desk and distributed the documents to each guest.

"As you can see, I've taken the liberty of filling out all the specifics for each of you on each of your release forms."

It was true. As Jared perused the form, he noted that she had indeed filled out his name, date of birth, and social security number in the indicated fields of the form. "How did she know my social security number," he wondered, scrunching his brow in confusion.

"All you need to do is sign and date at the bottom," she said returning to her desk. From the raven's tail feathers, she plucked a long quill and dipped it in an inkwell resting on the desk.

"What's all this written in the mmmmmiddle? It's too small for me to read," the Doctor asked and squinted his beady eyes behind his tiny glasses.

"Oh, just legal mumbo-jumbo. Really nothing special," Tracy assured them.

"Here, Freddy, I can read it," Estelle said as she leaned over the arm of the couch and patted the Doctor's sweaty head. "What's this mean? 'And I promise that I will not try to leave the Gold Mansion before eight o'clock on Sunday morning.'" She pointed to a small line of text within the 'legal mumbo-jumbo'.

"Yes, I'm glad you pointed that out, Miss Ellis. Now, I know. Well, of course, I know, because I'm the one that arranged this weekend. I know that you all paid a sizeable sum of money to attend my writing workshop. Now, that's all business, and I don't want to discuss business now. But,

the fact of the matter is, I want you all to get your money's worth here this weekend. Now, we're going to really get into what it means to be a good mystery writer, and perhaps some of you might get a little skittish and want to leave. But, that will really ruin all the work that we are doing here together. We all have to stay for the process to work. So, I just want you all to agree that you'll stay for the whole weekend. Even, if, heaven forbid, you are a little bored sometimes. Writing isn't always the most exciting profession, but I promise I'll do my best to keep it interesting if you all promise to be good, attentive students. That's all it is. Nothing special, like I said."

"Sounds perfectly reasonable," the Commodore announced as he reached for the quill in Tracy's outstretched hand. With a flourish, he signed his name and handed both the pen and his form back to Miss Gold.

"I'll ssssign, I guess," Doctor Payne said as he took the pen and signed his name on the document.

"Why not? Besides, I'm having fun so far," Estelle said as she signed her name too.

"Me too," Charlie acknowledged and signed his name.

"Here you go. I brought my own pen," Silvia mumbled as she handed over her document.

There were little red hearts and stars doodled all over the formal legal document, but her signature was visible at the bottom in an elegant script.

"Okay," Tracy said with a smile. "Jared, you in?"

"Uh..." he paused, thinking about what Claudine had told him.

"Don't be a baby," Charlie teased.

"Yeah, sweetie. If you get scared, you can always hold onto me," Estelle flirted, batting her doe-eyes.

"This reminds me of a particularly dangerous mission I was assigned to in Sierra Leone. Johnson didn't want to come along on patrol with the rest of us to scout out the rebel encampment at the base of the mountain. Reluctantly, I let him stay behind. While we were gone, some savages came and chopped him to pieces. All we found was his boot, with the foot still in it, of course. Bloody shame," the Commodore reminisced.

"Jared's wearing boots," Silvia whispered, pointing to Jared's feet.

"Of course, there aren't any savages here, Price. No need to worry about your boots," the

Commodore chuckled.

“I guess you’re right,” he said and grasped the pen from Tracy’s hand. With a sigh, he signed his name at the bottom and dated the form.

“Excellent!” Tracy exclaimed and bounded back to her desk. Once she was seated in the massive reclining leather chair behind it, she closed her eyes and leaned back so far that Jared thought she might topple the chair and fall over. “Now, that we have taken care of that little bit of business, I am happy to tell you that you will all be quite safe here in my home. To protect us from any intruders, I have taken the liberty of putting bars on all the windows in the house. I assure you that no one will be able to break into my home while you are here with me this weekend,”

“Well, that’s reassuring,” Charlie nodded.

“I’ve also called the phone company and had them disconnect my phone line for the whole weekend so that no one will disturb us in the midst of our mystery writing.”

“Okay,” Estelle agreed.

“Not only that, but I’ve also taken the liberty of placing time-locks on all the doors leading outside.”

“Time-locks? What do you mean time-locks?” Estelle asked with a confused look on her face.

“Yes, time-locks. See, to assure that we all stay together this weekend I installed special locks on the doors that won’t open until eight o’clock Sunday morning. Even I can’t open the doors once they lock! Isn’t that cool?” she smiled, growing excited.

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Jared cautioned. “What if something happens? What if one of us gets sick? What if there’s an emergency? A fire?”

“We have a doctor among us, right?” Tracy said pointing to Doctor Payne. “No need to worry. We can take care of ourselves this weekend I’m sure. And don’t worry, the kitchen is stocked with plenty of food that Zhang Shifu will be more than happy to serve us,” Tracy reassured them.

“I don’t know, I think Jared might have a point here,” Charlie said with suspicion. “Just exactly when do these time-locks lock?”

“That’s the best part! They already locked at eight tonight! We’re trapped here! Isn’t it marvelous?” Tracy exclaimed jumping up from her chair and striking a pose.

“At eight o’clock? But we hadn’t even signed the release forms saying we agreed to stay all

weekend by then,” Jared pointed out.

“Indeed! What kind of game are you playing here, Miss Gold?” the Commodore boomed as he stood up from his couch.

“There. There. Nothing to get so worked up about, Commodore,” Tracy said in her most soothing tone. “You all signed the forms, so what difference did it make whether you signed them before the doors locked, or afterwards?”

“She has a pppppoint. The logic is sound,” the Doctor agreed.

“I still feel a bit betrayed. You didn’t know we would sign,” Jared remarked sternly.

“Why wouldn’t you sign? Look. Let’s just forget about the doors. We have lot to do tonight, and time is ticking. No matter what happens, time keeps running. Even if the characters lag behind, time marches on. That’s a lesson for you.”

“We’re trapped in here?” Silvia screamed as she leapt from the couch. “There’s not enough air! I can’t breathe!” She clutched her throat and began to faint.

“I’ll catch her!” Charlie cried as he grasped at her large limp body. Despite his Herculean strength, his knees shook as he held her up. “Uh, a little help here?” The Commodore and Jared rushed over and the three of them managed to place her inert body comfortably back on the couch.

“Prop her feet up on the arm of the ssssofa,” the Doctor calmly suggested as he lit one of his aromatic clove cigarettes and puffed away.

“What else should we do?” Charlie asked.

“Ddddo you have any brandy?”

“Sure, there’s some in the cabinet on that wall,” Tracy pointed across the room.

“I’ll nnnnneed a big glass of brandy.”

Tracy floated across the room and quickly poured a tall glass of brandy and handed it to the Doctor. He downed it in one gulp. He then placed the glass on the floor and fanned Silvia’s face with his purple handkerchief. After a few seconds, her eyes fluttered open.

“She’s all right. Give her some room,” the Commodore commanded. Everyone but the Doctor backed away. “Welcome back, soldier. We thought we’d lost you, but you’ve the heart of a lion in that chest of yours,” he cheered as he patted her breast with his hand. His hand lingered there on her bosom, and then he realized the inappropriateness of the camaraderie-inspired touch, and

quickly pulled his hand back. “Sorry about that, Madame. I got caught up in the moment,” he apologized, wiping his hand on his pressed trousers.

“It’s okay,” Silvia whispered and sat up.

“Well, that was an adventure,” Tracy exclaimed. “I can’t wait to see what else transpires tonight!”

They all turned and looked at Tracy incredulously.

“What? See, that’s why we have a doctor here. Everything is fine. Now, we’ve got lots to do. Everyone follow me back into the lounge. I’ve got some toys to show you.” With that, she glided across the room, found the door handle in the bookshelf, and exited the study.

“How do you feel, Silvia?” Jared asked with genuine concern.

“I’m fine, really. I guess I just freaked out a bit. Let’s get going, I’m curious as to what kind of toys she has for us.”

“All right. Well, you heard the lady,” Charlie agreed.

“Let’s get going. Besides, that painting of the Reaper is beginning to freak me out,” Estelle remarked.

“Indeed. It’s dreadful enough to scare the hair off of a pigmy,” the Commodore joked.

They all got up and walked to the door. Percy was waiting for them just outside the room, and he dutifully guided them across the hall. Claudine was waiting outside the lounge, and she winked at Jared as he passed by.

Chapter Five

Tracy was seated on one of the several crushed velvet couches situated around the lounge's perimeter when they entered. At her feet were seven oblong boxes of differing sizes. Each box was wrapped in Christmas wrapping paper with Christmas trees and stars.

"Come in. Don't be shy. We've got a lot to do tonight," Tracy beckoned her guests as she motioned for them to sit down. "Commodore? Charles? Would you two mind pulling that couch a little closer so we can all sit together over here?"

"Sure thing," Charlie said as he turned to Estelle and flexed his bicep.

"Oh! What a muscle..." Estelle gawked and nibbled her fingertip seductively.

"I don't even workout," Charlie lied. He bent down and picked up one end of the couch while the Commodore lifted the other end. The two of them easily moved the couch closer to the two other couches near Tracy. Estelle flopped down on the couch and pulled Charlie down on the couch next to her.

"So, you don't even workout?" she cooed.

"Nah, I really don't have time to workout anymore. Back in college I used to do a little weightlifting, though."

"Weightlifting? How much can you lift?" she asked as she squeezed his tricep. Her little hands didn't fit around his arm.

"Well, I don't want to brag, but I could lift about three hundred pounds when I was in top shape. I'm a little out of practice now, though. I bet I could only lift about two hundred and fifty pounds now."

"I don't believe this guy," Jared thought to himself as he rolled his eyes. "I can only lift two hundred and fifty pounds, he says. No, that's not bragging at all."

"Two hundred and fifty pounds! Wow! I only weigh about one hundred pounds," Estelle lied. She laid her hand on Charlie's chest, and slowly dragged her fingers down it.

"Well, I could toss you around like a doll then."

"Maybe you can give me an exhibition tonight," she whispered in his ear.

Charlie smiled and leaned back on the couch. Everyone was looking at the two of them. The Doctor puffed a cloud of smoke towards the ceiling and rested his bulk against the back of the couch.

“Okay, now that that’s settled,” Tracy began with a smile, “let’s continue. Pop quiz. Jared, what’s the most important part of a murder mystery novel?”

“Uh, I don’t know. I was hoping to learn that here this weekend.”

“Come on. Think. What is the most essential part when you read one of my novels?”

“Whether it’s the right thickness to prop up the short leg of the sofa,” Jared thought as a smile crept on his face. “Um, the murder?”

“Precisely! Ten points for Jared. Move ahead two spaces and collect twenty dollars from every player. Murder. You can’t have a murder mystery without a murder. The more murders the better, but you need at least one murder. Writing a murder mystery without a murder... Well, it’s like making chocolate chip cookies without chocolate chips. It’s like baking an apple pie and forgetting to add the apples. It’s like... well, let’s just stick to those to similes, since I’m starting to get hungry again,” Tracy patted her flat stomach. “You know what they say about Chinese food. No matter how much you eat, you’re always hungry again an hour later, right? Now, back to murder. People have been murdering each other since day one. Cain and Abel and all that. Cavemen were beating the hell out of each other with rocks and sticks back when the dinosaurs were roaming the Earth. Fortunately, we’ve become much more civilized since then. We murder each other with style nowadays. We’ve got class now.”

“Civilized murder?” the Commodore asked quizzically.

“Civilized murder. When you’re reading a murder mystery, you don’t want to read, “And then Henry picked up a rock and bludgeoned Sally on the head until her brains spilled out onto the red Persian rug.” That’s too boring. We need something with a little more class.”

“I don’t know. That sounds pretty horrific, if you ask me,” Jared countered.

“Well, maybe that was kind of cool sounding,” Tracy admitted. “But, the point I’m trying to make is that we need to get creative with how we murder our characters. We need to surprise the reader. The stranger the weapon, the more interesting. Doctor, you’ve seen a lot of murder victims. What’s the strangest weapon you’ve seen used?”

“One time we were called out to the suburbs of Annapolis where a woman had mmmmmurdered her husband.”

“Okay, so how did she do it?”

“She ran him over with a riding lawnmower. Mmmmmulched him all over the yard.”

“Oh, Jesus!” Estelle exclaimed.

“Yes! See, that’s exactly what I’m talking about here, folks. And that’s the reaction we are looking for when we write. We want our reader to gasp and feel sick to their stomach when they read about how Henry murders Sally. Now, a riding lawnmower is a little hard to work into a murder mystery, unless of course you set the story in the countryside. So, most of the time, we will want to work with something you can hold or throw or shoot. Now, I have an exercise for us. Let’s all go around the room and come up with the most creative way to murder someone we can think of. How does that sound? Charles, you go first.”

“Me? Why do I have to go first? I’m not ready yet.”

“Well, you have to go first because you’re seated all the way on the left of the room. And, don’t worry, we’ve got all night, so sit and think for a moment. We’ll wait,” Tracy said twirling her long brown hair with her fingers.

“Okay,” Charlie closed his eyes and scrunched his forehead as he thought deeply. Suddenly, his eyes opened. “Okay, I’ve got one. Henry bricks Sally up in the basement of their house and eventually she dies of starvation.”

“Lame. Who are you, Edgar Allen Poe?” Tracy shook her head. “Estelle, give us a better murder, please.”

“Um... Sally replaces the water in his water bottle with sulfuric acid, and when he comes back from his workout, he takes a big gulp and dies?”

“Better. Better. Commodore, I’m sure you can come up with something truly wicked.”

“Well, when I was serving the crown in Mozambique, I saw some natives perform a particularly creative death ritual on some poor chap. So, perhaps Henry can shave Sally’s head, braid the hair into a rope, then strangle her with it.”

“What if Sally has short hair?” Tracy questioned.

“I didn’t think of that. In that case, I suppose he could just find someone with long hair, and use their hair instead. It doesn’t have to be Sally’s hair, but it seems a little more awful if it is.”

“Definitely. Okay, I’ll take that. Jared, what have you got for us?”

Jared had been thinking hard as he listened to the others speak. “How about,” he began,

“Henry shoves an umbrella down Sally’s throat and opens it.”

“Like one of the little umbrellas that you get in the drinks in Hawaii?”

“No, like a normal umbrella, that you use in the rain,” Jared explained.

“But how can you open it once it’s down her throat?” Charlie asked.

“I don’t know. I guess Henry would have to be really strong.”

“Okay, you get ten points for creativity, but lose five points for feasibility. Not bad though.

I’ve never thought of using an umbrella as a weapon. Except for like how the Penguin used his umbrella in the old Batman comics. You know, he had a sword that popped out of the end, and could release deadly gas from the tip at the push of a button. He even had one umbrella with a spiral design on it that he could spin and hypnotize Batman with. Pretty cool,” Tracy said nodding with approval.

“Doctor, you’re off the hook because of your lawnmower story. That’s plenty creative. Silvia, finish us off with a really good one!”

“Wait, I’ve gggggot another good one.”

“Okay Doctor, regale us with an even more interesting murder.”

“Henry ties Sssssally to a big tree, then uses a chainsaw to saw both her and the tree in half.”

“Good one. I like it. Especially since it’s noisy. Noisy murders are fun. Now, Silvia, how can Sally murder Henry?”

“On their wedding night, Sally says she wants to role-play in bed a bit. She gives Henry a police officer’s hat, and a holster with handcuffs and a gun. Then, when he’s looking at the gun, she says it will really turn her on if he pointed it at his face. He thinks it’s just a toy, and so he does. And then I grab his hand and pull the trigger, blowing his brains all over the wall!” Silvia shouted, shaking with excitement. Her eyes glowed with a passion none of them had ever seen.

They all just sat there, staring at her for a moment.

“Okay... Well, that certainly was an interesting murder, Silvia. You get twenty points and a gold star next to your name. So, you see, murder has to be interesting. If it’s just some mundane thing, no one wants to read about it. Now, time for presents.”

Tracy bent down, picked up the first gift, and read the tag. “To Charlie. From the Shogun.” She handed Charlie the long, thin box and picked up the next package. “To Silv... I mean, to... Estelle, from John Wilkes Booth.”

Charlie and Estelle tore off the paper from their gifts and opened the boxes.

“Awesome! A real samurai sword!” Charlie exclaimed as he drew the gleaming steel blade from its scabbard. The light danced on its razor edge.

“Now, be careful. It’s really sharp,” Tracy warned.

“Hell yeah it’s sharp! You could chop a man in half with one cut with this thing,” Charlie touched the blade with his thumb and instantly drew blood as the tiniest pressure on the blade sliced through flesh. “Ouch!”

“I just told you to be careful because the blade is really sharp,” Tracy said shaking her head. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” he said as he put his thumb in his mouth and sucked to stop the bleeding.

Estelle opened her box and dumped a small revolver with two barrels into her hand. “A gun?” she said with disappointment.

“Not just a gun, but an antique gun. See, it fires two bullets at once. One from each barrel. It’s cooler that way,” Tracy corrected. “To Bernhard, from the Zulu King,” she said as she hefted a small, but heavy, package and handed it to the Commodore. Then, she tossed an oddly shaped box to Jared. “To Jared, from the butcher and the baker.”

The Commodore unwrapped his gift and pulled out a long wooden stick with a heavy rock fastened to the end with braided reeds. “Ah, a Hutu ceremonial war-club. Top notch. Haven’t seen one of these since I was on patrol in Kenya.” He swung it and pounded his left palm. “Solid. Very solid.”

“A candlestick?” Jared said as he dumped the brass candlestick from its box onto his lap.

“Sure. As deadly a weapon as any other weapon here,” Tracy remarked.

“He gets a samurai sword, and I get a candlestick?” Jared complained, pointing to Charlie. “I want to trade. Does anyone want to trade?”

“Here,” Estelle said as she held out the antique revolver, “this doesn’t really go with my dress.”

“I’ll take the gun!” Silvia pleaded with outstretched hands.

“No!” everyone shouted in unison.

“What?” she replied sheepishly.

“No one is trading! Okay? Look, Doctor, here’s your present from Jack the Ripper. Silvia, here’s your gift. It’s from Dr. Kevorkian.” Tracy was a little annoyed as she tossed the two remaining presents to the two remaining guests on their couch.

The Doctor opened his small gift and removed a bottle of chloroform and a surgical scalpel.

“Man, isn’t that weird? The doctor gets the scalpel?” Charlie said with amazement.

“I can never leave my wwwwwork at home, can I?” Doctor Payne sighed as he deftly twirled the scalpel around with his fingers and flipped it into his left breast pocket.

“That was kind of impressive,” Jared said, amazed at the manual dexterity of the seemingly lazy doctor.

“I’ve had lots of time to pppppractice,” he said as he lit another of his clove cigarettes.

“Candy?” Silvia said squinting at the small bottle of pills she held in her fat hands.

“Not exactly. More like cyanide tablets,” Tracy corrected. “Very powerful.”

“I wanted the gun…” Silvia murmured as she rolled the bottle slowly in her hands.

“There’s still one more package left,” Estelle pointed out.

“Oh, that’s for me,” Tracy said as she picked up the last gift. Like a tiger shredding a deer’s hide, she tore open the paper and pulled out a large noose of manila rope. She swung it around her head once and then placed it on the couch beside her.

“So, now what?” Jared asked holding his candlestick in his hands.

“Now, we get creative. Your assignment for tonight is to write me a short story about a murder that takes place in this house using the weapon that each of you now possesses. It doesn’t have to be long. I’ve got paper and pens for you all right over there on the table,” Tracy said pointing to the table by the bar. “You’ve got free reign of the house to fuel your imaginations. Remember, be creative! I expect some really juicy murders when I see you all in the morning.”

“You aren’t going to stick around and help us?” Charlie asked.

“I’m hosting this weekend to help you become better writers. I’m not here to write for you. Don’t worry. I’ll give you plenty of constructive criticism in the morning when we read our stories to each other.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Percy has already placed your bags in your rooms. Whenever you are ready to go to bed, just

find Percy and he will show you to your room. If you have any problems during the night, you can either get Percy or Claudine to help you, or come see me. My room is just at the top of the stairs. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to head to bed. I'm all tuckered out," Tracy said as she rose from her couch, noose in hand, and floated over to the lounge door. "Good night. Sweet dreams. Don't let the bedbugs bite!"

The door closed behind her as she exited. The six guests sat in silence and stared at the deadly weapons in their hands, and then glanced at each other.

Chapter Six

“So, that’s it?” Charlie said sarcastically.

“What do you mean, that’s it?” Estelle responded. “It seems pretty clear to me. We write something and she’ll tell us how to improve it tomorrow. What else should there be?”

“Where’s the secrets of the criminal mind? Where’s the inspiration?” he continued.

“Inspiration? I think you’re holding about 4 feet of cold steel inspiration in your hands, Mr. Miagi,” Jared teased. “Plus, you’re standing in a mansion that looks like its architect played a bit too much Clue as a kid. What more inspiration could you ask for?”

“I guess you’re right. And this sword is wicked-pissah cool,” Charlie agreed, his Boston accent coming out as he drew the sword and swung it around his head. After a few seconds of striking samurai poses with his sword and nearly chopping one of the end tables in two, Charlie leaned the sword against the couch and sat down. “Well, I guess we should start writing if we don’t want to be up all night.”

“You don’t want to stay up all night?” Estelle cooed with a wistful look in her eyes.

“Well, I mean... I don’t want to spend the whole night writing.”

“Good, because I think I heard that there was a pillow fight scheduled for midnight in my bedroom. You’re the underdog challenger.”

“Who am I challenging?” Charlie teased.

“The undisputed reigning champ, Tilly the Tickler.”

“Paper? Pen?”

“What?” Estelle snapped to attention as she looked around and noticed the Commodore standing over her and Charlie with a stack of papers and a handful of pens in his large hands.

“I was handing out some supplies to us all,” the Commodore explained.

Charlie looked around and noticed that everyone else had positioned themselves around the lounge and were already busily writing. “Thanks, Commodore,” he said as he took some sheets of paper and two pens.

“Not even worth mentioning, Nash. I’m looking forward to seeing what you come up with. You know, I spent some time serving the crown in the Hokkaido area of Japan. The women there were a little too small for my liking, but the men with their katanas were the most honorable gents I’d

seen outside of the Isles.”

“Is that so? Well, I’ll keep that in mind while I’m writing,” Charlie said with mock seriousness.

“Tip top. Well, I’ll let you two get back to writing. I’ve got a devilish plot brewing in my brain and I don’t want to let it get away,” the Commodore laughed as he walked back over to one of the end tables and sat down in his chair.

“This is for you,” Charlie whispered as he presented Estelle with one of the pens the Commodore had given him.

“Thanks, sweetheart. I’ll treasure it forever. Or, at least until it runs out of ink,” she said as she clicked and unclicked the mechanism of the cheap ballpoint pen. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go check out some more of this fabulous mansion. See you at midnight.” A come-and-get-me look was written all over her face.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be there. I’ll be sure to bring my pillow, too,” he said as he watched her get up and waltz over to the door to the lounge.

Doctor Payne sat hunched over his paper and scribbled furiously for several minutes, then leaned back in his chair and lit a cigarette. When the cigarette burned down to his fingertips he mashed it out in the ashtray, hunched over his paper again, and began scribbling. Jared watched him repeat this behavior several times as he stared at his still blank sheet of paper. “You’d think he would pay more attention to his health, being a doctor and all,” Jared thought to himself. Jared laid down his pen on the paper and picked up his candlestick. His face looked distorted in its polished brass finish.

He tried to think of a good story, but his mind was plagued with too many other things. “What did Claudine mean when she said that I was in danger? Certainly, Charlie was a danger with that damn sword he kept swinging about, but so long as I keep a safe distance from the wannabe samurai, I should be safe,” Jared thought. “I’ll definitely have to find her before I go to bed tonight,” he decided.

“Does anyone now how to spell ‘seppuku’?” Charlie called out to everyone in the room.

“What’s that?” Silvia whispered as she gave pause to chewing on the end of her pen just long enough to utter the two words.

“It’s the Japanese word for ritual suicide. You know, when they cut open their own belly and their guts spill out everywhere?” Charlie explained.

“I thought that was ‘Hare Krishna’,” Jared suggested.

“No. I think you’re thinking of the classic George Harrison hit “My Sweet Lord”,” the Commodore corrected without looking up from his paper.

“I didn’t know you were a Beatles fan, Commodore,” Charlie said.

“Hrmph. Hardly. Those rag-tag mop-tops never did anything for me musically. But, I am British. It’s hard to escape Beatlemania in the land that spawned the four Liverpool lads,” the Commodore said with a snort.

“I think I meant “Hare Kari”. Isn’t that it, Commodore?” Jared corrected himself.

“Now, that sounds about right, Price. In fact, I had the strange pleasure of acting as second in a hare kari ritual once in Kyoto.”

“Second?” Silvia inquired, pulling the pen from her busy teeth.

“Yes. You see, the second stands behind the gent who’s going to kill himself, sword at the ready. Now, when the chap actually stabs himself, the pain is incredible. Most men can’t maintain their courage enough to continue disemboweling themselves after the initial shock of blood loss. So, when they falter, the second swiftly chops their head clean off. It saves their honor.”

“Eww,” she muttered under her breath. “Did you actually chop off his head?”

“Hardly! This fellow had about the biggest set of brass ones I’d ever seen. He pushed the dagger in clean to the hilt, then sliced right across his belly as professionally as any butcher in Scarborough. I was so proud of him, even though he did get caught selling little girls to a prostitution ring,” the Commodore said shaking his head in sadness.

“So does anyone know how to spell ‘seppuku’ or not?” Charlie pressed.

“S-Eeeeeeeee-P-P-U-K-U,” the Doctor enunciated as clear as he could between puffs on his newest clove cigarette. He spun his pen about his fingertips with amazing dexterity.

“How many E’s was that?” Charlie asked, confused by the doctor’s stutter.

“Just one.”

“Thanks, Doc,” Charlie said as he picked up his pen and continued writing.

Jared got up and stretched his legs. Everyone else was busy writing, and he hadn’t written a

single word yet. “I think I’m going to go explore the house a bit for inspiration, too,” he announced to the rest.

“Solid idea, Price. You may see me wandering about too if I run into some of that dreaded writer’s block that strikes us all now and then,” the Commodore agreed.

“Don’t forget your candlestick,” Charlie smiled as he held his sword in a strange pose then wildly swung it downward, nearly chopping off his own leg.

“Right.” Jared picked up the brass candlestick and grasped it a menacing way. Without another word, he was out the door.

Percy was waiting right outside the door. “Ready for bed, Master Price?”

“No, Percy, not just yet. I’m going to check out the rest of the mansion a little. I’ve got a bit of writer’s block, and I think that poking around some of these other rooms may get my brain working again,” Jared replied. He pretended to club himself in the head with the candlestick, smiled at Percy with a crazy look, then walked away from the butler. He had already seen the dining room. And the study. And he had just come from the lounge. Jared looked around. He hadn’t yet explored the room beside the dining room, so he started off in that direction.

He quickly crossed the great parquet floor of the main hall and found himself in front of the double doors of the room opposite the study. He pushed open the door and walked into the darkened room. Instinctively, he felt the wall to the left of the door for a light switch. Nothing. He tried the wall to the right and hit paydirt.

“Disco,” he murmured as he flicked the switch. The globes of several lamps illuminated the room and bathed it in a warm white light. “This must be the music room,” Jared thought as he gazed at the marvelous collection of instruments the large room held.

There were instruments from all parts of the globe. Everything was labeled with a small brass nameplate standing before each piece. Jared closed the door behind him, and walked further into the room. The center of the room was occupied by a large Steinway grand piano. The lid was propped open to reveal the eighty-eight wires criss-crossing the belly of the piano along with the eighty-eight felt-covered hammers at rest behind the keyboard. The keys were genuine ebony and ivory. Jared looked over his shoulder, then cautiously depressed one of the keys. He jumped as the pitch rang

clear and true. Placing the candlestick on the thick red Persian rug, he pulled out the stool and sat down. Slowly at first, but then with increasing vigor, he began banging away at the keys to the melody of the “Tritch Tratch Polka”. “Those ten torturous years of piano lessons weren’t a complete waste,” he thought, smiling to himself and impressed with his memory. He hadn’t even touched a piano in over seven years, and yet his fingers somehow remembered the melody as if he had learned the piece just yesterday. He stood up from the stool and looked around at the other instruments in the room. There was a rack of saxophones hanging on one wall. “Soprano, alto, tenor, baritone, contrabass. She’s got her bases covered if she ever wants to start a saxophone quintet,” he thought. Standing on its flared bell on a small felt-covered table was a tarnished silver trumpet. Jared read the nameplate beside it. “Played by Miles Davis, 1961,” he read aloud. “Well, I don’t know what’s wrong with her writing, but at least she’s got good taste in music,” Jared said to himself. Although his mom had insisted that he study the piano as a child, Jared’s true love was jazz. The saxophone, the trumpet, the trombone, the drums; these were the instruments he preferred to accompany on the piano.

The opposite wall had a whole assortment of different drums and various percussion instruments. Jared saw some bongos from Paraguay, a steel-drum from Jamaica, some shakareas from Kenya, an elegantly carved tiger-shaped Puk from Korea, some castanets from Spain, and a ceremonial tom-tom from the American Southwest.

Beneath the large blown-glass windows on the far wall of the room was a collection of flutes. Bamboo flutes of differing length and diameter stood like a small forest. Silver flutes and piccolos lay on a crushed velvet topped pedestal. Several more wind instruments were on display there, including an ocarina-type instrument from “Banpo Village, Xi’an, China, 4000BC”.

Beside the door hung a slew of string instruments. There was a Stradivarius violin, a viola, and a cello. In the corner leaned a huge stand-up bass. Jared was impressed with the collection. Never before had he seen such a wide range of instruments in such a private collection. He wondered if Tracy played any of the instruments, or if she just collected them for display. “I’ll have to ask her tomorrow,” he thought. “Maybe we can jam a bit if we have some free time.” A plot began brewing in his mind at that moment. Jared smiled as the murder danced in his mind’s eye. “That could work,” he thought. He opened the door, flicked off the lights, and walked into the main hall.

Percy was still waiting outside the door to the lounge. “Done exploring, Master Price?”

“Yeah, I think I found my muse in the music room over there. I’ve got an idea stirring in my head. I don’t want to lose it. I’d better get it written down as soon as possible.”

“An excellent plan, Master Price. When you’re ready to retire for the night, I’ll be right here to guide you to your room,” Percy said with a slight bow.

“Thanks, Percy. Hopefully I won’t be too long,” Jared replied as he entered the lounge and left Percy in the hall.

Charlie was busy contemplating the scabbard of his sword as his cheek rested on its edge and a small stream of drool flowed from his open mouth. A barely audible snore arose from his chest. The doctor scribbled something furiously on his paper, then lit another cigarette. The ashtray was brimming with extinguished cigarette butts. Silvia held the little bottle of cyanide pills aloft and stared at their roundness. Jared thought he could almost hear her as she mouthed the word “candy” with eager eyes. The Commodore was absent from the room, but Estelle had returned. She lay reclining on the couch with her lithe legs propped up on the coffee table. On her lap rested a thick book she must have gotten from the study. She was deep in thought as she penned her story, and didn’t notice as Jared entered. Actually, no one noticed him as he sat down in the chair he had sat down in earlier in the night when he had first met Silvia. He pulled the now crumpled paper from his pants pocket along with his pen and began writing. The story flowed more easily now.

Chapter Seven

The rain fell in sheets from the lightning streaked sky as the hansom cab barreled down the cobblestone streets of London's West End. Inspector Perrot pulled his pocket watch from beneath the heavy brown-plaid wool cloak he wore and glanced at the time in the brief light afforded by a gas lamp on one of the street corners they raced past. His beak-like nose wagged back and forth like a pendulum as Perrot shook his deerstalker-capped head in disappointment.

"It's been forty-seven minutes since Scotland Yard received the report of a murder at the Banks' Estate, Quincy," Perrot snapped, his voice full of exasperation. "Bloody forty-seven minutes. Honestly, it's almost as if they want the murderer to get away."

I looked at my companion in the hansom cab. Beneath Perrot's bulky cloak and jacket was a tall and lanky frame that was still full of hidden vitality and agility despite its fifty-three year vintage. Small, hawkish eyes darted suspiciously from either side of his massive pointed nose. Mouse-brown hair flecked with spots of gray grew in abundance on his head and fell to his neck where it met with the high collar of his starched white shirt.

"With the power outage from tonight's thunderstorm, the patrolling officer had to take a hansom all the way from West End back to headquarters. They called for us as soon as they could, Perrot," I reasoned.

"I know, your logic is sound as usual, Quincy. I suppose I'm still just a little cranky from being dragged out of bed at this hour of the night. Especially without time for a warm spot of tea to limber up these old bones," he said rubbing his hands together to warm them.

As we reached the northernmost point of West End, the Banks' Estate loomed before us in monolithic grandeur. It stood out from the rest of the homes on Haverly Street. A tall stone wall topped with shards of broken glass lined the perimeter of the yard. A tall hedgerow was planted immediately within this wall, offering visual privacy to compliment and augment the security provided by the stone wall. From the street, only the three small attic windows on the slate roof of the Banks' home were readily visible. Somber weeping willows obscured much of the rest of the house with their tendril-like branches swaying wildly in the damp breeze that accompanied the night's rain.

The hansom rolled to a stop in front of the large iron gate that stood centered in the stone wall

facing the street. Perrot glanced at his pocket watch again, and sighed.

“Fifty-six minutes and counting, Quincy. We may still have time!” he exclaimed as he kicked open the door of the cab with his boot heel and hopped out onto the cobblestone street.

Anyone unfamiliar with Perrot’s methods might assume that he would have dashed madly to the body lying in the music room of the Banks’ Estate to begin his investigation. But, having worked with him for almost four years now, I knew better and took my time in climbing down from the hansom. There was no need for me to hurry.

My suspicions were confirmed as I saw Perrot crouched in the mud by the front gate inspecting something closely with his large magnifying glass. I knew not to interrupt him while he was working and waited patiently on the street. He skittered about with great vigor, stopping here and there to examine marks in the mud only discernable to his trained eye. Slowly he worked his way up the front walkway to the front door of the estate; at times looking and acting more like a bloodhound than a man. Careful to keep my distance, I followed behind him. When he reached the large wooden doors on the front stoop of the building, he stood up straight and tucked his magnifying glass back into one of the inner pockets of his cloak. He cleared his throat and looked at me with a glint in his eye.

“It appears this case may be more interesting than it first seemed, Quincy. I’ve got a good idea of what we might expect inside, but let’s keep our eyes open, shall we?” he whispered. “Have you brought your pistol with you?”

I patted my jacket’s right waist pocket in affirmation and he nodded in approval.

“Good, we may need it, I suspect. There has been a murder here tonight, and there may be more if we are not careful.” He pulled the chain of the doorbell and we both waited for a minute in silence.

After a moment, the door opened and Captain Tenneil appeared at the door. A smile of relief dawned on his face as he recognized Perrot and me, and he opened the door further to let us in.

“Perrot! Thank God, you’re here. I’ve been wracking my brain trying to make heads or tails of this one, but I’m coming up dry,” he confessed with despair.

“Don’t worry, old chap. I’m sure we can get to the bottom of this little caper in no time at all. Just you see. Now, has everything been left as it was found?”

“Yes. As per your usual request I’ve instructed my men not to touch anything in the house.”

“Excellent. Where is Mr. Banks now?”

“He’s resting in the study with my men. He was quite distraught when we arrived. After having some brandy and a pipe his nerves have calmed a bit, though,” Tenneil explained.

“Good. Have your men remain with him there until I meet you in the study. I will investigate the rest of the house in the meantime,” Perrot instructed. “Oh, and be sure to tell Roberts that he paid too much when he had his boots resoled.”

Shock and amazement filled Tenneil’s face. “How did you know? He had them resoled just this afternoon, and was complaining to me about the workmanship just ten minutes ago.”

Perrot’s genius was above contestability and his skills as a detective were unmatched in London, but his powers of observation and deduction were his true strengths. His eyes could see things invisible to others. Undoubtedly, his vision would be crucial in solving this case, but on this point, he was merely showing off. When it came time to receive praise for a case well solved, Tenneil would often forget the invaluable assistance that Perrot and I offered him. It did not bother me in the slightest, but sometimes Perrot’s ego grew enflamed and this was his way of, at least privately, putting Tenneil back in his place.

“Nothing escapes these eyes, Captain,” he said using his right index and middle fingers to point to his hawk-like eyes. “Nothing.” With that, he stepped past the astonished Tenneil and into the foyer of the Banks’ Estate.

The interior of the Banks’ Estate was as grand as the exterior was foreboding. A large hall extended from the foyer with deep mahogany paneling covering the walls and ending in a waist-height ledge that was adorned with marble busts of several popular contemporary figures. A large staircase lead to the second floor, and, on either side of it on the main floor, two sets of double doors lead to additional rooms. The house extended further beyond the staircase, but darkness prevented me from seeing anything further.

“The body is in the music room, right here on the left,” Tenneil pointed out as he motioned to the first set of doors on the left of the main hall.

Perrot said nothing in response, cocked his head, bird-like, and sniffed the air. I breathed in the warm, dusty air, but could smell nothing. He then produced his magnifying glass, got down on all

fours, and crawled around on the parquet floor of the main hall. He proceeded in this manner for a minute or two, much as he had outside the building, pausing occasionally to make a note on his notepad. Finally, he stopped in front of the doors Tenneil had indicated as leading to the music room, stood up and straightened his cloak.

“Quincy, only one more question plagues my mind on this case,” he said with resolute confidence. “Let us see what Mrs. Banks can tell us now.” He entered the music room and I followed closely at his heels.

The music room was host to an impressive collection of musical instruments from around the world. Besides the more typical orchestral instruments that one might expect to find in the home of a classical music lover in Europe, there were also representative instruments from the Far East and the mysterious China, as well as some drums that must have come from the savage lands of Africa. In the center of the room was a large grand piano with the top propped open to reveal its inner workings. Seated at the bench and slumped over the keys was the body of the late Mrs. Banks.

Perrot walked over to her body and made a brief examination. After he was satisfied with his initial observations, he motioned for me to approach.

“Quincy, come take a look at the poor lass and see what you can see,” he requested as he stood back and charged his pipe.

Having served the Crown in the wilds of Canada’s British Columbia with Mountie Post Forty-Seven for three years as their chief medical examiner, I was no stranger to anatomy and physiology. My expertise in this area had more than once proved valuable in my investigations with Perrot. I looked her up and down. The cause of death was blindingly obvious. The entire front of her skull above the left eye socket was crushed in. Her left eye was indistinguishable from the gore and splinters of bone that comprised the massive clot of blood where the socket used to be. Her right eye was frozen in a look of horrific terror. Her fingers were curled into fists which rested on the keys of the piano. I shook my head and looked at Perrot.

“What do you make of it, old boy?” he asked me as he puffed away at his long, curved briar pipe.

“Well,” I began, already knowing that he had surely seen something I had not, “she was killed by massive trauma to the left frontal lobe.”

“That much is obvious,” he smirked. “Did you notice anything else? Anything unusual?”

I glanced at the body again and shook my head. “No.”

“You disappoint me, Quincy. Where are her shoes, Quincy? Where are her shoes?”

I looked beneath the bench and for the first time realized that the late Mrs. Banks wore only her stocking feet.

Perrot took big strides and exited the music room quickly. I hastened to keep up.

In the main hall, Tenneil was waiting for us.

“Have you found something?” he inquired eagerly.

“Where do those doors lead?” Perrot asked pointing to the room immediately to our left and blithely ignoring the captain’s inquiry.

“Those lead to the lounge. But, Mr. Banks is waiting in the study right across the hall here.”

“Thank you very much, Captain. I would advise you to watch him closely,” he said as he turned and walked towards the lounge.

“Perrot, the study is this way,” Tenneil called after him, pointing to the study.

“Thank you, Captain,” Perrot called back as he opened the door and stepped into the lounge.

By the time I entered after him, he was already standing beside one of the several sleigh couches that were positioned haphazardly about the room. A roaring fire burned in the fireplace near the door where I stood and the light cast a tremulous shadow on the far wall as it silhouetted Perrot.

“Quincy, my back is feeling a bit tight with the dampness of this evening. Would you mind checking underneath this sofa for me?” he said pointing to the couch before him.

Fifteen years ago, he was shot in the back while apprehending a petty thief, and since then his lower spine has been a source of discomfort for him on a daily basis. I’ve examined the vertebrae in question, but have been unable to ease his pain with my attempts. Against my continual suggestions, Perrot administered morphine to himself nightly, and, in my opinion, was quite addicted to the narcotic.

I bent down and lifted the skirt of the sofa. Two pink slippers were lying beneath the couch. “I suspect that these are Mrs. Banks,” I said as I pulled them from underneath the couch and rested them on the deep red Persian rug.

“Seeing as how the servants rarely wear pink slippers in the house, I suspect you are correct, Quincy.

My, what a lovely candlestick,” he admired as he held a large brass candlestick he had picked up from the mantle. “Unless you’ve got something else you’d like to investigate in this room, Quincy, I suggest we go across the hall and talk with Mr. Banks.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I agreed and followed him out the door.

Tenneil was still waiting in the hall and greeted us anxiously.

“Perrot, I trust you’ve found something.”

“Everything is in order, Captain. Don’t worry. I just want to talk with Mr. Banks in brief, and then I believe we can all go home,” Perrot said as he passed by Tenneil and stepped into the study.

The study could more appropriately be called a library for all the dusty tomes it held. Two walls were covered entirely by large mahogany bookshelves that extended from the floor to the ceiling. Several armchairs with small tables and reading lamps were positioned around the perimeter of the room and a large desk stood before a grand bay window. Its heavy green drapes were drawn closed to keep out the chill evening air.

Mr. Banks stood before his desk with a glass of brandy at hand. He started a bit as we entered and approached him.

“Mr. Banks, let me introduce you to our finest investigators, Inspector Perrot Le Fou, and Doctor David Quincy,” Tenneil announced.

Banks moved towards us and shook our hands. As he shook Perrot’s hand, Perrot leaned over and admired the large turquoise and silver ring Banks wore on his right hand.

“That’s a lovely ring you have there, Mr. Banks. Where on Earth did you find it?” he said feigning interest. I knew better and knew that Perrot was up to something for sure.

“It was a gift from a cousin living in the American Southwest. The natives there craft these wonderful baubles and sell them for pennies, he tells me,” Banks replied with an air of pride.

“How interesting. So, tell me, what happened here tonight, Mr. Banks.”

“Well,” Banks started, his face becoming instantly serious, “I arrived home just about an hour ago from my weekly bridge game at the Addison Gentlemen’s Club. The servants had already been sent home for the night. Usually, Mrs. Banks greets me at the door when I come home from the game. But, to my surprise, she didn’t come to the door tonight. I attempted to use my key, but found that the door was already open. I became worried at that point and searched the house for her. Then, I found

her in the music room.” A tear ran down his cheek. He swallowed hard, and then continued. “Then, I went out to find an officer.”

“A truly dreadful night for you,” Perrot consoled as he lit a match to light his pipe. He accidentally dropped the lit match on the floor near Banks’ feet and stooped to retrieve it. He lingered by the man’s shoes for a moment and then stood up and puffed at his pipe for a second. “Well, Mr. Banks,” he said as he patted the large man on the shoulder, “I can assure you that the man responsible for your wife’s murder will be brought to justice.” He turned and walked towards me. As he passed me on the way to the door he winked at me, and I knew that was the signal.

Perrot called back to us as he reached the door. “Quincy, let’s go. I’ve had enough of this case for tonight.” He grasped the doorknob, but instead of opening the door, he locked it and turned to Captain Tenneil. “Captain, if you would, please arrest Mr. Banks for the double murder he committed on this dreary night.”

A look of surprise fell on Tenneil’s face and he barely had time to see the large Mr. Banks barreling across the room making his way towards the door.

Perrot drew his cane from the folds of his cloak and held it menacingly before the enraged Banks. I thought Perrot would need to strike him, but Banks became suddenly docile as he noticed my pistol trained on him out of the corner of his eye. Recognizing that defeat was inevitable, he sat down on the carpet, buried his face in his hands, and wept.

“I’m so sorry Justine!” he cried in between sobs. The two officers in the room, Roberts and Gardner, quickly rushed to him and placed handcuffs on his wrists.

“Perrot, you never cease to amaze me. But, I’m confused, what did you mean by double murder?” Tenneil inquired with a look of confusion.

“The second murder to which I referred is that of the soon-to-be-reported-missing dockworker that I suspect you will find in the coalbox in the basement. With him, I also suspect you will find a rather bloody brass candlestick.”

“I’ll go look right away.”

“Excellent, Captain. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m quite tired and sipping a warm spot of tea on my couch sounds wonderful right about now,” Perrot said as he headed for the door. After unlocking it, he exited and I followed.

Once we were back in the hansom and rolling easily back down the streets of West End I could contain my curiosity no further and blurted out, “Perrot, how did you do it? I was with you the whole time. I saw everything you saw, yet was unable to make the conclusion you did.”

“My dear Quincy. Yes, you saw everything I saw, but you did not observe everything that I observed. For example, did you observe the large boot prints leading into the Banks’ Estate, but not leading away? The tread on the boots was of the type typically worn by fishermen and dockworkers for the excellent grip they provide on the slippery wooden docks. And, upon entering the mansion, did you notice the slight aroma of salt and fish that I detected?”

“No, I didn’t notice those things,” I admitted.

“Or, did you notice that Mrs. Banks was struck from the front and above. Seated at the piano, her assailant would have had to have been suspended from the ceiling to strike her from such an angle. Being a woman of class, she certainly wouldn’t have walked around the house with her slippers hidden under the sofa in the lounge. So, we can assume that she was in the lounge when she was murdered. When I pointed out the attractive candlestick on the mantle, did you notice that its match was missing? The round patch of dust-free marble on the top of the mantle indicated that it was recently removed.”

“No, I didn’t think of those either.”

“Well, how about Mr. Banks’ hands? Did you notice the light tint of pink that was still visible on his fingers from the blood he attempted to wash away? Or, did you see the small flecks of coal dust that were trapped underneath his fingernails and covered the otherwise polished leather shoes he wore?”

“No, I admit I didn’t see any of these things tonight, Perrot.”

“Wrong again, Quincy. You did see them all, you just didn’t observe them. That’s why you failed to uncover the truth,” Perrot corrected with a smile.

“So, this all lead you to suspect Banks. I understand that now. But, what happened here tonight? I’d still like to know that.”

“It’s quite obvious, given what we now know. As he truthfully stated, Banks did arrive home about an hour ago from his weekly bridge game. But, when he entered the lounge, he saw his wife caught in the throws of passion with a rather smelly dockworker atop her on the couch. Rage filled him, and he grabbed the candlestick from the mantle and bludgeoned the dockworker to death. Pinned beneath

the weight of the dead man, Mrs. Banks was helpless as her husband then smashed her forehead in as she lay on the sofa. Realizing he must get rid of the dockworker, he dragged him to the basement and threw him and the candlestick in the coalbox to dispose of later. Then, he returned to the lounge and carried his wife to the music room where he propped her up on the piano stool. Satisfied that he had sufficiently covered his tracks, he then returned to the realm of truth in his story and went outside to find an officer.”

“Amazing, Perrot,” I said with genuine admiration.

“It was nothing really. I’m sure you could have figured it out without my help, Quincy,” he said as he puffed away at his pipe. The rest of the trip home was spent in silence, the only sound the clip-clop of the horses’ hooves on the cobblestone street.

Jared put down his pen and stretched his hands above his head. Eight pages of hastily penned words sat in front of him. A yawn escaped his lips as he looked around the lounge. In his deep concentration, he had failed to notice that he was now alone in the lounge.

“I guess I’m the slow writer,” he said aloud to himself. He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes for a moment. Exhaustion hit him like a brick.

Chapter Eight

Jared rubbed his eyes and stood up. “Time for bed,” he thought. “No, first, I need to find Claudine and talk with her,” he corrected himself. “Then I can go to sleep.” His eyes wandered around the lounge and came to rest upon the fireplace. The fire was dying, having not been attended to by anyone in the last several hours, and the warm glow of the orange coals looked like tiny orange eyes peering at him. His eyes rose, then, and focused on the mantle.

“That wasn’t a bad story I just wrote, if I do say so myself. To myself,” he laughed as he spoke aloud again to the empty room. “A pretty creative murder,” he thought. “And, I did just what Tracy instructed us to do. Use the mansion and our weapon as inspiration. Hey,” he said, “where’s my candlestick?”

Jared looked beside the chair. Nothing. He decided he must have left it in the music room. “I’ll just stop by the music room and pick it up on the way upstairs,” he thought.

“Ready for bed, Master Price?” Percy inquired as Jared opened the door to the lounge. Percy was standing in exactly the same position beside the door to the lounge that Jared remembered him being in when he last saw him.

“Almost, Percy. I’ve just got to pick up something I left in the music room,” Jared called as he turned left and headed across the hall towards the set of doors diagonal to him.

“Excellent, Master Price. I’ll be right here when you return.”

“I’m sure you will,” Jared thought with a smirk. “It must be pretty boring waiting on us guests all day long,” he pondered. When he got to the music room, he extended his right hand and flicked the light switch. Warm light bathed the room.

“Now, where did I leave that thing?” he asked aloud as he walked around the room searching for the candlestick. “Let’s see. First, I looked at the piano. I sat down. I must have set it right here,” he thought to himself, pointing to the rug beside the piano stool. There was a slight indentation in the nap of the red Persian carpet beside the stool. It was round, like the base of the candlestick.

“Okay... so where is it now?” he said in confusion. Jared quickly scanned the rest of the room. “Oh, there it is,” he exclaimed with relief. He walked over to the small felt-covered table, but then realized that it was only the Miles Davis trumpet. He rubbed his eyes. “I must be more tired than I thought.”

Another quick scan of the room and he decided that it wasn't here. He hit the switch as he left the music room.

"Find what you were looking for, Master Price?" Percy asked as he started walking towards the grand staircase to lead Jared to his room.

"Actually, no." Jared didn't follow Percy towards the stairs and stood just outside the music room scratching his head. "Say, Percy, did anyone else go in the music room tonight?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Well, let's see. There was myself, and Claudine, and Madame Ellis."

"Ellis? Did she happen to have a large brass candlestick with her?"

"When?"

"When she left the music room."

"No."

"Wait. Did she visit the music room before me, or after me?"

"Before you."

"Okay, how about Claudine?"

"After you left."

"She visited the music room after I did?"

"No."

"No? You just said, 'After you left'."

"Yes, she did visit the music room after you. And, no she didn't."

"No she didn't what?"

"No, she didn't have a candlestick with her, either."

"Okay."

"And no, I don't have a candlestick, and yes, I visited the music room both before and after you did, Master Price."

"Did you see a candlestick in the music room when you were there, Percy?"

"No. Wait, did you mean before you left, or after you left?"

"After I left."

“After you left?”

“Yes.”

“Then, no.”

“How about before I visited the music room?”

“Still no.”

“Then why did it matter when I was asking about?”

“Well, I guess it didn’t matter after all, but I didn’t want to get confused.”

“And we four were the only people to visit the music room tonight?” Jared said with a sigh.

“I don’t know.”

“But haven’t you been standing there all night long, Percy?”

“Of course not, Master Price. In addition to standing here, I also escorted all the other guests to their rooms when they were ready for bed.”

“Right,” Jared said as he shook his head with disappointment.

“I’m sorry, Master Price.”

“It’s not your fault, Percy. I’m just too tired to think straight now.”

“Well, then if I may suggest, I think what you need is a good night’s sleep.”

“I think you’re right, Percy. I’ll find it tomorrow, I’m sure.”

“Of course you will.”

Jared walked over to Percy and followed him up the long staircase to the second floor. Percy turned right and stopped outside the first set of doors he came to. They were standing directly above the doors to the lounge.

“Here is your room, Master Price,” Percy said as he unlocked the door with a small key he had produced from his waistcoat pocket and opened it. He entered and flicked the light switch on the wall to the right of the door. Jared followed him into the room and saw his duffel bag sitting next to the large canopy bed pushed against the far wall of the room. “If you should need anything during the night, just pull this chain,” he mentioned as he pointed to a small chain. The chain was fitted with the same brass hand handle as the pull-chain outside the front door of the mansion. “It will ring down in my room, and I’ll come up to serve you, Master Price.”

“Thanks, Percy. Say, does each bedroom have one of these pull-chains?”

“Yes.”

“So... how do you know which room to go to when it rings?” Jared asked out of curiosity.

“There are separate bells for each room, Master Price.”

“Oh. I hadn’t thought of that,” he said sheepishly.

“If you’d like to brush your teeth, or shower before bed, your private bath is there on the right,” Percy continued, pointing to the large white door standing on the right wall of the bedroom.

“Actually, a hot shower sounds like heaven right about now.”

“Well, then, I shall leave you to prepare for bed, and wish you pleasant dreams, Master Price.”

“Thanks, Percy. You, too,” Jared said as he walked over to his duffel bag and put it on the bed.

“Oh, I haven’t had any pleasant dreams in ages, Master Price.”

“Well, you never know what will happen tonight. It could be your lucky day,” Jared smiled. His mood improved with the prospect of a hot shower.

“Yes. You’re right. It could be my lucky day,” Percy said deliberately as he backed towards the door. As he turned around and placed his hand on the doorknob he whispered, “You never know what will happen tonight.” Then, he closed the door behind him and Jared was alone in his bedroom.

Like the rest of the mansion, the bedroom was lavishly decorated with large wooden furniture and strange odds and ends. The king-size canopy bed occupied the bulk of the room, its four solid posts reaching nearly to the ceiling. On the bed, blue silk sheets were visible beneath the turned-down gold and blue paisley down comforter. Four large pillows were piled high at the head of the bed, and a blue woolen blanket lay folded at its foot. Small nightstands stood guard on either side of the bed with little brass lamps on each. To the right of the bed was a large window looking out over the side yard of the grounds. The left wall of the room held a large life-sized painting of several hunters on horseback chasing a fox with hounds in the countryside. Beneath the painting was a very comfortable looking sofa and an antique victrola complete with amplifying horn and an assortment of records stacked beneath its base. The right side of the room had the door to the bathroom, as well as a large wardrobe and dressing table with mirror. Tucked in the right corner of the room was a large globe on an even larger pedestal.

Jared walked over to the globe and spun it with his finger. He let his finger drag along the surface of

the globe and as the friction of his finger stopped its motion, he looked to where it pointed.

“Tannu-Tuva,” he murmured. “I’ve never heard of that one,” he chuckled as he squinted at the tiny country smashed between the borders of the Soviet Union and Mongolia. Jared sloughed off his sweater and tossed it onto the back of the chair in front of the dressing table. As he got undressed, he whistled a happy tune and walked around in circles on the fuzzy rug lying beside the bed. From his duffel bag, he drew his shaving kit and then walked, naked, to the bathroom door.

Jared closed the door and turned on the lights. The bathroom was blindingly white. Shiny white tile covered every wall and white tile covered the floor. Immediately across from where he stood was another door.

“I wonder if that goes to the next room,” he wondered. He walked across the white tile floor and tried the knob. It turned. He opened the door. Another door stood behind the one he had just opened. The door was locked, however, and so Jared closed his door and walked over to the large claw-foot cast iron bathtub. Besides a tall pedestal sink with a mirror hanging above it, an old-fashioned toilet with a tank and pull chain on the wall, and a small chest of drawers with several pink towels draped across the top, there was nothing else in the bathroom.

The handle for the hot water groaned in protest as Jared turned it, but soon steaming hot water shot from the showerhead. He picked up where he had left off on the happy tune he was whistling before, and washed thoroughly. After toweling himself off, he brushed his teeth and trimmed his goatee before shaving his neck and cheeks. The events of the whole day drifted through his mind as he recalled the long boring train ride, arriving at the mansion, introductions, a tasty dinner, the minor drama in the study, the strange weapon presents, the story he had written, and the confusing dialogue with Percy at the foot of the stairs. “Man, it’s been a long day,” he sighed as he wiped the rest of the shaving cream from his chin and from behind his ears. “Oh dammit!” he exclaimed as he suddenly remembered that he was supposed to find Claudine sometime tonight to talk with her. “Well, I guess it can wait until tomorrow,” he reasoned with himself, deciding he was too tired, and now too relaxed and ready for bed, to go looking for the French maid.

He tossed the towel back on the chest of drawers and opened the door to his bedroom. As he stepped into the room, steam billowed from the top of the doorway and curled lazily to the ceiling.

“Oh! Mon dieu!”

“Claudine?”

“Oui, Monsieur,” she said with embarrassment as she stared with eager eyes and hungry lips at his naked body.

“What are you doing here?”

“Monsieur promised to meet me tonight, but you didn’t, so I came to find you. The door was unlocked, so I came in and waited,” she explained as she moved one step closer to Jared.

“Oh, I guess I forgot to lock the door,” Jared said. Suddenly he realized that he was naked and frantically covered himself with his hands. “Wait!” he blurted. “I’m sorry! Here, let me get a towel real quick!” he said as he hastily turned around, deftly maneuvering his hands to cover his butt with perfect timing as he turned, then lunged into the bathroom again.

“Monsieur doesn’t need to be embarrassed,” Claudine said in apologetic tone. “You are quite handsome, I think. I don’t mind.”

“Yeah, but maybe I do,” Jared said as he reemerged from the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his waist. Claudine had retreated from her previous position and now sat demurely on the bed.

“We must talk, before it’s too late,” she whispered across the room.

“Okay, so what’s going on here?”

“Please come here. Close to me. We must not be heard by the others!” she said in an urgent whisper as she motioned for him to join her on the bed.

Jared walked across the room and stood before her. He crossed his arms across his chest and stared at Claudine. Claudine patted the sheets next to her and looked back at him expectantly.

“I’ll stand, thanks,” Jared said trying to control his now raging libido.

“Don’t you trust me, Monsieur?”

“Trust you? Why should I trust you? I barely know you.”

“Please. I may be the only one here you can trust. There is danger everywhere!” She looked at him with pleading eyes. “Please, sit.”

Reluctantly, Jared acquiesced and sat gingerly on the large bed next to Claudine.

“Okay, so what’s the big deal? What’s the big secret you need to tell me? Why am I in danger?” he began. From this distance, he could now smell the fragrant perfume she wore. It bombarded his senses like an industrial-strength aphrodisiac.

“Madame Gold is not who she seems to be,” Claudine whispered in Jared’s ear. Her breath was honey. Jared could feel his pulse quicken.

“You mean she’s not a kooky little woman who writes bad mystery novels? Because that’s what she seems like to me,” he said with a chuckle.

“No, I mean... how do you say? She’s not herself.”

“You mean she’s not normally like this?” Jared said with surprise.

“She is... Fou. Umm... she is mad.”

“She seems to be pretty happy if you ask me.”

“Not upset. I mean... uh... crazy. She is crazy,” Claudine explained as she put her hand on Jared’s towel-covered thigh.

“Well that’s obvious. She’s as nutty as a jar of peanut butter,” he laughed. In his mind, he pretended not to notice Claudine’s hand as it ever so slowly moved up his leg, but the rest of his body had other plans.

“This is no joke, Monsieur!” Claudine’s long fingernails clawed into his upper thigh causing Jared to wince slightly.

“Okay! Okay! So, she’s crazy. So why does that mean that I’m in danger?” he said as he placed his right hand on the bed behind her, barely touching her bottom. He leaned closer to her and could see the fear in her eyes.

“She means to kill you!”

“Kill me? Why?”

“Well, maybe not you. But someone will die this weekend, I’m sure!” Using almost unperceivable movements, she inched closer to Jared. Jared perceived.

“I admit that giving us those weapons downstairs was kind of a strange method for getting us to write creatively, but I don’t think anyone will kill anyone with them,” he replied. “Except Charlie. I’m actually surprised he hasn’t managed to Hare Krishna himself already with that damn sword.”

“You still think this is a joke!” Anger flashed in Claudine’s eyes. It subsided after a moment and was replaced by a look of sadness.

“Look, I’m sorry. It’s just too hard to believe. I mean, normal, sane people just don’t go around killing people because you give them an antique pistol, or a ceremonial war-club or whatever.” Jared

remembered his missing candlestick.

“That’s just it, Monsieur! The other guests! They are Fou too. Crazy! That’s why Madame Gold invited them. That’s why she gave them those terrible weapons. And that’s why someone will die this weekend!”

“Why would Tracy invite crazy people to her house and then give them deadly weapons with the hopes that they kill each other?” Jared said with a muddled mind.

“Madame Gold, in her madness, has decided that her next novel will be a true story. The murder mystery will come from a real murder, and she wants to be there to witness it! She’s sick!”

The story began to make a little more sense as Claudine revealed it to Jared. As repulsive as it seemed, it wasn’t a bad idea, he thought to himself. Half of the guests seemed like stock characters from a bad mystery novel to begin with. Lock them in a mansion that could pass for the generic spooky Victorian-era mansion used as the setting in any one of the remakes of “The House on Haunted Hill”. Give them weapons. Let them kill each other. Then write about it. Actually, it was quite brilliant. Sick. But brilliant, he thought, staring vacantly into Claudine’s eyes.

“I’m still having a hard time believing she would do this. Did she tell you that this was her plan?” Jared asked. His lips hovered just inches from hers.

“Non, not exactly, Monsieur. But, I heard her saying some strange things like this when she was choosing whom to invite here.”

“You keep saying we were invited here, Claudine. I wasn’t invited. My gi...” Jared stopped himself mid-sentence. “My friend signed me up for this weekend.”

“No, you were invited here! I know. I mailed your invitation myself, Monsieur.” Claudine insisted.

“Really?” Jared thought for a moment. Where had Monica found out about this weekend? “I’m not crazy, Claudine.”

“I know, Monsieur. That’s why you were invited. Madame Gold didn’t want all of the guests to be Fou, I mean mad. She said something about a good mystery needing at least one level head in it,” Claudine explained emphatically. Her fingers found the top of the towel around Jared’s waist and started to loosen the wrap.

“So is anyone else here sane? Are we the only ones?”

“Madame Ellis. Madame Gold also mentioned that a good mystery needs sexual tension. I think

that’s why she invited Madame Ellis, Monsieur.”

“A pornstar is a pretty promising source of sexual tension,” Jared thought. “Well, what about Percy and the cook... uh... Zhang Shifu?”

“Zhang Shifu is with us, I am sure. He and I spoke after dinner while you were receiving your weapons. He is scared too. If he is involved in any kind of criminal activities, he will surely be sent back to China.”

“And Percy? What about him?”

“I am not so sure about him anymore. He has been with Madame Gold the longest. He has been a father figure to her since her own father died when she was just ten. He has been acting strange lately, I think. I’m scared to talk with him, for fear he may say something to Madame Gold.”

“Okay, so what do we do now? What can we do?” Jared asked. He brushed a stray strand of Claudine’s long red hair from her face with his left hand.

“We must protect ourselves,” she replied as she tenderly kissed his cheek.

“I can protect you,” Jared said as he kissed the lobe of her left ear.

“We must trust each other,” Claudine added as she eased the towel from his lap.

“I trust you,” he moaned as he grasped her waist and pulled her against his bare chest.

“We must not let the others know,” she barely managed to finish her sentence before she pushed him down onto the large bed and straddled him.

“I won’t tell anyone,” he whispered as he pulled her onto him and kissed her passionately on the lips. With the skill of a Super Bowl MVP quarterback, he freed one hand from her strong embrace, blindly found one of the several pillows from the head of the bed, and hurled it at the light switch by the door. The room was plunged into darkness. Only the sound of lips on flesh and the rustling of clothes falling to the floor could be heard.

Chapter Nine

When Jared awoke, he blinked his eyes in the darkness. At first, he couldn't tell whether his eyes were still closed, or if he had opened them, it was so dark. He felt around on the bed beside him. Claudine was gone but the faint smell of her perfume lingered on the sheets. Jared inhaled deeply and sighed with content. A dumb smile was the only expression he could manage.

Jared pushed the tiny button on the bezel of his watch that lit the Indiglo face and glanced at the time. "4:15," he muttered and closed his eyes again. He rolled out of bed and shuffled to the bathroom in the darkness. When he returned, he felt much relieved. "Why did you have to leave, Claudine? We were just getting warmed up," he said, still half-asleep. He climbed under the covers and was out cold within seconds.

When he awoke this time, the garish light of the sun shining through the window hurt his eyes. He shut them again immediately and shielded his face.

"Oh, man. What a night," he mumbled. He had strange dreams of murders and screams and running down halls and blood. Lots of blood. He stumbled to the bathroom and washed his face. The white basin turned pink. Jared looked in the mirror with confusion. There was blood on his face. He looked at his hands. There was blood on his hands. There was blood on his chest. "What the hell?" Fear and confusion arrested his heart. "What's going on?" he cried frantically. Furiously he tried to wash the red from his skin in the sink, then when that proved too awkward, he jumped in the shower and washed himself thoroughly. As the blood swirled down the drain it looked just like one of those red and white peppermint hard-candies, he thought. He toweled himself dry and quickly dressed.

He sat there for a moment and thought of nothing. His mind was completely blank. Then, he popped back into reality and shook his head furiously. "I've got to talk to Claudine about this. Maybe she knows why I'm covered in blood," he decided aloud. He put on his boots and walked to the bedroom door. He looked at his room for a moment, then stepped out into the hallway.

Charlie was walking across the main hall on the way to the dining room as Jared closed the door. When he heard the door click shut, he spun around and waved to Jared.

"Hey sleepyhead, I think breakfast is on," he called up to Jared. Jared noted that Charlie had

managed to fashion some sort of strap for his katana, and it now hung diagonally across his back. Jared waved back absentmindedly and Charlie disappeared into the dining room.

Jared was still in a bit of a daze when he walked into the dining room. Proving that humans are indeed habitual creatures, the guests had chosen to sit in the same seats as they had last night at dinner, except for Estelle and Silvia, who had switched sides of the table. The Doctor sat hunched over his steaming cup of coffee. He took a long drag of his Djarum cigarette and blew on his coffee to cool it at the same time. The mixture of smoke and steam rising from the coffee made curious shaped clouds in the air.

“Now, I didn’t think that your cigarettes could smell any better, Freddy, but that little bit of coffee smell really does put them over the top,” Estelle praised as she inhaled deeply.

“You know, they say secondhand smoke is even worse for you than smoking itself,” Jared warned her. He had smoked in college, but thankfully, Monica had forced him to quit when they started dating six years ago.

“Well, I guess I should start smoking then, huh,” Estelle laughed and leaned her head on Doctor Payne’s shoulder. “Freddy, can I have a cigarette? Please?” she purred.

“Certainly, my lllllady.” The Doctor fished around in his jacket pocket and produced his box of clove cigarettes. With a practiced hand, he opened the box top with one hand, and slid one of the wide, unfiltered cigarettes free from the rest. His shaking hand offered the cigarette to Estelle. She removed her head from his shoulder, leaned forward, and took the cigarette from his hand with her lips. He spun the flint on his well-worn Zippo lighter and lit the end of the fat cigarette, then snapped the lighter closed.

Estelle took a long drag, the cherry on the tip glowing bright orange. Suddenly, her face turned green. She burst into a coughing fit and doubled over in her chair. Jared laughed.

“Ugh! Man, those things are like a punch in the lungs!” she groaned hoarsely.

“They are a lllllittle strong, I guess,” the Doctor admitted and took an impossibly long drag on his own cigarette.

“Well, maybe I’ll just stick to dying from secondhand smoke instead. It’s much more enjoyable.”

“Suit yyyyyyourself.”

“Hey, check this out,” Charlie said as he reached over his shoulder, pulled the grip of the sword, and unsheathed it. He lifted it over his head and accidentally scratched the wallpaper behind him.

“Oops.”

“Be careful with that thing,” Silvia whispered.

“Yes, it’s not a toy, Nash,” the Commodore reprimanded. He continued sipping his tea.

“Sorry. Uh, Percy, sorry about the wall. I think I can fix it,” Charlie said sheepishly. Percy stared at him.

“Don’t worry about the wall, Master Nash. It’s nothing,” he replied.

“No, I can fix it.”

“It’s nothing, Master Nash. Truly.”

“Well, I feel bad about it.”

“Maybe you should just put that thing away,” Jared said flatly. He still wasn’t feeling like himself.

“Where was Claudine,” he wondered.

At that moment, the doors to the kitchen opened, and Zhang Shifu entered. Before him, he pushed the silver serving cart from dinner last night. This time it was overflowing with countless breakfast foods. There were sausages, slices of scrapple, scrambled eggs, western omelets, a large stack of pancakes, toast, pumpernickel, whole wheat, egg, garlic, and salt bagels, oatmeal, and homefries. The aroma of so many delicious foods was overpowering, and everyone licked their lips with hunger. Zhang Shifu set everything on the table, then wheeled the serving cart back into the kitchen and disappeared.

“Please help yourselves to whatever you like,” Percy instructed.

“Shouldn’t we wait for Miss Gold?” the Commodore asked pointing to his right. In his stupor, Jared hadn’t even realized that the chair immediately to his left was still empty, and that their host was not among them.

“Madame Gold is a late riser, Commodore. I’m sure she’ll be down momentarily. Please eat before everything gets cold.”

“Well, you don’t have to ask me twice!” Charlie said excitedly as he leaned the katana against the table’s edge and helped himself to a large spoonful of scrambled eggs. The spoonful of eggs was followed by another spoonful of scrambled eggs, and two omelets.

“Like eggs much?” Estelle said sarcastically.

“They’re a great source of protein. Good for your muscles,” he replied in between swallows of egg. Everyone served themselves. Jared gingerly nibbled a bit of toast. His stomach wasn’t in the mood for food. Silvia wolfed down five links of sausage in a flash, then washed them down with a plateful of homefries. Commodore Griffon seemed to have brought quite an appetite to the table as well, and polished off two plates of pancakes, dripping with butter and maple syrup, in rapid succession. Even the sloth-like Doctor Payne showed no lack of energy in heaping several slices of scrapple onto two pumpernickel bagels and noisily tearing into them between puffs on his cigarette. Only Estelle seemed to share Jared’s lack of hunger. She slowly buttered a whole-wheat bagel and took small, dainty bites.

“Not hungry, Price?” the Commodore inquired after setting down his fork.

“Eh, I’m not feeling so good this morning. I’ll be fine though, I guess.”

“This truly is a magnificent breakfast. It reminds me of a breakfast I once shared with the Sheik of Araby. A terribly small man, the Sheik. But, despite his size, he could pack away the delectable dishes they served him at every meal like an anaconda. Not that he swallowed all his food whole and let it digest in his stomach for weeks. I just mean he could really hold his own, if you know what I mean. Well, we were stationed just outside his palace, and our canteen had been ransacked by tigers during the night. Damn that lookout, Donners. We didn’t know what to do, so we asked the Sheik if he might provide us with some simple fare from his storehouse. In a gesture of extreme kindness, however, he invited us to his personal table in the palace. We ate like kings, or rather, like a sheik, for the entire week until command could airlift us some more supplies.”

“That’s interesting,” Jared mumbled. His stomach was doing somersaults. He burped. “Excuse me. I’m really not feeling well, guys.”

“You don’t lllllook so well,” the Doctor commented.

“Yeah, I think I’m going to go to the bathroom and wash my face,” he said as he scooted his chair back and stood up.

Jared walked out of the dining room and into the main hall just in time to see Claudine tottering up the grand staircase.

“Claudine!” Jared called out in a loud whisper. She turned and stopped mid-totter.

“Oui, Monsieur?”

“We need to talk. What happened last night?”

“Do I need to explain it to you, Monsieur? You were there,” she said with a smile and a wink.

“Not about that,” he smiled back, momentarily forgetting the pain growing in his bowels.

“What is it, then?”

“I can’t talk about it here,” he said looking around the empty hall. “Let’s go some place private.”

“Not now, Monsieur. I need to go wake up Madame Gold. She’s slept even later than usual today. She never likes to sleep this late.”

“Okay. Well, meet me in the bathroom as soon as you’re done. It’s important.”

“Oui. I’ll just be a moment.”

“Okay. I’ll wait for you there then. Oh, wait. Where’s the bathroom on this floor?”

“It’s right below the staircase,” she said pointing down. “On this side,” she said, this time pointing to the lounge-side of the hall.

“Thanks,” he replied. His stomach had resumed its acrobatics routine, and he wondered if he could make it to the toilet before he threw up everywhere. He dashed towards the bathroom leaving Claudine on the staircase.

Like a visual cue, as soon as he laid eyes upon the sterile white porcelain toilet in the small bathroom, the vomit began its short trek up his esophagus and Jared had to dive towards the toilet to project most of it into the bowl. He banged his knees on the hard black and white tile floor, but the acidic taste of vomit was more pressing in his mind. He wretched several times until his stomach felt empty. Bad memories of wild college parties and awful nights spent hugging the toilet floated in chunks through his mind as stars danced before his eyes. He hung his head over the bowl for a few moments to catch his breath. Snot dripped from his nose in long gooey strings. Reaching over to the roll of toilet paper hanging on the wall, he tore off several sheets, wiped his face, and blew his nose. He leaned forward and flushed the toilet.

“EEEEEEEEEEAAAAAAHHHHH!” Suddenly, a woman’s scream pierced his ringing ears. As he started with surprise, the lid of the toilet tipped forward and came crashing down on the back of his

head. His face smashed into the edge of the toilet.

“What the hell was that?” he cried out, rubbing his nose. He stood up uneasily and ran from the bathroom.

Chapter Ten

As he exited the bathroom, he turned right and was at the foot of the staircase. Claudine was running down the stairs, her eyes filled with horror. She covered her eyes and tripped on the last few steps. She fell forward, screaming again. Jared caught her in his arms and the two of them toppled to the floor. She lay on top of him sobbing.

There was the sound of chairs being pushed back in the dining room, and five seconds later, the other five guests and Percy were standing at the foot of the stairs beside the tangled heap of Jared and Claudine.

“What in bloody hell is going on, Price?” the Commodore asked impatiently.

“We heard a scream,” Silvia said calmly. She pushed another sausage into her mouth.

Claudine untangled herself from Jared and rolled off of him onto her back on the floor. Before Claudine could open her mouth, Estelle cried out.

“Jesus! You’re both covered in blood!” she exclaimed and clasped her hands over her mouth.

Jared looked at Claudine and noticed blood smeared all over her face and chest. He felt his own face and looked at his fingers. Warm, sticky blood dripped off his fingertips. His head was pounding, and he felt suddenly very dizzy. If he hadn’t been lying on the floor already, he would have fallen over. Salty blood crept into his vision as it began to pool in the depressions of his eye sockets.

“Good GGGGGGGod!” Doctor Payne said as he rushed forward and cradled Jared in his arms. “Get me some water and some towels!” he demanded. He pulled his purple handkerchief from his breast pocket and began wiping the blood from Jared’s face. Percy reappeared from the dining room with a basin of water and a stack of kitchen towels.

After swabbing away some of the blood, Doctor Payne breathed a sigh of relief. “It’s just a slight laceration on his scalp. Head wounds always bleed wwwwworse than you’d expect.”

Claudine sat there shivering in shock. She looked vacantly at her bloodstained hands. Estelle ran to her side and held her from behind, careful not to get blood on her own clothes. “There. There, babydoll. It will be okay,” she comforted Claudine and kissed her hair tenderly.

“I still would like to know what in Prince Albert’s hell is going on. Why did she scream in the first place?” the Commodore boomed.

“It’s Madame Gold,” Claudine whimpered, her face paling.

“What about her?” they all asked in unison.

“She’s... she’s dead!” she cried and began sobbing.

The Commodore, Estelle, Silvia, Charlie, and Percy ran up the stairs, leaving the other three at its base. Hesitantly, they all peeked in the door of the master bedroom.

Blood. Everywhere. There was blood in large splotches on the floor. There was blood splattered on the walls. There were even tiny spots of blood clinging to the white ceiling. But their eyes were drawn past the massive amounts of blood on the floor, walls and ceiling to the enormous bloodstained bed standing in the center of the large bedroom. The Commodore stepped hesitantly into the room and inspected the bed. Tracy’s body lay cold and lifeless. The top of her skull was caved in and brains and ichors had dribbled out onto the crimson pillows. Her face was unrecognizable it was so horribly mutilated. Bits of bone poked through the skin on her cheeks.

“Oh, Jesus!” Estelle cried and threw up in the hallway just outside the door. Charlie followed her out of the room and patted her on the back. Silvia looked on in silence hungrily. Percy stood motionless. The Commodore made the sign of the cross then hung his head in despair.

Lying on the floor beside the bed was a large, bloodstained, brass candlestick.

They all shuffled out of the master bedroom somberly and looked down the stairs. Doctor Payne was applying a bandage to Jared’s scalp. Claudine was still sitting on the floor beside them, but it looked like some color had reappeared in her cheeks. The Doctor looked up at the investigating party after finishing with Jared and patting him on the shoulder.

“How’s Mmmmmmiss Gold?” he inquired.

“Dead,” the Commodore replied flatly.

“No nnnnneed to hurry?”

“Oh, no need to hurry. She’s most definitely dead, Payne.” A strange calmness permeated the air around them all. Their minds were unable to deal with the great calamities that had occurred in the last few minutes, and so they all reacted with peaceful numbness.

“Well, I think Jared is going to be just fine. He took a nnnnnasty blow to his forehead, but except for some minor swelling, I think he’ll recover without any lasting effects.”

“Good,” the Commodore answered, leading the five of them back downstairs.

“Estelle, if you could stay here with these two, I’d bbbbbetter go up and check on Miss Gold,” the Doctor requested.

“Sure, Freddy, but I’m not sure it’s going to make any difference now.”

“Wwwwwell, I guess I can’t do any harm then.”

“I’d be surprised if you could do any more harm to what’s up there with a sledgehammer,” Charlie said with empty tones.

Estelle and Silvia sat down with Jared and Claudine, each holding one in comforting arms. Jared laid his head on Estelle’s chest and breathed more normally. Like an ungainly antelope, Doctor Payne scaled the stairs with nimble feet, bounding up with ease that defied his bulk. Before he entered the master bedroom, he first stopped at his own bedroom. It was the second bedroom on the left of the hallway. When he returned he was carrying a small black leather bag.

“What’s that, Doc?” Charlie asked as he walked back up the stairs accompanied with Commodore Griffon and Percy.

“Just my emergency bag. Never leave home wwwwwithout it. You never know when you might need to help someone,” he said holding the bag aloft as if it were a trophy bass he had just reeled in and landed.

“I don’t think it’s going to do any good,” Charlie said sadly.

“Well, I am a dddddoctor. You know, Hippocratic Oath and all. If there’s any chance of saving her, I’ve got to at least try.” Doctor Payne stepped into the master bedroom and took in the gruesome scene. “Then again, sometimes I guess it’s a lost cause,” he said and shook his head.

The Doctor was only phased for a second, then continued into the room and placed his bag at the foot of the bed. He pulled his purple handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his glasses with it.

Unfortunately, he had forgotten that he had just used the handkerchief to sop up the blood on Jared’s face, and so the lenses of his glasses were quickly smeared with red.

“Dammit,” he muttered. He stuffed the handkerchief back in his pocket. He scanned the room then walked over to Tracy’s dressing table, grabbed several Kleenex from a box resting there, and swabbed the lenses clean again. “I don’t think she’ll mmmmmind if I use a few of these,” he chuckled.

Returning to the bed, he pushed his glasses tightly against his round face and peered at the body with great interest. He felt for a pulse in her wrist, then raised her arm and dropped it. It fell back to the bed with a slight squishing sound, landing in a damp bloodstain. He put his ear to where her mouth would have been and listened for a few seconds. Satisfied, he stood up and lit one of his aromatic clove cigarettes.

“She’s dead,” he said with a degree of certainty in his voice.

“You think?” Charlie asked sarcastically.

“It’s pppppretty obvious. Of course she’s dead.”

“And that’s your professional opinion?” Charlie continued.

“Your attitude isn’t helping any, Nash,” the Commodore reprimanded.

“Well, how am I supposed to act? Huh? Tracy’s dead!” he shouted with fear in his eyes.

“Now calm down, Charlie. Let’s nnnnnot lose our heads,” the Doctor said coolly. He opened his small bag and removed a pair of white latex gloves. “We still need to find out how she died.”

“I think it’s also pretty obvious, Doc,” Charlie interjected, regaining a bit of his senses.

“How so?”

“Well, it’s pretty clear that someone beat the hell out of her head with that candlestick,” he said pointing to the bloody candlestick still lying on the floor near the bed.

“Let’s not jump to conclusions just yyyyyet, Charlie. I’ve seen plenty of innocent men fry for botched investigations.” He reached into the bag again and removed a long thick thermometer. He lifted the sheets from Tracy’s body. They peeled away with a sickly sticking sound. “Oh, it looks like Miss Gold sleeps in the buff.”

Although all the men present could agree that Tracy Gold had been a beautiful specimen of womanhood in life, her lifeless body had quickly transformed into a husk that only a necrophiliac could love. Her breasts were flattened against her chest, and her abdomen had begun to bloat slightly. The Commodore swallowed uneasily.

“No matter, it will just mmmmmake this a little easier. Ambient temperature, seventy-five degrees Fahrenheit.” The Doctor then shook the thermometer several times.

“Uh, are you going to put that where I think you are going to put that?” Charlie asked. His brow was furrowed in disgust.

“Ever cooked a tttturkey, Charlie?” Doctor Payne deftly inserted the thermometer into Tracy’s rectum and left it there. He looked at his watch and counted the seconds. After one minute, he pointed to Charlie and the Commodore with his lit cigarette.

“Ding! She’s done,” he laughed and removed the thermometer. “Internal body temperature, eighty-four degrees Fahrenheit.” He then wiped the thermometer clean with another Kleenex and reinserted it in a pocket in the depths of his bag. From another pocket, he withdrew a small plastic disk. The disk was actually composed of three disks of differing sizes pinned together at the center. The Doctor spun the outermost disk in one direction, then the middle disk in the other.

“What’s that, Payne?” the Commodore inquired.

“Just a little ttttoy I made a few years back. See, human bodies, like most things, cool at a fairly predictable rate. Using Newton’s Law of Cooling, I devised this little beauty to help me estimate the time of death for a body. You just input the ambient temperature here on the outermost dial. Then, you spin the middle dial to the internal body temperature. Then, bam, you read the estimated time of death right here on the center dial. I call it my “Death Dial”. Catchy, huh?”

“What if she had a fever?” Charlie cut in.

“Well, we just have to assume a nnnnnormal living temperature of ninety-eight point six. That’s why it’s just an estimate, Charlie.”

“Indeed,” the Commodore said. “So what’s your diagnosis, Payne?”

“Well, let’s see, seventy-five, eighty-four, and we get... Four hours.” Doctor Payne looked at his watch. “It’s about nine o’clock now, so I’ll place the time of death at around five this mmmmmorning. Give or take an hour.”

“Give or take an hour?” Charlie asked quizzically. “That’s not very accurate...”

“Well, the rate at which the body cools depends on how different its ttttemperature is from the ambient. It cools rather quickly at first, but then slows down the closer it gets to room temperature. Using this rather crude method, this is about the best I can do right now. Plus there are other factors that affect how she cools, which I definitely don’t have the equipment to measure presently.”

“Oh.”

“So, now we know when she died, but we still don’t know how she died,” the Commodore pointed out.

“Well, luckily that’s nnnnnnext on my list.”

Doctor Payne rummaged through his bag and pulled out a large magnifying glass. Leaning over the body, he examined it, his small eyes just inches from the bloody mess. He poked and prodded, nodding occasionally. He looked the whole body over, from its carnage soaked head to its bluing toes. Finally, he stood up straight and placed the magnifying glass back in the bag. He lit another cigarette and puffed away contentedly, looking like he had just solved the Sphinx’s Riddle. Bending over, he picked up the candlestick and swung it around.

“Ddddamn. This thing is heavy,” he said setting it back on the floor.

“Well?” the Commodore and Charlie asked together.

“Well, it seems like Miss Gold had a pppppretty rough night last night.”

“You could say that. Someone beat her to death with that brass anvil of a candlestick.” Charlie pointed to the candlestick again and looked at the Doctor.

“Now, Charlie, what did I tell you about jjjjjumping to conclusions?” Doctor Payne pointed to the candlestick at his feet. “No one beat Miss Gold to death with that candlestick.”

“Well it certainly looks that way.”

“To the untrained eye, it certainly would. But, look here,” Doctor Payne motioned for the two of them to come to the bedside. Stepping carefully, the Commodore and Charlie made their way over to Tracy’s body and looked where he indicated. “Do you notice anything odd about her nnnnneck, Commodore?”

“I see some purple marks, but the skin all knotted. It’s too rough to see much else,” he replied as he examined her neck.

“Those pppppurple marks and knotted skin are rope burn.”

“Rope burn?”

“That’s what I believe,” he nodded and took another drag of his cigarette.

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that Miss Gold was strangled to death, probably with that mmmmmmanila rope noose she had last night.”

“What about the candlestick and all this,” Charlie looked confused as he pointed to the gore surrounding them.

“That all happened after she was already dead. Pppppretty sick, huh?”

“Why would someone beat her face in after she was already dead? Isn’t that a little much? Even for murder...” the Commodore inquired.

“I haven’t a clue. I told you she had a rough nnnnnight last night.”

Charlie and the Commodore looked at each other, then at the corpse, then turned and looked over their shoulders to the door of the master bedroom.

“Well. What’s the plan now?” the Commodore proffered.

“Miss Gold is going to start to stink to high hell here in a few more hours at this temperature.

Normally I would suggest that we stick her in the fffffreezer until tomorrow. But, since this examination wasn’t exactly thorough enough for a criminal investigation, I suggest we wrap her back up, close the door, and leave her here until we can contact the authorities.”

“Tomorrow? We need to call the cops right away!” Charlie exclaimed.

“Have you forgotten, Charlie? Mmmmmmiss Gold disconnected all the phones in the house for the weekend. I tried using my cell phone last night, but I couldn’t get any service.”

“Let me try mine,” Charlie said as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a little Motorola flip-phone. “Dammit! I can’t even get one bar in here.”

“And, we’re trapped here in the mansion until Sunday at eight o’clock,” the Commodore noted.

“We’ll just see about that,” Charlie strode out of the bedroom and jogged down the stairs past the rest who were still waiting at its base. He approached the front door and tried the handle. Locked. He shook the handle with all his might, but it didn’t budge. He pounded on the heavy oak paneling of the door. The sound of solid wood echoed in the hall.

“What are you doing, Charlie?” Estelle called out from across the hall.

“What does it look like? I’m getting the hell out of here. Percy, open the damn door!” he demanded.

“Master Nash, I’m sorry. I can’t do that any more than you seem to be able to.”

“Don’t give me that. There must be a way to open the door!”

“I don’t think so, Master Nash. Madame Gold was pretty thorough in her preparations for this weekend. She took all the house-keys from us before you arrived. Plus, she placed that time-lock on the outside of the door as a secondary precaution. So, even if I could unlock the handle of the door from the inside, the outside would still be bolted closed,” Percy explained calmly.

“Well, where did she put the keys?” Charlie replied, slightly more in control of his anger.

“I haven’t the foggiest idea, Master Nash. I would suspect that she placed them in the safe. But, I don’t know the combination for that, of course.”

“Where’s the safe?”

“In the study. I’ll show you. Follow me,” Percy instructed as he walked to the study. Charlie followed him quickly.

In the study, Percy stood by a section of the massive bookshelf on the right wall and pressed the spine of a book titled “Macroeconomics for Your Microcosm”. There was a faint click, and a two-foot square panel of books next to him swung open to reveal the face of a safe tucked into the recessed wall.

“I’m not much of a safe-cracker, Master Nash, but you are more than welcome to give it a try yourself.”

Charlie walked over to the safe and looked at it. It was made of cast-iron, with a large combination dial and a small steel handle in the center. Charlie tried the handle. It rotated, and the door of the safe swung open.

“Amazing...” Percy said dumbstruck.

“It wasn’t locked, Percy.”

“No, I mean, amazing, as in there’s nothing in it, Master Nash.”

Charlie looked and saw that Percy was right. The inside of the safe was bare.

“Well, where the hell are the keys?” Charlie said as he patted the inside of the safe to make sure it was really empty.

“Oh, this is really awful, Master Nash.”

“Yeah, no keys.”

“No, it’s worse than that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, in addition to the house-keys that I assume Madame Gold placed in there for safekeeping, there were also all of your release forms that you signed last night, the deed to the grounds, and the Gold family fortune.”

“The family fortune?”

“Yes, Madame Gold never trusted the banks with her money, so she kept it all here in the safe.”

“But she was a best-selling novelist, she must have had millions!” Charlie exclaimed.

“Indeed. At last count, I think she had over nine million dollars in the safe.”

“Oh, my God!” Charlie blinked with amazement.

The Commodore poked his head into the study from the hall.

“Nash, Percy, we’re having a meeting in the lounge. Chop chop.”

“All right, we’ll be right there,” Charlie closed the safe, and he and Percy walked to the lounge.

Chapter Eleven

They were all already seated on the couches scattered around the room when Charlie and Percy arrived. Charlie sat on the couch next to Doctor Payne and Percy took a position standing by the door. “This involves all of us, now, Percy,” the Commodore began as he stood up from his couch and walked to the center of the room. “So, why don’t you please come sit together with us?” “As you wish, Commodore,” Percy walked over to the vacant seat on the couch next to Silvia and sat down attentively.

“Now, we have a lot that we need to talk about, but I’d like to first lead us in a short prayer. Does anyone have a problem with that?” the Commodore asked and scanned his audience. No one made a sound.

“Good.” He then made the sign of the cross and clasped his hands at his waist. “Lord, today we lost Tracy Gold. In your wisdom, you took her from us. She was so young, and so full of life. Most of us barely knew her, but she had been a good friend to us for the few hours we spent with her. We all hope that you can take care of her in Heaven, as we were unable to here on Earth. Amen.”

“Amen,” the rest whispered in near unison.

“All right,” the Commodore boomed and clapped his hands to punctuate his beginning. “Now, I know we are all sad about the death of Miss Gold this morning. But, unfortunately, her death brings to mind another issue that thus far we have mostly avoided discussing. Murder.” At that moment, a streak of lightning flashed outside the window, followed by a crash of thunder that shook the mansion’s foundation. Claudine jumped in her seat and both Estelle and Jared simultaneously reached over and placed their arms around her shoulders. The sky had become suddenly dark, and a heavy rain began to fall. The Commodore paused and looked around at everyone, his blonde handlebar moustache bristling. “To any of us who have seen what’s left of her upstairs, it’s pretty clear that Miss Gold didn’t die of natural causes during the night. Which brings us to murder. You all seem like a jolly lot, so I am still having a hard time accepting it myself, but one of you is the killer.”

“One of us?” Silvia repeated.

“Yes, one of you has committed this heinous crime, and I, with the Crown as my witness, I swear I’ll bring you to justice!” the Commodore boomed, his face livid with anger.

“Hey now, why are we suspect, Bernhard? What about you? How do we know you didn’t do it?”

Estelle countered.

The Commodore looked at her for a moment with furious eyes, then softened his expression and answered softly. “Well, I know I didn’t do it.”

“Well, I didn’t do it either,” Estelle snapped back.

A chorus of “Neither did I”s and “I didn’t do it”s echoed around the room as everyone started shouting and pointing at each other.

“Now, everyone calm down!” the Commodore boomed in a most uncalm voice. Everyone stopped their bickering mid-sentence and sat silently. “We won’t get anywhere like this. I know I didn’t do it. That’s as far as I can speculate. We can only be sure of ourselves. Even the murderer is going to claim that he... or she... didn’t do it. We can’t use such denials as alibis.”

“So what do you suggest we do?” Jared asked. They were the first words he had uttered since his spill in the main hall. He was nervous. He hadn’t seen the master bedroom, but he had overheard enough of the details to know it was coated in blood, and that his candlestick was found by the bedside. Although he had no recollection of any foul actions that he may have committed last night, waking up covered in someone else’s blood seemed like damning evidence if he had ever heard of it. He really needed to talk to Claudine about it before he did anything else. Unfortunately, she was still nearly catatonic, and didn’t feel much like talking about anything. He squeezed her shoulder with a comforting pressure. She turned to him and smiled weakly.

“Right on, Price. What shall we do?” the Commodore said with a nod of approval. “I suggest we all sit down and discuss what we know about the murder.” The Commodore pulled one of the small armchairs over to the rest of the couches and sat down. “Doctor Payne, would you please tell us all what you have discovered with regards to the murder. This will give us a good basis for discussion.”

“Certainly, Commodore. After a rough field examination of Mmmmmmiss Gold’s corpse, I estimate that she was killed at roughly five o’clock this morning by strangulation with what appears to have been a rope noose. The head wounds, judging by the size and shape of the concave depressions in her skull, were inflicted postmortem with the brass candlestick found by her bedside.”

“Thank you, Doctor. Now, let’s take your report piece by piece. Five o’clock. Where were we all at five?” the Commodore asked.

“In our beds? Asleep? I slept like a rock last night,” Charlie answered.

“I can vouch for him. Uh, I was a little scared being in such a big room in a strange house all by myself, so I stayed in Charlie’s room for the night,” Estelle explained. Everyone looked at her with disbelieving eyes. “What? Nothing arose between us. Isn’t that right, Charlie?”

Charlie’s face turned beet red and he looked at his lap.

“Okay, we’ll all assume that most of us were asleep at five. Was anyone awake at five?” the Commodore asked, rephrasing his original question.

There was silence for a second, then Jared raised his hand slightly.

“I was awake at four-fifteen. I went to the bathroom, but then I went right back to sleep.”

“Did you hear anything at that time? Any screams? Anyone walking around? Footsteps?” the Commodore pressed.

“No. I didn’t hear anything.”

“Anyone else?” Silence filled the room again.

“No one else was awake at five o’clock. Fine. Let’s move on,” the Commodore continued. “The noose. Who had access to the noose?”

“I guess everyone did. In a way, right? I mean, if Tracy had it with her, whoever killed her could have just picked it up in her room and used it then,” Charlie answered.

“He has a pppppoint,” the Doctor agreed.

“Indeed.”

“Wait,” Silvia interjected. “If the killer went to Tracy’s room with the intent of killing her, wouldn’t he bring his own weapon?” All eyes shifted to Jared.

“Yes, that brings us to the next point. The candlestick. Maybe you could explain to us how your candlestick came to be in Miss Gold’s room last night,” the Commodore inquired. Everyone stared at Jared with apprehension.

Jared swallowed hard. “I don’t know how it got there. Honestly!” he replied defensively.

“So, your suggesting that the killer broke into your bedroom last night, took your candlestick, then used it to bash in Miss Gold’s head?”

“That’s not what I said at all! I just said I didn’t know how it got there. I lost it last night while I was exploring the house. I didn’t even have it when I went to bed last night.”

“You lost it? What do you mean you lost it?” Charlie asked.

“I brought it with me to the music room last night when I was trying to think of something to write about. I accidentally left it there when I came back to the lounge to write. I didn’t realize it until I was done writing, but when I returned to the music room, it was gone. Percy, you can back me up on this, right?”

Percy thought for a moment. “Master Price and I did have a discussion about the whereabouts of his candlestick last night before he retired for the evening. He didn’t have it with him at that time.”

“Well, maybe you just hid it in the music room to use later, then talked with Percy about it to lead suspicion away from yourself,” Charlie reasoned.

Jared looked at Charlie with cold eyes. “I really don’t like this guy more and more,” he thought.

“Well, smarty, if that were the case, why would I leave the candlestick beside her bed after braining her, knowing it would only cast suspicion back on me?”

Charlie pondered for a moment, then nodded his head as he conceded that Jared’s reasoning trumped his own.

Although Jared was still completely in the dark about why he was covered in blood when he awoke this morning, the simple fact that his candlestick was used in the murder reassured him. In his own mind, he was cleared of any wrongdoing, since he knew he didn’t have it with him last night.

“And besides,” Jared continued with more confidence, “Doctor Payne just told us all that the candlestick was only used after she was already dead. I think the murderer killed her, and then bashed her head in with my candlestick to make it look like I did it.”

“Or, you came into her room after she was already dead, thought she was just sleeping, and then smashed her head in,” Silvia suggested.

“Even if that were so, why would I leave the candlestick in the room? And where is the noose? The real murder weapon? Doctor Payne, you said that the noose wasn’t around her neck when you found her this morning, right?”

“That’s rrrrright.”

“Maybe you heard someone coming and forgot to pick the candlestick up in your expeditious retreat?” Estelle thought aloud.

“You all just said that none of you were awake at five o’clock! Who could have startled me?” Jared

defended himself.

“Well, someone’s lying then,” Charlie said.

“Maybe you’re lying, Charlie,” Jared countered viciously.

“I was with Estelle last night.”

“Well maybe you are both in on it,” Jared said as he looked across the couch towards Estelle. She pulled her arm from around Claudine’s shoulder and shook her finger at Jared.

“Hey, now. Don’t go looking at me like that. I didn’t do it, and neither did Charlie,” she said raising her voice and turning livid.

“Calm down, everyone!” the Commodore boomed again. “We’ll never get to the bottom of this with finger pointing and flared tempers.” Everyone quieted and sat silently for a moment.

“What I still don’t understand is how the murderer got in and out of Tracy’s room. Wasn’t the door locked?” Jared asked everyone.

“That is right, Monsieur!” Claudine piped up, life returning to her face. “The room was locked this morning when I came to wake Madame Gold.”

“But you unlocked the door when you found her. So, you have a key,” Charlie eyed her suspiciously.

“Oui. Of course, Monsieur. But I didn’t do it either!”

“Where were you at five this morning, Claudine?” the Doctor asked.

“I didn’t do it! I…” she blushed with embarrassment, “I was asleep, with Monsieur Price.” She laid her hand on his thigh.

“Price?” the Commodore looked at Jared.

Jared hesitated for a second. “It’s true,” he lied. He placed his hand atop hers. “Claudine was with me all night.”

“Well, who else has a key to Tracy’s room?” Charlie said in confusion.

“I have one, Master Nash,” Percy said as he produced a small silver key from his breast pocket. “But, I promise I also didn’t kill Madame Gold last night.”

“If you two are the only ones with keys to her bedroom, obviously one of you is lying then,” Estelle said.

“Not necessarily, Madame Ellis. You are all forgetting the one other person in the house. The one other person with a key to Madame Gold’s room.”

Sudden realization dawned on them all like a warm summer's day.

“The cook! Zhang Shifu!” Charlie exclaimed. Percy nodded in agreement.

“Well, bloody hell, where is he?” the Commodore boomed.

Percy looked at his watch. “It's almost eleven, Commodore. He's probably in the kitchen making lunch.”

They all looked at each other for a moment, then bolted from their seats and ran down the hallway to the kitchen.

They piled into the kitchen in a throng of hands and arms as they tried to squeeze through the door all at once.

“Quit pushing!” the Commodore boomed as he inched through the door first and walked into the spacious cooking area.

The kitchen was outfitted like the kitchen of a small four-star restaurant and was equipped with the necessities for cooking all sorts of culinary fare. The countertop that circled the room had various mixing bowls, chopping blocks, and kitchen appliances placed upon it. A large Garland gas range with eight burners stood along the brick-finished wall opposite a double set of ovens. In the center of the kitchen, a large island was installed, with lunch being prepared on it. Burritos, tacos, enchiladas, and fajitas lay on aluminum cooking sheets waiting to be served. A smaller tray with a plethora of small chopped vegetables, dipping sauces, cheeses, spices, seasonings, and other toppings sat beside the cooking sheets. Spanish rice, guacamole, and refried beans were spooned into decorative bowls. The smell of spicy peppers permeated the air and burned their nostrils as they all inhaled the warm aroma.

“Mmm... I love Mexican,” Charlie said and licked his lips.

“Zhang Shifu?” Estelle called out. There was no response.

“Well, wwwwwhere is he?” asked the Doctor. He lit a cigarette and puffed away impatiently.

“It looks like he was here just a moment ago. The water is still running in the sink,” Jared pointed out.

“Zhang Shifu?” Still, the sound of water flowing down the drain was the only response. The Commodore and Doctor Payne crept further into the kitchen in search of the cook. As he passed the island, Commodore Griffon's gaze dropped to the floor.

“Sweet Lord! Not again,” he exclaimed and blinked his eyes in disbelief.

“What is it, Bernhard?” Estelle asked impatiently. She moved closer to the island.

“It’s the cook.”

“What about him?” Charlie asked, moving closer as well.

“Uh... he’s dddddead too,” the Doctor replied flatly.

“Are you sure?” Jared asked and grasped Claudine’s hand, sensing her apprehension building.

“Definitely. Again, our killer has done a reasonably thorough job in his work,” the Commodore answered.

Zhang Shifu stared at them with vacant eyes. His face was frozen in a grotesque expression of abject fear. A silent scream was on his lips. The rest of his body lay a few feet away in a growing pool of crimson blood. His left hand still clenched the cleaver with which he had been chopping vegetables. The Doctor knelt down beside the body and felt for a pulse in the right wrist.

“Payne, what’s the point? He’s dead,” the Commodore sighed.

Doctor Payne looked up at him and shrugged his shoulders. “I guess it’s jjjjjust habit.” He stood up and continued staring at the body with the Commodore.

“What’s wrong with him?” Estelle moved closer to the island. The Commodore held up his hand in protest.

“No, Miss Ellis, you don’t need to see this. Our murderer has left another gruesome mess here, and I don’t think your stomach can handle it if your previous performance with Miss Gold is any indicator.

“Shall I clean it up?” Percy offered, stepping forward.

“No. I think we should leave him here for the moment and regroup. There’s a new twist in this case, and I recommend we adjourn to the lounge again and discuss it,” the Commodore suggested.

“As you wish, Commodore.”

“All right, everyone back to the lounge!” the Commodore boomed. “And stay together. There is danger here.”

In a nervous cluster, the eight walked back to the lounge in silence. The Commodore waited for everyone to enter the room, then looked around the hall. There was no one in sight. He stepped into the lounge and locked the door behind him.

Chapter Twelve

Once everyone had taken his or her place on the couches, the Commodore began.

“Percy, is there anyone else in the house?”

“I thought not, Commodore, but obviously I was mistaken. My deepest apologies.”

“Your apologies are not necessary, Percy. But, this new murder makes it painfully obvious to us all that we are not alone here in the Gold Mansion. Doctor Payne, when would you place the time of death for Zhang Shifu?”

“I didn’t really examine him at all, Commodore. But, judging from the fact that the bbbbbblood was still flowing from his severed...”

“They chopped off his head?” Estelle cried out. She clasped her hands over her mouth and closed her eyes.

“Yes, Miss Ellis,” the Commodore apologized. “The extremely graphic nature of his death,” he continued and cast a sour look at the Doctor, “was precisely why I suggested you not look at the body in the kitchen.”

“Sssssorry, Estelle,” the Doctor added sheepishly.

Estelle gulped several times, then lowered her hands to her lap. She opened her eyes and took a deep breath. “It’s okay, Freddy. I’ll be fine. Go on.”

“Okay. As I was saying, judging by the fact that...” Doctor Payne paused and chose his words carefully, “he was still... bbbbbbled when we found him in the kitchen, I would place his death no more than five or ten minutes previous to our discovery of him. His wrist was still warm when I felt it.”

“And the tacos were still warm,” Silvia added. A spot of hot sauce and guacamole was on her upper lip.

“Oh my God! Did you eat a taco while we were in the kitchen?” Charlie asked and shook his head with disapproval.

“No,” she whispered.

Charlie used his finger and dabbed his own upper lip, then nodded at Silvia. She followed suit by licking her finger and wiping her lip clean. “What?” she asked innocently.

“Let her be, Nash. We have more important matters to discuss than whether or not a taco was eaten.”

The Commodore rose from his couch and strode to the center of the room. All eyes were on him as he continued. “With the Doctor’s expert opinion placing the time of death for Zhang Shifu just ten minutes before we discovered him, I think we can all agree,” he looked at everyone in the room as he turned slowly for effect, “that all eight of us were here in the lounge when he was murdered.”

“Agreed,” they nodded in unison as a response.

“And, we can also be sure that Zhang Shifu did not take his own life.”

“Yes,” the Doctor concurred. “The butcher knife he was holding was not used to...” He glanced at Estelle, “remove his head. I have been trying to reconstruct the scene of the murder in my mind for the last few minutes, and my best reconstruction is that the cook was approached from behind while he was chopping vegetables at the island. The mmmmmurderer then applied a very swift, and very powerful, blow to the back of the neck with a sharp object, probably a large knife.”

“Therefore, there must be another person in the house. He or she has killed twice,” the Commodore said.

“Bernhard, not to be a doubting Thomas, but how do we know that the same person killed both Tracy and the cook?” Estelle brought up. “We’ve decided that none of us killed the cook, but Tracy’s murder is still a mystery. Any one of you could have done it.” She cast an evil glance at Jared, still angry about his previous insinuation.

“We don’t, Miss Ellis. But, desperate times call for desperate measures, they say. We must assume that a house of this size can hold, at most, one lunatic killer. Any more would just be out of expectation.”

“One murdering psychopath is a little beyond my expectations for this weekend,” Charlie quipped.

“Yes, well, this reminds me of a particularly terrible tour I spent in French Guyana. Jenkins had been murdered during the night in his tent. It was simple suffocation, so all of his tent-mates became capable suspects. While we were discussing how to proceed, two of my finest lookouts were shot through the hearts with those damned poison-tipped arrows the bloody savages use down there. It turns out that Jenkins’ murder was just a ploy to distract our attention. The ambush started that night, and I lost many a fine sailor that evening.”

“And your pppppoint is, Commodore?” the Doctor lit a new cigarette.

“The point is... The point is...” He thought for a moment. “The point is that we have a killer on the

loose in this mansion, and we'd better not sit around idly and let him pick us off one by one like a damned savage," the Commodore boomed with gusto. "I suggest we hunt this pathetic creature down and bring him to justice!"

"Why don't we just stay in here until tomorrow, with the door locked, where it's safe?" Jared countered.

"Safe? Price, I'm surprised at you. A military man like yourself talking about safe when his base is surrounded by the enemy! Was Troy, with its thick walls and solid gates, safe when the Greeks laid it siege? No! Bloody hell, the killer may be lurking right outside the door now, waiting for us to open it and finish what he started. We've got to take action! Our only hope is a good offensive strike."

"So, what do we do then, Commodore?" Estelle asked.

"Right-oh. We'll use this lounge as our base of operations. The door appears to be strong, and the couches are fairly comfortable. Our first order of business, then, is to take an inventory of our assets. What are our strengths?" The Commodore reached to the small of his back and slipped his Hutu war-club from the waistband of his trousers. He smacked his open palm with the heavy stone tip. "This scoundrel is armed, and so we must take up arms too. Who's got their weapon with them?"

Doctor Payne fished around in his breast pocket and withdrew the small scalpel and bottle of chloroform. He spun the scalpel deftly with his dexterous fingers.

Silvia stuffed her chubby hand into a deep side-pocket in her long black skirt and pulled out her bottle of cyanide tablets. She eyed them hungrily.

"You do know that those are poison, not candy, right?" Charlie said as he noticed this.

"I know that," she snapped back and held them close to her bosom.

"Nash, where is your katana?" the Commodore asked noticing the empty scabbard strapped to his back.

Charlie felt his back and made a confused face. "Uh, I don't know." He thought for a moment. "Oh, I think I left it in the dining room when we ran out to see why Claudine was screaming this morning."

"All right. Price, your candlestick is in Miss Gold's room. Miss Ellis, do you have your revolver with you?"

"No."

"Why not?" the Commodore asked with exasperation in his voice.

“I told you it didn’t go with my dress. Besides, why would I bring it to breakfast with me?” she reasoned.

The Commodore sighed. “Okay, where is it?”

“I left it on my nightstand.”

“Fine,” Commodore Griffon looked at Percy and Claudine. “Do either of you have something to protect yourselves with?”

“Non, Commodore. Madame Gold did not give us presents like she did to you last night.”

Percy rose from his couch and walked over to the fireplace. He grasped the wrought-iron poker and held it aloft. His aging muscles fatigued quickly, however, and he brought it down and rested the tip on the floor. “I think this may be useful, Commodore.”

“Brilliant, Percy. That’s the kind of inventiveness that’s going to win us this war! It reminds me of a weekend of leave I spent in Nepal once. We were all relaxing in the local pub, when a fight broke out between Lieutenant Rapsallion and one of the Sherpas. Some disagreement about the quality of the yak-hair bonnet the Sherpa was wearing, I don’t really know. Anyhow, the Sherpa came at Rapsallion with a silver kukri, ready to gut him for the insult. Thinking quickly, however, Rapsallion tore down the Tibetan antelope head mounted on the wall and ran the poor bastard right through to the antelope’s floppy ears.”

They all stared at the Commodore with a mixture of boredom and annoyance.

“So, we’ve got a club, a scalpel, a bottle of poison, and a poker,” Jared observed. “Not much of an arsenal, Commodore. And, unless you’re planning on having tea and cakes with him, I doubt the arsenic will be a very effective weapon.”

“Duly noted, Price. Therefore, between the eight of us, we have three viable weapons at our disposal. I suggest, then, that we all head back to the kitchen and arm ourselves more completely. I’m sure there are plenty of knives and other implements of destruction to be found there.”

“All right then, let’s go,” Charlie said impatiently. “On the way there, let’s stop in the dining room so I can pick up my samurai sword. I feel kind of naked without it now.”

“Good plan, Nash. Tip top. Now, Nash, Percy, you two will lead the patrol with me. Price, Doctor, you two will bring up the rear. Ladies, you stay in the middle for safety. Is that clear to everyone?”

They all nodded in agreement. Rising from their couches, they assembled in a jumbled line by the

door.

“Good. Now, once we leave base, no verbal communication. Hand signals only. Does everyone understand?”

A slightly less confident nod resonated among them. The Commodore nodded in approval, patted Percy on the shoulder, pointed to his eyes with his fore and middle fingers, held his index finger against his lips to indicate silence, and turned the handle of the lounge door. Slowly, he eased the door open and peered into the hall. The hall appeared as usual. No killer stood in the center of the black and white parquet floor ready to hack them to pieces. Brandishing his Hutu war-club menacingly, the Commodore ventured into the main hall with everyone else in tow.

They proceeded slowly and in silence. When they reached the foot of the main staircase, the Commodore stopped suddenly and held his hand up in a fist. The group bumped to a stop.

“Ouch!” Estelle called out.

The Commodore wheeled around and stared at her with frightening severity.

“He stabbed me with his scalpel,” she whispered apologetically.

“Sssssorry,” the Doctor stammered back.

The Commodore looked at Doctor Payne and rolled his eyes in frustration. He held his finger to his lips again for silence, then crept forward on tiptoe.

They reached the doorway to the dining room without any more accidents. The doors were still open from their hasty exodus to the main hall that morning. The Commodore poked his head inside and looked quickly from left to right. He brought his head back into the hallway, and then held his left hand up and twirled it in a slow circle, then pointed into the room. Everyone looked at him in confusion.

“What does that mean?” Estelle whispered from the middle of the pack.

The Commodore wagged his head, then pushed Charlie and Percy into the dining room. The women were just out of his reach, and he motioned for them to get into the dining room as well. They tiptoed in followed by Jared and the Doctor. The Commodore cast one final glance around the main hall and ducked into the dining room himself. He shut the doors behind him.

The dining room was exactly as they had left it that morning. Cold scrambled eggs lay on their serving dish, next to the cold pancakes and cold sausages. Charlie walked over to his seat and searched for the katana, but it was no longer resting on the table's edge as he had left it. He dropped to the floor and looked under the table. Nothing. Dejectedly, he rose to his feet again and shrugged his shoulders in defeat. Jared smiled. Finally, we'll be safe from that idiot and his damned sword, he thought.

By this time, the Commodore was already at the door that connected the dining room to the kitchen and had his ear pressed against the hardwood paneling. He motioned for Percy to ready his poker and the old butler strained with both hands to lift the heavy weapon. The Commodore shook his head, and Charlie tapped Percy on the shoulder. He held out his hand. With a grateful expression, Percy dropped the poker into Charlie's outstretched paw and breathed a sigh of relief. Charlie hefted the poker easily with his right hand and gave the Commodore the OK sign with his left.

Cautiously, the Commodore slid open the door to the kitchen and peered in. All appeared normal. Zhang Shifu's headless body still rested on the tile floor in a pool of blood. Everything was normal. They moved into the kitchen slowly and gathered around the island.

"Oh God," Estelle exclaimed and covered her mouth as her eyes met Zhang Shifu's vacant gaze. The Commodore had given up on trying to enforce silence among his companions and just tried to ignore her outburst. Walking over to the huge gas range, he lifted a heavy steel wok from a hook on the wall and handed it to Jared. Silvia lifted a long serrated bread-knife from the surface of the island and looked at the Commodore. He shook his head in disagreement then proceeded to the long counter and rifled through several drawers until he found one containing a jumbled assortment of glistening cutlery. The Commodore extracted three large carving knives and handed one to each of the women. Stooping beside the cook's corpse, he unclenched the fingers that held the cleaver and presented it to Percy. The old butler took it and nodded with satisfaction. The Commodore then raised his hand to indicate they should head back to the dining room.

The Doctor held his hands up in protest briefly, then flipped his scalpel into his right breast pocket. Standing on his toes, he reached onto the top of the refrigerator and brought down a large rolling pin. He grinned and gave the Commodore the thumbs up sign. They all made their way back into the dining room and waited for the Commodore to resume the lead position. He listened at the door to

the main hall for a moment, then opened the door and stepped into the hall. It was still empty. Quickly, they all rushed across to the lounge and piled in. The Commodore closed and locked the door behind them and breathed deeply.

Chapter Thirteen

“What part of “no verbal communication” did you all not understand?” the Commodore implored.

“Okay, the first time was an accident, okay?” Estelle said defensively. “And the second time, I mean, Jesus, his head was just lying there staring at me. I got freaked out. And what the hell are your little hand signals supposed to mean?” she mocked as she tried to imitate him.

“All right, no need to get upset. I guess we should have gone over the signals beforehand. But we made it back alive, and that’s the important thing.” He strode over to a couch and sat down heavily.

“And we’re armed now,” Charlie added.

“We can only assume that the killer now possesses your katana, Nash, since it wasn’t in the dining room,” the Commodore reasoned.

“It’s probably what he used to decapitate Zhang Shifu,” Jared added.

“Yeah. It was damn sharp. I bet it sliced through him like a hot knife through butter,” Charlie thought aloud.

“Gross.”

“Butter,” Silvia mumbled and licked her lips.

“What do we do now, Monsieur?” Claudine asked the Commodore. She set the carving knife in her lap and folded her hands atop it.

“Now, Claudine, we go out and catch this killer on the loose. He’s trapped in here, just like us. So, we just need to search the house from top to bottom and ferret out the little rat!” the Commodore answered. He got up and strode to the door. “Now, this time, let’s try to be a little more silent, shall we?”

Everyone started to assemble in their patrol formation near the door.

“Ready?” the Commodore asked and inspected at his now-armed posse.

“Uh, Commodore?” Jared said and raised his hand.

“Price, what is it?”

“Yeah... Um... This isn’t going to work.”

“What do you mean it’s not going to work, Price?” the Commodore implored, arching his left eyebrow.

“Well, this house is huge, right? It’s a mansion after all. It’s got like, I don’t know, twenty rooms or

so?”

“There are twenty-eight rooms in the Gold Mansion,” Percy corrected him.

“Twenty-eight rooms. All right, Price, there are a lot of rooms. I’m still not sure what you’re getting at, though,” the Commodore insisted.

“Well, the killer isn’t likely to just sit in one room and take a nap while we look for him, is he? No, he’s going to move around. So, what’s to stop him from sneaking from room to room while we hunt him down?”

“I’m still not getting you fully, Price. One more time.” The Commodore looked completely perplexed now. Jared looked at the Commodore and was also perplexed. “How did this man ever become a commodore being so dense? No wonder his men seem to die on every one of his stupid tours,” Jared thought. He opened his mouth to speak again, but Estelle, sensing his frustration, patted his chest and broke into the conversation.

“I think what he means, Bernhard, is that we could be searching all night and just keep missing him,” Estelle explained. “For example, suppose we check the music room. No killer. Then, we check the dining room. No killer. Then, we check the kitchen. Now, while we’re checking the kitchen, the killer, who was in the master bedroom the whole time, sneaks down the stairs and hides in the music room. Then, when we make our way upstairs eventually and search the master bedroom, the killer is already tucked away safely downstairs.” Estelle crossed her arms across her chest and looked at the Commodore for a response.

Finally, he seemed to understand the problem and walked back over to the couches. “Good thinking, Price,” he conceded. “We can’t simply trounce around in a single patrol if we want to catch him. No, we need to divide and conquer.”

“Sssssplit up?”

“Yes, Doctor, we need to search the entire mansion at once. Like Jared pointed out, if we search each room in turn, the killer might evade our net all day. So, we need to split up into several patrols and comb the rooms that way,” the Commodore explained.

“How should we sssssplit ourselves up then?” Doctor Payne asked. He laid his rolling pin down on the end table, extracted his box of Djarum cigarettes from his pocket, and lit one. His gaze was fixed upon the Commodore through the thick clouds of smoke he exhaled.

“Percy, how is the mansion laid out, exactly?” the Commodore inquired and turned to the still-standing butler.

“Well, Commodore, I could try to draw you a map of the mansion, though I’m not much of an artist. Or, we do have a complete blueprint of the mansion and grounds in the study,” Percy suggested.

“Battle plans! Ha ha!” the Commodore exclaimed excitedly. Everyone looked at him and shook their heads. They were all trying to grow accustomed to the Commodore’s over-the-top military exuberance, but they continued to fail at every instance. “Well done, Percy, old man!” he continued.

“Now, Price, Nash, it’s time for you two to earn your stars. As the other two military men in our platoon, I’ll need you to escort Percy to the study and back so he can retrieve the plans.”

“Us?” Charlie asked as he pointed to himself and Jared.

“Don’t lose your backbone on me now, Nash!” the Commodore boomed. “It’s your call to duty, man!”

“I’m not chicken. I just don’t see why we don’t all go together.”

The Commodore recollected the difficulties they had encountered as he had led them across the hall to the dining room and shook his head. “It’s too risky to move in complete formation again. No. This time the Doctor and I will stay here and guard our base of operations, while you three do a little recon next door.”

“Come on, Charlie, there’s nothing to it,” Jared said bravely and walked over to Percy’s side. He grasped his wok menacingly in his right hand.

“All right, I’m coming,” he said and walked over to the other side of Percy. “Let’s do this.”

“Now that’s the spirit, men!” the Commodore cheered. The four of them walked over to the door.

“All right, now, if there are any complications, just call out,” he instructed as he reached for the doorknob.

“Or, you know, sugar pie, if you get chopped in half by your own samurai sword, just call out,” Estelle teased from the comfort of her couch. Charlie gulped loudly. Jared smiled and winked at Estelle. He liked her sense of humor, especially when it was directed at Charlie. “I wonder if all pornstars are this funny,” he pondered. Thinking he had winked at her, Claudine grinned seductively and winked back.

“That’s enough, Miss Ellis,” the Commodore reprimanded. He listened at the door for a moment,

then turned the knob and slowly opened the door. After scanning the main hall, he gave his recon patrol the thumbs up sign and saluted them stiffly.

Jared popped to attention and gave a quick salute back. He nudged Charlie in the ribs, and Charlie saluted too. The Commodore dropped his salute with a crisp movement. Sandwiched between Jared and Charlie, Percy left the lounge and turned left towards the study.

Charlie's head swiveled side to side, causing him to unconsciously weave back and forth as he walked the short distance down the hall. Thankfully, Percy did not have the same problem, and walked normally a few steps ahead of Jared who brought up the rear. They reached the study without any problems. The door was still open, just as Percy and Charlie had left it several hours before. Charlie peeked in the open doorway. Everything appeared normal. He stabbed at the air with his poker and jumped into the room. Percy shuffled in behind him. Jared looked over his shoulder. Out of the corner of his eye, he thought he spied something moving in the shadows on the second floor. He peered into the darkness with straining eyes. Nothing. Were his eyes playing tricks on him again, he wondered. The bandage on his head itched a bit. "What a crazy morning," he thought. "I don't know what's going on anymore. Here I am, with a wok in my hand, reconing the study with Benny Hanna and Alfred," he thought. "What am I doing here?" Jared shook his head and ducked into the study.

"They're taking a long time, don't you think, Bernhard?" Estelle asked and stood up from her couch.

"I mean, they are just walking next door. How hard can it be?"

"I'm sure they're fine, Miss Ellis. They know to give a shout if they run into some trouble," the Commodore replied coolly.

"Well, I'm sure the cook would have yelled too if he had had the chance. But, it didn't look like he had much of one before he lost his head, huh? I'm worried about them. It's been almost five minutes," she said and paced back and forth on the large tiger-skin rug.

"Calm down, Miss Ellis. Nothing to get worked up over, I'm sure. No sense in losing our heads too," he said as he tried to comfort her.

"Anyone want a drink?" the Doctor asked as he got up and walked over to the bar. "My treat."

“Monsieur, let me do that!” Claudine offered and tottered over to the Doctor.

“It’s nnnnnothing, Claudine. I can do it,” he said as he picked up a bottle of Jack Daniels Black Label. Claudine looked at him sternly. “Monsieur, it’s my job!”

The Doctor smiled at her serenely. “And who do you wwwwork for now, Claudine?”

“Why, Madame G...” She stopped mid-sentence. A confused look crept over her face.

“I think you’re officially on vvvvvvacation now, dear,” the Doctor smiled at her. “Here, let me get you a drink. I think you could use one.”

“I suppose you’re right, Monsieur.”

“Good, we’re agreed then. So, what’s your ppppppoison?” The Doctor topped off his glass with the Jack Daniels and set the bottle down on the bar.

“Sex on the beach,” she replied in a sultry voice.

“That sounds like exactly what you nnnnneed,” he teased. “One sex on the beach coming right up. Anyone else need something? I’m mixing,” he called out again as he finished making Claudine’s drink.

“Can I have a chocolate milk?” Silvia whispered from across the room.

“Chocolate milk... hmm, let me see.” He looked at Claudine and silently mouthed, “Is there any mmmmmilk?”

“In the fridge by your feet, Monsieur,” she mouthed back. The Doctor bent his large body over and opened the refrigerator. There was a quart of two-percent milk on the door.

“Any chocolate sssssyrup?” he mouthed again.

Claudine shook her head in the negative. The Doctor looked around the bar. His eyes fell on a stout green bottle. He winked at Claudine. With a practiced hand, he mixed equal parts milk and Bailey’s Irish Crème in a tall frosted glass. Claudine giggled. The two of them walked back over to the couches.

Doctor Payne handed Silvia her drink. She looked at it curiously as she took it from him.

“Chocolate milk?” she asked.

“Not exactly, Silvia. This is better, trust me.” He raised his glass and clinked it against hers. “It does a body good.”

Silvia hesitantly sipped her drink. Then she took another sip. And another. She smiled at the

Doctor. “Mmm... yummy!”

“Do you think that’s really a good idea, Freddy?” Estelle asked concerned.

“She’s fine,” he defended himself.

“Are you sure? I don’t think she’s much of a drinker, Freddy,” Estelle laughed and pointed to Silvia.

The Doctor looked her. She had quickly drained the glass and was now reclining on the couch with her eyes closed, grinning from ear to ear.

“Dammit, Doctor! Don’t go incapacitating my troops. We’ll need everyone alert and in top form for our patrols,” the Commodore rebuked the Doctor and shook his finger at him.

“Don’t worry, Commodore, she’ll be fine in a mmmmmminute or two.”

“I highly doubt that. I’m placing you in charge of her for the time being, Doctor. See to it that she doesn’t get any more inebriated.”

“Roger dodger, Commodore. I’ll keep her safe,” he chuckled and puffed away at his cigarette.

“This is no joke, Doctor. Danger lurks around every corner here. This mansion has become the lion’s den. And we have become David,” the Commodore said with fervor.

“Don’t you mean, Daniel?” Estelle corrected.

“It’s not important, Miss Ellis. The point is that we must take this seriously. The murderer must be caught! We can’t become lax in our endeavor. It will be our own lives if we do.”

“All right, Bernhard, I get the idea,” she said and sat down on the couch. “Where are they?” Estelle asked absentmindedly.

Suddenly, there was a slight rapping at the door to the lounge. The Commodore jumped up from the couch and tiptoed to the door with his Hutu war-club raised at the ready.

“All right, Percy, where are the blueprints?” Jared asked curtly as he closed the door behind him.

“Right over here, Master Price,” he replied and walked over to a section of the bookshelves with huge thin books stacked on the shelves. Percy thumbed across the different books until he came to a large purple-silk-bound one. “Here it is.” He pulled it out and, with a little effort, brought it over to Tracy’s massive desk.

“And this has the floor plans for the whole mansion in it?” Charlie inquired coming over to Percy’s side.

“It should, Master Nash. I haven’t really looked at these plans in a long time, but if my memory serves me right, it should have everything we need in it.” The book was nearly three-feet square and embossed with a large G in the center. Percy opened the book and revealed page after page of plans for the mansion.

“Hey, this is the study! Wow, I’m standing right here!” Charlie exclaimed with amusement. “Hey, Jared, check it out, I’ve got my finger on the page exactly where you’re standing too!”

“Amazing,” Jared replied drolly. He stepped a few feet the right. His eyes wandered around the room as Charlie enjoyed himself walking his fingers across the plans for the study. Finally, his gaze fell on the safe in the wall. “Percy, what’s that?” he asked and pointed to the safe.

Percy looked up from the plans. “That is Madame Gold’s private safe, Master Price.”

“Private safe? I don’t remember seeing it there when we were here last night.”

“Well, it was hidden behind some false books, Master Price.”

“And now?”

“We opened it earlier today to check for the keys to the mansion’s doors,” Percy replied.

“Oh, so now we have the keys to the house. Excellent!” Jared nodded in approval.

“Not exactly, Master Price. It was empty. Master Nash and I reasoned that the killer must have extracted everything from the safe sometime during the night before we got here to check it.”

“Well, what else was in the safe besides the keys? Anything good?” Jared asked. His curiosity was piqued.

“I’m not precisely sure what was in the safe, Master Price, but we suspect that the release-forms you signed last night were also in there, along with the deed to the mansion grounds and the Gold family fortune.” Percy counted off the items on his fingers as he spoke.

“I see,” Jared continued. “And, just what kind of fortune are we talking about here, Percy?”

“Our best guess is about nine million dollars.”

“Oh, nine million. I see,” Jared nodded and looked at Charlie coldly. Charlie had been listening to the two speak silently, and gulped, feeling Jared’s eyes burning into him. “Nine million dollars, Charlie, did you hear that?”

“Nine million, you say?” Charlie repeated, feigning ignorance.

“I say. So, if you don’t mind me asking, Charlie, were you planning on telling the rest of us this

anytime soon? Or were you just going to keep this little tidbit of information to yourself?”

Charlie swallowed hard before responding. “I... uh... I meant to tell everyone about it earlier. But, we got all caught up in the mess with the cook, and I guess it slipped my mind.”

“You don’t say. Well, I think we’d better bring this up when we get back to the lounge. You know, before it slips our minds again,” Jared said icily.

“You know, that’s a great idea, Jared,” Charlie said apologetically. “Why don’t we do that?” He then closed the big purple book and handed it to Percy. “Ready to head back, Percy?”

“I’m ready, Master Nash,” Percy affirmed and started walking towards the door. Jared joined them and grasped the knob.

There was no one in the hallway when he opened the door and peered into its vastness. They crept silently in the same formation as before and reached the door to the lounge in no time. Charlie tried the handle to the door. It didn’t turn. Quickly he looked side to side to make sure no one was sneaking up on them. The hallway was still empty. Gently, Charlie knocked on the door to the lounge three times.

The Commodore held his war-club aloft and listened at the door. “Who is it?” he whispered through the door.

“It’s us. Who else would it be?” Charlie whispered back.

“The murderer, Charlie,” Jared reminded him.

“Oh, right. It’s Charlie, Percy, and Jared, Commodore.”

“How do I know you are who you say you are?” the Commodore’s voice came through the door in muffled tones.

Jared looked around. Still no killer sneaking up on them. He moved his face close to the doorknob.

“Jesus, Commodore, let us in!” he whispered urgently. “We’ve got the damn plans like you wanted.”

“Price!” the Commodore whispered with excitement. The door swung open in an instant and the three rushed into the lounge. The Commodore closed and locked the door behind them, then walked over to the table where the three had already assembled.

Percy set the silk-bound volume on the table and opened it. While no one was looking at him, the

Doctor smacked Silvia on the cheeks to wake her up. Her eyes fluttered open and she yawned deeply. She smiled and sat up. He breathed a sigh of relief and motioned for her to come with him. Claudine, Estelle, Silvia, and the Doctor got up from their seats and joined the others at the table. “Excellent work, men,” the Commodore congratulated and slapped them all on the back in turn. “Now, let’s see what these battle plans can tell us!”

“Wait, Commodore, I think Charlie has something important to share with all of us, first. Isn’t that right, Charlie?” Jared interrupted.

Charlie smiled meekly. “Well, you see, I meant to tell you all about this earlier, but we got distracted, so I didn’t have a chance. It’s nothing too big though,” he started.

“Dammit, Nash, we don’t have all day. Spit it out already,” the Commodore boomed.

“All right. All right. Well, this morning Percy and I were looking for the house-keys in the study. We didn’t find them, because the safe had already been cleaned out by the murderer,” Charlie paused.

“Oh, go on, Charlie. It gets better, all. Isn’t that right, Charlie?”

“So, apparently, besides the house-keys, the murderer also took the papers we signed last night and the deed to the house and some money.”

“Oh! Mon Dieu!” Claudine gasped. She looked at Percy. He nodded back at her.

“Some money, Charlie? Why don’t we clarify that a bit for everyone, huh? Just how much money was there?” Jared pressed severely.

“Nine million…” Charlie whispered and looked at his feet. He drew on the floor with the tip of his poker in a distracted manner.

“How much was that?” Estelle asked. “I didn’t quite hear you, Charlie.”

“Nine million,” he repeated loudly and looked up to see the shocked faces of his fellow guests.

“Nine. Million. Dollars,” Estelle said slowly. She smiled unconsciously. “Oh my.”

Everyone but Charlie, Percy, and Jared became lost in thoughts of the money. Their eyes wandered this way and that as they imagined the stacks of bills sitting somewhere in the house. They stood silently, but their minds were shouting greedy shouts of triumph and excitement. The Commodore was the first to break his reverie.

“Well, this certainly does put a bit of a spin on the case, doesn’t it?”

“You could say that, Commodore. Our killer isn’t just a murderer now. He’s also a thief,” Jared said

with a level voice.

“True. Though I was thinking in another direction, Price,” the Commodore replied. “We already knew that the killer was a ruthless, and violent, man. In our hunt for him, we needed a certain level of protection from such a man,” he said and held his Hutu war-club aloft. “Now, the stakes have been raised. This man is no longer just defending himself. He’s also protecting a sizeable sum of money. Like a speckled bear protecting her cub, he’ll be even more ferocious in his attempts to avoid capture, now.”

“A speckled bear? What are you talking about, Bernhard?” Estelle questioned.

“While in the deepest jungles of Myanmar, my troops and I came across a tawny speckled bear in our campsite. It was rummaging through the food supplies during the night. Usually, this sort of bear is fairly skittish. With this in mind, Jenkins ran up to it to scare it away. Unfortunately for Jenkins, this particular bear wasn’t the usual sort. It was a mama, and its baby cub was lurking behind a large crate of canned beans. When Jenkins rushed the mama bear, he inadvertently came between it and its cub. Well, the normally docile speckled bear flew into a blind rage and pounced on Jenkins. It ripped his arms from their sockets before we could even react. By the time we had brought the beast down with a salvo of fire from our riflemen, Jenkins was merely a bloody heap of bones. A terrible night,” the Commodore finished quietly.

“That’s a dreadful ssssstory, Commodore,” the Doctor sighed and lit another cigarette. He puffed away and thought of all the cartons of cigarettes he could buy with nine million dollars. “I could even travel to Indonesia and buy them directly,” he mused. He imagined himself in a khaki hunting shirt and pith helmet driving an all-wheel-drive jeep through muddy trails in search of the best quality cigarettes.

“What happened to the cub?” Silvia asked the Commodore.

“What cub?” he asked back.

“The cub in your story.”

“Oh, that cub,” the Commodore paused and thought for a moment. “What did we do with that little bugger?” He twisted his blonde moustache and stared at the ceiling. “Ah! I remember. We took the little cub in. He would have never survived in the wild on his own, Miss Blackstone. So, we made him our company mascot. Even named him. After a few weeks, though, he started getting a little too

big for comfort. We could sense the natural instinct in him beginning to rear its ugly head. One day we came across a traveling circus on its way to the capital. They offered us a hefty sum for the bear cub, and so we parted ways.”

“Oh,” she whispered.

They stood in silence again.

“Well, let’s not dwell on it anymore. I suggest we continue with our plan. We search the mansion and find our culprit,” the Commodore urged. “He’ll be as fierce as a bear, but we’ll be ready for him.” He pointed to the blueprints of the mansion. “Now, there are four floors. This main floor. The second floor with all of our bedrooms. Another set of stairs that leads to an attic above. Finally, a basement.”

“There are eight of us left,” Jared pointed out.

“Right, Price. We want to scour the whole mansion at once, in order to flush him out of hiding. And, we don’t want anyone to go alone. So, we’ll split into pairs. Two people will cover each floor together.”

“I am scared, Commodore,” Claudine whispered with fear in her eyes.

“There’s nothing to be scared of, Claudine. We have the advantage of numbers and surprise. Price, you’ll go with Claudine,” he commanded and pushed the two of them together, shoulder to shoulder.

“Why does he get to go around with her?” Charlie asked.

“What does it matter, Nash? We should put each woman with one of the men for safety.”

“I’m just saying, shouldn’t we discuss this a bit?” he continued. Estelle reached over and kicked his shin.

“Ouch!”

“We’ll go together, Bernhard,” Estelle announced. She grabbed Charlie by the arm and dragged him aside from the rest of the group.

“I don’t trust them,” she whispered to Charlie as she spoke closely to him. Charlie looked over her shoulder at the rest of the group at the table. “Especially Claudine. I think she’s up to something.”

“I don’t have a good feeling about Jared, either,” Charlie added in a hushed tone.

“Me neither. Look, let them do whatever they’re going to do. I don’t care. We’ll take the second

floor. We can go grab my gun from my room, and then we'll be safe. Okay?"

"All right. Do you trust me?" Charlie asked. He looked deep into her mirror-like blue eyes.

"Of course I trust you, sweetie. Why do you think I want to be with you?" she replied in a husky voice. "Now, let's get back to the rest and see what their plotting now, before they do anything stupid," she whispered and pulled Charlie back to the group with her.

"Doctor, I'm still holding you responsible for Miss Blackstone," the Commodore reasoned.

"What?" she whispered. Her eyes were still slightly glazed-over.

"It would be my pppppleasure, Commodore," the Doctor replied. "I'll keep you safe, Silvia," he said with a smile. The purple handkerchief was expertly extracted from his pocket and he wiped his glasses with it. Unfortunately, it was still soaked with Jared's blood, and it smeared red all over them again.

"Ddddammit, again!" he cried despondently. Walking over to the bar, he tossed the handkerchief on the counter and grabbed a handful of linen napkins. He stuffed one in his pocket, and used another to wipe his glasses clean.

"That just leaves us gentlemen, Percy," concluded the Commodore. "The Crown will be our guide!" He shook his war-club in the air with vigor. Percy looked at him blankly, and shook his cleaver in a slightly less vigorous manner.

"If you say so, Commodore," he replied.

"Well, it's all settled then. We've got our patrols configured. Let's divvy up the mansion now." The Commodore bent over the blueprints and pointed with his war-club. "Doctor, Miss Blackstone, you two will take the basement.

"Okay." They nodded in agreement. The Doctor took Silvia's fat hand in his own. She smiled contentedly.

"Price, Claudine, you search the main floor."

"Fine, Commodore." Jared looked over at Estelle and Charlie. He suspected that they were plotting something. "I'll keep my eye on them," he thought to himself.

"Nash, Miss Ellis, you two will cover the second floor," he instructed as he turned the pages of the big purple book to reveal the second floor layout.

“No complaints here.”

“Fine. Percy, you and I will comb the attic.”

“Good idea, Commodore.”

Everyone stood in their pairs and looked at the book on the table.

“I want to take the book with us,” Estelle said and reached for the large book.

“What a minute,” Jared interjected. “We could all use the blueprints during our search. Why should you get them for yourselves?”

“Oh, my mistake,” she said apologetically. “Why don’t you just look at the plans real quick, and then we can take the book with us?”

“Or why don’t you look at the plans real quick, and we can take the book with us, instead?” Jared repeated.

The Doctor thumbed through the pages of the book. He pulled the scalpel from his pocket and quickly cut out several pages.

“Doctor, what are you doing?” Claudine cried out.

“Each floor has like sssseven different pages worth of plans here. I don’t think anyone will miss a few pages here or there.” He handed Jared the plans for the first floor, and Estelle the plans for the second floor. Turning around, he gave the plans for the attic to Percy, and kept one sheet of the plans of the basement for himself. “Problem solved.”

“All right. Let’s get a move on.” The Commodore glanced at the clock on the mantle. It was three-thirty. “The time is flying by, men. We haven’t got much more time. Let’s all agree to meet back here in the lounge at six. If we haven’t found the killer by then, we’ll regroup and make a new plan.”

“I’m hungry,” Silvia complained. She patted her round stomach. It growled audibly.

“Yeah, we kind of missed lunch,” Charlie pointed out. “Well, most of us did, anyway,” he said and looked back at Silvia. “Jared, why don’t you guys fix us some dinner while you’re searching this floor,” he joked.

“Oh, that’s a good idea,” Silvia agreed and licked her lips. A string of saliva clung to her top lip.

“When we meet back here at six, we’ll organize another reconnaissance party to bring back some food, Miss Blackstone. Of course, hopefully we’ll have apprehended the killer by then, and we can eat in peace and safety. But, until then, let’s keep on our guard and do what we need to do.”

The pairs walked over to the door and waited. Jared listened at the door. Silence. He opened it and held out his hand to Estelle. “Ladies first,” he offered with a smile.

“Gee, thanks,” she said. After making a point to roll her eyes at him, she grabbed Charlie by the hand and yanked him into the hallway. In turn, the Doctor and Silvia exited the lounge, followed by the Commodore and Percy. Jared and Claudine stood in the doorway and watched silently as the three search parties fanned out in the hall. Jared waited for the last of them to disappear from sight, then closed the door to the lounge behind him and locked it.

“Claudine, before we go looking around, we need to talk first...” he said and led her to the couch.

Chapter Fourteen

Doctor Payne and Silvia walked side-by-side across the main hall and ventured down the smaller hallway to the left of the main staircase. Tucked beneath the staircase was a small door. It was paneled in mahogany to match the rest of the décor in the main hall and fitted with brightly polished brass pins and knob. The doorknob was installed in a large brass doorplate that had a keyhole big enough to accept a huge skeleton key. Fortunately, when the Doctor tried the knob, it was not locked, and turned easily without a sound.

He pulled the door open completely, and the two of them peered intently into the foreboding darkness inside. Illuminated only by the gas lamps of the main hall, the stairs to the basement quickly became shrouded in blackness. A massive, dangerous looking switch was on the wall just to the left inside the door.

“I’ve only seen a lllllight switch like that before in cheesy B-movies with mad scientists,” the Doctor commented as he pointed to the switch.

“Shhh...” Silvia whispered to him.

“Wwwwwhat?”

“Aren’t we supposed to be quiet?” she whispered again. Silvia blinked her eyes slowly. The Bailey’s was still coursing through her veins and making her a little sleepy.

“Hrrmmph. Do you see the Commodore lllllooking over our shoulder now? No.” The Doctor tucked his rolling pin under his left armpit and pulled his box of cigarettes from his right jacket pocket. He spun the flint on his lighter and intently lit one of the aromatic clove cigarettes. “He means well, but I think he’s taking this a bit too far, if you ask me, Silvia.”

“Yeah, I suppose,” she mumbled in agreement.

“No matter how quietly we search the house, I’m sure the mmmmmurderer is quite aware that he is being hunted. He knows. So, he’s going to be on his guard. He’s going to hear us a mile away, no matter how quiet we think we are being,” the Doctor explained to her.

“Well, then shouldn’t we try to be even more quiet then?” she asked with a confused expression on her face. Doctor Payne smiled at her and shook his head.

“Maybe this is really an awful thing to say, but I don’t really want to find the mmmmmurderer.” He held up his rolling pin and pointed to her carving knife with the cherry of his cigarette. “Do you

really think these mundane implements are any match for the killer and his samurai sword?”

“But, there are two of us. There’s just one of him. The Commodore said that we have the advantage of numbers,” she went on in a sleepy voice.

“Silvia,” the Doctor said gently. He put his hand on her shoulder. She started to pull away, but then stopped and looked at him intently.

“What is it?”

“Let’s both be very honest with ourselves. You, and I, we aren’t exactly in the pppppinnacle of good health. My hands are delicate surgical tools, but the rest of my body is a study in laziness and bad habits. I really should exercise more.” He looked her directly in the eyes, then looked her body up and down, then came to rest his gaze again in hers. “And you, Silvia, I want to tell you that I find you very attractive. But, you could probably use some exercise, too.”

Had her mind still not been slightly muddled by the alcohol in her system, his comment might have offended her. But, the cogs in her brain turned slowly, and she was still comprehending the first half of his sentence when he spoke the second half.

“You think I’m pretty?” she asked and smiled shyly.

“Of course. You really have a bbbbbeautiful smile. I just wish you would show it more. You always seem so sad,” he said softly. He withdrew his hand from her shoulder and puffed at his cigarette seductively. He pulled the smoke deep into his lungs, then blew tiny rings into the air between them. They lazily drifted towards the ceiling, until they were caught by a draft flowing up the stairs of the basement and were distorted in the torrent of the air current.

“I… I’ve had some bad luck with men in the past,” she whispered, suddenly becoming somber.

“Well, I’m no Romeo, but I think those other mmmmmen really missed out on being with someone very special.”

“You think I’m special?” she asked and brightened again.

“Yes, Silvia. So, here’s my plan. Let’s try not to find the mmmmmurderer in the basement. If he’s down there, let’s give him plenty of warning that we are coming. That way, maybe he can find a good hiding spot, or run up the stairs and out of the basement. Maybe he’ll even run up to the attic and the damned Commodore can deal with him.”

“Okay.”

“Let’s hope this ddddoesn’t electrocute me,” the Doctor winked and flipped the switch on the wall. Several light bulbs hanging from the sloped ceiling lit and illuminated the stairs downward. The staircase was not wide enough for the two of them to walk side-by-side, and so the Doctor held his rolling pin ahead of him and started down first. “Gee, I hope there are no crazy mmmmmurderers down here in the basement,” he said in a normal voice.

“Yeah, if there are any murderers down here, they’d better hide really well, or run up to the attic,” she said with a devilish smile on her face and stepped down the stairs behind him.

Charlie and Estelle stood at the foot of the main stairs and watched the Doctor and Silvia continue past them down the hall to the left towards the kitchen. The Commodore and Percy stood next to them. The Commodore held out his hand, and Percy gave him the plans for the attic. He looked at them briefly, then handed the large piece of paper back to Percy. He held the Hutu war-club in his right hand, and using his free left hand, he pointed to his eyes, then made a fist, then pointed upstairs. Estelle gave him the OK sign and pointed upstairs as well. The Commodore nodded seriously, then began tiptoeing up the stairs. Percy looked at Estelle and Charlie and shrugged his shoulders helplessly. He followed the Commodore as silently as he could, but his hard-leather soled oxfords made tiny footstep sounds despite his efforts. The Commodore turned and looked at him severely. Percy merely smiled and held his cleaver in as menacing a pose as he could. The Commodore shrugged his shoulders and sighed in defeat, then continued up the stairs. After nearly a minute, the two of them had scaled the stairs. Reaching the landing, they turned right and disappeared down the hall between the master bedroom and Jared’s room.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Estelle lowered her carving knife to her side and turned to Charlie. He was looking down the hall where the Doctor and Silvia had gone.

“Hey, buster, let’s go,” she said as she jabbed him in the ribs.

“All right, sweetheart.”

“Don’t call me sweetheart, darling,” she corrected.

“Why not?”

“Does it really matter why? Now come on. First stop is my room. Once we have that revolver, I’ll feel a lot safer.”

“Okay,” he agreed and looked up the stairs.

“Well?”

“Well what?”

“Well, what are you waiting for? Go on,” she said and looked at him expectantly.

“Ladies first,” he smiled and pointed upstairs with his poker in a grand sweeping motion.

“Don’t give me that bull, sugar,” she said and shook her head.

“Oh, come on. We just saw the Commodore and Percy go up. There’s no one hiding at the top of the stairs waiting to pounce on us and chop us to pieces.”

“Good. Then you shouldn’t have any problem going up first,” she insisted.

“Look, this staircase is huge. You could march a small parade up this thing with room to spare on either side. Why don’t we both go up at the same time? Together,” he reasoned.

Estelle looked up the stairs, then across the hall at the door to the lounge. Jared was standing in the doorway looking at her. She gave him a sour look, then turned to Charlie. “All right, let’s go.”

She swapped the carving knife from her right hand to her left and grabbed Charlie’s empty left hand. He grasped her hand firmly, but gently. Hand in hand, they ascended the massive staircase and turned left at the top. As she looked down onto the first floor, Estelle saw the door to the lounge close and heard the soft click of the lock sliding into place.

Jared sat on the couch next to Claudine and set his wok on the floor beside them. He cautiously reached for her hand and eased the carving knife from her limp grasp. He deposited the knife on the floor next to the wok.

“Monsieur, what’s wrong?” she asked with confused eyes.

“What isn’t wrong? This whole weekend is one big mistake.”

“I know, Monsieur, it’s all gone wrong,” she admitted. “This wasn’t the plan at all.”

Claudine buried her face in her hands and began crying.

It was Jared’s turn to look confused. He knotted his brow and gently pulled her hands from her face. She looked at him, her green eyes bloodshot. The tears ran down her rosy cheeks and collected on her chin. “What plan, Claudine?” he asked.

Claudine pulled him close to her. Her heaving bosom pressed tightly against his chest. Their

clothes were still caked with bloodstains from that morning. “Oh, Monsieur, I shouldn’t have lied to you last night. I’m so sorry!” she pleaded and began crying on his shoulder.

“I’m confused, Claudine. What’s this plan you’re talking about, and why did you lie to me last night?” he said and pushed her away slightly so that he could look her in the eyes again.

“She made me lie to you, Monsieur. Madame Gold. I’m sorry! I didn’t want to, but she said she would fire me if I didn’t do it! You know, it is hard for to find a good job like this, for me,” she said letting her English slip more and more as she spoke.

“But what did you lie about? That’s what I want to know.”

“About Madame Gold. She’s not crazy. Non, not at all. She is a brilliant woman! She was a brilliant woman...” Claudine sighed. She placed her hands on Jared’s lap and massaged his thighs absentmindedly.

“So, the whole plot to have us kill each other so she could write about it was a lie? Is that what you’re saying, Claudine?”

“Well, yes and no. She never intended for one of you to die. Non, not at all. Instead, she planned to fake her own death. Percy and Zhang Shifu and I all knew this, and we were supposed to play along with it. So, this morning, when I went to her room to wake her, I expected to find her pretending to be dead. I never thought I would see what I saw instead, though. She was really murdered! Oh! Mon Dieu! The blood was everywhere, Monsieur! It was dreadful!” Her eyes were again filled with fear and she clawed his legs with her long, sharp fingernails.

“Ouch!” he winced and grabbed her hands with his own. “She faked her own death to give us a scare...” Jared repeated.

“Yes, she wanted to. But now she really is dead. You heard what the Doctor said, Monsieur! And poor Zhang Shifu! Now he’s dead too. And the money is gone! This is not like we planned at all...”

“I guess you could say that,” he nodded. They sat there in silence for a moment, then Jared questioned her again. “Claudine, this morning when I wanted to talk to you, on the stairs, I wanted to ask you about last night.”

“I know, but I don’t understand. What about last night?”

“Why did you leave my room? And, when did you leave?”

“I left around three-thirty, or so, Monsieur. Madame Gold wanted to go over the plan one more time with me so that I would know exactly how to respond when I found her dead in the morning.”

“Then why did you tell everyone that you spent the whole night with me, this morning in the lounge?” he pressed.

“Well, I intended to spend the whole night with you. I wanted to return to bed with you as soon as I was finished with Madame Gold. But, when I came back to your room, you were gone!”

“I was gone? Where was I?” Jared asked. “Now I really don’t know what’s going on,” he thought. His mind was a swirl of smoky thoughts and ideas.

“Don’t you know where you were, Monsieur?”

“No. I woke up around four and noticed you were gone. I went back to sleep and didn’t wake up until morning.”

“Oh no, Monsieur. You were not in bed at five this morning when I came back to your room. I checked the bathroom in your room, too, but you weren’t there, either,” she explained.

A dreadful thought pushed its way into Jared’s mind. He didn’t want to accept it, but the more he thought about it, the heavier it loomed in his brain. His heart sank. “Claudine,” he whispered, “when I woke up this morning, I was covered in blood.”

“Yes, we both got bloody when we ran into each other on the stairs this morning. We’re still all messy, Monsieur.”

“No, Claudine, you didn’t hear me.” Jared held her hands tightly and looked deep into her eyes. “When I woke up... before you ran into me on the stairs... when I woke up this morning, I was covered in blood.”

“Oh! Mon Dieu!” she cried out and scooted away from him on the couch in horror.

Percy and the Commodore reached the top of the main staircase and turned right. A dark hallway emerged before them as they reached the door to Jared’s room and turned left. The Commodore walked forward slowly and with great care to be as silent as possible. After walking ten meters down the corridor, a door appeared on their left. The Commodore stopped in front of the door and looked to Percy.

“The attic?” he mouthed silently.

Percy nodded.

“For the crown!” the Commodore mouthed and shook his Hutu war-club in the air.

Percy sighed and waved his cleaver about wildly for a second, then let his arm fall back to his side as soon as the Commodore stopped looking.

Like a safecracker fingering the dial on a bank vault, the Commodore gently grasped the doorknob with his fingertips. Ever so slowly, he began to turn the knob. Millimeter by millimeter. The seconds passed like hours. Percy sighed deeply. Only by observing that the Commodore’s wrist was turning, could Percy even begin to believe that he was still turning the knob. After what seemed like an eternity, the nearly inaudible click of the door mechanism was heard, and Percy knew that the door was finally open.

With lightning swiftness the Commodore threw open the door and brought his war-club down in a ferocious downward swing. The war-club crashed into the murderer’s skull with such velocity that it became lodged in it and the Commodore had to let go of the club as the body slumped to the floor.

Or, it would have crashed into the murderer’s skull if the murderer had been standing right behind the attic door. But, there was no murderer standing behind the attic door, and when the Commodore chopped the air with his club, he hit nothing. The lack of resistance his war-club met as it came down in its potentially deadly arc of British justice completely surprised the Commodore, and he was wholly unprepared as the war-club continued past his would-be assailant’s would-be head and squarely struck his own right knee. Using some supernatural reserve of discipline, the Commodore didn’t cry out in agony as pain exploded in his knee. Instead, he let go of the stone-tipped club and slumped to the floor like a wet blanket. The sound of the club as it clattered and came to rest on the highly polished hardwood floor behind the Commodore echoed like the blast from a cannon in his ears.

Percy stood beside the Commodore, mouth agape, for a moment. “What just happened,” he wondered. The Commodore clutched his knee in agony and clenched his teeth in obvious pain. His teeth gnashed this way and that as he silently let fourth curses sampled from a dozen languages. Percy dropped his cleaver and then dropped to his knees beside the Commodore.

“Dear God, are you all right, Commodore?” he cried out. The Commodore’s eyes bulged in their sockets and Percy felt his pulse quicken as the savage fury he saw in those eyes burned deep into his soul. Still clutching his knee with his right hand, the Commodore brought the index finger of his left hand to his lips and signaled for Percy to be quiet. He then pointed into the darkness of the attic stairwell, then returned his hand to his knee.

“This man is a maniac,” Percy thought dumbly. “How can he still be concerned about silence in a situation like this?” The Commodore massaged his knee vigorously, realigning the cartilage of his kneecap with forceful kneading motions. Percy was almost sure that he heard the bones and cartilage grinding back into place with small popping sounds. The Commodore winced, his mouth locked in an expression of the utmost torture. Finally, his face relaxed and he sighed uneasily. Sweat poured from his brow and tears streamed from his bloodshot eyes. Percy reached into his pocket and withdrew a neatly pressed white handkerchief. He held it out for the Commodore. The Commodore pushed it away and wiped his tears with the sleeve of his red uniform.

And then, he stood up. Percy couldn’t believe it. Had he not witnessed it with his own eyes, he would have never imagined that a man could stand on his own power after receiving such a blow to his knee. But, the Commodore slowly rose to a crouch, then gently straightened his legs and rose to his full height with the sureness and steadiness of a proud veteran sailor raising the Union Jack up the mast of his Corvette.

The Commodore looked at the floor behind him. His club lay there, nestled against the mahogany paneled wall. He started to bend down to pick it up, but Percy, still kneeling on the floor, noticed the movement, quickly slid across the floor, and retrieved it before the Commodore could fully bend over. He handed the heavy war-club to the Commodore’s outstretched right hand, then reached down and picked up his own weapon. The cleaver felt so light in his hand compared to the club. “I’m glad I don’t have to carry that bloody thing around,” Percy mused happily. His attention snapped back to the gravity of the situation as the Commodore took a hesitant step towards the attic stairs. The Commodore’s lips twisted in suffering as his weight shifted from his good knee to the injured one.

“Good God,” Percy thought as he shook his head in amazement and awe. “He’s still going to explore the attic! He needs to go see the Doctor!” Remembering the frightful eyes that seared his

soul when he cried out a minute before, Percy desperately wanted to avoid the Commodore's wrath again. He gently tapped his shoulder to get his attention. The Commodore turned and looked at Percy expectantly, as if nothing was wrong; as if his knee wasn't shattered in four places on the kneecap.

"We need to get you to the Doctor, Commodore," Percy mouthed silently.

The Commodore shook his head in disgust and shook his war-club menacingly. "For the Crown!" he mouthed back and took another step towards the stairs.

Percy blinked. "He's crazy," he thought. Seeing that there was no derailing the Commodore's dedication to his charge, Percy gave up and slowly followed the Commodore up the steps one painful stair at a time.

Chapter Fifteen

The stairs led downward at a steep angle. The Doctor held onto the railing to balance himself as he descended slowly. Silvia followed several steps behind him. They reached a landing, then the stairs turned to the right and doubled-back extending further downward. When they finally reached the last step, the two stood side by side and looked around.

The basement was a cavernous space that seemed impossibly large. The ceiling was nearly twenty feet above their heads. The stout wooden beams that supported the weight of the floor above criss-crossed the ceiling in a lattice of oak. Cast-iron pipes as thick as small tree trunks wove in and out of the beams, poking through the floor to supply water to the kitchen and numerous bathrooms in the mansion. In addition to the pipes, several copper air ducts were tucked in among the beams. Both the water pipes and the air ducts snaked back to a common source at the far end of the basement where an enormous coal furnace belched forth heat and hot water. A warm orange glow radiated through the heavy metal grate on its face. The center of the basement was empty, but boxes, assorted furniture, bags, and other various dusty objects lined the walls in huge stacks, piles, clumps, and clusters. It appeared that Percy did not pay nearly as much attention to the tidiness of the basement as he did to that of the rest of the mansion.

Silvia looked at the Doctor. “I don’t see any murderers down here,” she said and squeezed his free hand with hers.

“No, there are definitely no mmmmmurderers down here,” he replied loudly. “Or, if there are, they’d better hide really well. We wouldn’t want to run into them.”

“Yeah,” she called out. “We’ll just go over here, and look at this corner of the basement. We’ll be looking over here really good, so there’s no way we would see any murderers if they were to sneak behind us and flee up the stairs to the attic. We’d never think to look for them there,” she announced jovially to the empty air.

Despite its large area, the basement was sufficiently lit by the bare light bulbs that hung from the floor above at regular intervals.

“We’re walking over to this cccccorner now,” the Doctor called out and pointed towards a pile of boxes that resided in the corner of the basement to the left of the furnace. It looked like a very unlikely place for a murderer to hide. As casually as if they were strolling through a sunny meadow

in the springtime, the Doctor and Silvia walked across the basement floor and made their way over to the corner the Doctor had just indicated.

When they reached their destination, Silvia left the Doctor's side and was drawn like a magnet to a large wooden chest lying on the floor near a pile of old clothes. The chest was bound in strong black iron bands and a skull and crossbones decorated a large lock on its lid.

"I wonder what's in this thing?" she asked the Doctor with curiosity.

"I don't know, darling. Maybe it's a pppppirate's treasure."

"Oh! I hope so!" Her voice was giddy with excitement. She placed her carving knife on the floor beside the chest and tried lifting the lid. It wasn't locked, but it was too heavy for her to lift more than a few inches. "Hey, give me a hand, will you?" she implored and looked at the Doctor with sweet eyes.

The Doctor pushed his tiny glasses further onto his nose and walked over to the chest. The two of them grunted and strained, but managed to open the chest's lid completely. As it opened past vertical, the weight of the lid carried it over and it fell open with a crash. Dust swirled in a small cloud at their feet. Silvia covered her eyes and mouth and coughed as the dust flooded her lungs. The Doctor lit one of his cigarettes and inhaled deeply. When the dust had settled, she lowered her hands and peered into the chest.

Victorian-era dresses and masquerade costumes were arranged in tangles inside. Silvia reached in and pulled one of the dresses out. It was ruby red silk with shimmering silver sequins in a floral pattern on the sides of the chest. She held it up to her bulky body. It was nineteen sizes too small.

"Bah," she exclaimed in a childlike voice and tossed it over her shoulder. She crouched over the chest and rummaged through the rest of the dresses with earnest intent.

Doctor Payne looked around and noticed a small table nearby with a canvas tarp draped over it. An oddly shaped object was hidden underneath the tarp, pushing it up at crazy angles. Filled with curiosity, he walked over to the table and pulled off the tarp. Beneath it was an old jukebox in the shape of a merry-go-round. It was quite hideous. Tacky did not begin to describe it. The Doctor examined it closely. Ten horses on little poles were arranged in a circle around the mock merry-go-round. Each of the horses held a small forty-five r.p.m. record in its wooden teeth. In the center of

the merry-go-round was a little spindle for the records to be placed upon.

“I wwwwwonder if this still works?” he said and turned to Silvia. She looked up briefly from the chest. A growing pile of dresses was accumulating on the floor behind her right shoulder.

“Give it a shot,” she replied and went back to her search through the dresses.

“I would, if I could only figure out how to ttttturn it on,” he said. The Doctor felt the sides of the jukebox with his sensitive fingers. Around the back, he found a small crank. “I think I’ve got it,” he called out and began winding the crank. After a minute of winding, the horses started moving in a slow circle around the center. On the front was a panel of several buttons. The labels for the buttons had long since worn away. “Here goes nothing,” he said and pushed one of the buttons.

One of the horses, an Appaloosa, slid in a tiny track in the base of the jukebox to the center and deposited its load onto the spindle. The record spun and the horse then tipped over and rested its mane on the record’s surface. A few hisses and pops were audible as the needle found the groove in the record, but soon a gentle melody began to play from the jukebox speakers.

Silvia recognized the tune immediately and her pudgy ears pricked up. “Hey, I know this one,” she cooed. “It’s Ella Fitzgerald and Duke Ellington, “Sophisticated Lady”, recorded in 1939,” she recited.

“I think I sssssee a sophisticated lady,” the Doctor replied seductively. Silvia blushed.

“I think this one might fit,” she said and held up a green dress. To the uncultured eye, it looked more like a bundle of window curtains than a dress.

“Try it on, then, dddddarling.”

“There’s no place to change,” she said bashfully.

The Doctor looked around and saw that she was right.

“I’m a doctor. I see people without their clothes all the time.”

“Not good enough,” she smiled.

“I’ll ccccclose my eyes, if you want,” he suggested.

“Promise you won’t look!” she pleaded.

“I pppppromise I won’t look, darling.”

“Okay. But no peeking!”

“I ppppppromise I won’t peek. Look, I’ll even cover my face with my hands,” he insisted and

covered his eyes with his fat hands.

“Okay. I’ll let you know when you can open them again.”

The Doctor heard the rustling of clothes being unzipped and unbuttoned, and then the soft swish of Silvia’s clothes falling to the floor. He spread his fingers just a little and peeked. His heart quickened. Just as she was about to glance in his direction, he closed his fingers again. He heard more zips and buttons and then silence.

“Okay, you can open your eyes now,” Silvia whispered in his ear.

The Doctor lowered his hands and sighed softly. A vision of beauty stood before him in green splendor. Sweat beaded on his forehead.

“Yyyyyou lllllook ammmmmazing,” he stammered with more than his usual stutter.

“Do you really think so?” she asked and grasped his hands. He dropped his cigarette on the floor. “Dance with me then.”

“Okay.”

The two of them slowly swayed back and forth in time to Ella’s romantic crooning. The Doctor spied a large velvet sleigh couch pushed against the wall nearby and directed their dancing in that direction. Within several more measures of the song, they were standing before the couch. Gently, he pulled her down onto the couch with him.

“What are you doing, Doctor?” Silvia asked innocently.

“Well, we aren’t sssssupposed to meet up with everyone else in the lounge for another two hours. What do you say we kill some time and get to know each other a little more, darling?”

“And how do you suggest we do that?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” he said and leaned forward and grazed her flushed cheek with the back of his right hand. “Bbbbut, I’ve got some ideas.” He tenderly kissed her on her anticipating lips. Like a bear, she pounced on him and nearly knocked the two of them off the couch with her enthusiasm. Soon, the Doctor was absorbed in the folds of her green dress and only his shiny black leather shoes were visible.

The jukebox switched records and the gentle sound of Frank Sinatra singing “Girl from Ipanema” was all that could be heard as the two became lost to the world.

Estelle closed the door behind them as Charlie followed her into her bedroom. Her room was directly opposite Jared's room, just to the left of the master bedroom. When the architect designed the Gold Mansion, he mirrored the mansion's rooms along the main axis, and so the layout in Estelle's room was identical, though reversed, to Jared's. Additionally, Tracy seemed to lack creativity in interior decorating, and so it was decorated with similar strange odds and ends and furniture. The only big differences were that Estelle's bed was fitted with soft sunflower sheets and comforter, rather than blue, and instead of a large painting of hunters on the right wall, a magnificent reproduction of Venus emerging from the sea in a shell hung in its place.

Charlie walked over to the bed and glanced at the nightstand. It was empty, except for a small bottle of expensive French perfume.

"Dammit! It looks like the murderer got your pistol, too, Estelle!" he exclaimed with disgust.

"Sweetie, relax. I've got everything under control," she said as she sauntered over to the dressing table. She sat down in the chair and pulled open the bottom drawer. A mass of silk and satin panties of all colors and cuts spilled out of the overflowing drawer. Estelle rummaged through the panties until she found what she was looking for. With a gleam in her eye, she removed her hand from the drawer and held the revolver tightly.

"I thought you said you left the pistol on the nightstand?" Charlie asked in confusion.

"So, I lied. Like you've never lied about anything."

"Why lie to everyone about where you left the pistol, though?"

"Why tell them the truth? I knew where it was. That seemed like the most important thing at the time," she reasoned. "What does it matter now? We have it again, and I feel safe." Estelle leveled the pistol at Charlie. "So the thing you've gotta ask yourself, is do you feel lucky, punk? Well, do ya?" she growled out in her best Clint Eastwood impression.

"Hey, watch where you're pointing that thing, okay?"

"Yeah, whatever," she replied and lowered her aim to the floor.

"So what do we do now? We're supposed to be searching the whole floor."

"What's the rush?" Estelle said nonchalantly. "I want to check up on our friend, Jared. I don't trust that guy. I think something was going on with him and Tracy. Maybe he had more to do with her death than he's letting on."

“But the Doctor said that his candlestick wasn’t what killed her.”

“You saw her room. What killed her isn’t important. Someone went crazy with that candlestick, and, as far as I’m concerned, that makes Jared the prime suspect.”

“Well, he’s downstairs.”

“Exactly, so I suggest we do exactly what we are supposed to be doing, and search these rooms. And the first room I want to check is his,” she decided.

“Okay, let’s do it.” Charlie walked over to the door with his poker in hand and opened it. “You’ve got the heavy firepower, so this time, ladies first,” he grinned.

“Oh, what a gentleman,” she cooed and spun the revolver around on her finger. She walked into the hallway and waited for Charlie to follow behind her.

It was just a quick trip past the master bedroom again, and soon the two of them were standing outside the door to Jared’s bedroom. Charlie tried the handle. It was locked.

“Dammit!” Charlie whispered.

“See, that’s damning evidence if I ever saw it,” Estelle whispered back. “Why lock the door to your bedroom if you have nothing to hide? Right?”

“Maybe the killer is in there? Maybe he locked himself inside?”

“Don’t be stupid, sweetheart. Jared’s downstairs. How could he lock himself inside his bedroom?”

“Estelle, I don’t think the murderer is Jared. He didn’t kill the cook, right?”

“Yeah, I still haven’t figured out how he did that... That was pretty tricky. Either way, I’m getting in this room, locked or not.”

“All right, step back,” Charlie instructed and stepped a few steps back from the door. He lowered his massive shoulder and charged at the door.

Charlie bounced off the door like a rubber ball and nearly rebounded over the railing of the balcony. Estelle caught him just before he tumbled to his death and shook her head.

“You men are all the same. Always trying to impress the lady. Look. This is how it’s done.” Estelle reached into the back of her blonde curls and produced a tiny hairpin. She inserted it into the large lock and twisted and turned the pin with tiny movements. In a few seconds, the tumblers fell

into place, and a tiny “snick” was heard. “Now try the handle,” she said and leveled the gun at the door.

Charlie turned the doorknob and pushed the door open. No killer rushed at them from Jared’s room. With caution, Estelle ventured into the bedroom followed by Charlie. He closed the door behind them, and locked it again from the inside.

“Nothing looks out of the ordinary,” Charlie remarked. He walked over to the globe and spun it. “It looks like your room, but with uglier paintings.”

“I’m not convinced. He’s hiding something, that’s for sure. Look around some more.” She walked over to Jared’s duffel bag and dumped its contents all over the bed.

“What are you doing?”

“What does it look like? I’m looking for the killer.”

“In his bag?”

“I’m a thorough searcher. Besides, maybe Jared hid the money he stole in his bag.” Besides a few pairs of underwear and socks and a spare change of clothes, there was nothing of interest in the duffel bag. “Oh well. I guess he hid it somewhere else...” Estelle mumbled in disappointment. She walked over to each of the nightstands and rifled through their drawers.

“Aren’t you going to put his stuff back in his bag?” Charlie asked as he looked up from searching the drawers in the dressing table.

“Nah. If he asks, just say the killer must have done it.”

“If Jared is the killer like you insist, though, darling, don’t you think he’ll know he didn’t do it?”

Estelle held the gun aloft. “I don’t really care what he thinks anymore. Come on, let’s check the bathroom.”

The bathroom was just as Jared had left it that morning. A towel lay on the edge of the sink. Estelle walked over to the sink and looked at the basin.

“Ah ha! Look at this!” she said and pointed to the white porcelain basin. Charlie came to her side and looked carefully.

“Looks like blood.”

“That’s exactly what it looks like to me too, sweetheart. And look at this towel! It’s got a few blotches of something red on it. Could be blood, too. Has Jared been up to his room since he cut his forehead this morning?”

“I don’t think so... we’ve all been together since then,” Charlie recalled.

“So why is there blood in his sink and on his towel?”

“Maybe he cut himself shaving?”

“Or maybe he is a bloody psychopath who went on a killing frenzy this morning in Tracy’s room.” Estelle walked over to the bathtub and peered at the bottom. “Look! There’s more blood over here. The whole bottom of the tub is stained pinkish red. The soap still has blood on it from when he was washing himself off.”

“Okay, I think you’ve convinced me, Estelle. Jared is definitely hiding something. Maybe he didn’t kill Tracy, but he sure was covered in blood this morning. Let’s go tell the others.”

“Wait. Let’s hold off. I don’t want to spoil the surprise yet.”

“So what should we do then?”

“Well, I’m pretty sure that Jared did it all, so as long as he’s downstairs, we don’t have anything to worry about. Let’s go back to my room.”

“We were just in your room.”

Estelle looked her watch. It was a little past four-thirty. “I’m a little sleepy,” she said in a playful tone. “Want to help me take a nap until we need to meet everyone at six?”

“A nap...” Suddenly Charlie got the picture. “Oh, a nap. Sure thing, darling,” he replied with a sly grin.

“I was hoping you’d agree. I wouldn’t want to sleep all by myself here in this big old mansion.” Estelle exited the bathroom and walked over to the door to the hallway. “It’s safe now, so, after you, my hunka hunka burning love,” she said with her worst Elvis impression.

Charlie opened the door and stepped into the hallway. As the two of them walked to Estelle’s bedroom, Charlie stopped and scratched his head.

“What is it?”

Charlie looked at Estelle and knitted his brow. He looked at the doors to the master bedroom

directly to their right. “Weren’t these doors closed just a minute ago?”

Estelle turned and looked. The doors to Tracy’s room were wide open.

“You’re the murderer!” Claudine cried out. She reached to the floor and grabbed her carving knife.

“I didn’t do it, Claudine!” Jared protested. He stood up and backed away from her. She held the knife with a steel grip and suddenly looked like she knew exactly how to use it. “Claudine, you’ve got to believe me! I can’t explain how I got all bloody, but I know I didn’t kill anyone!”

“How can I trust you?”

“How can you trust me? Jesus, Claudine. You’re the one who just said you’ve been lying to me! How can I trust you?”

“That was different,” she replied. She lowered the knife slightly but kept her eyes fixed on Jared.

“I fail to see the difference. Look. Why would I tell you any of this if I was the killer?” Jared could start to see some hesitation in Claudine’s stance.

“I don’t know. Why were you all covered in blood this morning if you aren’t the killer?”

“Claudine, that’s exactly what I want to know, too. That’s why I wanted to talk to you this morning at breakfast, and that’s why I told you just now. I have no idea how it happened. All I know is that I didn’t kill anyone. And, well, if you don’t believe me, then I guess that’s that. Just don’t go stabbing me or something just because you think I did it.” Jared held up his hands in defeat and backed away from Claudine one more step.

Claudine looked at Jared for a long time. Finally, she lowered the knife to her side. “Okay, I believe you, Monsieur. You’re right. Why would you tell me anything if you were the killer? And, although I’ve lied to you repeatedly, it seems like you are an honest person. So, I’ll believe you. I still don’t know why you were all bloody, though, Monsieur,” she sighed and dropped the knife to the floor again.

“Thanks, Claudine. The only thing I can think of... is that someone wanted to frame me for Tracy’s murder. Maybe the killer snuck into my room and put blood on me to make it look like I did it?”

“Perhaps, Monsieur. I forgot to lock your door behind me when I left in the night, so I guess anyone could have come in.”

“Thanks, Claudine...”

“Sorry, Monsieur,” she apologized. Claudine stepped closer to Jared and put her arms around him. Her perfume remained strong on her body, despite the hectic day she had experienced. “How can I make it up to you?”

Jared looked deep into her emerald green eyes. He held her at arms length. “I’m hungry.”

“I could give you something to eat, Monsieur,” she replied seductively, pressing her body against his again and grinding her hips into his.

“No, I mean I’m starving. Let’s go to the kitchen and get some food.” Jared looked at the clock on the fireplace mantle. It was almost four-thirty. “I’m sure everyone would appreciate it if we brought something back to the lounge with us for them.”

“All right, Monsieur. We will bring back some food. But I am still scared to leave the room.”

“Don’t worry,” Jared replied as he stooped down and picked up his wok. “I’m quite skilled with a wok.” He bent forward and kissed her on the cheek. “I’ll keep you safe, don’t worry.” The two of them walked to the door to the lounge and listened. There was silence on the other side of the door. Jared opened the door cautiously and looked into the main hall. No one stirred. “The coast is clear, Claudine. Let’s go,” he said and started into the hall. With trepidation, she followed closely behind, tottering after him in her high-heels.

Jared chose to avoid the dining room, and went directly to the kitchen by the passage that continued past the main stairwell to the left. The door was open, and he walked in. Lunch was still lying on the counter. The burritos were rock-hard and cold now, and the spicy blend of melted Mexican cheeses in one of the serving bowls had long since congealed into a hard yellow mass.

“Eh... that doesn’t look too appetizing anymore,” Jared suggested to Claudine as he pointed to the cold food on the counter. “Do you think we can warm this stuff up again?”

“Oui, Monsieur. We can just use the microwave.” Claudine walked into the kitchen past Jared and came around to the far side of the island in the center. She began picking up the trays of food.

“Watch out, Claudine,” Jared cautioned.

“Watch out for what, Monsieur?”

“For Zhang Shifu. Aren’t you stepping on him right now?”

“What?” Claudine looked down to the tiled floor. There was nothing there. “No, there is not any Zhang Shifu, Monsieur.”

“That’s impossible,” Jared exclaimed and rushed forward. But, as Claudine had told him, the floor was indeed bare behind the island. There wasn’t even any trace of blood on the tile. The grout between the tiles shined sparkling pearly white. If he hadn’t seen a headless corpse lying there on the floor just five hours before, he would never have guessed that this was the sight of a murder. “Where did he go?”

“I don’t know, Monsieur. I just came in here with you right now.”

“This is really getting creepy. Who kills someone, and then cleans everything up after everyone knows about the murder?”

“Perhaps the murderer is crazy?”

“Well, that goes without saying, and crazy seems to be the leitmotif this weekend. Look, I guess it doesn’t do any good to stand here wondering where the body went. The killer is trying to mess with our heads. Let’s just grab some food and bring it back. Forget warming it up.”

“Good idea, Monsieur,” she nodded in response and grabbed a big basket that was hanging on the wall. “I’ll put as much as I can in this picnic basket.” Claudine loaded the basket full of burritos, tacos, fajitas, and tortilla chips. She also placed several bowls of Spanish rice, guacamole, and refried beans into the depths of the wicker basket. Finally, it was laden with as much as it would hold, and she pointed to Jared. “You carry it, Monsieur. It is too heavy for me to pick up,” she said helplessly.

“All right,” he said and hefted the large basket. It was pretty heavy. “Let’s go back to the lounge and wait for everyone to return.”

“Okay,” she replied and tottered after him as he lead the way out of the kitchen and back into the main hallway. It was still deserted. Jared looked up to the top of the stairs and noticed that the doors to Tracy’s room were open. “That’s odd,” he thought to himself. “Weren’t they closed before?” He only paused to think for a moment, then continued across the hall to the lounge. He peeked inside the lounge before entering. It was just as they had left it. Wok in one hand, and picnic

basket in the other, he disappeared into the lounge with Claudine behind him.

The Commodore limped up the stairs one at a time. After what seemed like an eternity, he reached the top of the stairs and was greeted with another door. He turned on the last step and looked at Percy.

“Oh, God,” Percy thought. “I hope he doesn’t do something stupid again.”

The Commodore held his war-club aloft and slowly turned the handle of the door. This time, when he threw open the door, he didn’t anticipate a killer lurking on the opposite side and just held his club in a menacing manner. Satisfied that there was no one in the immediate vicinity of the doorway, the Commodore proceeded up into the attic. Percy followed.

The Commodore motioned for the plans of the attic, and signaled for Percy to keep watch as he examined them. Percy gave him the plans and stood by his side while he looked around the attic.

The attic was dusty, which secretly embarrassed Percy. It was his job to keep the mansion tidy, and it had been several days since he had been to the attic to dust. The attic was not as enormous as one might suspect judging by the voluminous enormity of the rest of the mansion. The ceiling in the master bedroom and main hall was vaulted, extending all the way to the roof. Additionally, because of the sloping roof of the mansion’s exterior, the walls in the attic were tilted inward, making the remaining space seem much smaller than it really was. The Commodore looked at the plans, then handed them back to Percy. He walked off to the right and inspected some piles of boxes that were stacked haphazardly near the wall. They were labeled “Summer Clothes”, “Christmas Ornaments”, “Old Photos”, and other similarly obvious categories of miscellany. There did not seem to be any organization to the collection of boxes. Percy hung his head in embarrassment.

The Commodore pointed to the far wall, and walked across the floor of the attic in that direction. He checked out a large stuffed grizzly bear that stood guard over several more boxes. Percy followed him slowly. He knew what everything was in the attic already. So, unless they bumped into a murderer, Percy was fairly uninterested in inspecting every dusty bit of memorabilia that Tracy had collected over the years. Still, he didn’t want to anger the Commodore, nor did he want to lag too far behind, lest he be attacked, and so he stayed close to the enthusiastically

investigating Commodore.

The Commodore continued in this manner for nearly an hour, searching high and low in every corner of the attic.

Then, when the Commodore was busy inspecting a barrel filled with old umbrellas, something caught Percy's eye. On a small table near the grizzly bear they had noticed before, sat a small satchel. It was not covered in dust, and Percy recognized it instantly. It was black leather, and a bright silver clasp emblazoned with the Gold family crest fastened it shut on the front. An electric thrill ran through Percy's body. He bit his lip with excitement. The Commodore turned and looked at Percy. Percy shook his head to return to reality and peered back at the Commodore.

"No one here," the Commodore mouthed silently.

"Okay," Percy replied, containing secret happiness in his heart.

The Commodore glanced at a dusty, cobwebbed clock resting on a pile of boxes in the corner of the attic near the door. It read four-forty. "Does that clock work?" he whispered.

Percy nodded.

"Well, there's no sense in staying in here. Let's go down to the second floor and help the others search," he mouthed back to Percy.

Percy nodded again. His mind was far away. The Commodore started back down the stairs, favoring his left leg as he limped along.

"I was sure that those doors were closed before," Charlie insisted and walked over to the gaping doorway. "Oh, God," he exclaimed as he looked into Tracy's room.

"What is it? Is there somebody there?" Estelle whispered and hid behind Charlie's back. She held the revolver out from behind him and pointed it in the room.

"No, there's no body in the room."

"Well, if there's nobody in the room, why did you call out just now?" Estelle remarked and smacked Charlie in the back of the head with her free hand.

"I mean, there's no body in the room. Not nobody in the room. Well, I mean, nobody too."

"What are you talking about?"

"Tracy's body. It's gone. It's not on the bed. Look," Charlie pointed. Estelle looked into the

master bedroom and couldn't believe her eyes. Not only was Tracy's body no longer lying on the bed in gruesome pools of blood, but the gruesome pools of blood were gone too. The whole room was spotless. The ceiling, the walls, the floors were all completely devoid of any evidence that a bloody murder had been committed in the room earlier that day. The sheets on the bed were fresh and crisp. The pillows were fluffed and comfortable looking. The candlestick was missing.

"What the hell happened here?" Charlie asked quizzically.

"Beats me, sugar, but this has definitely taken a turn for the weird. Let's get out of here," she insisted and pulled Charlie close to her.

At that moment, a huge crash of thunder boomed just outside the window. The lights in the room flickered, then went out. The master bedroom was plunged into darkness. The only light came from the soft glow of the gas lamps in the main hall on the first floor.

Estelle screamed, and when she finally stopped, she could hear two other distinct screams echoing throughout the mansion's walls. She grabbed Charlie and ran with him down the stairs to the lounge.

"Eeeeeeahhh!" Silvia screamed and leapt from atop the Doctor.

"My! Wwwwas it that good?" he asked smarmily.

"The lights have gone out, Doctor!"

"Oh, have they? I didn't even nnnnnotice," the Doctor said and pushed his glasses back onto the bridge of his plump nose.

"I'm scared of the dark..." Silvia whispered and wrapped her thick arms around the Doctor.

"No nnnnneed to fear, my dear," he said and flicked his lighter. The immediate area around them was bathed in the warm glow of the lighter's flame. He lit a cigarette and puffed away contentedly. "See, no problems. We've got plenty of light here." The Doctor set the lighter on a nearby table so that it stood like a lighthouse beacon, illuminating them in a dancing flicker. "Now, where were we?" he growled and pulled her down onto him on the couch.

"I want to go back upstairs," she insisted. "It's scary down here with just that little light."

The Doctor sighed. "Now, now, there's nnnnnothing to be scared of, darling," he persisted.

"I want to go back upstairs," she said again. She looked like a three-year-old ready to break

into a temper-tantrum.

Recognizing that it was useless to try to convince her to stay, and feeling that the moment had passed, Doctor Payne got up from the couch, retrieved his lighter, and took Silvia by the hand. “All right, darling, let’s go back upstairs.”

Claudine screamed. She dropped her carving knife on the floor again, narrowly missing her own right foot as it fell and stabbed into the flooring. The lounge was not completely darkened when the power went out, thanks to the orange glow emanating from the fireplace. Jared put down the wok and the picnic basket and held Claudine.

“There, there,” he comforted her. “It’s nothing. The power went out, that’s all.”

“Oui, Monsieur. I just got a little of a surprised, that’s all,” she said, forgetting her grammar.

“All right, are there any candles in here, Claudine?”

“Oui. There should be some by the bar,” she remembered and bounced over to the counter behind the bar. She disappeared below the railing for a moment, then popped back up with a handful of jars of scented candles. Returning to Jared’s side, she handed them to him.

Jared looked at the five jars in his hands. They were made locally in Chesapeake City, and were actually the same brand of candles that he used to buy for his mother for Christmas when he was in high school. “Chocolate chip cookie. Apple cinnamon. Cherry. Bayberry. Banana nut bread. Man, I don’t think these are going to smell good together, but I guess smelly candles are better than no candles at all.” A tin of long matches stood on the mantle above the fireplace and Jared lit one, then lit all of the candles with it. After placing one candle on each of the end tables that were positioned near the couches and leaving one on the bar where he deposited the picnic basket, the lounge was sufficiently lit. “At least no one will trip on a couch in the dark,” Jared thought to himself.

There was an urgent knock at the door of the lounge.

“Let us in, Jared!” a woman’s voice cried out from the other side of the door.

“Who is it?”

“It’s Tilly! Now let me in!”

“All right, hold your horses,” he said and dashed to the door. As soon as he unlocked it, the

door swung open and Estelle and Charlie rushed in. They tripped on one of the closest couches in the dark and collapsed on the couch in a heap of arms and legs. Had he not accidentally dropped the poker during his fall, Charlie probably would have impaled Estelle with it when she landed on him. Charlie screamed as he noticed a heavy lump of steel pressing into his left temple.

Estelle unwrapped her arms from around Charlie's head and pulled the revolver away from his temple. "Sorry, Charlie," she said and put the gun on the table. She rubbed his forehead and kissed him hungrily.

Jared shook his head and began to close the door, but was pushed back as the Doctor and Silvia burst into the room. They managed to avoid colliding with anything and sat down on an empty couch. Their chests heaved with exhaustion. "It must have been a long run up the stairs from the basement," Jared thought with amusement.

Before he closed the door, Jared peered into the main hall. At the top of the stairs, he saw the Commodore and Percy. The Commodore saw Jared and signaled for him to hold the door. Slowly, he hobbled down the stairs, leaning heavily on the dark mahogany railing. Jared waited, and soon they were all safe inside the lounge. Jared locked the door behind him and joined the rest.

Chapter Seventeen

The Commodore looked around. Charlie's eyes were glazed over, and Estelle lay slumped over on his lap. After a few seconds, Charlie fell on top of her. Claudine and Jared were sitting propped against each other. Jared was already drooling on Claudine's shoulder. Percy looked at the Commodore with frightened eyes.

"Dear God, Commodore! You've all been poisoned! Don't worry I'll..." The Commodore didn't hear the last of Percy's sentence as he too fell to the ground in slumber. The last thing he saw was Percy standing over him.

Jared's left eye cracked open a hair and he moaned in pain. His head felt as if someone were jack hammering directly into his brain. With great effort, he opened his left eye all the way and winced. The sunlight that poured in through the lounge window amplified the pain in his skull. Swallowing hard, he opened his right eye, and moaned again. He felt something pushing on his stomach. Jared looked down his chest and saw Claudine's inert form nuzzled against his stomach in a fetal position. She stirred as he moved slightly and yawned.

On the next couch, Estelle and Charlie were also beginning to show signs of waking. Estelle gently removed Charlie's arm from across her breast and straightened her hair with her hands. She sat up and blinked.

"What happened?" she asked lazily.

"I think we were drugged," Jared replied. His words slurred together in languid tones.

"Mmm..." Silvia growled as she grasped her stomach and rolled off of the couch and onto the floor. She landed next to the Commodore. He shook his head and blinked back into consciousness.

"Bloody hell," he whimpered and clutched his forehead. "My head is killing me."

"You can say that again," Charlie moaned in agony, also holding his head.

"Wwwwwhat time is it? I feel like I've been asleep for days," the Doctor asked as he slowly righted his body on the couch. Jared looked at his wristwatch. It was seven-fifty.

"It's almost eight, Doctor."

"Good. Ttttime for breakfast."

The Commodore sat up suddenly. "Did you say it was eight, Price?"

"Yeah. Just about."

“Good God! The time-lock, Price! The door will open any minute. Everyone to the front door! We can’t let the killer escape!” the Commodore urged as he started to stand up. His knee buckled under his weight and he fell back down.

With sluggish movements, everyone slowly got to their feet. Estelle leaned back and stretched her arms over her head. Jared woozily shuffled to the door to the lounge.

“Price!”

“What?” Jared said as he turned around just in time to catch a heavy black wok in the chest. It clattered to the floor. “Oww...” he moaned.

“Sorry, Price,” the Commodore apologized and eased his weight onto his right leg. This time it held his weight and he walked over to the door and joined Jared. He held his Hutu war-club in his right hand. “No time to lose. To the fray, men!” The Commodore threw open the door and stepped into the main hall. Like zombies, the rest followed him slowly.

Percy stood before the front door. Upon hearing the door to the lounge open and the shuffling of feet exiting it, he turned and looked back. The Commodore stood in the center of the main hall and pointed the club at Percy.

“Percy, what’s the game, man?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Commodore.”

“Don’t be coy, you bastard!” the Commodore accused and stepped toward him with shaky steps.

“Ah ah, Commodore,” Percy warned as he reached into his right pocket and drew Estelle’s revolver. “I wouldn’t come any closer.”

“Hey, that’s my gun!” Estelle protested.

“Yes. Thank you very much, Madame Ellis. I must admit, it’s a much more threatening weapon than the cleaver the Commodore outfitted me with.” Percy pointed the revolver at Estelle.

“Whoa. Percy. Easy now,” she said and held her hands up.

“An excellent idea, Madame Ellis. Yes. Why doesn’t everyone put their hands in the air, just like Madame Ellis here? And you should put down those ridiculous pots and pans you’ve got too. I wouldn’t want you to drop one on your head and knock yourselves out.”

Hesitantly, everyone complied and raised their hands.

“Good.” Percy looked at his watch. In his left hand, he carried a small black leather satchel.

“What’s in the purse, Percy?” Jared asked.

“It’s not a purse. Though, I guess I could go on quite a shopping spree with the nine million dollars in it.”

“You found the money?” Silvia blurted out.

“Apparently, Madame Blackstone. Though I have the Commodore here to thank for it. If he hadn’t searched the attic so thoroughly, I might have missed it. Luckily for me, I didn’t.” Percy smiled an evil grin.

“Why, Percy?” the Commodore asked and began to lower his arms.

“Arms up, Commodore!” Percy shouted and pointed the revolver at the Commodore. The Commodore froze and thrust his arms into the air again. Percy chuckled. “Why not, Commodore? Why not steal a fortune? There’s no one here to stop me. As soon as this door opens in… four minutes, I’ll be gone, and you’ll all be left here. And, I wouldn’t call the police, if I were you. Or if you do, I would leave out the part about the two murders, or at least the two missing persons. They usually don’t react too well to confessions like that.”

“We could always just say that you did it,” Jared countered bravely.

“You’re one to talk, Master Price. After all, it was you who was covered in Madame Gold’s blood this morning, was it not?”

“It’s true!” Estelle shouted and pointed to Jared with her eyes. “We found blood all over the place in his bathroom. Isn’t that right, sweetie?”

“Uh, yeah,” Charlie added. “There was blood in the sink and the tub.”

“Guys, I don’t know how I got her blood all over me. But I didn’t kill her!”

“Price, how could you do such a thing?” the Commodore reprimanded. “We all trusted you.”

“I didn’t,” Estelle chimed in.

“Oh, Madame Ellis. Don’t be so hard on Master Price. He didn’t kill Madame Gold. I did,” Percy admitted and winked at Estelle.

Everyone stood in shocked silence.

“See, I told you I didn’t do it,” Jared insisted.

“Using your candlestick, I found it in the music room by the way, to smash in Madame Gold’s head and pouring blood all over you while you were sleepwalking down the halls was a nice touch, though, wasn’t it, Master Price? Actually, you really gave me a fright, until I realized you were only sleepwalking.”

“I was sleepwalking?”

“Yes. You almost walked right down the stairs, too. I didn’t want you to trip and tumble to your death, so I helped guide you back to your room.”

“And then you poured blood all over me to frame me for Tracy’s murder. Thanks for being such a pal, Percy,” Jared hissed.

“But why, Percy?” the Commodore pressed. “Why kill her?”

Percy’s face turned red in anger. “That woman! You know, Commodore, after her father died, I treated her as a daughter! I raised her! And what did it get me? Nothing! She treated me like a common servant! Well, I’d had enough of it! That woman can rot in hell for all I care!” he shouted and waved the revolver at all of them. Percy breathed heavily for a minute, then calmed down. He took a deep breath and relaxed.

“Why the cook then, Percy? What did he do to you?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea which one of you killed poor Zhang Shifu. I had nothing to do with that,” Percy said. He looked at his watch. “Well, it’s been great chatting with you all, but now I think I’ll be leaving. Don’t try to follow me, or I may have to use this nasty pistol.”

At that moment, the clocks in the house struck eight, and a buzz could be heard emanating from the front door.

“Ta ta,” Percy laughed and turned the handle. It turned easily and Percy swung the door wide open.

“Freeze! Cecil County P.D.!” the two uniformed police officers shouted from the front porch. The female officer leveled her revolver at Percy and screamed at him.

“Drop it! Drop the weapon!”

Percy was aghast. In a split second, he fired the two-barreled pistol at the police officer. At that distance, he couldn’t miss. The two bullets caught her right in the chest and sent her flying

backward off the porch and onto the walkway leading up to the mansion. The rotund second officer rushed at Percy with a baton, but somehow Percy managed to avoid his grasp, jumped down from the porch, and began running for Madame Gold's Rolls Royce parked in the driveway.

With lightning quick instincts, the Commodore picked up his war-club and ran to the front door. He sighted Percy at nearly 20 meters and hurled the mighty club through the air.

It thudded heavily on the back of Percy's head and dropped him instantly. Everyone rushed through the portal and crowded on the front porch. The Doctor was at the downed officer's side within seconds, and Jared and Charlie ran over to Percy's unconscious body. They dragged him over to the other police officer and dumped him on the ground unceremoniously.

"Tracy?" Estelle gasped as she looked at the face of the shot police officer. The woman officer coughed heavily and sputtered back to life.

"Oh my God! It hurts!" Tracy moaned and began rolling on the ground. The Doctor was amazed. He lit a cigarette and puffed away.

"Is that you, Madame Gold?" Claudine asked in shock.

"Oh God! Get it off me! It's burning my chest!" Tracy cried out and began shucking off her blouse. Underneath was a bulletproof vest. The two bullets that Percy had fired were lumped right over her left breast. Claudine bent down, helped Tracy unsnap the fasteners on the vest, and pulled it over her head. "Oh... Let's not do that again," she moaned and collapsed back on the walkway.

"What the hell is going on?" Charlie asked. "Aren't you dead, Tracy?"

She breathed heavily for a moment, then sat up. "Almost, Charlie. Not quite. Wow! What a rush!" Vigor pumped through her veins as the adrenaline coursed through her body. Slowly, she stood up. "Say, who got Percy?"

"I did, Miss Gold," the Commodore smiled.

"Hey, good job. The Queen would be proud." The Commodore blushed. "Zhang Shifu, are you okay?"

The other police officer finished putting handcuffs on Percy and nodded. "I'm fine, Madame Gold." Everyone looked at the second officer and was doubly confused. It was indeed the cook.

"Wait! You're alive, too?" Charlie scratched his head.

"He most certainly is, Charles," Tracy quipped.

“But how? We saw you, and him, dead. Just yesterday!”

“I know, isn’t it great? I really need to thank the guys over at the morgue for lending me those two dead bodies. They really did the trick. After I had them disguised, you guys couldn’t even tell the difference. Yes!” she squealed with delight. “Of course, I won’t get my deposit back on the girl. This swine over here,” she said pointing to Percy, “had the nerve to mess her all up with that damned candlestick. Can you believe him? He tried to kill me! It’s a good thing I had already switched places with the body. Otherwise, I’d be the bloody mess.”

“So you did fake your own death,” Jared inquired.

“Claudine, did you tell him?”

“Sorry, Madame. I thought you were dead.”

“Well, I guess it’s no big deal now. Yes, Jared. I faked my own death. I really wanted to give you all something juicy to write about this weekend.”

“And the cook?”

“Hey, two murders are better than one, right? Especially when you have no idea who did it, or how they did it, right? Even Percy was befuddled with Zhang Shifu’s death.”

“And the money?”

“Greed makes the world go round, Silvia. I thought if I cleaned out my safe and hid the money in the house, it would add a little extra flavor to the mystery. Don’t worry. All of your release forms are safe and sound. Oh, I almost forgot,” Tracy said as she reached for the radio on her utility belt. “Clarence, Floyd? We’re all good here. Wanna come by and pick up Percy? He’s out cold.” She clicked off the radio.

A brown and white Cecil County police car rolled up the driveway and parked next to them. Two well-muscled officers hopped out and placed Percy in the back seat.

“Your money, Miss Gold,” one said as he held out the black satchel that Percy had been clutching in his hands.

“Thanks, Floyd. And tell the chief I’ll have those bodies back to him by this afternoon.”

“Sure thing, Miss Gold.” The two police officers got back in the car and drove away.

Everyone crowded around Tracy in a tight circle. They all stood in silence. Each one of them was lost in thought about the strange turn of events that they had just witnessed. Their minds were

swimming with confusion, when suddenly Tracy broke their concentration.

“All right, everyone,” she said as she reached into a bag and produced a ream of loose-leaf paper and a handful of pens, “let’s all sit down on the lawn here and write a real murder mystery! Ready? Go!”

The End

Chapter Sixteen

The Commodore didn't miss a beat, and was already standing in the center of the ring of couches before Jared could return and sit down.

"Please sit down, Price," he instructed and pointed with his war-club to an empty seat near Percy. Jared sat next to Claudine instead. "Well, it would appear," the Commodore began again, "that we were all unsuccessful in our search for the killer."

"Yeah, he's so damn elusive," Estelle hissed with venomous eyes at Jared.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Jared asked defensively.

"Nothing. Nothing," she replied and picked up the revolver from the table.

"Miss Ellis, let's not go through this again. We've already decided that Price isn't the killer," the Commodore insisted as he interrupted the brewing argument.

"I said it was nothing," Estelle insisted innocently. "So, what now?" she continued, trying to change the subject.

"Well, our original plan was to recon the kitchen and get some supplies for dinner. But, the power outage has made that too dangerous. The killer could be lurking in every shadow between here and there, now, and a few candles won't give us enough light."

"I smell food," Silvia piped in and began sniffing the air.

"Yeah, we brought some food back from the kitchen with us," Jared added and pointed to the bar. "It's cold, but at least it's something."

Silvia jumped up and rushed to the bar. Percy got up from his couch and joined her.

"Madame Blackstone, please allow me to serve you all. Madame Gold may no longer be with us, but I'm still in charge of the mansion and of keeping you all well served. I insist." Percy removed a taco from Silvia's hand and placed it back on the tray in the picnic basket.

"Okay," she said dejectedly and walked back to the couch.

"Bravo Zulu, Price! You've saved the day. And, thank you very much, Percy, for volunteering to dish out the mess," the Commodore boomed.

"Are you all right, Commodore? Your right leg looks pretty swollen." The Doctor rose from his couch and examined his knee. He directed the Commodore to the couch and had him roll up his pantleg. The knee was purple and bruised.

“How ddddddid this happen?” the Doctor asked.

“Yes, well, we ran into a bit of trouble in the attic, but unfortunately, Percy and I failed to turn up anything in our search. Did any of you find anything interesting in your searches?”

“We found something strange,” Charlie noted. “Well, actually we didn’t find something, which was strange.”

“Well, did you find something, or didn’t you?” the Commodore asked. He winced as the Doctor pressed on his kneecap.

Charlie saw where this was going, and decided to avoid the confusion altogether. “Tracy’s body was missing from her room. We saw that the door to her room was open, and when we investigated, we found that her body was gone. Not only that, but the whole room had been cleaned and redecorated. It was like nothing had ever happened there,” he explained.

“Intriguing. I don’t know what to make of it, Nash. This killer is a dastardly fellow, whose only trademark seems to be confusion. First killing Miss Gold twice, then absconding with her body and redecorating the room. Positively incomprehensible.”

“We also had a similar experience,” Jared chimed in.

“You didn’t find Miss Gold’s body, also, Price?” the Commodore questioned.

“No, we didn’t find Zhang Shifu’s body when we searched the kitchen. The kitchen had been cleaned up, too. No trace of the body or any blood at all.”

“Where could the murderer be hiding? With two dead bodies, no less? We’ve searched the whole bloody house,” the Commodore shook his fist in anger.

Everyone looked at each other. Each group, except the Commodore and Percy, had done such a poor job searching that the killer could have easily evaded their searches. They all read as much in their eyes.

“We didn’t find anything either, Commodore,” the Doctor said and lit another cigarette. At that time, everyone noticed that Silvia was now wearing a large green dress, and that the Doctor’s pants were buttoned, but not zipped.

“I’m sure you didn’t find anything, Freddy. I bet you were looking real hard,” Estelle smirked and slouched down in her couch. She put her hand, with the revolver, on Charlie’s lap.

“And I suppose that no one found the money, either,” the Commodore sighed.

Percy walked around to the couches with a serving tray held in both his hands. “Everyone, please take a plate,” he instructed. With ravenous hands, everyone did as instructed and immediately tried to appease their famished stomachs. By the time Percy had given the last plate to Claudine and walked back over to the bar to deposit the tray, Silvia had already finished her taco, burrito, fajita, Spanish rice, and refried beans and was licking the plate to get the last of the guacamole off of it.

“Is there any more, Percy?” she asked in a tiny voice.

“Yes, of course, Madame,” he replied and returned to her with a plate of food that he had prepared but left on the bar. She dug in eagerly and soon finished that plate too.

“Aren’t you going to eat something, Percy?” Charlie asked in between bites of burrito.

Percy looked wistfully at the second, now empty, plate that sat on Silvia’s lap and smiled. “I’ll do without, Master Nash. I’m not very hungry, actually.”

Everyone looked at Silvia, but she didn’t notice.

“Here, Percy, you can have some of mine. I don’t really like burritos anyway,” Estelle volunteered and held out her plate.

“Thank you, Madame Ellis. Please, you finish, and I’ll just have some of the burrito later. I’m really not too hungry at the moment.”

“Okay,” she replied and went back to eating.

“So, what’s our plan now, Commodore?”

“I suggest that we stay here in the safety of the lounge until the power comes back on. Then when it comes back, we’ll search the house again. I would also suggest that each group search the same floor that they searched before, since they will be more familiar with the layout.”

The Doctor nodded in agreement. “Well, I hope the pppppower stays out for at least an hour or two, I’m a little sleepy.” With heavy eyelids, Doctor Payne looked to his right. Silvia was snoring soundly on the couch next to him. “I guess Silvia was...” He didn’t finish his sentence before his head fell back and hit the cushion of the couch.

The Commodore looked around. Charlie’s eyes were glazed over, and Estelle lay slumped over on his lap. After a few seconds, Charlie fell on top of her. Jared and Claudine were sitting propped against each other. Jared was already drooling on Claudine’s shoulder. Percy looked at the Commodore with frightened eyes.

“Dear God, Commodore! You’ve all been poisoned! Don’t worry I’ll...” The Commodore didn’t hear the last of Percy’s sentence as he too fell to the ground in slumber. The last thing he saw was Percy standing over him.

The Commodore’s eyes fluttered lazily. Percy stood over him waving a wet towel. Commodore Griffon yawned, then sat up.

“Percy, what happened, man?”

“I don’t know exactly, Commodore. The food must have been drugged. You’ve all been asleep for hours. I kept the door locked and waited here to protect you all.”

“Good job, Percy.”

Charlie and the Doctor began stirring on their couches. Charlie yawned deeply and slowly removed his hand from Estelle’s breast. As she sensed the movement, she began to wake up too.

“What happened?” she asked with a groggy mind.

“Drugged, Miss Ellis. We were drugged. Luckily, Percy hadn’t yet eaten anything and protected us while we slumbered.”

“Aww, thanks Percy baby,” she remarked slowly.

Jared and Claudine awoke and shook the sleep from their heads. Finally, Silvia opened her eyes and grinned.

“What a nice nap,” she sighed. “I’m hungry.”

The Commodore looked at the clock on the mantle. It read eight-ten. He was confused.

“Percy, is that eight in the evening, or eight in the morning?”

“It’s eight in the morning, Commodore.”

“Good lord! To the hallway, everyone!” the Commodore boomed and jumped up. His knee buckled under the pressure of his weight and he fell down again.

“Commodore!”

“I’m all right. Price! Nash! To the door! Hurry!” He stood again, and steadied himself on the back of the couch near him. Percy slung his arm around the Commodore’s shoulder to help him stand. In a tired mob, the eight of them sloshed over to the door to the lounge. Charlie opened the door.

To their left, they all saw the front door standing wide open. Daylight poured in and shone brightly on the parquet floor of the foyer. Birds chirped outside. The Commodore limped over to the doorway with Percy's help. There was no sign of the killer anywhere. He sighed and hung his head in shame.

“We've failed you, your Majesty,” he said with remorse. “Another scoundrel has been loosed upon the world. He has slipped through our fingers.” The Commodore saluted the sun rising in the sky and walked back to the group.

“So what do we do know?”

That's how the story could have ended...

But it didn't end that way...

Instead, it ended like this...