

“All Things Sublime”

A John Hasard Story

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Chapter 1

“Brringg”

“Brringg”

“Christ, not already” I thought. My hand flung out across my body as I slammed the ‘alarm off’ lever. “I just fell asleep!” Of course, the ringing continued.

“Brringg”

It wasn't the alarm, Hasard, you horse's ass. It's the damn phone. I groped around in the darkness to grab the receiver, cursing as I fumbled with it while I knocked a glass off the nightstand next to it. The glass hit the floor but luckily didn't break as it fell on the throw rug. I finally grabbed the receiver and picked it up.

“Yeah?”

“Hasard, that you?”

I didn't recognize the voice. Of course, I had no desire to at this hour, otherwise I would rap the caller in the mouth the next time I saw them.

“Who do you think it is, Damon Runyan? Who's this and it better be good”

By now I was rubbing my eyes moving backward to rest my back on the headboard.

“Hasard. There's another one, just like the one you're working on, found in an alley behind the diner on Main and Northrup. That's all I can say”

The next thing I heard was the click of a hung up phone. I still had no idea who it was but I didn't care at the moment. I shook my head and got up out of bed. I squinted my eyes at my poor abused alarm clock; the phosphorescent hands were in the 3:34 position. Well, there goes my beauty sleep. I stumbled to the bathroom while I slapped my face with an open palm. Got to wake up now. After a quick splash of water on my face, a swig of mouthwash, and a wet comb through my hair I re-entered the bedroom. As I pulled up my trousers and yanked the suspenders in place I looked over towards the bed. After all these years I still don't sleep on that side. “Honey, I've gotta go, you understand.” How many times did I tell her that? Of course, now all that's left is just an empty space in the big bed and the throw rug.

I made my way out into the foyer, grabbed my hat and coat and went out the door.

Chapter 2

“Here, keep the change” I threw the driver a deuce and made my way to the scene before I could hear his halfhearted utterance of thanks. Two bits wasn't enough of a tip to the clown, after all, it was so difficult to navigate three in the morning traffic with a silent passenger. Now, I'm not saying that his job doesn't stink running the graveyard shift, of course it does, but cut me some slack.

As I got out you had to be comatose to not notice the activity. Of course, there they were, Buffalo's

finest, milling around like it was a church festival. In addition, the neighbors and late night diner customers were milling around trying to get a glimpse of what was behind the police barricades. You'd think that they never seen a homicide before.

I struck a match and lit a Lucky Strike as I approached the taped off crime scene.

“All right, everybody, clear out. Nothing to see here!” the young cop bellowed. He nervously motioned to the growing audience in his fresh pressed blues. Of course, they definitely aren't going to be happy to see me. I approached the tape as the officer went forward to stop me.

“Hey! Back up mac! Didn't you hear me?”

“Yeah, I heard you. In fact, everyone East of the Mississippi heard you. And you wonder why you've got a circus starting here. Now, let me by.”

“Who the hell do you think you are!?”

Just before I opened my mouth with another great witticism, and proceed to throw my dwindling cigarette onto his shoes, my old friend Jones showed up next to the young cop. He looked better than I felt but you could tell he was wearing out. His normally crisp overcoat was showing signs of rumpiness and his tie was loosened.

“Hasard, what the heck are you doing here?” He spoke to me with such love it almost made me feel warm inside.

“What can I say, Jones? I missed you. I couldn't sleep so I decided to see what my old pal was doing at three in the morning.”

Jones smirked at me nastily and pressed me. Spare me the horse manure. What's up?”

“What do you think? I'm on a case.”

“Case? What case? This just happened.”

“What I said, a case. You know, the people who don't trust you, call on guys like me.”

“Me? Whattya mean, me?” I loved getting under his collar because if there was one thing that Jones didn't like it was private dicks like me. As far as he was concerned all we did was impede his work.

“You know, your....kind.”

“Kind?” He clearly hated this line of discussion which made me use it more. “You're a real piece of work Hasard.”

“So I hear. Now, are you going to let me look at the crime scene? See, the nice folks that gave me an advance lost their baby boy a week ago and rumor has it that this one has a similar M.O.”

The younger cop moved to Jones's right, with his hand resting on top of his gat. I caught him out of the corner of my eye.

“Lighten up there, Zippy. Jones and I are old friends.”

Jones motioned to the younger man, “S'alright. I hate to admit it but he's ok.”

I smiled at Jones, “Aw, shucks, If I didn't know any better I'd say you cared.”

“Don't push you luck Hasard, now, make it quick!”

I walked around the barricade and didn't have to go far. There he was, what was left of him that is. Poor kid looked to be in his early to mid twenties. Of course, to me, all kids looked young. Obviously somebody took offense to either his looks or behavior. The way the side of his head is bashed in like a ripe melon definitely shows it wasn't an accident of affection. As I examined the body I noticed the kid was either a student or, perhaps, a little well to do. Of course, that ain't hard to ascertain when you notice the monogrammed button collar shirt and sport coat. Then, I saw it, a slight bulge on the right side of the coat. Nah, it couldn't be. How the hell did Jones miss this? I looked towards the barricades and I was in luck. I palmed the notebook and slipped it into my pants pocket. I took one more look at the mess and got up and walked towards Jones and zippy.

“Okay, thanks Jones!”

“You happy now Hasard?”

I scowled at Jones, “Happy? Yeah, I get REAL happy when I see a kid who won't live to screw up his life like you and I did!”

“Hey! Take it easy there, I didn't mean nothin' by it...”

“Yeah, yeah. I know. Sore subject, you know that.”

I took a deep breath and recomposed my charm. “Any scoop on the kid back there?”

“Nah, just another kid, probably a grad student like the other one.”

“Oh, so you do think it's related to the other one?”

“Yes and no. You know how it is Hasard, you go with hunches sometimes.”

“Yeah, I do know. Well, thanks.”

I figured this was as good a time as any to exit. As I walked away I put my hand in my pocket and patted the pad.

“Hey, Hasard! You gonna let me in on your case?” Jones yelled after me.

“Time'll tell Jones. Thanks again, you're one of the best of your kind!”

I didn't look back but I knew Jones was shaking his head.

Jones muttered under his breath, "Again with the 'kind'."

I figured I would get under his skin one last time, I yelled back, "You know, my favorite kind of ...'mick'."

I'd had enough, I glanced at my watch and noticed it nearly five a.m. "Well, too late to go home, I'd never get back up if I hit the bed, so might as well just go in to the shop."

I started walking in the direction of my office. It was going to be a long day ahead.

Chapter 3

It seemed like my eyes had just closed when I was awoken by the ringing of the front door as it opened. "Uh... I'll be right with you!" I yelled out as I lifted my head from the back of my chair. I didn't even have time to take my feet off the desk when I heard Stella's voice.

Stella was easy on the eyes with an hourglass figure and gams that go on forever, but there was nobody I trusted more than Stella, the kid was straight honest and as tough as a cheap deli steak in Brooklyn. She kept me in line and made sure I knew it when I did cross that line.

Stella was my late partner Frank's wife . Of course, I'm sure that after Frank's mishap she entertained thoughts of getting out, but, to her credit, she stayed. Although, I can't help but keep thinking that part of the reason was out of loyalty to Frank and the firm. Even though everything she had been through she still stuck with me."

"It's just me, Johnny! Wow, you're here early! The mice kick you out of your place?"

"Yeah, they said they were building you a new hatbox doll!"

"No, seriously, Johnny. What's up?" she peered into my office.

"Got an anonymous call at three this morning. Went to the scene, and, to be honest, something doesn't feel right."

"Oh, boy. Nose twitchin' , huh? Can I get you a cup of joe?"

"Ahh... you're an angel. Now I know why Frank kept you around."

Stella appeared back in the doorway with two hot mugs of coffee and a look on her face as though she was ready to throw both of them at me.

"Kept me around? Let me tell you something, you rotten lout!" I loved it when I pressed her buttons, it made her brown eyes literally glow. "If it wasn't for me, you two mooks would have been cleaning the windows on the Empire State Building instead of sniffing on the ground for clues like a couple of hounds!" She placed my mug between my feet on the top of the desk as she took a seat on the far edge. I moved my feet off the desk and chuckled.

“You got a point there, kid.” I reached into my pocket and pulled out the notebook I had glommed from the body.

“Here, what do you think of this?”

I tossed the notebook in Stella's direction. She caught it with her nicely manicured hand.

“Gee, I don't know, Johnny. What's this? A pad of paper? I'm just a dumb broad, remember?”

I sighed audibly at her. “Well, let's suppose you aren't so dumb. Take a look at the last page, what do you think it means?”

Her pretty eyes traveled to the writing on the page and she started to read aloud in that great voice of hers.

“Object all sublime, let the punishment fit the crime. I don't know, sounds nice though, like a poem.”

I leaned forward in impatience and took a swig of my coffee.

“Yeah, I get it, but what's it mean?”

Stella looked off into space, thinking hard underneath that pretty coiffed head of hers.

“I mean, now that I hear it, it almost sounds like a play that Frank took me to.”

I leaned back in my chair and smirked.

“You're kiddin' me right? Frank and a play? What was it? The Rockettes on ice?”

Stella's eyes turned icy.

“Ha, ha. Let me tell you something, quacker. Frank had quite an appreciation for the theater!”

“If you say so, doll.”

Stella furrowed her brow at me. “Look, I know what it is. I just can't place it.”

I'd had enough of this game, besides if I continued I was going to feel Stella's right cross. And I've felt that before and it wasn't pleasant. I got up and went to the coat rack to grab my hat and overcoat.

“Stell, be an angel and call around to see if anyone else has heard about this. You know, ear to the street and that type of thing.”

I touched Stella's shoulder as I proceeded out.

Stella got up from her perch on my desk and followed me out to the front of the building.

“Yeah, I know, cackle with my fellow hens and see if I come up with anything, right? Isn't that what

you mean?"

I laughed out loud and opened the door. "I'll check in with you in a little bit!"

I heard Stella's venom as the door shut. "Oh, joy. I'll be waiting with bated breath!"

I smiled and laughed out loud as I made my way down the street.

Chapter 4

I spotted my favorite shoe shine spot and sat down in the chair.

"I'll be with you in a sec.. Just have to finish this gent's shoes" the shoe shiner said without looking up. Without missing a beat he continued. "Wait, I'd recognize that well-worn pair of Florsheims anywhere! Just be a second my good man!"

I leaned back in the chair as best possible, "Take your time, Theo. I'm just enjoying the scenery." Yeah, there was nothing like a busy city street in the middle of a workday. The gals were dressed in their business best hustling down the streets in their high-lift stilettos as if they were born in them. Yep, there was somethin' to be said about a gal's business best. Theo said his goodbyes to his previous customer, pocketed his payment and turned his stool to me.

"Ah, Mr. Hasard. Now my total attention is on you. Can I offer you the usual?"

I chuckled. If you didn't know him, you'd think that Theo was a milksop who fell down on his luck to shine shoes to scratch out a living. That couldn't be further from the truth. In fact, Theodore Lionel Washington III, was one of the smartest men I had ever met. And, believe me; I've met a lot over the course of my life. He looked to be around in his fifties and still had a full head of black hair, but, I had a suspicion he was older than that. He had that lean, wiry build of most colored men who worked and lived around here. Accompanying his expanded vocabulary was his knowledge of the goings on in this city. If you were to say that someone truly had their ear to the street, it was Theodore.

"Sure, Theo, sure. So, how's your hearing? Still OK after all these years?"

He hated it when I called him Theo but he didn't look up as he proceeded to dab polish on my shoes.

"Well, thank you for asking Mr. Hasard. My hearing is actually quite well recently. Is there a particular subject you have in mind that you wish to entertain intercourse over?"

I liked the guy, but I wanted to speed up this conversation. I took a pin and leaned down to place it in Theo's breast pocket. I continued.

"You know, dead kids, notes, young men who shouldn't meet their maker so quickly..."

"Ah, a subject that holds much disapprobation for your well-being." Theo retorted calmly. Interest

I was starting to feel very impatient, enough, Theo. "Yeah, yeah..."

"I beg your amnesty my good man. I may have heard something, but... it's very faint and coming in

slowly.”

I palmed another fin and stuffed into Theo's breast pocket to join the previous one I had deposited.
“Is it getting clearer now?”

Theo began to shine my shoes vigorously.

“Actually, your shoe is shining quite brightly now! And I am beginning to hear at a finer audible resonance than I was able to prior.”

I shook my head in surrender to his oratory.

“Yeah, so Swami, anything?”

“Well, I hear that the recent unfortunate homicides all have a literary bend to them. In fact, I have heard that conjecture has it the first loss scene contained a note from *Richard III*.”

I leaned forward slightly.

“Who the heck is Richard the Third? You're the only third of anything that I know of!”
Theo ignored my outburst and continued.

“It is an intellectual missive from the great William Shakespeare, my dime pulp reading fellow. The quote that was discovered at the scene was “So wise so young, they say do never live long.”
I grabbed a note pad out of my pocket and wrote down the statement. I then realized something.

“Wait, so you're telling me that that the first kid, my client's son, had a note on him too?!”

“Why, Mr. Hasard, am I to presume, by your animated outburst, that the most recent unfortunate also had a note on him?”

“Yeah, only it didn't make it to the M.E.s office, it sort of fell off the body.”

Theo grinned. “I see. And, may I inquire? What did this note consist of?”

I sagged in my seat resignedly now.

“I don't know, some crap about sublime and crime, or somethin' like that.”

Theo sat back on his stool. “Well, you have me there, Mr. Hasard. However, I may know of an individual who may be able to fill in this blank on the crossword.”

“And, who's that, Theo? Dick Tracy?”

I started to get up, I was mad at myself for not knowing this new information.

“Well, the young men all attended graduate school under the tutelage of a Professor O'Fletcher who is stationed at the University's main Library. In addition, both young men are, I mean, were, employed at the University at Buffalo's Library.”

I handed Theo a sawbuck for his troubles and made my way off of the stand.

“Thanks, Theo. I think I'll pay this professor a visit.”

Theo started straightening up his station.

“You're very welcome my loutish fellow! Please do not hesitate to employ my services again if your shoes appear to lose their luster soon.”

“Yeah, you can depend on that. Of course, sometimes I think that I'd be better off with a new pair of shoes, I know it'd be cheaper for me!”

“Ah, perhaps. However, I could determine that they would not shine quite as brightly.”

I tipped my hat in the direction of Theo and decided to go visit the library, even though I knew my card was expired.

Chapter 5

As I left Theo my mind was racing, have I found a common thread in the two murders? How the hell was I to know? What did I think, that divine providence was going to provide me with answers? One thing is certain; I've got to find this professor, myself. Looking down the street I realized that the library was a few too many blocks than I cared to walk. I stuck out my best two fingers and hailed down the first taxi I saw approaching.

Holy Cow! I barely jumped up on the curb as the cab came careening towards me. Just as I got my newly polished shoes up on the walk the yellow cab screeched to a halt. I looked down at my feet to make sure they were still there and opened the rear door.

“Where to Mac?” the voice came from the front seat as though it was excited to drive me.

“University Library, please” As soon as I answered I was thrown into the rear seat back as the cabbie went from stop to go with a quick depression of his foot. As I attempted to regain my equilibrium I took a look at the Cabbie's I.D. Photo. No wonder he drove like a maniac, The I.D. photo showed me a gal! And, quite a looker if I do say so! As I held on for Mama Hasard's favorite son's life I decided to strike up a conversation hoping that I could distract her enough to slow her down so I don't end up like so much trash on the street.

“So, what's a good lookin' number like you doin' bein' a hack?”

As I noticed the long hair hanging out of her cap I swore she took notice of my question as she hit the turn going ninety. Suddenly my driver turned her head fully around to address me. Great, I thought, while I didn't mind looking at that pretty face I couldn't help but think that we were going to be wrapped around a pole or something soon.

“Hey, Joe. A gal's gotta earn a livin'” she answered curtly. Then just as quickly she added, “sides, there's worse ways to earn a buck. Right?” With that I heard the roar of the engine as she punched the accelerator.

I definitely wasn't going to argue with her. All I wanted her to do now was to get her eyes back on the road!

“Yeah, you're right about that kid!” as I hung on to the door handle as she took the turn and returned her eyes to the road.

No sooner did I get that out of my mouth then the cab came screeching to a halt. I got out of the cab and threw her a fin for the ride. I figured I'd better hightail it out before she gave me a permanent new walk.

“Hey, Mac!”

I turned as quickly as I had decided to run.

“Yeah, kid?”

“Here” she threw her business card at me. “If you need another ride or want to buy a working gal a drink sometime, look me up. Of course, that last part is off-duty!”

As she said that I took a good look at her. Underneath the uniform and cap she was a looker, that's for sure.

“Be careful what you wish for kid! I may take you up on that!” I yelled to her. With that she tipped her cap and sped off. As I turned around I saw the rise of the library and decided that this was it. You don't get answers wishing in the bottom of an empty glass after all.

Chapter 6

I entered the library as though I was entering a chapel. Both institutions haven't seen my like in a long time. Perhaps too long. I looked around with awe and proceeded to take off my hat. I mean, where else but in a federally funded building are you going to see ceilings that go up to the heavens and ornate decorations such as these? Heck, if it was my money you'd probably see a bunch of book shelves and a single table. I approached the front desk and saw something that I liked.

“Um, good morning, miss.” I tipped my hat in my best gentleman manner.

The attractive blond looked up and put down her pen.

“Well, good morning, sir. How may I help you?”

I was frozen, as though I just stared at Medusa. Her smile was so radiant I thought I was staring at 12 karat diamond.

“Uh, I'm looking for a professor that works here. I think...” I grabbed my notepad out of my breast pocket. “O'Fletcher?”

The goddess grinned with recognition as she looked me up and down over her glasses. “Oh, Professor O'Fletcher! Of course! His office is on the third floor!”

“Three floors?” I tore my eyes away from her pretty face and looked towards the staircase.

“Actually, sir, there are seven floors here, but, who's counting? She grinned mischievously at me and returned her gaze towards the papers on the desk.

“Really, well, that's a lot of books, isn't it”

“Well, they sure aren't grapefruits silly. The professor's office is the fourth door on the right.”

“Thanks kid, see ya' round.”

I turned to start up the stairs. That pretty voice made me pause on a step.

“That's not a bad idea, let me know when you want a tour of the floors!” She called to me as I walked over to the stairs.

Chapter 7

As I made it to the third landing I turned right, there, on the door was the nameplate “O'Fletcher” This must be it, I thought.

I rapped on the door and noticing that it was ajar, took a peek inside.

“Professor?” I called out.

“Harrumph, who is it?” the voice came from within the office. Without even seeing the guy I had a feeling that he was a stereotype of every professor I had ever met. An office full of books and papers strewn about in no particular order except to himself. He probably also had patches on his jacket elbows and a pipe in his pocket. I braced myself for the snob.

“John Hasard, P.I. Could I bother you for a minute?”

The birds in San Tropez could hear his bothered sigh.

“Well, I am rather busy at the moment, you understand, I AM a professor after all. But,” the pause was far from pregnant, “I will acquiesce to see you briefly.”

You have no idea how badly I wanted to answer with 'please just stuff it your majesty' but Mama Hasard's favorite and only boy held his tongue. I opened the door fully and entered his office.

“Thanks for seeing me prof.” I dropped my card on his desk as I made my way in.

I looked around as I entered, yep, just as I thought, papers and books thrown about all over tables and chairs in a haphazard manner, where only the office's owner knows where everything is. Funny, maybe the professor and I aren't so different. At the one table I noticed a young kid, about twenty or so.

“Welcome, what can I do for you sir?”

I looked the professor up and down. Yep, just as I thought. Of course, the pocket watch is a nice touch. I held out my hand to shake his.

“Professor, as I said before, I’m John Hasard, P.I. I’ve been retained by Mr. and Mrs. Vanderwald to investigate the murder of their son. I was wondering if I could trouble you with a few questions.”
“Ah, young Mr. Vanderwald. Such a pity. Good student, sharp mind.”

So, maybe I was getting somewhere.

“So, you did know him. How about the latest victim, McGill?”

I noticed out of the corner of my eye as I spoke McGill’s name that kid at the table became animated. I pretended that I didn’t notice and proceeded with the prof.

O’Fletcher shook his head in disbelief or sorrow, I couldn’t tell with these professor types.

“McGill also?” He took a deep breath.

“Well, this is quite a turn. He was an associate of young Vanderwald and of Mr. Hastings here.” The professor pointed to the squirming otter at the table.

I looked the kid up and down as I spoke to the professor.

“So, any reason why these guys were killed? Frat house prank or sorority revenge?” of course, I didn’t know squat about their type of life but I figured if you can’t get answers, irritate them till they either kick you out or slip.

“What are you talking about?! We don’t belong to a Frat house! We’re grad students!”

Ha, got to the kid.

“Whoa, take it easy there, Buzzy. I’m just trying to get some info to help. Now, can you think of anyone who would want to do this to your pals?”

The kid grabbed his head in anguish before he spoke.

“Look, do I really have to do this now? I’m, I’m... not thinking too straight.”

I smirked at the kid, “Why? Had a bad night with a baseball bat that you used on him?”

The next thing that I knew, the kid flew up from his chair like he had just been ejected from a side show cannon.

“Now look here, whoever you are!” He shook his bony finger at me, “Two of my best friends are dead! How do you think I feel?”

The professor made a move like the ref at Louis vs. Conn and got between the kid and I.

“Harrumph... Now, all right Bobby, excuse yourself to your home to compose yourself. Hasard, that is your name, isn't it? Please refrain from upsetting young Mr. Hastings until a later date, if you must at all!”

The prof turned his attention directly to me as though he was chastising a spitballer in his class. “I will be more than accommodating to your requests for the present.”

Turning his head to the kid he issued a final proclamation.

“Hastings, make haste and go!”

“Yeah, that’s one way to live up to your name, kid!”

I watched as the skinny kid made his way out. It's funny, I never noticed before but he was like a junior Professor, same neat hair, tweed jacket and pressed slacks. Hmm, definitely not the attire of a starving student. I made a mental note of that as he made his way out the door. After the kid was out of earshot I turned back to the professor who had wisely made his way to the front of his desk.

“Well, that didn't help much. I'm sorry I upset the kid, must have had some sour milk with his Wheaties this morning. The kid always that jumpy?”

The professor sighed at me resignedly as though he recited the same passage for the fifth time to me.

“Your lack of social grace betrays your well polished shoes.” he drawled as his eyes went from my shoes to my face. “Now, is there anything else I can assist you in today, my 'cough' good man?”

I chuckled at his attempt to bemuse me just like I used to do to old Mrs. Granderson in old Millard Fillmore Grade School.

“Well, actually, now that you mention it, I came to see you about a related matter. The added bonus was me finding out about Mr. Hastings associates.”

I reached into my breast pocket and pulled out my handy notepad.

“Here, what do you make of this?” I handed my notepad to him opened to the particular page. “These make any sense to you Prof?”

O’Fletcher grabbed my note pad as he gave me a dismissive look. I noticed that the look disappeared as he read it.

“Harrumph, well, yes. One of these is a stanza from Shakespeare's brilliant missive, *Richard III*.” He adjusted his glasses and proceeded. “The other is from a nasty little Operetta, *The Mikado*, by Gilbert and Sullivan. Of course, I realize that these are probably foreign titles to someone in your manner.” I smirked and shook my head at the know-it-all.

“Yeah, OK. That's me, Mr. Bungle. Now, what do you think it means?”

“Well, that depends upon which context that you found these excerpts.”

“Ok, I'll let you in on the case. These were left on the bodies of the two young victims that I mentioned prior. Both were left on notes to be found on the bodies.”

The professor actually showed some concern now.

“Harrumph... you mean... do you mean to imply that these are evidence?”

It was my turn to act high faluting:

“Yep, that's what I'm saying.”

“Well, isn't this highly irregular when it comes to police work?”

“Prof, I never said I was a copper.” I took a breath and continued. “Let's just say that I'm borrowing these because our highly esteemed professionals in the law enforcement profession don't seem to deem that they are worthy to the case. Now, what do you gather from these?”

The professor seemed to enjoy this sense of sneakiness. Heck, if I knew it was that easy to enlist his help I would have told him that they I palmed them from the Mayor himself.

“So, am I to surmise that I am Doctor Watson to your Holmes in this pursuit?”

What the hell was he talking about? But, he was on a roll.

“Of course, with your crass demeanor, I am quite sure that you fancy yourself similar to Sam Spade, but, in reality, you are more like an Ed Jenkins, “The Phantom Crook” playing both the police and the criminals against each other.”

“Yeah, sure Prof. Now, how about some of your superior wisdom on the notes that I showed you?”

This seemed to shake the professor out of his superiority mode.

“Well, I would ascertain from these quotes that our protagonist/murderer is more than meets the eye. He is, on the surface, well versed in the literary arts, perhaps even a performer, and he decided to leave these calling cards to bring attention to the fact that his intellect is far superior to those that would hope to pursue him.”

“Ok, so he's read a few books and has a good memory. Big deal, so have I.”

The Professor smiled weakly towards me.

“Yes, yes, I'm sure you have. But these are not only famous works of prose that he used, but in addition, performance pieces. He is taunting us, informing us that he is more than a reader, but perhaps a performance artist!”

So, prof. Is there a connection between the two quotes or not? Were your two dead students working on the origins of these quotes?

“Harrumph. Well, not that I know of. Of course, they, like the rest of my students, are very bright and

perhaps they were working on their own regarding the works.”

I was beginning to grow tired of this self-relegated superiority of the Prof and the killer.

“So, he's smart. I get that. Perhaps he knows you, don't you smart guys all belong to the same club?”
The professor's demeanor started to change so I continued.

“In fact, what's to say that this guy isn't one of your students also? After all, the two victims were. In fact, who's to say that it wasn't you that killed 'em. What with your superior intellect and all you probably had the means to sneak up on them and do 'em in for the fact that they didn't put the book they borrowed back in the proper spot and all.”

“I, I do not appreciate the droll manner in which you attempt humor. And humor is what I hope it is. Because, to insinuate that I, of all people, would have the capability to commit such atrocities, is... is... reprehensible!”

I hit a nerve, what, I didn't know, but I definitely hit a nerve.

“Whoa, whoa. Don't worry, prof. You passed the test, or, you're a good actor. I was trying you on for size, to see how you would react. So, tell me about this Hastings kid.”

The professor attempted to regain his composure, yet, he was clearly upset with me. He wiped his brow with his handkerchief.

“What is there to say, Mr. Hasard. Hastings is a bright young man currently in his third year of grad school, he has a bright future ahead of him and is well set. He comes from a well-to-do educated family and is currently engaged to be married to a fine young girl.”

“Wow, get personal much with your students prof?”

“Mr. Hasard, you will find that in life, especially in a classroom, it is difficult not to be engaged in your student's', and, your colleagues', lives. People like to talk about their lives with people that they deem safe. Now, don't tell me that you have never encountered such occurrences.”

He stared me up and down with knowing eyes.

“Whoa, hang on there prof. I was just joshin' you again. Hey, thanks for your help. I owe you a drink or somethin' sometime.”

I decided that this was the time for me to make my exit; I shook the prof's hand and headed out after handing him another one of my cards.

“Harrumph, I will certainly call you if I obtain more information my good sir.” The Prof answered excitedly while staring at my card.

I tipped my hat towards him fished in my pocket for a cigarette and made my way out the door.

I walked out of the front door of the library not paying attention as usual since my mind was deep in the case. I was jotting notes into my trusty notepad when I heard the, as now, unmistakable squeal of tires. Luckily I looked up just in time to spare a visit to the local hospital.

“Hey! Big guy! Need me?”

I smiled at a double entendre which I wisely determined as better unsaid.

“Wow, talk about service!” I remarked as I got into the cab.

“Drive me to my offic...” before I could get the words out of my mouth my back was hugging the innermost portions of the seat cushion.

“Whoa, don't you want to know where my office is?”

I watched the back of her head as though I could see her smirk.

“Nah, I already know mac!”

“How would you know?”

“Hey, a girl needs to know these things, what? Do you think you're the only one with a nose for clues? You'd be surprised at what I could do! Besides, don't worry, I don't know where you sleep...yet!”

Before I could stand to be surprised next, the cab screeched to a stop in front of my office. Sure enough, the kid did know where my office was. I got out, shook my head at my new found chauffeur, or menace, I wasn't quite sure what yet, and threw her a deuce.

“Thanks a lot, big guy! See you again soon!”

I tipped my hat to her and shook my head and proceeded to my front door.

As I walked in I didn't even have to look to feel the eyes of Stella penetrating my head.

“Isn't she a little young for you, 'Big guy'?”

As I hung up my hat and coat I couldn't help but retort, “Why, jealous?”

“Not in your wildest dreams John. Besides, I gave one of you louts a shot at me once. That was enough!”

“Good for you doll, at least you learned your lesson.”

Stella answered staring off into the unknown space between earth and heaven. “Yeah, you're right. It was a good lesson though.” she trailed off.

Now, I may be a thoughtless rummy in my best days, but, I could tell that I dredged up something that I shouldn't have. I was anxious to move the conversation forward.

“So, what'd you find out? You know, while pecking at the feed.”

“Not as much as I would have liked to. The boys, the ones that were brutalized, were from well-to-do families. And, they all worked together at the University library.”

“Yeah, I got that too...”

“And, “she swung herself up onto my desk corner as I sat down. “They all belonged to the same class in school, while having the same professor as a mentor.”

I leaned back and took in Stella's sleek back facing me. “Let me guess, Professor O'Fletcher.”

“Yep, you got it Johnny. What do you think? Should I check him out?”

I smiled at the kid; she had a good nose for this business.

“Actually, Stell. What I'd like you to do is to see what you can come up with on this kid, Hastings.”

“Hastings? Who's that Johnny?”

“A nervous little wretch who was in O'Fletcher's office earlier, and a member of the team of kids in the professor's class. I don't know, but, there's something about the kid. I mean, I don't think he has it in him to be the killer, but...”

“You never know. Remember Johnny, sometimes it's the most obvious suspect that is your culprit.”

I smiled ear to ear. If I didn't know any better I'd have sworn it was Frank talking to me through Stella.

“Yeah, you got that right. So, what do you think?”

Stella turned her pretty face to me. “Yeah, you got it, as much as you got a good eyeful of me, lecher!”

I couldn't help but smirk, she always caught me and chastised me, but, it was worth it.

“Hey, enjoy it while it lasts, anyways...” before I could get another word out I felt her hand slap me in the face as she stood so quickly I couldn't see it.

“Hey! Anyways, I don't know, Stell. Something doesn't smell right about all of this.”

“Yeah, like you do after being caught in a rain shower, you dog!”

Stella stormed out to her office as I rubbed my cheek pondering the case.

Chapter 9

I sat at my desk trying to get a handle on where's and how's of this case. I started writing down the possible list of suspects from the people I had already met regarding this case.

The most obvious ones were the other students. The more I thought about it, only students would leave such ridiculous clues at the scene of the crimes. It's almost as though it was a game to these cretins.

Yeah, I know how these college boys are. They think because they have all this book knowledge that they're smarter than most of us. Therefore, the game with clues, as if they're the only ones who have read Poe and Doyle. I've got news for them. Anyone can read a book, it's the truly intelligent that know how to decipher those words, and not just recite random quotes.

Okay, now that it's the students, which ones? The only one that I've met of the group and that was that twitchy little kid, Hastings. What was his story? Why would the kid be so damn jumpy around me? Did he do it? Was he jealous of his fellow classmates and that's why he did them in?

Next, what about the professor? What was his story? The old prof seems to be the biggest poindexter in the city of Buffalo, yet, who's to say that he's not playing a game? I've seen these bookworm types snap. It's almost as if these guys take in so much theory that suddenly they burst and then all that they have in their head explodes out in a grand display of destruction. Yeah, I remember good old Sgt. Weikopf over in Anzio. Actually, I don't want to relive that.

I was deep in thought as I swore out loud as the phone rang.

"Hasard here!" I barked into the phone receiver.

"Is that any way to talk to your favorite gal? Let alone, a possible potential paying client calling in for your services?"

Cripes, what an ass I feel like.

"Stell, sorry. I'm hammering at this case and..."

She cut me off like a butcher cuts off the end off of an expensive roast.

"Johnny, whoa... I got it. I've seen you and Frank in these moods, remember? Anyways, I dug up some info on this case. You ready to hear it or you gonna cut my head off again?"

I took a deep breath. I wanted to tell her that maybe I wouldn't be in such a mood if she was here to answer the phone and not me. But, I held my tongue. "Yeah Stell. What've you got? Something good I hope. After all, you owe me for that rap on my face!"

"I should have kicked you somewhere else for that, you lecherous toad!"

I was tired and in need of a break. "Stell, what have you got for me?"

"Oooh, the tomcat dragging his tail? Ok, Grumpy. Here goes. First, that kid, Hastings. He's not as he seems. I got a lead on his address and, let's just say it's a little nice for a college student."

"Really? How so doll?"

"I'll ignore that and just tell you it's the Fillmore apartments on Tupper."

"The Fillmore? Well, maybe he's got a roommate or something."

"Well, he's got somebody, but it ain't a roommate. No, she's a good girl. At least she seems to be."

I couldn't help but laugh out loud. "What do you mean, seems to be? Woman's intuition or cat claws?" Stella's silence only told me that she had a look on her face that would have frozen me if her hair was a set of snakes. She ignored me and continued.

"His girl, Celia, works for the M.E. office. Think that means anything?"

I pulled the receiver away from my ear. This was interesting, wasn't it?

"Stell, you're the best! See what else you can come up with. Meantime, I'm going out to snoop around!"

"Don't leave yet Johnny. I think I see a shoe store that's calling me."

"Well, hurry it up Stell! I smell a lead or two!"

I kept thinking about what Stella said, about Hasting's girl working for the M.E.'s office. Normally, that wouldn't be a problem. The people they hire in the M.E.'s office are usually on the up and up and too detail oriented to think of anything else but their work. Besides, the supervisor, Hoskins, was a good egg and had been with the department for more years than I can remember. He's helped me out many times during the cases that I've had.

I walked out of my office, locked the door (damn you Stella, I hope those are some good shoes you're buying) and looked in the direction of the M.E.'s office. As I was contemplating a long walk my sixth sense picked up the ever increasingly familiar sound of a certain set of tires.

I jumped up further onto the sidewalk and smiled as the cab came screeching to a stop on the sidewalk in front of my office.

"Hey, Hasard! Up for a ride or you just catching some rays from one of our few days of sunshine?"

"Well, if it isn't my angel on wheels. Sure, I could use a ride. Save the soles on these beloved Florsheims of mine."

I hopped into the back of the cab and, as before, we were off before I could tell her where.

"Police department Hasard?"

I hung onto the door handle as she took the turn. "Close, kid. M.E.'s office!"

"Wow, should have figured!" she punched the accelerator as though she was kicking a lecher in the shins.

"Figured? What makes you say that?" I should have kept my mouth shut because the next turn threw me against the far door.

"Well, you ain't any further into your case and I'm sure there's some evidence you're curious about!" The cab lurched to a stop before I could get another word out. I swung open the door and stepped out. I threw her a fin and started to say thanks.

"Well, Hasard. Am I right?"

"Who do you think you are? That broad, Jane Greer in that Dick Tracy film?"

"You're funny Hasard. I'm no femme fatale and 'sides you sure ain't no Dick Tracy!"

"Aww, really? And here I was going to go buy a yellow hat just for you!"

She peeled off while giving me the five finger salute and I entered the front door.

Chapter 11

It's been a long time since I was in this place. To be honest, not long enough as far as I was concerned. As I worked my way up the stairs way too many memories came rushing back.

"Can I help you, sir?"

Whoa, young, cute, blonde, and in a white lab coat. Mind out of the gutter Hasard! "Yeah, I'm looking for Hoskins."

"Supervisor Hoskins. Well, right this way sir!"

I followed the blonde through the maze of desks. When I wasn't focusing on the backside of the pretty girl I took in all the faces of the worker bees. Most of them were the typical boffins, and then I saw her out of the corner of my eye. Young, slight in stature, and pretty in her own way this gal was making a

quick phone call while looking around to make sure no one was watching. My observations were stopped when I heard a familiar voice.

“Hasard! You old dog! How’ve you been?”

“Sarge, you know how it is. Been keeping my nose clean, as best as I can!”

“Sarge! Been a long time since then, John.”

Wow, I caught myself. He’s right, but it’s hard to look at someone who used to cover your behind when you were a greenhorn in the middle of the biggest war in history.

“Sorry, Ted, sorry. Anyway, do you have a minute?”

“Sure, sure. Follow me.”

Ted turned and walked into his office. Of course, he never forgot. The way he turned is the way he used to run drills. Pirouetting on his forward foot, stiff as a board. And, as usual, I followed him like I used to. As we walked into his office he motioned towards the chair in front of his desk as he seated himself.

“So, Johnny, what you got?”

“Well, you know those kids that have been getting knocked off?”

“Yeah, of course John. In fact, I have most of my team on it.” I pulled my pad out of my breast pocket and scanned my notes.

“Well, I do have an odd question to ask you, do you have a tech by the name of Celia?”

“Celia McGillicutty?”

“I guess so. I’m not sure about her last name.”

“Well, if she’s the one you want, yes. Yes, I do. Actually she’s one of my best. In fact, she’s on the case you just mentioned. Do you want to meet her?”

“Yeah, I guess so, just don’t let her know why. Ask her about the case and if she has anything new on it.”

“John...”

“Ted, I know how it sounds, but, trust me. Can you?”

“Of course I can, Johnny. Of course.”

Ted looked at me with those old eyes of times past and present. He nodded and walked out of his office door.

“Celia, can I see you for a minute?” Ted asked outside his door. I decided to settle back in the chair and play opossum.

Celia and Ted entered the office. Celia stood to the side while Ted took his seat behind his desk. Celia’s eyes gravitated towards me and it was then I recognized her. The girl making the secret phone call! This should be interesting. Ted continued with her.

“Celia, I have a delicate matter here.”

“Ummm, Yes sir.”

“We have some items of evidence that are extremely... delicate, I should say.”

Celia nodded blankly and looked at me again.

“Celia, are you alright? If you aren't feeling well I could turn this over to one of your colleagues.” Celia shook her head as if she was emerging from a fog.

“No, no. I'm fine sir. You were saying?”

“Anyways, this evidence is from the series of murders that have occurred regarding the young college students. I need your work on this material to be completely discreet and confidential. With the understanding that any results that you come up with should be kept completely confidential and any results kept to yourself and brought only to me. Do you understand?”

“Yes sir. Absolutely. You know you can count on me.”

Hoskins smiled, yet, I caught that this kid Celia was extremely uneasy. Her eyes kept glancing towards me as Ted spoke.

“Well, that's what I suspected, and knew. Which is why I approached you first for this assignment. Now, we are going to test these items for soil content, which includes clay type, residual chemicals, mineral content, etc... In addition, we need to test for any organic tissue or fluids that may be in the soil also.”

He looked into Celia's eyes as he continued. “In other words, anything that can help direct the authorities to the killer, or killers.”

“You can count on me sir, now, if you don't mind, I'll go to my station and wait for you to deliver the material.”

“That's my girl! I knew I could depend on you.”

Celia smiled and walked out of his office and I took mental note of that little number.

“Ted, I can't thank you enough for your help. Now, if I remember correctly, Celia is the name of the fiancé of one of my suspects. Do me a favor, for old time's sake; keep an open mind about her.

Ted stared at me with a smirk.

“Johnny, you should know me better than that. No one is without sin in my eyes!”

I chuckled and shook my head. Yep, same old Ted. You don't get to be the head of the M.E.'s office with naivety.

Chapter 12

After that little interlude, I was more determined than ever to find out more about that pimple Hastings. So I made my way down to the Professor's office.

“Prof. You there? I leaned my head in with all of the charm and discretion that I was known for.

“Harrumph, Mr. Hasard. What can I do for you today?”

I smiled wickedly at the Prof on purpose. “Oh, you know. A little bit of this, a little bit of that.”

The Prof sighed audibly. “Oh, how I'm so enthused by your sojourn here.”

“Gee, thanks Prof. Anyway... I can't believe I'm saying this. I need your help.”

“Help? Well, this is surprising.”

“Prof, enough, to be honest I’ve got you on my most likely list.”

Me? Harrumph, how...how dare you. What would make you...”

“Enough Prof. I don’t think you did it but, you got to see it my way. You did know all of the victims.”

The professor turned away from me disgustedly. Yet, I saw in the eventual relaxation of his shoulders that he understood.

“All right, Mr. Hasard. How may I assist you?”

“Well, I need you to help me get to know your students without them knowing I’m getting to know them.”

The Prof looked at me with a raised eyebrow and then he got it.

“Oh, I see. Like a Dashiell Hammett story.”

“Yeah, sure Prof. That’s it. Now, can you help me?”

“Actually, yes. There is a meeting of the Literary Debate Club in a few minutes. I think it would behoove you to observe the said meeting.”

I smiled appreciatively at the offer. I hated to admit it but the Prof was turning out to be okay. Before I could answer him my favorite nervous nelly entered the professor’s office. The Prof motioned for me to take a seat against the back wall.

“Ah, young Mr. Hastings. How good to see you! I trust that you have recomposed your ill thoughts and feelings from the other day?”

“Yes, yes professor. I'm as good as can be expected, I guess. “Bobby paused, “Umm... thank you for the kindness you offered me the other day. I... was rather a little bit, overwhelmed.”

Professor O’Fletcher smiled as he continued shuffling the mess on his desk.

“Think nothing of it my boy. Now, don't you and your companions have a meeting in a few minutes?”

Bobby's head turned towards the clock on the wall.

“Yes, you are right, sir. Of course, now...” Bobby trailed off. “But, it’s a couple of members short.”

O’Fletcher smiled sadly and continued. “Yes, I suppose you are proper in saying that. However, with no disrespect to our fallen comrades, perhaps it is time to recruit some replacements. After all, with a reduced number of members the opposing points of view become increasingly slim, do they not? And, remember, a lack of opposing viewpoints only leads to stiling, unstimulated conversation. “

Bobby shook his head in acknowledgment. “You're right, yes, I surmise that you are right, professor. The show must go on, correct?”

“Absolutely, my boy! Now that's the spirit!”

Bobby nodded his head and headed down the hall to meeting hall and I smiled at the Professor following him to the meeting hall.

Chapter 13

Bobby entered the meeting hall while I and the professor trailed him. As I took a look inside I noticed how sterile and prototypical the hall was. As the centerpiece of the room, the long oak table occupied the majority of the room. The twelve chairs that surround the rectangular table are high backed and

regal in stature. However, despite its appearances, the table and chairs are not privy to acts of royalty, but to the debates and opinions of not yet fully formed men. As Bobby approached his seat I took a seat next to the professor towards the rear corner of the room, an annoying looking young man, who I would later learn was Mr. Layton, banged the gavel to begin the meeting and also to confirm his own misguided sense of self-worth.

I noticed Bobby was still shaking his head at what I assumed was the Professor's apparent indifference towards the deaths of his classmates. As he made his way to his seat he noticed the conspicuously empty pair of seats at the table. However, I also noticed that his musing was interrupted by the sudden clamor of the falling gavel.

"I would like to call to order the meeting of the Literary Debate Club!" The handler of the gavel, announced. His well coiffed hair and demeanor belied his penchant for intellectual arrogance. The murmuring in the room quieted down as the last echoes of the gavel resonated.

Michael Dipson, another member of the group, stood up anxiously. "Excuse me Mr. Chairman. With all due respect. But, I would like to propose before we commence with our meeting, a moment of silence for our two fallen brethren, Messrs. Vanderwald and McGill. I apologize for my lack of deference in advance, yet, I feel this is an important issue."

The other attendees nodded their heads in agreement amongst each other and waited for Layton's response.

"I would like to concur that the motion is an appropriate suggestion. Thank you, Mr. Dipson, for the suggestion. Now, are there any contradictory arguments to this motion?"

As Layton surveyed the attendees everyone shook their head to the negative.

"Well, it is agreed upon then! Mr. Dipson, seeing that it was your motion; would you be so propitious as to lead?"

Michael nodded his head in agreement and gratitude. He adjusted his tie before orating.

"Thank you. I feel that it would be appropriate to remember our fellow colleagues for their contributions and minds to this group."

Andy Lossom raised his hand. Michael nodded his head in his direction.

"I remember their droll wit and arguments for argument's sake as we discussed certain authors and their works."

His associates rewarded him with their applause. Yet, despite the kind revelry, I saw that Mr. Hastings was still bothered by all of this and he clapped begrudgingly.

"Very good, anyone else have something they would like to add to this tribute?" Layton moved the meeting along.

"I would like to add that, I, for one, will miss the wonderful counter-views that both of our fallen comrades offered. The debates always felt like a bigger event when they would counter so ambitiously!" This also struck a chord with the attendees and the applause increased.

The applause was broken with the bang of Layton's gavel. "Thank you. Now, if no one else has anything to add..." Layton's eyes connect with Bobby's. "Mr. Hastings, would you like to contribute anything further?"

"Ummmm, no. I mean.. Well, doesn't any of you find it a bit...odd?"

Andy Lossom was the first one to address him, "What's odd? What are you getting at?"

Bobby took a deep breath and focused his eyes downwards. "I mean, two of us, mere grad students, have been gruesomely murdered. Am I the only one who is a bit unnerved with this?"

Bobby could feel the eyes piercing him as he spoke. Was he the only one who thought this way or was everyone else too scared to bring it up? The uneasy silence was broken by George Xander, another group member.

"Well, Bobby, perhaps it is because we are the PREMIER literary students in the entire free world! Have you ever thought about that?"

The outburst served its purpose and the mood in the room lightened up slightly. Jonathan decided to attempt to move the meeting along.

"Gentlemen, I feel that I am secure to say that our fallen compatriots would appreciate the levity that we are displaying now. Now, let us commence with our meeting, shall we?"

Quickly, a new voice interjected.

"Well perhaps the heinous perpetrator of the murders is none other than our conveniently astonished colleague, Mr. Hastings. Who knows, perhaps he was thinning out his perceived competition within this group! Not that there is a competition, you either have the mind or you don't!"

Eyes raced towards Bobby's face. Some couldn't suppress a giggle; clearly, Lawrence Wargrave's off-the-cuff comment served its purpose to alter the tone, or, did it? I studied Hastings's body actions closer.

"Now see here, Wargrave. How could you even suspect me?" Hastings answered alarmed. His demeanor started to change from fear to anger. Jonathan gave him a stern look.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen! Enough!" He banged the gavel in earnest. "Now, Mr. Wargrave, I realize that you are marginally new here, but, please refrain from such tasteless displays of ill-humor. I am relatively certain that our Mr. Hastings here is no more capable of such a grievous crime as murder. Nor, would I hope are you or I. Now, out of respect for the deceased, please allow us to commence with our meeting and attempt to restrain yourself!"

The room's buzz became anxious as Hastings and Wargrave stared at each other.

"We will discuss and debate Poe's story...." Layton continued choosing to ignore the ensuing disruption. However, that did not change Bobby's increasing sullenness. I glanced over at the Professor to see his reaction as if this happens all the time.

Chapter 14

Whew, after that paint peeling Literary Club meeting I was ready to go find a resting place at the bottom of the Erie Canal. Not only was I bored to tears but more confused than ever. Sure, there was something about Hasting's fiancé that didn't quite ring right but that didn't explain his demeanor. Heck, if he acted this nervous through his entire life I doubt that the kid would have ever been toilet trained. No, there was something missing, and I was almost beginning to suspect that none of those boring page pressers were capable of killing. Heck, not that they couldn't bore a man to death, but to be as violent as the killer was? I don't know.

"God, what's next? I thought as I stared at the top of my desk. "What am I missing? What, Hasard, what?" I rubbed my forehead as though I was trying to convince myself that I still had my full head of hair. Then, like an arrow plunged into my temple the phone's ring shook me out of my stupor. I grabbed

at the receiver as though I was throttling its throat.

“Yeah?”

“Mr. Hasard?”

Great, a genius. “Pal, you called me, remember? Now, what?”

“I think that there is something of interest for you”

I was starting to lose my fabled patience and charm with this clown. “What interest? And who is this? What's my line?”

“Never mind. Go to sixty-four Elmwood Avenue. The door will be unlocked, my unappreciative lout!”

Before I could fire off one of my best witticisms the click of the phone on the other end told me that it would be wasted on empty air now. I took a moment to think about the voice. It was the same one that disturbed my beauty sleep a few days ago. I grabbed my pencil and wrote down the address while it was fresh in my mind. What the hell, might as well check it out. I grabbed my coat and headed out the door.

No sooner had I started down the street that I cursed myself for my impetuosity. Maybe I should have used that wonderful tool that old man Bell created and called a taxi. Yet, someone must have been looking down on me, because no sooner did I think of it I heard the rapidly familiar squeal of a certain set of tires.

“Hey, Hasard! You need a ride?”

I smiled and shook my head. “Kid, don't you ever take any time off?”

“Sure I do, not that you'll ever know. Not that's it any of your business but I picked up an extra shift!”

I grabbed the door handle and tossed myself in the back. “Sixty-four Elmwood kid!”

This time I grabbed the door handle in preparation for it. Sure enough, I was catapulted to the back seat cushion as she took off.

“Wow, good thing I was here, huh?”

I stared at the back of her pretty head I realized that her hair was still perfectly lustrous after full day of driving in the Buffalo heat. Of course, before I had a chance to think further we came screeching to a stop.

“Here you are, John!”

As I got out of the cab I threw her a fin and tipped my hat. She leaned out of the driver window.

“Thanks, Johnny! Hey, you know, the offer still stands. You still got my card, don't you?” Hmmm, the kid ain't bad. This was the first time I got a chance to look in her eyes, and brother, what a pair of eyes they were. Before I got lost in those brown eyes of hers she tore off and I stood and looked at the exterior of the building I was called to.

Chapter 15

As I approached the front doors I noticed that this definitely wasn't the Ritz. And, sure enough, the door was ajar as the voice on the phone told me. I pushed the door open with my right hand while my left cradled my Colt M1911. Nothing. Maybe that's a good sign or a really bad one. I slipped inside on an angle keeping my gun hand ready.

When I was fully inside I fumbled on the wall for a light switch, it was darker than Stella's mood

towards me on a Monday morning. I groped my hands on the wall to the left of the door. Ah, there, they were. I depressed the top button and wha-la, nothing. Well, time for plan B. Heaven forbid this place turn out to be civilized. I reached into my breast pocket and pulled out a match, struck it on the sole of my shoe.

Great, another body, only this one was hung like a side of beef in Mario's butcher shop.

As I looked the body over, I noticed that the kid must have been told to come here quickly. As he hung from the thick, corded rope around his neck the kid still had his overcoat on. What the hell would make a kid like this come to a building like this? The last time this place looked good was the turn of the century. The place reminded me of an old bank executive who once wore the finest shoes and now shuffles in those same shoes forty years later in a vain attempt to retain his stature.

As I studied the stiff I figured I'd get a closer look. I lit another match and looked around, there was a dining room chair to my right. I used it as a stepladder and got a better look at the kid. , what's this? I carefully reached up and grabbed the slip of paper sticking out of the kid's breast pocket. I placed the slip in my pocket and got off the chair and found the phone. Cripes, even the phone was old in this place, I'm surprised I don't have to crank it, and, it works. Apparently the killer wants me to be able to spread the good news. I dialed the precinct and after the third ring one of the donut scroungers finally picked up and put me through to Jones.

"Hey, Hasard here. Yeah, yeah. Better send a car and a meat wagon down here to sixty-four Elm Street. Well, you can figure it out when you get here. Nah, no hurry, trust me, there's no one here that you can save. Yeah, I'll stick around, anything for you!" I just love getting under Jones's skin. Yeah, he'll probably be a ray of sunshine when he arrives.

I went outside, took a seat under the streetlamp, read the note and grabbed a smoke while I waited for my playmates.

Chapter 16

Soon enough, the circus arrived. Well, I'm glad they listened to me and sent a bus in addition to the black and whites. I took another drag on my butt and waited for Jones to arrive. (Ah, here he comes, happiness.

"Hasard, do you mind telling me what the hell you stepped into now?"

"Well, as much as I'd like to take credit for ruining your beauty sleep, of which it still wouldn't help, this wasn't my doing. Take a walk through that door and see for yourself."

Jones shook his head at me with the great affection that he enjoys showing me.

"Going to join me Hasard?"

"Well I've already seen it but since you asked me so nice, sure. Anything for you!"

I flipped my butt into the bushes and followed him in the building. Of course, by now it was like entering a carnival ride with all of the uniforms and medics in there.

"So, you want to tell me how you 'happened' upon this?" as he scanned the room.

"I received an anonymous call to come here. You know how I get those." I smirked at my old friend as his face wrinkled up. "I got here, noticed the door ajar and entered the fun zone. Then, I called you, my dearest friend in the world."

"Yeah, right." Jones deadpanned to me as his eyes focused on the dim light that the flash lights were emitting as he went to the kid hanging in the center of the room. "Christ, what were you thinking when you walked in?"

“I wasn’t.”

“Well, what the hell do you think?”

“Me? Hey, I was kicked off of your playground, remember? You guys are supposed to be the professionals.”

“Ease up, Hasard. You know darn well that we aren't getting anywhere on this case. Now, come on, give me a break, do you have anything?”

It was nice to here Jones grovel a little, but, despite his posture, he has always been good to me.

“Jones, what can I say? I honestly don't have any further scoop on this case. What keeps bugging me is the why. These kids aren't rough or shady; they're just egg-heads!”

We both shook our heads as behind us, they lowered the body.

“Yeah, I get it. That's what I can't figure also. Hey, what do you make of that?” Jones pointed his stubby finger towards the wall behind the body as it came into view. Well, isn't that special. In addition to our killer's many talents they were also an artist. There, on the wall written in what looked like blood were the ominous words, 'WHO'S NEXT?'

“I don't know. What do you think? A bluff or the truth?”

“Well, if I had a crystal ball I'd be able to tell you Hasard, but, I don't. In fact, I think you took it.”

“Yeah, I got it right up...” luckily, before I could finish my thought we were interrupted by a wet-behind the ears uniform.

“Umm, Excuse me detective. We've determined the identity of the victim.”

Jones stared at the kid making him nervous. You could see the kid braced himself just to talk to him.

“Well, what have you got son?” Jones almost barked.

“The victim's name was Xander, George Xander.”

Jones turned to me and didn't even look at the kid.

“Anyone you know Hasard?”

“Nah, I don't know him from Adam, Jones. How about you?” (I lied through my teeth to him. Yeah, I recognized the kid. Poor dope was one of the page pressers from the sleep club.)

“Why would I know? I just figured that your great deduction skills had already been ahead on this.”

“Ah, you're making me blush Jones. I think I'm getting misty with your adoration of my skills.”

“Yeah, I bet Hasard.”

Well, this was becoming a waste of time now. I figured now was as good a time as any to make my exit. I turned to head towards the door.

“Thanks for your hospitality Jones. I think I'm going to mosey on off.”

“Had enough fun, Hasard?”

I smiled wide at that, “Yeah, I guess you could say that. See ya.”

As I walked away Jones couldn't help but needle me one more time.

“And, remember, Hasard. You keep me in the loop on this. I know you got somethin' you crocodile!”

I threw him the two finger salute and made my way out of the scene.

Chapter 17

As much fun as I had, I figured I'd wrap up my evening at my favorite watering hole. Fortunately it was only a few blocks away from the murder scene. I pulled up the collar of my coat to break the rapidly cooling air and made my way.

Harry's had been here for as long as I can remember. While it had the elegant ambiance of a higher class joint it still had the old saloon feel that I read about in the old west. I hung up my coat and hat and set off to my favorite stool.

“Willie, you're the best.” I said as I grabbed my glass already sitting in front of me.

“Oh, I already know that, John. But, thank you again for the compliment.”

I smiled as I gulped my drink. Willie, having already foreseen this, grabbed the bottle and filled me up again. I took the opportunity to light one up. As I took a long drag Willie spoke.

“John, you alright? You look like your best dame suddenly had a book club meeting.”

I smiled to myself. If anyone else had asked me that question I would have barked at them and put them firmly in their place. Willie was one of the few people who could get away with asking that. I'd known Willie so long he was like my long lost black uncle.

“You know, I wish that were the case. But... I just can't get a handle on this case I'm involved in!”

“Well, I've known you long enough to know that this is just a temporary set-back. After you've had a few and a good night's sleep it will come to you. As long as you stay away from the women. Won't it John?”

“Yeah, I hope you're right Will, hey, how's the action tonight” I asked as I scanned the room.

“You know the usual crowd. Although, it is rather quiet tonight.” As Willie spoke he wiped the bar and straightened the glasses.

“No disrespect Will, but I'm kinda glad. I'm in no mood for a clamor tonight.” Willie smiled at me knowingly, and went to his busy work, cleaning glasses, straightening up the bottles. I was just finishing up my second glass and getting ready for my third when I heard the door open. I didn't pay it no mind and tapped the bar with my finger for a refill.

“Harrumph', Well, I surmised that I would find you here. Predictable.”

Nahh, I thought, it couldn't be. I turned to my right and sure enough, it was Professor O'Fletcher seated next to me. What the hell was this Bookworm doing here?

I slapped myself mentally for my lapsed manners.

“Prof. Well, this is a surprise. How you doin’? You’re looking for me? Look, what ever it is, I didn’t do it. Really.” I caught Willie out of the corner of my eye trying to suppress a laugh. Yet, the professor didn’t find anything funny.

“Well, if you must know, I’ve been thinking about the two young men and their unfortunate and untimely demises.”

I muttered into my glass, “three”

“Three! Oh my word! When did this occur? This is terrible!”

I tapped the professor’s sleeve. “Prof, let’s keep this low, got it?” I darted my eyes around the near empty room to emphasize my request. I mean, the last thing I needed was this patched sleeve bookworm getting excited.

“Of course, of course. Discretion in police work and all. Now, my regrets sir. Where were we?”

“Well, I was about to ask you the same thing. How’d you find me?”

The professor smiled like a kid who just won in a game of hide-and-seek.

“Well, quite basic really. After your recent visit to my office I began to ponder upon the exact kind of person that you were. And, eventually, after much hypothesizing, I determined that you must be a man of character, even if you don’t particularly display it much. Because, after all, if you didn’t care about people you wouldn’t be in the profession that you are in. Therefore, after much scholarly debate, I began to piece together the items upon which we had spoken prior in my office. And, I came to the conclusion that It would be necessary to speak to you in person about my theories. Now, in the determination of where to find you, I merely ascertained that the recreational activity that you would partake in would be an alcoholic establishment of sort. So, taking into account the whereabouts of your office and the sorts of establishments you would take refuge in, I fell upon this place. Obviously, walking in and finding you here confirmed my thought process. Wouldn’t you say?”

“So, you took a guess and won. Is that it?”

The professor looked at me as though I had just told him that Shakespeare didn’t really write all those plays.

“Well, I wouldn’t quite make it that simple. I, if I must say so, am quite impressed with my Sherlockian skills. After all, I did find you, did I not?”

I smiled broadly, the bookworm had a point. I motioned for Willie but he was already there.

“Will, round up a drink for the Prof here and get him a kewpie doll while you’re at it!”

“Sure thing, John. What would you have sir? I will choose to ignore John’s request for an amusement park doll.”

“Harrumph, yes, I see. Well, what is Mr. Hasard drinking?”

“MR. Hasard only drinks Cutty Sark. Would you like some?”

“That is scotch, isn’t it?”

I decided to answer for Willie. “Well, yes it is, Prof. Want some? It’ll put hair on your chest.”

“No, no thank you. Umm, I will have a sloe gin fizz. Is that available?”

“Anything for a friend of John!” Willie grinned ear-to-ear as he prepared the Professor’s drink.

“Well, Prof. I’m impressed. So, you do drink when you aren’t eye deep in books!”

“Well, of course I do Mr. Hasard, what do you think I am? An introvert? I do drink; of course, many times it is for medicinal purposes!”

Willie went ahead and filled my glass again while setting down the Prof's drink. He took a sip of his and then scanned the room.

“Which young scholar was struck down this time?”

“Well, to be honest, Prof, I don't know if he was one of yours. He sure looked it. Do you know a kid named Xander? George Xander?”

The Prof shook visibly. This hit him hard. “Young Mr. Xander? This is terrible! He has, oh, I mean, had, so much promise.”

“Who the heck would have wanted to string him up like a piece of beef?”

“He was what?”

“Well, he was hung, gored, and then his blood was used as ink.”

The Professor looked visibly sickened; I probably shouldn't have said it like I did.

“I honestly don't know. He was a member of the same club as the other two unfortunate young men. Do you suspect that perhaps some unscrupulous individual is targeting these young men? I mean, for what purpose?”

“Look, I don't know. What I do know is that it doesn't take a PHD to figure out the angle that these men are being targeted. The main question is why? I mean, how can someone so young have such brutal enemies? I mean, come on, how many enemies can you highbrows have?”

The professor was visibly upset with me with the remark.

“Harrumph' Excuse me, Mr. Hasard, but the term 'highbrow' is quite demeaning. Yes, they are exceptionally gifted, but that does not mean that they are any less important to normal society than the rest of us.”

“Professor, whoa. I didn't mean to insult you. But, you have to understand, I'm looking for anything that can give me a clue, an edge, in this case. So, help me out, did these boys have any , you know, opposing minds that want to get even?”

“No, actually, no, not that I am aware of. I mean, they would get into some rather heated debates but I can't see how that would justify the actions. Besides, highly intelligent people often get into rather animated discussions of opposing viewpoints.”

“Ok, I get it. Is there anyone new, or acting odd, in the group as of recently?”

“Well, Mr. Layton is rather full of himself, but I can't imagine that he is violent.”

“Ok, who else?”

“Well, Mr. Dipson likes to admire the sound of his own voice. Mr. Lissom is still at large. Mr. Hastings is always nervous. You've met him. However, I give him a pass because he is working on his thesis and is engaged to be married in the recent future.”

“Oh, yeah, that kid.”

“The only one that I do not have a full dossier on is Mr. Wargrave. He transferred into our program and, I am ashamed to say, I do not know him well.”

I nodded in anticipation. “Well, I would say that that is as good a place for us to start as any, Prof.”

“Are you implying that I assist you in this matter?”

Oh, boy. I just caught that, I said us. Great. The last thing I need is a hang on, but, he can be useful if I try.

“Tell you what; Let me know what you think of this.” I handed him the note I found in Xander's jacket.”

“And then, maybe we'll discuss it further.”

“Really, Mr. Hasard. I happen to think that we could compliment each other.”

“Take it how you want. Let me put it this way, though. If we don't figure out who's nailing these kids you won't have anyone left to teach. Now, would you?”

“Well, if you put it so crudely like that, I suppose you are correct. So, my Watson to your Holmes?”

The professor reached out to shake my hand.

“Yeah, I guess so. Now, let's get to work.”

The professor made his way out the door while I settled into my bar stool.

“Another one, John?”

“Yeah, Willie, one for the road so to say.”

I finished my drink, threw Willie the payment and as I headed out the door I began to wonder. What the hell did I just get myself into with this O'Fletcher character?

Chapter 18

As I made my way down the street I thought about the case and dealing with the Prof. He was an odd bird, but, I thought to myself, he wasn't all bad. Who knows? Perhaps he wasn't lucky enough to have friends and that's why he turned to books. Doesn't matter, for better or for worse he was going to either be a great help or a huge boil on my behind. Time would tell. Actually, he already helped me with this case.

Walking past an alleyway is when. Suddenly I felt a banging on my skull as though I was hit with a truck. The only thing I could see was stars. As I was going down I threw an uppercut wildly and kept throwing as I went down. I couldn't tell what I connected with but I sure as hell felt a couple of good kicks to my ribs. As hard as I fought to stay awake all I saw in front of my eyes was a growing blackness. As I went out I swore I heard a voice in my ear threatening me and the squeal of tires.

Chapter 19

“Holy cow! That's Hasard! And, two against one ain't fair at all!” the cabbie exclaimed out loud. She aimed the cab right in the direction of the two figures clad in black doing a tap dance on Hasard's body. The figures clad in black scattered as she slammed her foot on the brake and brought the three thousand five hundred pound mass of stamped steel, plastic, and rubber, to a screeching stop on the sidewalk cursing to herself that she missed hitting the two cowards.

She raced out of her cab and quickly knelt beside Hasard's prone body.

“Hasard! Can you hear me?” She grabbed the back of his head and shook it. “C'mon you big lug! Answer me!” in response she got John's mumbled response.

“Huh? What? What is it? Oh ...” he trailed off.

A feeling of relief washed over her, “John, it's me, Angela! C'mon, snap out of it big guy! They hit you in your head! You know, the hardest part of your body!”

John's eyes rolled into the back of his head. “Siggs... My sigarettes... wha happened?” Suddenly his eyes focused hard on the face in front of his, “Oh, an angel.... an angel to take me away...” with that John drifted off into unconsciousness.

“Oh boy, he's done.” she exhaled. “Ok, let's get you home mister so you can sleep it off.” She placed her shoulder under his arm and hauled him off into the back seat of her disheveled cab.

Angela threw herself back into the driver's seat and slammed the clutch in while shifting madly. While she straightened the cab out on the road she took her one hand and adjusted her cap.

“Well, Johnny, where do you want me to take you?” she smiled to herself knowing full well that he was out of it like a wino on a five dollar binge.

“Heaven. Heaven, where are you... Stella, Frank, when the heck are you two gonna worry about work and not each other...”

Angela smiled to herself in an exasperated type of sigh. “Great, what am I gonna do with him? I just can't leave him at his office. Who knows what he'll do. Cripes, I've got another shift in the morning. Well, only one thing to do.” she talked to herself. Then, suddenly she spoke aloud.

“It's your lucky night John! I've got no choice where to take you! You're going to love it!”

Chapter 20

I came to, reluctantly. I felt as though I had eaten a box of cotton and my body ached as though I had just gone fifteen rounds. As my eyes began to focus I noticed the time on the small alarm clock on the settee. Wait, this isn't my room, where am I? As I lifted my head up from the couch cushion it was like a large bass drum was in my head. While I waited for the pounding in my head to stop I heard the sound of water running behind a slightly ajar door.

“Rise and shine Hasard!” the voice came from behind the door. “You can't stay on that couch all day!”

Nah, it couldn't be. That's, that's the voice of the cabbie. Where the hell am I? Then I looked down at myself, oh boy. This ain't what I think it is, I hope. Where the hell are my clothes? I looked around anxiously and spotted them draped over the back of a chair and freshly pressed. I grabbed the sheet that served as my blanket and shielded myself.

“Umm, good morning, I guess. Do you mind telling me...?” Before I could get the next word out I my voice was frozen. There she was, my cabbie, emerging from the bathroom like an angel. I never noticed her before but she looked absolutely radiant. I'll tell you, she gets better looking with each appearance? Then it hit me, I was standing here in my skivvies! I glanced quickly down at my draped body and stared at her. She picked up on my sudden uneasiness and broke the sudden silence.

“Well, don't worry Hasard. Regardless of what your mind is thinking we didn't do anything. Now, run into the bathroom and freshen up. If you're a good boy we can get together when I'm off shift. Now, we've got to go!”

“But, what happened?” I had to ask as I made my way to the bathroom.

“You had a run-in with a couple of thugs and an iron pipe. I knew that you were unpopular but I didn't

realize how much. “

I rubbed the back of my head and felt the knot that was there. “Wow.”

My now pretty cabbie continued. “When I came upon you the two were running away from you.”

“Two? Who the heck...”

“I don't know Hasard, some guy and a gal”

I tilted my head, “Gal? How do you know?”

“Takes one to know one. Of course, I couldn't spot 'em. They were covered in black, head to toe.”

I grabbed my clothes from the seat back and made my way to the bathroom using them as a shield to cover my suddenly vulnerable body. “Ummm.. Thanks kid. I owe you one.”

She smiled quickly and retorted fast. “That's nice. Now, hurry up or you're going to owe me my first five fares! What do you think? This gal just runs around and picks you up?”

I took that as my cue and sped into the bathroom.

Chapter 21

Cripes, I'd like to say that I was getting used to the quick stops but I wasn't feeling up to snuff to prep myself. Before I knew it, I was one with the rear seat cushion.

“Here you go!”

I moved my reluctant body to get out of the cab. I moved to her window and gave her a Jackson.

“Here, kid. This'll help, I hope. I owe you big kid!”

She smiled with that million dollar grin of hers. “Hey, anytime, big guy. But, next time, all you have to do is call me, you don't have to fall at my feet to get my attention!” With that she left a trail of rubber behind her and waved out the window.

I walked into my office and hung up my hat and coat and made my way to my desk. Of course, as much as I wanted to I couldn't avoid Stella.

“Whoa.. Johnny.” She poked at my rapidly increasing black-eye. “What'd I tell you about hanging out with those young gals? You look like something that the cat dragged in and threw out because it was done playing.

“Stella, have I told you what a sweetheart you are?”

“Ahh, you know just the right things to say to a girl. How about a cup of joe? You definitely look like you could use some, unless that is, you'd prefer a kick. I don't have any hair of the girl, I mean, dog that bit you unfortunately. I never knew that you liked those rough and tumble girls!”

I suppressed a smirk, it was a good one, I'll admit that. “You know Stell, you're a real treasure. I'd love a cup. Oh, and later, remind me to bury you so that I can dig you up!”

“Keep talking to me like that flat foot and you can go harvest your own coffee beans.”

But, for all her talk, I knew that she was just looking out for me. She brought me a hot cup and placed herself in the chair across from me, folding those dangerous legs in front of me.

Turning on her all-business side she started.

“So, what happened John? Did you at least come up with something? I hope so because otherwise you

took a hell of a hit for asking the wrong question.

“Another kid got it last night. They hung him like he was a side of beef in a cooler!”

“Wow. Well, what else? I know it's not like you to just admire a crime scene.”

I let out a chuckle. “Well, I think that it's the same M.O. As the prior two hits. The wise-guy, or guys, left a note in the pocket, like the other two, and then they used the kid's blood as wall paint.”

Stella crinkled her pretty little nose at the thought of that scene.

“Eeww. So, what did the wall and the note say?”

“Honestly, Stell, I don't know. As much as I don't want to, I'm beginning to think that it's an inside job. You know, someone who knows or IS one of these kids and I'm beginning to think that there's a good possibility of more of these murders happening.”

“Well, they definitely know that you're on their trail. That's a hell of a tattoo that they gave you.”

I smirked, “Yeah, you should see the ones that are covered up!”

“Oh, I'm sure your personal chauffeur has already seen those!”

I ignored her jibes and continued. “Well, we know that quite a few of these people have seen me by now. Subtle I'm not, as you constantly remind me. Now, I understand that it was a guy and a broad that used me as their dance floor.”

“Really? How do you know that? You're after hours dance partner? Does she keep her cap on while she discusses world news with you?”

I sighed audibly, as much as I love Stella when she gets like this it really grates on me. “Actually, yes. She said that when she picked me up she could tell it was a woman running away from me.”

“Oh, do tell!”

I shook my head, “She says it takes a gal to know a gal...”

“Or, a cat to know a canary in the cage. Hmmm?”

I ignored her and continued, “Ok, you ready for what we have?”

Stella moved her hand under her chin in mock rapt attention. “What do we have oh great detective?”

I pulled out my trusty notepad and started marking off my notes. “Ok. The kids all belong to the same class and have the same professor. However, before we look at the prof, he was awful quick to provide the names of his students. And, they all belong to some sort of club.”

“What? A glee club?”

“Nah, some sort of an egghead thing. Debate, or discussion type of club.”

Stella leaned back in her chair, “I get you, what else do we have?”

“Well, of the kids who are still around, there's one by the name of Layton, Prof says he likes to talk a lot, there's a kid who goes by the name of Wargrave, whom the professor admits that he doesn't really know, and a final one, Hastings, whom I've already met. Nervous, jumpy kid.

“So, what's the plan swami?”

“I want you to dig up anything you can on the Professor and the other kids except for Hastings. I'll check out him by myself and I'll also do some digging on my own about this Professor. “

“Sounds like fun, you want me to check out your personal cab driver while I'm at it or have you already

checked her out, thoroughly?"

I shook my head, "Enough already. She's a good kid and I owe her!"

"Oh, I'm sure you do..."

I'd had enough of this cat and mouse game. I wasn't accomplishing anything sparring with Stella.

"Stell, I'm heading out. I'll touch base with tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? You're not giving us much time, are you?"

"The way this killer or killers are going, we won't have a case left if we don't move fast. All the kids will be murdered and there will be no one left. Don't you think?"

Of course, this just served to fire Stella up more and she straightened up, clicked her heels together and saluted me.

"Aye, aye, Capitain!"

You gotta love her I thought as I walked out the door.

Chapter 22

"Another victim found in a grisly manner in the city last night. In a similar case to the ones prior this month, the victim, a student at the local University, was found hung in an abandoned building. Local authorities have no clues and are looking for further leads."

"Celia, did you hear that? Did you hear the radio?"

Celia sipped her coffee at the small kitchen table. "Huh? Bobby?"

Bobby was starting to become animated again, "The radio! Did you hear that?"

Celia took a deep breath. As much as she loved him, his proneness to excitability wore on her at times. Times like these it becomes rapidly apparent of his immaturity in dealing with life's normal ups and downs. "Bobby, OK. But honestly, why do you care so much about this? It hasn't affected you, has it? Or, is there something you aren't telling me?"

Bobby stared as though Celia wasn't there. "How can you say that? No, Celia, I'm not hiding anything. But, don't you find it even slightly unnerving that associates of mine are being killed one by one?"

"I guess so." She took another sip of her coffee. "But, Bobby, you've told me yourself that you don't really know them. Do you think that they were involved in something illegal or illicit?"

"I... I don't know."

"Don't know nothing! You shouldn't allow yourself to get so worked up! You should be concentrating more on our future, US, not some guys that wouldn't give a hoot if it was you who was found! We have a future, you and I, not them. Start worrying about completing your doctoral thesis and becoming an adjunct professor."

Bobby settled into his chair and relaxed slightly. "You're right, Celia. You're always right." he moved to gather his coffee mug and started to rise out of his chair. As he made his way over to the sink Celia moved up behind him and gave him a hug.

"Thanks, Celia, thanks. I sometimes don't know what I would do without you to ground me."

"Have a good day sweetheart, remember, us, not them."

Chapter 23

I knew I needed something more; I just couldn't put my finger on it. As I walked down the street it dawned on me. I made my way over to my favorite seer. I was no sooner seated than I heard the familiar voice.

“Well, if it isn't my favorite pair of Florsheims. I see that they are in need of a shine.

“You got it, Theo. I'll just bide my time watching the sights.” As I said that I was observing a particularly fine specimen of a working girl walking down the street.

The precarious balance that they maintain on those high heel shoes is just amazing, and those calves... My musing was interrupted by Theo.

“So, Mr. Hasard. What is the word today?” He looked around and then focused on my shoes. “It appears that your shoes are a little scuffed today.”

“Well, as of this moment, you know as well as I do.” I handed him a fin. “So, how is your hearing?”

“Well, my good man.” As he began to dab on the polish, “Word is that you had, how may we say...an incident.” As he said this his eyes left my shoes and landed right on my mouse.

“Well, I guess that's one way to say it. So, any word on who?”

As I got those words out of my mouth I heard it. It sounded like a pack of school kids running to the cafeteria on hot dog day. Before I could look I felt the rumble in my chair as the legs attached to the rapid feet settled into the seat next to me.

“Ahhh, I ascertained that I may find you here.”

Oh, boy, it was my erstwhile partner... the Prof.

“Prof, what's up?”

“Well, you asked me to investigate on my own, and I have.”

Where were my manners? Theo was looking at the Prof as though he was a Revenue agent.

“Professor O'Fletcher, may I introduce Mr. Theodore Lionel Washington here.” I nodded towards Theo as he was purposely wasting time polishing my shoes.

“Ahem, the Third, actually. And, it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance sir. I do hope you will relieve me of the personal grace of shaking your hand. As you can observe my hands are quite busy at the moment.”

“Quite, quite, my good man. It is true pleasure to familiarize myself with you also.”

Cripes, another one with the thousand dollar words. Where do I find these mooks? Anyways, Theo broke my disenchantment with them.

“Mr. Hasard, I notice that your shoes are in a very foggy state. Is it perhaps ill winds or will it be safe to confer and discuss the weather further?”

I smiled broadly and looked at the professor as I addressed Theo, “Yeah, the weather is fine. The old Prof here, well I guess you could say that he's like a sidekick to me on this.”

“Old! Sidekick! Well, I don't... but... Well, I thought...”

I mean, Theo, that he's my partner in this case.”

The professor calmed down at this, “‘harrumph’ Well, now that you make corrections as such...”

“The shoes clearing up Theo?” If I didn't cut him off I had a feeling that the professor would go on for hours.

“Well, perhaps they are now. Oh, there it is... I have heard word of a man AND a woman who were perhaps responsible for your 'slip' down a flight of stairs.”

“Yeah, I heard the same thing. Anything else? I mean perhaps this will open up a line of communication.” I slipped him another fin as the professor took that in.

Theo smiled as he continued working on my shoes. This was a game that we've both played for a long time. “Well, now I haven't any concrete facts, however, word is that in certain circles someone is not whom they appear to be. Umm... a mole or plant as you would probably commonly refer to. Many people whisper about the ‘clues’ or notes left, while other circles imply about a doppelganger.”

“Well not to enter an already existing conversation and risking being labeled as rude, but... I have deciphered the latest note that was left at the most recent crime scene.”

Suddenly Theo perked up. “Oh, now I know why your name rang familiar, you're the young lads' professor. Aren't you?”

“Why, yes. Did Mr. Hasard let you know?”

“Well, let's just say that your students and yourself are gaining a certain, let us say, notoriety within the community at large. After all, it does well appear that your troupe is starting to be an exact re-enactment of the mystery novel, “Ten Little Indians”

“Ah! I have a signed copy of the British first edition which was titled “Ten Little Niggers” The Professor enthused.

I decided to chime in now. “Well, that's all fine and wonderful guys, but, what can I use? Huh prof?”

The professor decided to finally show his card. “ Well, the note is not of very high literary value I'm afraid.”

Theo interjected now, cripes, don't make me regret using these two, lord.

“Another note was found? So, if I ascertain this all correctly, all of the bodies had small 'clues' left upon them and these did not find their way into the evidence coffer of their particular cases. Did they?”

“Yeah, whatever, Theo. Now, Prof, what have you got? I'm going to grow old waiting for you two broads.”

That did it; if looks could kill I would be in a hole so deep I'd emerge in China. But, at least now maybe they'd stay focused.

“‘harrumph’ Well, unlike the other written tomes, this quote appears to emerge from a source more mundane than other forms of literature.”

“English, prof...”

“Yes, Mr. Hasard is enamored of the simpler words of description that are available in our language.” Theo drawled.

“Well, the note stated the phrase, “It will be found, in fact, that the ingenious are always fanciful, and the truly imaginative never otherwise than analytic. “” I searched my notes and reference material, and, I am afraid to say, it originates from a... mystery book!”

This was rich, I thought, “Really? Prof, I didn't know that you kept copies of those in your house of higher learning!”

“harrumph' Your droll attempt at humor falls flat like your feet my friend. Of course we keep those dependent upon the author!”

“Well, then just how did you know where that quote came from, Prof?”

“Well, my uncouth friend, the works of Edgar Allen Poe are quite good reading.”

Theo broke in to concur.

“Actually Professor, Poe is one of my favorite poets. “That the wind came out of a cloud, chilling and killing my Annabel Lee...”

I'd had enough. “All right, now, I could really care less between you two of 'what is next to which' What I would like to know is what comes next. Now, which book did that phrase come from?”

“Sigh' *Murders in the Rue Morgue*”

“Well, then I would surmise that our homicide perpetrator isn't so clever after all. It would seem that he is merely going for the obvious, now...” Theo interjected.

“Or, he is merely trying to slip us off the trail, a la the Sherlock Holmes story...”

I cut off the Prof quick. I think I just came up with something.

“Look boys. At this stage in the game I could care less if he reads the back of Post Toasties. Now, why don't the two of you put your vast intellects together and help me figure out who this clown is before he strikes again!”

With that, I got up quickly and I threw another fin at Theo (and the gal at the bank asks why I always change my big bills into smaller ones).

“I'll check back with you two later. Something just popped into my mind that I have to go check out.”

I hurried off in such a state that I didn't even look at the broads on the street.

Chapter 24

I strolled into the library and breezed past the pretty receptionist, or whatever she's called. I nodded to her and went directly to the stairs. If this case did anything, it would certainly help me lose the little bit of weight I needed to. I turned the corner and found the Professor's office with just the guy I wanted to see in it.

“Hastings, I know you and I got off on the wrong foot the other day. Do you have a minute to talk to me?”

The kid visibly shook but, to his credit he sucked it up and addressed me.

“Sssure. Mr... Hey, I don't mean to be rude but I never did catch your name the other day.”

“Hasard, John Hasard. And, you are Mr. Hastings, correct?”

The kid took a deep breath, “Yeah, that's right. I'm Bobby Hastings. What can I do for you sir?”

“Well, I'm trying to figure out what the motive is. You know, for the murders. I mean, who the heck would target you guys? Is it some sort of sport prank that you college kids pull?”

“You know, Mr. Hasard.” the kid took a seat at the table. “I really don't know. I mean, I wish I did. If

I could figure it out then maybe I could feel safe for myself.”

I took a seat across from the kid. He was visibly shaken and even I didn't like to see that, in anyone.

“Ok, Bobby, let's try this. Why don't we start on the suspects? For example, why shouldn't I suspect you?”

“Because I would never do anything like this! I wouldn't even have a thought about it!”

“Well, how do I know that? Convince me that you're innocent in this!”

The kid made a conscious attempt at relaxing. “Look,” he paused. “I'm about to tell you something that even my fiancé doesn't know about me.”

I relaxed back in my chair. “Shoot”

“Well, I... I come from a well-to-do family. In other words, I really don't want or need for anything that most people do.”

“I'm supposed to be impressed?”

“What I am trying to tell you, Mr. Hasard, is that why would I be the killer? I have no reason to 'eliminate' or squash a rival. I have no competition. I am in school to pursue a degree in higher learning, not to obtain a position in society at large. Do you understand?”

“Actually, yeah, I do kid, more than you know. But, who would do this?”

“I don't know. I pore over it every hour and still come up with nothing.”

“Bobby, how well do you know the others? Your peers?”

“It depends, whom do you mean?”

I took my notebook out of my pocket and leaned forward to him.

“George Xander”

Bobby answered calmly. “Nice enough guy. I never really had a problem with him, however, he was a little opinionated though. To the point that he was annoying. Of course, now it doesn't matter, he won't be presenting his side in any debate soon.”

I continued. “Michael Dipson”

“Another nice fellow.” He paused. “Yet, do you know that he's the only one on our debate team that recognized the deceased as one of us?”

“Lawrence Wargrave”

Bobby paused at this one. “You know, he's the one that none of us really know about. He came on campus new and suddenly he was on our team. But, none of us ever really got a handle on who he really was.”

“You don't know where he came from?”

“No, not really. To be honest with you Mr. Hasard, he doesn't even seem to be a college type of guy.”

“How do you figure that?”

Bobby relaxed into his chair now. “Well, it's just a feeling actually. But, whenever we would start to discuss certain types of books he didn't really contribute much. He would just sit there and avoid talk.”

Hmmm, maybe I was getting somewhere finally. “Anything else?”

"I'm sorry Mr. Hasard, not at the moment."

"That's all right kid, you have been a big help. Thanks." I got up to leave.

"Umm.. Mr. Hasard."

"Yes"

"You know, you're all right. I'm sorry how I acted before."

I smiled and tipped my hat. "You're OK too kid. Keep in touch or I'll call on you if I need you."

I took a glance around and made my way out. I don't know why but I thought I just made some head way.

Chapter 25

While I felt good about the case, I still wasn't coming up with anything concrete. I decided to call into the office to see if perhaps Stella had unearthed anything. I found a pay phone and rang her up.

"Hello, Hasard and Knox agency. How may we help you?"

"Ahhh, you sound so professional and alluring when you answer the phone like that! Why don't you speak to me like that?"

She didn't miss a beat, "Gee, Johnny, you're so sweet you give me cavities... now, listen zippy, this 'secretary' just dug up quite a bit of information on some of your playmates."

"Do tell, do tell. What have you got?"

"Well, first thing, that Professor, O'Fletcher I believe it is, is pretty much what he seems. Straight arrow, boring, and known for burying himself in his books. Do you know that this guy has never had as much as a jaywalking charge? Unbelievable. I don't think that you have to worry about him, he's as clean as you're likely to find."

I adjusted my stance while talking on the phone. "Yeah, I kind of figured as much. What have you got on the others?"

"Well, the other kids are about the same. I mean, I thought when you reached college age you were supposed to be wild, but, I guess not. Except for the one kid."

Great, now she was going to be dramatic, something I had no patience for. "Yeah? Who? Or do I have to tuck you into bed and tell you a story before I find out?"

"You wish, Johnny. Dream about me, that's the closest you'll get. Anyways... turns out that the kid named Wargrave isn't who he really is."

"I heard something about this, but not who. So..."

"Turns out this 'kid' isn't too much of a kid at all. He was actually a Marine by the name of McCarn, George McCarn. Turns out that this McCarn died in action. You know, pronounced dead and all. Then, up turns this Lawrence Wargrave, new student transfer and little to no history. Well, you're a smart guy; you can put the rest together."

I shook my head at this, "How the heck did you stumble across this? I mean..."

"Yeah, I know what you mean Johnny. Hey, I used to be married to a P.I., remember smart guy? You don't think that I picked up a few things? John, I know you're a blockhead but you can't be that dense."

I laughed out loud, only Stella could knock me off my high horse and into the horse manure. "I didn't

mean it that way, you know that. I'm on my way; I'll be there in a few! Great work kid!"

"Ahh Johnny, you know how to make a girl feel warm all over."

She hung up and I made my way to my office.

Chapter 26

Don't ask me why, but I always seem to have an extra sense when it comes to danger. It's probably why I've lasted so long in this business. As I turned the corner on West Northrup going to Main I felt it. I touched my palm to my piece as I approached my office. I looked at the front door and noticed it was slightly ajar and the lights were off. Again, something told me to pull out my piece and open the door slowly.

Sure enough, as I walked in I saw somebody leaning over a body on the floor. I strained to focus and then I saw her. It was Stella on the ground. I leveled my piece at the body leaning over her, it took all of my will to not shoot and ask questions later.

"Hey! You! Yeah You! Let go of her. Back off slowly or you're going to find yourself like a pincushion!"

The body didn't move, in fact, he seemed to freeze.

"Harrumph' I dare say sir, but this poor woman is in need of dire medical attention!"

I thought I knew the voice but my head was pounding with rage. "Just get away from her and I'll determine that!"

"Mr. Hasard, please, listen to me."

Wow, it hit me, that sounded like the professor. But Stella said he was harmless. Yeah, and I also heard that the quiet ones were the ones who eventually snap. Damn it, Hasard! You should have known!

"Prof? Is that you? Turn around!"

Sure enough, the sap turned around. It was him, O'Fletcher in the flesh. He was shaking so badly that I quickly figured that it wasn't him that did this to Stella. I holstered my companion and rushed over to her.

"What happened Prof? Huh? Why are you here?"

"I... I... forgive me; I have never had a gun pointed at me before. Allow me to regain my composure!"

I had no patience now, "First time for everything Prof! Now, What?" I leaned in on Stella to look her over.

"I don't quite know what happened. I came here looking for you and came across her lying on the floor."

I could tell he wasn't going to be much help. The kid was pretty well beat up; she also had a cut on her face and her hands. I grabbed a handkerchief out of my pocket and wiped the blood off. I leaned in further. "Doll, what happened?"

She stirred at the sound of my voice; I took that as a good sign. Either that or she hated me so much she was trying to move away from me.

"Doll, what happened?"

She struggled to talk. One thing I did know about Stella, she was one tough gal and whoever did this didn't do it easily.

“Johnny? Is that you?” her eyes were having difficulty focusing.

“Who else has such a good looking mug?”

She was OK, she smiled. “It was that kid Wargrave, or McCarn, the one I told you about. I know it!” she coughed hard. But, I noticed she was coming around more now. “He said, he said he was going to finish this once and for all.”

“Stell, ease up. Save your strength kid.” I turned to the prof. “Prof, get a hold of the ambulance”

“Already ahead of you, my good man. I anticipated as much.” He could have told me that he was already on the phone instead of quacking up a storm. In the meantime, I bunched up one of my extra jackets and placed it under Stella's head. When I was certain the kid would be alright I turned my attention once again to the long-winded professor.

“Prof, sorry about the whole 'shoot you' thing. I didn't see who you were. But, I'm glad you were here. So, did you find anything?”

“Actually, yes. That is how I came about arriving here. Some time after you left the shoeshine establishment, Theo and I continued conversing. As it turns out, and what a nice fellow that Theodore is by the way, one of my students is not whom he appears to be.”

I tried to shake the extra words out of my ears. “Ok, I think I heard something similar. So who is this student, or non-student?”

I continued looking down at Stell to make sure she was still with me. Her breathing appeared to be ragged but just then I heard the sirens coming.

“Ummmm, yes. Well, I believe that it is Mr. Wargrave. While Theodore and I were trading descriptions we both ascertained a similarity in our stories. It turns out that Theodore had noticed a young man with Wargrave's features spending quite a bit of time with Mr. Hastings's fiancée, Celia.”

Maybe the egg-head was onto something. “Really, is that so? Because Stella, before someone tried to make her a pincushion, found out that Mr. Wargrave is in reality a dead Marine who went by the name of McCarn.”

“Really?”

Wow, it was the shortest sentence I think I had ever heard him utter. “Yeah, so apparently this kid is a lying rat who's been playing us all!”

“But why? What would make someone go through such elaborate methods of deception and diversion?”

Before I could contribute a theory the front door thankfully flew open and with it came the ambulance workers. As I looked down at Stell I was awful glad to see them, at least I wasn't being loaded in their van. I got up and hugged the wall along with the prof as they worked on her.

“Prof, if we knew the answer to that then perhaps guys like me wouldn't be needed and I would have had to get a job selling cotton candy at the carnival.”

“Yes, quite. I determine what you are implying at.”

The EMTs lifted Stella up on a stretcher and moved by me. Suddenly Stella's arm grabbed mine.

“Johnny, get this guy...'cough' He had a shiner on his face, like yours!”

“I got it, calm down kid.”

Stella coughed violently and finished with what I swore was “Get him!”

I followed her out and watched 'em load her into the wagon. The kid was going to be all right, that's the feeling I had now. Just as I thought I could leave here came my old friend Jones.

“So, Hasard. What have you stepped into this time? Or were you feeling lonely and wanted to see me?”

“You know what, Jones? I don't honestly know.”

“You stonewalling me still?”

That was it; I leaned in close to Jones, although he didn't mean it I was starting to snap.

“Jones, right now if I knew I'd tell you. However, I come in and find the best gal that I know attacked and left for dead in my office. My own damn office! How do you think that I feel right now? Trust me, I'd throw in with the devil himself if I could put an end to this madness. It's hit way too close to home now!”

“Whoa, take it easy John. All gruffing aside, you know I'm on your side.”

The uneasy tension was broken by the police radio just as the professor moved in closer to me.

“All available cars, hostage situation at the Fillmore Apartments on Tupper. Suspect is threatening to kill a female hostage. Repeat... hostage situation at the Fillmore apartments on Tupper.”

Jones looked at me as though he was relieved. “Hasard, be available. We may need to talk further. Lucky for you, I gotta leave now for that call.”

“Gee, lucky me. I'll wait with bated breath Jones.”

Jones gave me a sneer as he walked away. I yelled out, “Jones thanks.” I tipped my hat towards him as he got into the squad car. With all of my anger I didn't catch all of the broadcast.

“Mr. Hasard. If I may, the Fillmore is where Mr. Hastings resides. You don't suppose?”

I snapped out of my daze as if I was hit by a baseball. “Anything is possible, Prof. You know how high strung the kid is! I think we better go check it out instead of wishing we did!”

The professor nodded his head in agreement. As I looked down the street for a ride you would think that she had radar. There she was, squealing tires and all racing around the corner right to me.

“Hasard, jump in! I'll get you there!” that pretty face, that I was becoming attached to, yelled out the window as she came to a stop.

I threw open the door and climbed in. “What's up kid? You my guardian angel?”

“You wish. I was listenin' to the police band and I heard the hostage situation. I put two and two together and figured it was something you were wrapped up in!”

I motioned for the prof to hurry up. The door wasn't even closed when she took off.

“What would make you think that?”

“Come on, Hasard. I'm a lot smarter than you give me credit for or would like to know!”

The professor grinned ear-to-ear upon that. “My, isn't this convenient, a personal cabbie and who knows what else. Interesting.”

As if we rehearsed it we both answered, “Ain't what you think prof!”

Before we could continue the discussion, she pulled up in front of the Fillmore apartments. Of course, by now it looked like a boardwalk carnival.

“Looks like its just standing room only John!”

I answered the back of her head as usual. “I see that, it's going to be tough getting in.”

Suddenly out of one of the front windows popped a young girl.

“Help! Help” He's going to kill me!”

We watched as the chaos ensued. The police, my buddy Jones, and every other sheep was watching the scene unfold. However, that didn't do me any good. The final key to my puzzle was in there and I had to figure it out. The professor stated the obvious though.

“Well, this is quite the dilemma. Now, how should we go about gaining entrance to the building?”

“We? Nah, I don't think so, Prof. I don't want to have to nanny you, and god forbid you get hurt, I couldn't live with myself!”

“I beg to present an opposing view, my good man. If you happen to approach Mr. Hastings without my familiar face and you may be responsible for him doing something rash!”

My soon-to-be ex-cabbie then chimed in, “You know Hasard, the tweed may have a point!”

“Oh, okay, so now the two of you are more experienced than I am in these situations. Well, geniuses, how are we going to get in there? This place is surrounded like a cheese truck by rats.”

“I've got you covered boss!.” With that my re-appointed cabbie threw the car into gear and started backing up so quick you'd think she just saw her mother. The next thing I knew we were parked in an alley next to the apartments.

“Here you go! Just shimmy on up that fire escape and you'll enter the service entrance! You just have to watch out for the third step from the top, it's a little loose. Then, walk along the escarpment and you can enter from the back window!”

I smiled as I got out of the car. I stopped at her open window, I threw her a tenner. “I have to ask, how did you know about...”

She put a well manicured finger up to my lips, “Don't ask. This girl doesn't kiss and tell. Maybe after you buy me a drink... Go! You better hurry!”

I tipped my hat and almost dragged the professor with me to the fire escape.

I looked up at the fire escape stairs of the Apartment complex. Like most of the expensive high rises in the Queen city it protruded up ten floors. , wow, maybe when I was younger I could hop those stairs easily. I jumped to grab the riser and bring it down so that I could comfortably climb. I positioned it so the base touched the ground and started up the stairs. I glanced behind me to watch the professor follow me.

Chapter 27

I wasn't as limber as I used to be, at least out of bed. I rushed up the old fire escape as quickly as I could. I was doing better than the Prof. It seemed as though he stumbled on every step up. But, I had to hand it to the guy, he didn't give up. I don't know why, but I thought that he would just give up after the first flight. By the time I reached the final flight he was right behind me by only a few steps.

“Prof, you all right back there?” I yelled as I reached the final step before we reached the top step of the

landing.

“Do not fret about me, 'puff' I am right behind you my good associate!” Good old Prof, I knew he was OK by the way he used 40 words where another man could answer in one.

“Ok, Prof. Now, be careful on this landing and be quiet. We're going to enter in this window here and we don't want to be heard!”

I made my way on the ledge and eased into the window. The professor followed me a little unbalanced and fumbled as he reached the window. I grabbed him by his lapel and pulled him in, “oh, Th...” I clamped my hand over his mouth and gave him my patented nasty look. At least I thought it was patented.

We found our way through the door in the room. “I looked around and we were standing in the cleaner's room. We made our way to the door and moved down the hallway to Hasting's apartment”

From there I could hear what was going on in the front room. The kid was right, of course, it was going to be well worth that drink to hear her story about how she knew about this room. Anyways... I motioned for the Prof to follow me. As I peered my head outside the door I heard it.

“Celia, what are you doing to me? What!?”

“Bobby, stop waving that Table leg around! You're going to hurt me?”

I could hear the commotion of moving around. Great, the mouse has a weapon. Instinctively I touched the hilt of my gun as I continued listening.

“Hurt you? What about what you've done to me?”

“You? I've done nothing to you!”

I heard a chair fall over. Great, I didn't want to move yet, but would I have a choice? I stayed back for a bit more, fully against my better judgment.

“Celia, you came in here, and you told me there was evidence against me! How the heck can that be? I wasn't even near them!”

“Bobby, acting like this won't help matters. Now, just relax and we'll figure it out. I didn't come here to get you upset, I came to help!”

“Help! HELP! How do I know that you aren't setting me up? How do I know that you aren't mixed up in all this?”

The kid had a point, actually that was an angle I didn't even think of. It made sense though, Wargrave as an inside guy and her setting up her boyfriend.

“Bobby, darling. Now, you should know bet...” The kid cut her off with another scream.

“You! You're leaning out the window yelling that I'm going to kill you, I don't think that that's helping!”

I heard another chair fall and decided I couldn't sit idle any longer. I looked at the prof, nodded my head and made my way out into the hallway.

Chapter 28

As I made my way out into the hall I saw him too late, there was Wargrave, hugging the wall waiting for me. Before I could react he swung the pipe he had in his hand at me. Luckily I started to duck but I still got hit, and I hit the floor. As I shook the stars from in front of my face he got ready with the pipe

once more. Great, after all this, Mama Hasard's boy was going to end up a piñata. I willed my body to move as he brought the pipe down once again. This time it hit my shooting arm and I dropped my gun. As I struggled for my dropped gun the pipe came down once again, this time towards my head.

'Whack' I heard the pipe strike and looked down at my body. Nothing! As I scanned my eyes upwards I saw my unlikely savior. There, the professor held a book which he brought into the path of Wargrave's pipe. I watched the Prof and Wargrave struggle as I began to get up. The Prof turned out to be more resourceful than I thought. He grabbed the book with both hands and twisted the pipe out of Wargrave's hand. In the meantime I was on my feet and grabbed Wargrave myself. As I pistol whipped him he finally began to fade out. The professor, having thrown the book to the ground, kicked Wargrave in the shins bringing him down. As I was throwing a set of handcuffs on him I heard her running down the hall.

"George, George..." Before she could get another word out the Hastings kid tackled her to the ground. Wow, I guess I was wrong about these bookworm types; they did have something in them. I left Wargrave as he was coming to and grabbed a length of rope and tied up the gal's hands behind her back.

I turned my attention back towards my playmate.

"So, we meet face-to-face this time coward. What's wrong? Your mask rip?"

Mr. Personality decided to spit at me. "You're lucky I'm cuffed you son-of-a-bitch. I'm a marine dammit!"

I chuckled. All these tough guys quack up a storm when they're bound. Of course, if they were as tough as they thought they were then maybe they wouldn't be tied up.

"Yeah, tough marine taken out by a Professor!" As I began to get up the other one started.

"It would have worked you fool if you would have done your job and done in this dumb dick when you were supposed to!"

"I knew it!" Bobby exclaimed.

Now it was my turn to break the kid's heart. "Kid, what the marine and 'your' gal want to say to you is that these two bound mallards have been an item. All the time behind your back!"

"Celia, how? Is this true?"

"Bobby, what can I say?" she looked down at the floor avoiding her ex-boyfriend's eyes. "George, here and I used to be an item years ago. Then, I lost him, or so I thought. Look, Bobby, I really did fall for you but when I found out that George was back, well, I guess that one thing led to another. "

The kid looked like someone stole his Halloween bag and gave it to the pound.

"Ahh, so, that is why I suddenly inherited a new student and there was little information that I had on him." the professor chimed in.

Wargrave spit out more venom. "Yeah, you've got it professor. And, boy, I gotta tell you. You birds were ripe for the plucking. You let me in so easily it was almost embarrassing."

I was starting to have enough of this clown, but, if I kept him talking I could fill in the blanks to this sordid little tale.

"Oh, yeah, what a shame. You encountered some decent, good people, unlike yourself and your moll here."

"In your ear Hasard! It would have worked out fine if I had done you in when I had a chance! You and

your stinkin' cabbie. How much do you pay her to be around you withered old dog! Oh, by the way, how's the office help?"

The low-life was itchin' for another slug from me, but I wasn't going to buy into his garbage.

"Actually, the office help is quite fine. Unlike you, she's a tough gal who can take a hit. Big, bad, Marine!"

He struggled against his cuffs. Unfortunately he fell down again as he just happened to trip over my feet.

"So, if you would be so kind everyone, allow me to fill in the remainder." Great, this should only take six hundred words I thought as the Prof started. "Obviously a policy was taken on young Mr. Hasting's life, making the rest easy to proceed with. Celia, having covered that, provided for you to infiltrate the literary club, thus allowing you access to your victims. Then, utilizing Mr. Hasting's penchant for excitability, it would prove a simple matter to create a web of evidence around him. Isn't that correct you two?"

Bobby looked as though he was kicked in the head by a mule.

"What can I say? I got tired of struggling in life. Cripes, I was brought up with nothing and the last thing that I wanted to do was spend my adult life with nothing. George's plan sounded good and I figured, with Bobby's insurance payment, I could live a normal life. I mean, come on, what kind of life would I have living with Bobby? A professor? With that kind of salary I would still be struggling." she trailed off. "I'm sorry Bobby."

I laughed aloud now. "Well sweetheart, the joke's on you. Old Bobby here has a lot more than he let on to you."

I took that as a cue to open the front window and yell down to the boys in blue. I'd had enough and it was time to break up this little party.

"What does he mean, Bobby? What?" Celia pleaded with Bobby now.

Bobby sighed audibly. "What he means, oh dear Celia, is that I come from a wealthy family, and I planned upon getting my doctorate and then managing the family trust. You wouldn't have had a care in the world Celia. In fact, I had already started the arrangements for you in my family's estate."

"But, you lived like a hermit!"

"Celia, I needed to concentrate on my studies, not worry about my surroundings. I kept it simple on purpose. And besides, I wanted to make sure you loved me for me, and not anything that I might have."

Now it was Celia's turn to look as though she was kicked in the head. I couldn't help but add my two cents as the boys came into the room.

"Good move, kid. Now you and your mighty marine can be pen pals in adjoining joints." I turned towards Bobby. "Hey, at least you found out now."

Before I could fire off another witticism my old pal Jones arrived.

"Hasard, I'm not even going to ask how you got up here so quick. But, care to fill me in?"

"I think the two lovebirds in handcuffs will be able to let you in on the action. In fact, I would 'hazard' to guess that they have one heck of a tale to tell you."

"'Harrumph' I would dare to forward that it is almost Shakespearean in effect." the Professor chimed in.

The boys moved in to grab Bobby. “Whoa, leave the kid be. He's just another victim in this sick game that the other two played him in. Don't worry, he'll be down to the station to talk, I'll take care of it. Just give him a few. He just found out that there is no Santa Claus!”

Jones chimed in, “Yeah, trust what Hasard just said.” He turned his attention to Bobby. “You are gonna be down, right?”

Bobby nodded. Jones shot me a look.

“Yeah, Jones, I'll be down too. In a bit...”

I took that as my cue to walk out. I looked back at the Professor and motioned for him to follow me. We made our way down the stairs again, only this time inside.

“Well, I must concur, that was quite an adventure. Would you not agree?”

“Yeah Prof, I would say it was.” I reached into my pocket and pulled out a note I had retrieved from the floor of the apartment. As I scanned it I couldn't help but laugh.

“Why, what is so amusing Mr. Hasard?”

“This note I found. The geniuses were obviously going to plant it on poor Mr. Hastings after they forced him to snap.”

“Well, what does it say?”

“A fitting end to his kind!' what do you think Prof? Another great tome?”

The professor smiled in my direction, “Well, obviously a foreshadowing of the fate of Miss McGillicutty and Mr. Wargrave, wouldn't you say?”

“Yeah, I guess Prof. “

The professor's eyes turned downward.

“What Prof? What's up?”

He pulled the book that stopped the pipe out of his pocket. “It's a shame about this bible. It is such a nice piece of work, now it has a pipe wound on the surface of it.”

I smiled as we continued walking down the street.

“Yeah, I would say so Prof. Especially since it was illustrated by Gustave Dore.”

The professor stopped in mid stride. “I say, Mr. Hasard. How would you know that? Or is there more to you than you happen to represent?”

“Prof, you should know better than that. After all, I am just a simpleton, isn't that what you said?”

Before the professor could answer the welcome squeal of car tires broke the quiet.

“Hey, Hasard, Prof! Good to see you guys in one piece! Hasard, you lout! Do you have my fare!” She broke out laughing loud.

“Kid, great to see you too!”

“Hey, not that I want you to think anything, but I'm off in a bit. Got some time for a gal?”

“You know something? That sounds good to me. Where shall I meet you?”

“Oh, you know me, I'll find you!” with that she sped off leaving me to see her hand wave out the window.

As I continued walking I tilted my head to the professor. “Hey, Prof. Thank you.”

“Why, of course. Perhaps you would like to indulge me in a drink during the time you are waiting for your chauffeur to get off of her shift?”

I nodded, “Well, she isn't quite my chauffeur, but I think she is one hell of a kid. It probably wouldn't be a bad thing to get to know her.”

“Yes, Yes. I would suppose that she is quite unique. Now, how about that drink?”

I chuckled as we neared Harry's.

“You know what Prof? That sounds good. I'll buy you one of those 'medicinal' drinks.”

I looked up to the sky and said a quiet thank you to her. You know something; it was going to be a good night after all.