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Death On The Air

By Michael J Renner

Chapter 1- "Dead Air"

It happened oh so fast that no one had time to react.

There they were, the four of them, sitting around the table, talking joking, laughing, having a drink, when one of the guests, Arthur Neeld, just went and dropped dead. If not out and out rude, it showed, at the very least, a definite lack of manners. He could have at least waited until the end of the show. But this being "Satellite Radio", it probably enhanced the broadcast.

The show was of course "The Alan Harvey Afternoon Zoo" and they were used to controversy. In fact it was what the audience expected. Alan and his sidekick, Sheri Rogers spent the last five years building up their Satellite Radio show after 10 years on the regular airwaves. They loved this medium better as there wasn't as many rules and regulations they had to follow or worry about.

They had a following of almost 20 million, which is outstanding and relatively unheard of in radio. But most important to the sponsors (and producers), the audience was that coveted 18-30 year old college educated men and women who had jobs and spent money like, well, like 18-30 year olds do.

Amongst the usual guests on the show included everything from people with abnormalities (physical and mental) to the full range of the political spectrum. Sometimes they even got "regular people" like TV and Film stars and sport figures.

No matter who the guest was, they were subjected to teasing, personal questions about hygiene and underclothing choices, all the way to embarrassing childhood foibles. Of course guests were told to listen to the show and most were aware of what the show was like, and so were ready for the grilling. In fact the better the sense of humor showed by the guest, the less teasing they would get. In fact if someone came on and was uptight and tried to be serious, they would be subjected to cruel ridicule by the hosts and call in audience.

During each broadcast, there would be time to have refreshments and of course the refreshments were supplied by sponsors. Sandwiches from a local deli chain, cakes from a national bakery, drinks from different pop and beer suppliers, each wanting their products mentioned. They even didn't mind the teasing and in fact a lot of the nasty comments have actually been used in advertisements. Heck, as long as the products sold, who cares what was said.

With the show being four hours long, they had the chance for eight breaks (20 minutes of show, 8 minutes of commercials and 2 minute of the host and guests talking about the products per half hour segment of the show). Each segment was of course sponsored by a different product or company and the position of each spot was very competitive. Alan and Sheri loved this since the more people paid for the spots, the more money they would make.

The format was labeled as "Shock Radio", which meant that anything goes, maybe even murder. Well time to find out.

Today's guest, Arthur Neeld, was a particularly uptight and conservative columnist for a very influential right wing newspaper and blog. He was the one that the "Talking Heads" on TV would bring out during news shows when they needed a reactionary viewpoint. He has made many enemies and he is constantly being attacked by other pundits, even if he isn't around to defend himself (in fact most other commentators are so afraid of him that they won't say anything derogatory to his face). His views have become more of a verb, being Neelded (a play on needled) meant that you have been mentioned in one of his pieces. How it is meant depends upon whether he agreed with you or not.

Alan and Sheri really disliked Arthur and they felt his ideas were too close to fascism. They ridiculed his views on sending all juvenile criminals straight into the armed services, as well as all unwed mothers should work as nurses in order to get government stipend checks.

Arthur being prepared, gave back as good as he got. In fact there was a time when everyone thought that the three of them were going to get into a fist fight. If it wasn't for the producer, Rob Hill, physically getting between everyone and calling for an early break, it would have been a sight for the studio audience to remember (okay maybe not as good as the "Stripper Contest Show", but you got to take what you can get, right?).

It was during the fourth break when they brought out the coffee and sponge cakes that it happened. The cakes and coffee were placed on the table. Cups were placed in front of everyone, as well as cream, soy milk (for lactate intolerant people), and various packets of sugar and artificial sweeteners.

The cakes, wrapped in cellophane, were opened before being served, so as to avoid the embarrassing faux pas of a guest not being strong enough to rip open the package. Yes, this had actually happened to a football player who was ridiculed by fans for it to the point where he had to be traded. So to avoid a repeat performance, Rob had the show interns, a couple of broadcast students from a local college, prepared the food and drinks as they were called for by the host. Hey one has to start somewhere right?

Alan went into his normal spiel and started telling everyone about the "Lincoln Bakery's Spongecakes" ("available in all supermarkets, convenience stores, gas stations or anyplace else over-sugared, preservative laden, nutritionally deficient, junk food is sold", goes the tag line), when Arthur let out a gasp, pointed across at Alan and Sheri, reached for his briefcase and then just fell to the floor. The studio audience let out a roar (they were die hard fans of the show) and the whoops and whistles were deafening. It wasn't until they realized it wasn't a joke that they fell into a stunned silence.

Someone finally called 911 and the words "Don't touch Anything" rang throughout the studio as there were people coming forward trying to revive Arthur, but the sweet smell of almonds, a dead giveaway for cyanide, was all too prevalent. Well the studio audience did get something to remember after all.

Many of Arthur's enemies wanted him dead, and would gladly have helped with his execution.

But which of them actually had the guts to do it?

Chapter 2 - "The Investigation"

Inspector Alfred Barnes of Homicide was looking at the scene and figured he would probably have an easy case in front of him, right? After all it was someone everybody in

the room hated, and the killer would want to brag about the deed and get his or her accolades, not to mention the sure fire book deal with full movie rights.

Naturally everyone was in shock and wondered aloud how this could happen. As the inspector interviewed the participants, he was just drawing blanks.

Alan and Sheri admitted to disliking his political views, but felt that ridiculing him on the air and exposing his follies to their audience would be enough. Neither had admitted to ever having anything to do with him or meeting him before this day.

Rob, the producer along with Ken and Jenna the interns, also claimed to have no previous dealings with Arthur. They also went through their routine of unwrapping the cakes, making the coffee, and getting the creamer, soy milk, sugar and sweetener packets of the refrigerator where they were kept prior to being served on the show.

No one noticed anything out of the ordinary with any of the items on the tables. As far as the coffee cups, well Alan and Sheri always had their own special cups that they drank out of everyday, and most of the guests, including Arthur, brought his own in, as they usually stopped in the coffee shop in the lobby before coming up. Of course there were cups available in case one didn't bring one, or had a paper/styrofoam cup that was thrown out during the broadcast.

At the appropriate time, Ken and Jenna would prepare whatever the product being promoted was. In the case of the deli sandwiches, they would look over what was delivered and made sure Alan's had no mayo or tomatoes, and Sheri's was strictly vegan. Of course they would ask the guests before hand what they wanted to make sure they would make them happy and of course give the sponsor a great plug, which would keep them happy and signing the checks.

When it was time for the Lincoln Bakery's spot, the cakes were taken out of the box and all the cellophane was unwrapped and the cakes were placed on the plate and the plate was always placed between the broadcast participants. Coffee was then served, with the condiments along side. Everyone was poured coffee by one of the interns, they took turns serving the items as it kept down arguments about who does what and both got the chance to meet all the guests. The coffee was provided for by the station and was made in the regular coffee room which was open to every employees of the station. And no they didn't leave the coffee alone in there while brewing. So nobody could have come in and "spiked" the coffee behind their backs. The routine was the same every day.

Inspector Barnes had all the cups, half eaten cakes, creamer, soy milk, sugar and sweetener packages picked up and taken to the lab for analysis. he kept looking at the crew and just knew someone was, or maybe all of them were hiding something. It was as if there was a conspiracy of silence between them.

Were they protecting someone, or were they truly innocent and he was barking up the wrong tree? Maybe he'll have to widen the search, all the way from the delivery people to the manufacturers. Of course the station management was more than willing to work with him, up to a point. They were more interested in damage control than really worrying about a death in their studio. Typical.

The phone banks were really burning up the lines. The rate at which calls came in really surprised everyone. Most, if not all, were saying how cool it was that they "bumped off" one of the worst people on the planet, others wondered if they wouldn't do this as a regular feature. Yes said another caller, they could have the listeners vote on who they want to hear die next. Inspector Barnes just shook his head as he couldn't believe how

sick society has become, and what was wrong with the young adults and youth of today. Alan and Sheri had decided that maybe they should take a few days off until the clamor died down and give the police time to work things out and placate the sponsors, not to mention Arthur's family. Of course they sent flowers and took out full page ads in all the major newspapers denouncing the attitude of the callers, and proffered their sympathies to his family. They made sure they mentioned how "Just because we disagree with someone, or feel they are misguided in their approach to life, doesn't mean that we wish them dead."

The ads were of course placed by the PR department after a close scrutiny by legal to make sure they said all the right things. And of course they were quick to repeat these thoughts once they came back on the air a few days later. But things didn't feel the same. There was a pallor over the broadcasts, and both Alan and Sheri seemed just a bit nervous. Ken and Jenna didn't move the same, and some of the guests even refused to partake in refreshments. It was as if the ghost of Arthur Neeld was hanging over their broadcasts. Maybe his spirit wouldn't let them be comfortable until justice was done. Meanwhile Inspector Barnes was getting nowhere with his investigation. Yes one of the spongecakes was poisoned. But how and when did it happen? The trash had been removed so they couldn't get any of the cellophanes that covered the cakes. He had all the people who were involved with the broadcast and their belongings searched thoroughly. He had them in numerous times for questioning. He knew more about the production of a radio show than he ever wished. In fact he felt he could run his own show, and pondered the thought seriously. He wondered who he needed to talk to about having his own show. Oh the things he could talk about, all those solved cases, oh the unsolved cases, maybe a contest to help solve them? The possibilities were endless. But first the task on hand. It had been a week since the death, and the station and sponsors were getting nervous. Sales of Lincoln Bakery's goods were dropping as people stopped buying them. They tried everything, including a big public recall of all products on shelves, but still nothing seemed to work. Copy-cat crimes started popping up, as well as hypochondriacs and scam artists were trying to claim feeling sick after eating one of the spongecakes. Bogus lawsuits were pouring in and the management decided that something needed to be done and done fast. If the police couldn't do anything, maybe a private firm can? Inspector Barnes felt that being a public servant he owed them a solution. It was his job to solve this, and everytime he didn't find a solution, he felt he let the public down. But alas even he agreed that maybe it was time to bring in an outside agent. He wasn't so proud that he wouldn't accept help.

After all he did all he could, right?

Chapter 3 - "Bringing in Help"

Mitch Robinson was an ex-cop who decided that he was tired of being forced into dangerous situations, and instead he should be able to choose his own danger. That is why he quit the force took his correspondence course, got his license and opened up his own private detective agency. He did keep on good terms with his old friends on the force, and was always glad to help out (for a fee of course) whenever they were stuck on a case. In fact his old childhood chum, Alfred Barnes called on him regularly, and he always gave him a good rate, as he knew it was public money and the city wouldn't look too kindly if he charged too much. This kept the doors open to steady work, and that is always a good thing.

When he got the call this time, he was more than ready to jump in on the Neeld case. He had been following the case through the newspapers, and felt sorry for his old friend. However this time things looked even better. First of all the sponsors, station, and the DJ's were going to pay the fee, so he could charge more for his service. "Hey everybody wins, except for the murderer, this time" he thought.

He quickly called in his two freelancers that he worked with. Mary Hereford and Jason Eider. Mary and Jason were two of the geekiest people Mitch had ever met, but they got results and that was all that mattered. They seemed to live together, but for some reason he couldn't see them actually as a couple. The only thing each of them enjoyed was rebuilding their multiple computer systems and playing games on the Internet. Oh yes they also are the best crackers in the biz and they can find out anything about anyone or anything you wanted.

What Mitch needed Mary and Jason for was to find out everything they could about the 5 people involved (including Arthur of course) and what was the nature of the relationships if any between them. They were very eager to get on as they were big fans of the show ("that figures" thought Mitch, "as that type of sophomoric humor suited the two of them") and were very familiar with the incident. In fact they were ardent consumers of that brand of spongecakes, and never gave it a second thought afterwards as they continued on (stocking up before the recall took place) eating them even with (or in spite of) the general scare.

The first meeting would take place in Alan and Sheri's office. Mitch wanted to do it in his, but then he realized that his office is just a spare bedroom that he shares with his pet Parrot. So that would not do. And the living room just wasn't professional enough. One can't do a good grilling of a suspect when they are sitting on a couch sipping tea could one?

He posted himself behind Alan's huge mahogany desk, and placed a chair directly in front of him for his interview subject. He got all the participants together and asked them to be patient with him as he knew just what he read in the newspapers, and he wanted to be sure that he got the whole story. He decided to take them first one by one figuring this way maybe they would open up more.

Chapter 4 - "Alan the Host"

First in the box was Alan. He was a bit uneasy and a bit distracted. Even after a week he wasn't able to forget the scene and wondered if maybe that could have been him. He never really been on this side of his own desk, and he felt like a trainee in an interview. He didn't like this stranger taking over his office and sitting in his chair, but he knew the situation and like a good trooper he went along with it all.

He mentioned how he is not involved with the preparation of any of the snacks, food or drinks. That is what interns are for, after all that is how he got his start. Rob was the person in charge of lining up the guests, and it was he who suggested that they try a "Fair and Balanced" broadcast seeing how they lined up a few liberal pundits the day before. He thought this was a good idea and they both agreed that if they got Arthur Neeld, it would be a ratings coup.

He was surprised to hear that Arthur was eager, and yes he knew what the show was about. He thought that they had great chemistry, bantering insults and digs at each other. In fact he and Rob talked with Arthur after the first break and discussed maybe having him come on as in a recurring spot during the year. They would all get together after the

show with Sheri and hammer out the details. He was surprised that off the air, he actually liked Arthur and felt a bit guilty what he was doing to him on the air, but once the show restarted they fell back into their roles as adversaries. Yes it was all an act, an act that made them millions.

He really thought Ken and Jenna were necessary evils. Yes though he started as an intern, he hated the way they hung around him, especially Jenna, all the time. He really liked his privacy and needed time off the air to prepare for the next day.

He did let out that he and Sheri were not just partners on the air, but did actually live together, and enjoyed a wonderful life. They just enjoyed each other's company and even though they would search out their own topics and guest lists, they made final decisions about the show together. It was an equal partnership, and that is why they made it work so well.

As far as Arthur went, he never met him before that day, and really didn't pay him much mind. There were no death threats or any warnings before the show started, at least none that he knew of, maybe one of the interns or Rob knew of any. No he didn't notice anything about the serving of the cakes and coffee, and didn't really notice as he is busy talking and quipping about the products and checking his notes to make sure he knew where he was in the show. One doesn't want to do a promo lead-in for the wrong product now does one?

That was all he had to say, and looked at Mitch with a confused look in his eyes. One that spoke of sympathy, fear and a sense of loss.

With that Mitch said thanks, and asked him to send in Sheri.

As he rose to leave Alan just said "Find whoever did this, and make sure they pay", then he left.

Chapter 5- "Sheri The Hostess"

Sheri came in and took her place in the chair. She nervously drummed her fingers on the arms of the chair and just kept looking around the office as if she had never been there before. Of course her desk was just a few feet away, but this new perspective seemed to enthrall her. The strain on her face showed she was not taking all of this very well.

No she didn't remember the serving of the items and who brought out what. She usually takes that time to look at her notes and practice her lines for the "live" promo before they cut to commercials and she can run off and take care of "personal business", if he knew what she meant.

Mitch nodded and a wry smile crossed his lips as she went on.

She never met Arthur before, and thought it was a great idea to get as many voices on the show as possible. This way they could make fun of every side in the political debate without seeming to take sides. Free speech is what their show is about, and if someone is foolish enough to disagree with them, well they are candidates to be ripped on the show. She didn't know about Rob and Alan talking with Arthur during the first break but she knew that they would include her on the decision later when it got serious, and yes her vote counted and it had to be unanimous. But she felt she would have agreed to the idea. Controversy boosts ratings, and ratings were what drove sponsors to pay a lot of money, and money was let them live their wonderful lifestyle. So why not?

She didn't mind Ken the intern, as he seemed to be generally interested in the business and

was a willing and eager helper. He always had a lot of questions to ask and felt that Sheri was a great mentor for him. Jenna on the other hand seemed a bit spacey and more interested in Alan than in an actual radio career. However she did her work and was useful for a lot of other things as well, you know running errands and stuff.

Then she dropped a bombshell.

Yes she didn't mind who the sponsors were, but her body was a temple and she watched what she ate. She wouldn't touch a Lincoln Bakery Spongecake if they were the last food on Earth. They paid well, and all the college students and dopers who listen to their show seemed to love them, so she went along with the charade, but substituted an organic healthy cake made to look like the rest for herself. This way the studio audience and sponsor's agents wouldn't suspect a thing. She made them herself and marked them with a little "M" on one end so she would know. She left a plate of them at the studio, and she didn't mind sharing them with others.

However that day when she went to pick up her cake she noticed there wasn't one on the plate. She later noticed on an uneaten end of the one Arthur took a bite out of had the "M" on it. Some how the plate must have been turned around and he just took the one closest to him.

Could she have been the actual target? Could someone slipped into the kitchen area while they were on the air and slipped something into the cake? Or maybe someone just wanted to discredit the show and get their coveted time slot.

Mitch thought about this for a minute. He wondered if Barnes had thought of this angle, or was he just concentrating on the cake. Or maybe there was something he was missing here.

He let Sheri go and as she rose she sniffled and it looks like tears started to well up in her eyes, she look soulfully into Mitch's eyes and said how badly she wanted him to find the murderer and how she never wanted to go through something like that again.

With that she left and told Ken he was next.

Chapter 6 - "Ken the Eager Beaver"

Ken came in cheerfully and sat down in the chair. Of course he was used to this chair, as well as the one in front of Sheri's desk, so it was normal for him to be there and he seemed comfortable.

His attitude was one of a person who didn't mind being where he was, and his countenance was of a confidence and sureness of purpose.

He loved being an intern, and thought the world of Alan and Sheri. He didn't always agree the way they treated guests, and he felt when he gets his own show, he would be more respectful towards them. But hey this was what their audience demanded, and he was just an intern, so he kept his thoughts to himself and went about the daily grind.

Alan was all right, but seemed to keep to himself when they were off the air. Sheri however seemed to take an interest in the training of the young interns, almost as if she wished she were a teacher instead of a radio celebrity. Maybe in another life.

As far as Arthur Neeld, he was aghast that he was going to be a guest. Ken always looked up to Arthur as his role model. In fact he once applied to be an intern on his show, but was turned down. That was 2 years ago, and the reason was the lack of education and experience in the field. So he enrolled in college and got this gig instead. He was

planning on using this position as a stepping stone either to get his own show, or on Arthur's staff.

As mad as he was after being turned down, he wasn't that mad, and he felt it made him work harder to prove to all what they were missing. Yes he believed that being successful was the best revenge. Besides, he wouldn't want his hero dead would he?

Also he and Arthur talked before the show and it seemed that Arthur did recognize him, and had nothing but good words and praise for the job he appeared to be doing on this show, and maybe there might be a spot coming open in the next six months or so. maybe they should talk sometime in the next few weeks.

As far as Jenna, well she was all right he guessed. A bit of a loon. She was always swooning over Alan to the point where he would get embarrassed by the attention. Sure when she worked she did her job well. She would run a lot of errands and knew her way around the studio. She didn't seem to get along with Sheri so much, but they would have their "private meetings in the ladies room, and they seemed to get along after that for a while.

As far as the incident, well he was making the coffee and getting the cakes ready when Jenna showed up a bit late, but jumped right in to help as he went to tend to the coffee pot. The cakes were already on the plate and he believes she took them out and placed them on the table. she was in a rush to go somewhere so probably didn't notice how she laid them down or where Sheri's "special" cake was located.

The shock of seeing his idol laying on the floor dead really sent a shock wave through his system, but it has since subsided as he has a job to do, as they say, "The show must go on, right?".

After an extended chat about his duties, dreams and aspirations, as well as what life like a detective was like, Mitch let him get on his way and do his chores.

As he left he turned again to Mitch and expressed his love and admiration for Arthur, and hoped that whoever the dastardly coward who did this was, that they be caught and punished and made to suffer for their crime.

With that he left and sent in Jenna.

Chapter 7 - "Jenna the Wonderful Helpmate"

Jenna came in and immediately broke into tears when she sat down in the chair. Se was wondering how this all could have happened, and how could someone be so cruel and mean and...

She stopped and dried her eyes and went right into her spiel.

She mentioned how everytime she thought of the incident it just made her so depressed that she couldn't help herself. How she was busy on an errand for Sheri and got back a little later than expected, so she wasn't there to help out Ken with the preparation of the cakes, but was there in time to help him serve. Yes he had them all done, but he went and grabbed the coffee as he wanted to make sure he got some "face time" as he called it with his idol. So she was in charge of the cakes as she placed them on the table, but didn't notice the location of the "special" cake as she was too winded from her unspecified "personal errand" for Sheri.

She finally stopped talking and Mitch decided to ask her a few background questions that he started everyone else with.

No she hadn't known Arthur Neeld, and in fact never heard of him before. She really didn't pay attention to "political junk and stuff". As far as she was concerned he was just another in a long line of loud mouths that were lined up and they all looked the same to her (even the women).

Her feeling towards Sheri were ambivalent. Sheri seemed to not like her for some reason, but they did get along and she was happy to do errands and other stuff for her and Alan. Maybe because Alan showed interest in her that made Sheri dislike her. However on the whole she felt that they weren't enemies per se, and they did have their moments of bonding, so it wasn't all bad.

Alan on the other hand was the one she felt really helped her career here. He always has time for her and she just adored the way he tore at the guests, especially the more uptight ones. She hoped one day to take her place along side him and then rocket off to her own show. She thought Sheri was bringing down the show lately and seemed a bit distracted. In fact Sheri told her that she is considering retiring in a year or two and just settling down, but please don't say anything as it was told in confidence and is a secret between "us girls".

Mitch nodded that he understood and let her continue.

As far as Ken was concerned, she felt him to be a stuck up toadie. He was always rushing around asking for something to do and brown-nosing Alan, Sheri and Rob. He would elbow his way into some of her responsibilities, and try to be a superman. She felt he was a bit uptight, but always seemed so cheerful, even when getting yelled at for mistakes he made. She couldn't understand what Sheri and Alan saw in this pathetic little person, but maybe they just enjoyed using him. In fact it seems that Sheri favors the little squirt and hinted at maybe some extracurricular activities might be happening.

She held her hand to her lips and leaned in close as she said this. Another little secret. She seemed to have a few.

As far as Rob the Producer of the show, well she had nothing to really say about him. He just seemed to run around a lot and scream at everyone about weird things that don't seem to be that important for the show.

For instance if there isn't the right brand of water in the fridge for certain guests, or if the air temperature isn't exactly 72 degrees F. But I guess that is his job right?

As far as guests are concerned he never seems to come up with his own ideas, and I have to give him a few now and then. In fact there are a lot of things he should be doing that he isn't, and it falls to Ken and myself to do. Well mainly I have to do them as Ken is too busy kissing up.

"Like what for instance?" asked Mitch.

She went on to explain how she was involved with the calling to arrange the guests, arranging rooms and pickups from the airport, finding out their personal likes and dislikes, that sort of things. She also had her serving duties which she felt was beneath her and she should have an assistant to do this stuff, as she is the "senior intern" being here a year before Ken arrived, so she could help Alan more with his planning and writing of the show. But alas maybe next year she would be free of the menial stuff and move on up. Heck with her moving up and with Ken to do the little stuff, she felt they wouldn't even need Rob.

Mitch nodded and wondered aloud about the "special errands" she does for Sheri.

Jenna went on to explain how she would take care of getting the ingredients for her

special cakes. The organic ingredients were available at very few stores, and luckily one was on her way home. So it really wasn't a problem. Also there was laundry and dry cleaning, as well as..well you know, other stuff too personal to get into.

There was that phrase again, and he wondered what could this "personal" stuff really be. Oh well she clammed up and that was all he would get out of her.

She just looked at Mitch and said that if there was anything she could do for him, anything at all, just ask and it's his. She winked and went on to say that he must find the killer and bring him to justice for Alan's sake.

With that she rose and left the office.

Rob was the last one Mitch needed to talk to, so he waited for him to show up.

Chapter 8 - "Rob the Producer"

Rob came in and sat down. He was disheveled and had a look of a man who needed a rest far far away from "RadioLand".

He placed the pile of papers he was holding on the desk, looked around and said he was ready to answer any questions.

His job was to arrange guests and sponsors, see to the hosts, take care of making sure the interns knew what to do placate management and take care of complaints, etc. etc.

Basically just make sure the show ran smooth and everybody was happy. In other words, he was the parent for the show. Yes he did produce another show, Morty's Sports Report, which ran in the mornings, just before this one. It was hectic, but the money was good and he loved the business.

As far as arranging guests, he would meet with Alan and Sheri and they would discuss who they wanted and what they wanted to discuss usually two to three months in advance. This way they had time to arrange guests and make sure schedules meshed. He forgot exactly who suggested Arthur Neeld come on the show, but he did remember that they all agreed that it would be great. This way they could prove they weren't biased by silencing one side of the political debate. Yes he did remember talking to Arthur and Alan about coming back on a regular basis, also that Alan would return the favor and come on Arthur's show. Of course it all depended upon Sheri, as the decisions all had to be unanimous and neither Alan nor Sheri liked making important decisions about the show without consulting the other. It is what made them a great team.

As far as the interns were concerned, Ken and Jenna were all right. They tried hard, but neither had any real "on-air" talent. But they did what was asked of them and he thought were going to make great "off-air" back room types in this business. Well running sound boards, answering phones, research that sort of things. Also he did use them for calling guests once he had arranged with their agents. It was routine work and this way they felt they were doing something more important than filling coffee cups, water glasses and serving food.

As far as getting the refreshments between breaks, he left that all to them. His job was to line up the sponsors and get commitments as to what they were going to pay, and provide. It was the interns jobs to actually fetch the food from the deli and prepare all the rest. It's what interns do in this biz. Basically glorified "gofers" who are also expected to learn the ins and outs of the off-air side of the biz. Once in a while they do find a very talented intern who does turn into an on-air talent, and they get their own shows, or other

offers from film and TV. In fact that is how Alan got his start.

When asked about the "special Cake" for Sheri, he hemmed and hawed for a bit then reluctantly started to talk about it.

It seems that Sheri is a very picky eater and doesn't put anything with chemicals or processed flour. She is a vegan and demands all her ingredients be organic or at least grown from the ground. Therefore she has a recipe using healthy ingredients which turns out a cake that looks like one from the sponsor. She makes them herself, in batches of twelve and places half of them in a private refrigerator in her office, and the rest of them in the refrigerator in the break room. She doesn't mind that other people eat them, as she is a very sharing person.

This is to fool the studio audience into thinking she is actually eating the sponsor's food, and therefore they should as well. It's her little private joke. She cares what she eats, but as far as everyone else, well she feels that is their decision. Of course she is always talking about "retiring" and opening up a chain of Organic Supermarkets. But that is down the line as she is enjoying the fame and money from this gig at the moment. Alan says when she retires, so will he as he feels that they are a great team, and he doesn't think he could do this without her. It just wouldn't be the same, kind of like Abbot without Costello, Barnes without Noble, Peanut Butter without Jelly, if you catch my drift.

It was amazing how our audience really loved the whole death scene and there are enough sickos out there that listen to us that actually want more! I tell you, one is way too much, and a second would be the end of the show.

He wasn't sure who would have done this, and was afraid that no one will ever find out. But luckily the sponsor is back on board, and the audience hasn't diminished, in fact they are more popular than ever. Perhaps other shows that are slipping in the ratings are seeing this and we will soon have copy-cats? he laughed at his own sick macabre joke. But he knew too well how the business worked and wouldn't have been surprised if someone tried it in the near future.

If Sheri and Alan do leave, well he always has the morning sports show that he is producing, and he was sure he could find a replacement show for theirs. He had made enough money, and since he worked the long hours that he did, he wasn't hurting for money and could easily survive for quite a few years without having to worry. Besides running only one show would be like a vacation, and maybe he was ready for a career change anyway. He loved Alan and Sheri like his own siblings, and if they wanted out, well he would support their decision, and besides he was sure he would still be their agent for gigs in the future, so let it be.

As he rose to leave, he turned and said that he didn't care one way or another if the killer was caught, it was all in the past now, and he just cared about the show. He walked out giving Mitch a wink.

He came back in a minute later, running and out of breath as he gathered the papers he placed on the desk earlier, apologized for the intrusion and left, again.

Mitch looked at his notes and started organizing them. He felt that the answer was staring him in the face, but alas it just wasn't getting through that thick brain of his.

He called Inspector Barnes and asked if he had tested all the cakes and creamers and sweeteners. Barnes said he had, and also had all the cakes still in the refrigerator tested as well as the half eaten one he found in the trash can. Only one had cyanide in it and the

rest were clean. Though he did have a question about why the one with the poison the two in the fridge, and the one in the garbage seemed to be different from the others. It seems that they were of an organic nature while the rest were definitely processed and from the commercial bakery. Mitch said he would see if he could find out, but he already knew, but he did promise that he would keep it secret unless absolutely necessary to tell the word.

He thanked the inspector and hung up the phone. He felt he was much closer to his answer, but again something was missing, but what?

He went on scratching his head when a commotion broke out in the hallway. People were screaming and running around in a panic. Mitch packed up his notes, in case of a fire or bomb scare, and ran out of Alan's office and tried to ask what was going on. He finally was able to reach Rob and he pulled him to the side and asked him what the heck was going on?

Rob looked at him and with a panicked look and said:

"Sheri's lying dead in the women's bathroom. Apparent heart failure while snorting coke."
"

It appears that she had another deep secret she kept from the audience. He let Rob go and phone for assistance, though the only assistance would be coming from the morgue and an autopsy. Well Rob had said another death would be the end of the show, but he probably wasn't thinking it would be one of the hosts.

Chapter 9 - Too Much Information?

Mitch went back to his office/home and pondered what just happened. He was kicking himself for not recognizing the nervousness of Sheri for what it was, yet he couldn't know? Was he supposed to think that just because they were celebrities that they were into drugs? Of course not, that was stereotyping. Besides he knew quite a lot of celebs that were not into drugs. So he could forgive himself for that, but a suspect, or worse possible target being murdered on his watch? That he couldn't forgive. He was now even more determined to settle this once and for all.

When he got back he called Jason and Mary to see if they found anything. They had and wanted him to come around later so they could share with him what they found. Oh yea, Jason and Mary hated going out for anything. They mainly shopped online, and even used online services for grocery shopping, and could count on others for their alcohol supplies. As far as social life? Well they had each other as friends, and of course multitude of online forums and their incessant gaming. They worked as freelance research specialists, having their fees paid through online services. So leaving the apartment was, though an option, not really necessary. Except the occasional holidays to visit parents once a year, and of course the two SciFi conventions they participate in, but that didn't really count as once they got there, they never left the hotel until checkout time.

So he had to go visit them, and oh yea, brought two cases of beer, part of the fees you know, with him.

When Mitch reached their apartment, he found the door slightly ajar, and the sounds of two different battles were resonating from inside. He was used to this, as both Jason and Mary were engaged in some sort of online game. They left the door open so they wouldn't have to get up in the mid-battle.

Mitch walked in, shut the door behind him and placed the beer in the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator and placed a few inside and took out a slice of ham and started munching as he sat down on the couch. From this vantage point he could see both of them in their specially designed gaming chairs. Jason was involved in some Medieval quest, while Mary was fighting some future war. After 20 minutes, the pair finally ended their battles, said goodbye over their headsets to whomever they were battling with, and signed off. They acknowledged Mitch and Mary went to the kitchen to get some popcorn, as Jason reached for his bag of chips. It seems they were involved in their games for 2 hours, and now needed to refresh their liquids, and eat something.

Finally they got down to business. They were both eager to share the information they acquired, but please no questions as to how, and Mitch didn't really want to know so no problem there.

Mary went first. She had a lot of information about Rob, Sheri and Alan. First of all they were not just partners, they were actually married. She found that they secretly eloped two years ago, but wanted to keep it a secret for business reasons. Only the two of them and Rob, who was not only the producer but their business manager as well knew about the marriage. He held a great stake in their business and his wealth was tied up in their productions. If the partnership had ended he wouldn't be as well off as his other productions weren't doing so well.

Rob has been talking to producers and studios out in Hollywood in regards to a movie about Alan and Sheri's life. Sheri was against it and didn't want their private life invaded by the "Scum of the Earth" referring to movie people. In fact she also had secretly purchased land for her stores and was in negotiation with suppliers for her Organic Stores. Of course Rob would have been cut out of these profits as it wouldn't have anything to do with the actual show. She also found where Alan has been secretly moving funds away from Rob's control to a new financial manager, as if he was planning to retire along with Sheri, so there was some tension between the couple and Rob.

It is amazing what one can find if they dig deep enough and know where and how to look.

Jason had a report on Arthur and the interns, Ken and Jenna.

Ken was interesting as he was a good student, but somehow was one of those that couldn't translate theoretical into practical. Yes he was good at school, but not so good in the real world. He did try a few times to get onto Arthur's show. In fact there was a time a few years back where Arthur actually had a restraining order placed on Ken. It had expired and they saw no reason to renew as it seemed he calmed down, since he was now working on Alan and Sheri's show. He has worked there for about a year. Ken had been in trouble during High School, getting kicked off the football team after a positive drug test. He also was very good with science, especially chemistry. He lived by himself, and seemed to save his money. He also ran a fan web site and a blog about the show, where he waxed poetically about the beauty of Sheri and the indifference of Alan.

Jenna was also a good student, and she first came on the scene two years ago and has been running her own private Alan Fan Club. She also has been developing podcasts that she offered as proof that she was ready to go on the air. Jason thought they were not only amateurish, but down right boring and definitely terrible. Mary said that she would call them more horrible than terrible, but added that Jason was just being nice because it was a female's voice. It also seems that she has a cousin who has been arrested multiple times

for dealing in drugs, mainly cocaine, but always seems to get off on technicalities. Her bank account was very active, and it seems that she was getting something on the side somewhere. She also lived alone in an apartment in the artsy neighborhood. As far as he could tell, there was no connection between her and Arthur. And oh yea, Ken and Jenna belonged to the same health club.

He couldn't find anything of real interest about Arthur that made a difference.

Mitch thanked them both for their efforts. They both beamed as they loved hearing praise about themselves. The both giggled and said anytime. Mitch said he was to be off, and would send them a money transfer next week, and they were fine with that (no checks so they don't have to leave their nest). They settled back into their gaming chairs, hooked up their headsets, picked up the controllers and they were off into their dream worlds. Mitch let himself out, closing the door behind him.

As Mitch walked back to his apartment, he thought over what he had just learned, and then it hit him. Yes he just realized what he was overlooking back at the studio. It was all clear, and yet so obvious that he wanted to kick himself for missing it.

He had a solution, and now just needed to get everyone together, solve the mystery, see justice done and most importantly, collect his fee.

His pace quickened as the cloud of uncertainty lifted and he thought he saw sunshine, but alas it was only a streetlight, it was after 10 P.M. after all.

Chapter 10 - Truth, Justice, and Show Me The Money

Mitch woke up and immediately called Inspector Barnes. He told him he wanted to see him at the studio around 2 P.M. Oh, and bring a couple of uniforms as they will be needed.

He later called Rob, Alan, Ken, Jenna, the studio head and the Sponsor's agent to meet with him at that time. They all agreed, as they were going to be there anyway to discuss the future of Alan's show in the wake of Sheri's untimely death.

At 2 o'clock the group was assembled back in Alan's office. Mitch once again sat behind the big desk, and had 4 chairs arranged in front for Alan, Rob, Ken and Jenna. Behind them there were 4 more chairs for the station manager, the agent for Lincoln Bakery, and their secretaries. In the back of the room, by the door, stood Inspector Barnes and two uniformed officers, one male and one female, ready to do their duty if called upon.

Inspector Barnes, if he had his druthers, would run the whole rotten lot in, lock them up and forget about them. But alas there were laws against that sort of thing in this country, so instead he had to wait for the results of Mitch's meeting.

Mitch began by thanking everyone for coming and that he was ready to solve the case. There was a murmur amongst those attending and he held up his hand for silence. He asked that everyone hold any questions or comments until he was finished talking. he said that he felt that the killing of Arthur Neeld was a red herring, as he wasn't the real target. The real target was Sheri. Arthur was just a side show.

Everyone gasped and squirmed in their seats.

Tings just fell into place and it was obvious once you whittle down the details. The poison was in the spongecake, and it was in one of Sheri's special cakes. It was served up so that Sheri would get it, but alas in the confusion of that day it was set down so that the cake was closer to Arthur and of course he grabbed that one and the rest is history.

Alan of course didn't have a motive or the means, nor the opportunity to poison that one cake. Yes only one was poisoned we had the rest tested. Rob had a motive, loss of possible future income from Sheri's proposed retirement and refusal to go along with the movie idea. But again not the means or opportunity as he wasn't here when the food was prepared and he didn't do the serving, so he couldn't have put that cake on the plate. He could have put it in the refrigerator before hand, but alas with other people eating them, he couldn't take that chance.

That leaves us with our two interns. They both had the means, the motives and the opportunity to do this.

Ken had the motive to murder Arthur, as he refused your employment and actually had a restraining order against you. You also placed the cakes on the plate, so you could have made sure the poisoned one was closest to Arthur, being it was differentially marked with Sheri's mark on it.

Ken's face turned ashen as he shook with anger and tried , in vain, to scream in protest, but Mitch waved him down and continued.

"But alas you didn't do the serving did you? And Arthur did talk to you and basically showed you all was forgiven, and even wanted you to come by for a position didn't he?"

Ken nodded, calmed down, and the color returned to his face.

Mitch continued, "besides the second murder is the one that leaves you in the clear".

"That brings us to Jenna".

Jenna rose in her seat, but a hand on her shoulder sat her back down.

"Yes you had the means and motive, and opportunity".

He went on to explain how she purposely came in late to help with the preparation of the snacks. This way she could place some of the suspicion on Ken. She knew of his past with Arthur, but not of the news that they had made up, and all was forgiven between them. She took one of the cakes from the refrigerator home and spiked it with cyanide. She brought it back and when Ken turned to take care of the coffee after plating the spongecakes, she took the one for Sheri off the plate and substituted the one she brought in. She took a bite out of the form the plate and threw it into the garbage can hoping no one would think anything about it. She then served them purposely so that Arthur would get the poisoned one, and everyone would blame Ken. But for the second murder, she would have got away with it, but that didn't help her at all.

The second murder is the one of Sheri. Yes everyone thought that maybe it was because of the cocaine and her heart condition, but alas there was cyanide in her bloodstream, and in her nasal passages. She wasn't counting on an autopsy, or that we would be looking for cyanide. Yes the "special errands" Jenna ran for Sheri, was in fact feeding her cocaine habit. Her cousin supplied her with the cocaine and very possibly the cyanide as well. With that Inspector Barnes and the female officer stood on either side of Jenna and placed her under arrest.

with tears in her eyes she looked at Alan and said, "I did it for us my love. I know she couldn't have loved you like I do. She was just using you. I thought with her out of the way we could.."

But Alan didn't let her finish. He looked at her with hatred in his eyes, and said, "Sheri was my wife, and our love ran deep. If she used me it was because I allowed it as married couples that love and respect each other do. What makes you think I wanted you? "

With that he turned away and made sounds of disgust.

Inspector Barnes and the police officers lead Jenna away to be booked for both murders. He knew he could have the cake that was poisoned and the one thrown away tested for Jenna's DNA to help prove Arthur's murder, and her confession to help prove Sheri's.

Alan turned to the studio exec, and said that he was going to have to retire, as he didn't feel he could do the show. Maybe buy a boat and sail around the world.

The exec just said, to take 6 months leave, go sailing and they'll talk when he gets back. And with that left the room.

Rob and Alan were talking, and they decided that maybe they should honor Sheri's memory by opening those food stores, together, and maybe the film wasn't such a bad idea after all, as long as Alan gets final say over the finished product. Rob Agreed.

Alan turned towards Mitch and said, "Thanks for your help. Now I can have some closure." He took out his checkbook and said, he knew he wasn't the client, but felt he had to pay something for the work he had done, and wrote out a check for \$10,000 and gave it to Mitch.

"Is that enough?", he asked Mitch.

Mitch just smiled and after a mild protest took the check and pocketed it before Alan could change his mind. He then gathered his belongings and hoofed it on home, where he just couldn't wait to tell his parrot the news.

A Room With No View

By Michael J Renner

Chapter 1

The darkness of the moors on this moonless night gave Angus Podgorny an uneasy feeling. It was not the kind of night you wanted to be outside in the middle of nowhere with a broken down vehicle. The cold wind ripped through everything, and to make matters worse he slipped into a puddle, soaking him as well. "Well", he thought to himself, "If only I can make it to that old manor up ahead, maybe I can dry out and light a fire. No one has lived there in years, and I'm sure whoever owns it wouldn't deny a traveler a wee bit of comfort".

Now Angus wasn't the superstitious type, and he has heard the stories about the myth of the moor with the ghosts, who supposedly walked these parts, and the mysterious disappearances, but that was easily explained, or so he thought. The wind howling across the moors, and the shadows from the brush in the starlight did produce an eerie sight, "but that's for simple folk", thought Angus.

It was then that he heard the music. He wasn't sure at first, maybe the way the wind circled the valleys below, but it grew louder as he approached the old, deserted manor. It sounded like a single piano, and yes it was coming from the house!!

"Great, maybe someone is home after all, and they just might have a phone", thought Angus, "lucky for me". As he approached the house, a chill just ran over his body, "Just the wind and these damp clothes" he thought.

Strange, even though the music was definitely coming from the manor, there was no evidence that anyone has been here in years. Passing the feeling off as just letting his imagination run wild, Angus went up to the front door, and noticed it was open! More like the hinge just rusted away and the door couldn't defend itself from the constant strong winds blowing across the moors.

Angus' first instinct was to run away, very fast, but instead he decided to go in, "Hello", he shouted, "Anyone home"? "My car broke down up the road and I was wondering if I could use your phone"? No answer came back. The music seemed to be coming from the upstairs. Warily he climbed the stairs in the dark, when he saw the light coming out of a room at the top. The haunting music was coming from within. As he reached the room, the music stopped. He peered in and thought he saw a dark figure hunched over the piano, but in an instant it was gone.

He decided to investigate further. He entered the room slowly, when all of a sudden he felt very dizzy and disoriented. As he came around the room seemed to come alive! It looked very different, as if from another time. The people in the room seemed to be dressed in costumes from 200 years ago, and he seemed to wander into a party. They were all grouped around the piano, where the dark figure peered at him with a vicious sneer.

A cold shiver ran down his spine as he turned to run away. He found he couldn't seem to move his feet. He started to panic, and tried to scream, but no sound came from his mouth, not that anyone would have heard, but it was just an instinctive reaction.

That's when he saw the pale, drawn face in front of him. "Going so soon?" asked the stranger, "but you just got here." "WWHhoo aarree yyyouu?" quivered Angus. "Who I am is not important", answered the stranger, "what I want to know is why are you here?" " More importantly what should I do with you?" At that point, Angus felt a cold sharp pain in the back of his neck, and crumpled to the floor. He was never heard from again, and when his car was found the next morning, without a trace of him anywhere to be found, Angus became part of the myth of the moor.

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CHAPTER 2

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Kristin Johnson was one of the reporters covering the disappearance of Angus. She came up to this part Scotland for the magazine to investigate the stories and mysterious vanishings. Her publisher knew she had a special knack for solving these types of mysteries, and always seemed to come up with the most brilliant articles to boot.

"Well", she thought, "If it was me I probably would head for that old manor on top of the hill". "Who lives up there?" she asked one of the local policemen. "Nobody, that place has been deserted for close to 200 years", replied the policeman, "It was owned by a local noble man and his family, but they disappeared mysteriously, as has anyone who tried to live or visit there. It is said to be haunted, the ghost of the nobleman, who was an accomplished pianist, who it is said to be heard playing on the darkest nights, just as he was the night he and his family disappeared, or so goes the myth."

"Oh, nice place" replied Kristin . "Who owns it now?" she asked. "I believe it's owned by an old retired general or colonel or something like that, name of MacArnold I think", replied the policeman. "Though he has never visited here, I think it's held in a trust, he might not even realize it's his".

"Mind if I go ahead and take a look around?" asked Kristin .

"Sure, no problem. The place is empty, except for rotten furniture and cobwebs. Been through there many times myself, but never found anything untoward."

Kristin started trudging across the muddy moor. She wasn't feeling anything eerie or odd, but then it was morning, and the sun was shining brightly. "Ouch", she cried as her foot slipped, and she fell into the mud. "Must be a Thursday" she thought, "I never could get the hang of Thursdays". Luckily she was prepared with her boots and rain gear, so it really wasn't so bad, just embarrassing if anyone was watching.

As she neared the manor, she started feeling a chill, "Must be the dampness", she thought, but her intuition said something else. She went through the front door, and the musty stench of a place that hasn't been cleaned for a century made her cringe. "I've been in worse places", she thought as she wandered around the main floor. There was nothing to suggest that anyone has been here for quite a while. The old furniture was all but eaten away by time, water and rot. There were two old paintings above the mantle. "Must have been the Lord and Lady of the house", thought Kristin "Yes she was very beautiful, such a shame to be cut down like they were in the prime of life". She saw another painting of a younger woman on another wall. She thought the woman looked very familiar, too familiar for comfort. "Well all these paintings look alike anyways, probably saw one done by the same artist somewhere else."

She decided to look around the upper floor next. The rooms were pretty much the same, old broken down beds and tattered curtains. The mold and mildew was overwhelming

and everywhere. As she went from room to room she was thinking, "I'm surprised that this place has never been vandalized. You would think someone would have ransacked it and sold off the property long ago. Of course it is rumored to be haunted, but surely someone would have tried. But everything looks like it was left alone to rot over time". She came to the last room, where she saw an old mildewed baby grand piano. As she entered the room she felt a cold chill run down her spine, and thought she saw a group of people in period costume, having a small gathering. She felt dizzy and disoriented, like, well she felt that way before, but couldn't place the feeling. She also noticed the strange collection of dolls over the fireplace, but the way they were dressed up didn't quite fit the scene. As a strange dark figure that was playing the piano at the center of attention noticed her, she went into shock. She fell back, and found herself looking back into the deserted mildewed room. For a minute, she actually felt she saw the room, as it was in its prime a century or two ago. "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark", she thought, "Maybe it's time to get t9000 to check this out for me, I think I remember that odd felling I felt as I entered the room, but better safe than sorry. Also is that the same retired General MacArnold I know?"

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CHAPTER 3

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General (ret.) Gordon MacArnold was pleased when he picked up the telephone and heard the voice at the other end, "Hello Ms Johnson, been a long time hasn't it?"

"Yes, too long", replied Kristin . "General, I need to talk to you, is it okay if I come by this afternoon?"

"Sure Ms Johnson, my door is always open for you, you should know that."

"Thanks General, and please call me Kristin , There's no reason to be so formal."

"Okay see you around 1 then?"

"Yes, See you then".

As he hung up the phone, the General felt a tinge of excitement. It must have been the urgency and anxiety in her voice. He knew something was up, and if she was calling for his help, it has to do with strange or unusual phenomenon. Even though Kristin wasn't officially a part of The United Nations Alien Contact Team (UNACT), he did feel like she was an old Comrade-In-Arms, especially after what they went through with the Steward and all. And of course, if an old comrade needs his help, who is he to decline. Besides, he felt he could do with a bit of excitement.

Kristin was prompt, knowing that an ex-military person like the General hated to be kept waiting, besides she always liked him especially the way he treated her when she hung around UNACT's

headquarters. He could have thrown her out, but instead he treated her respectfully and as if she was part of his team. That is why even though some might think she is imposing on him; she knew he didn't see it that way.

"Hello Ms John.. er Kristin , come in I'll put on some tea".

"Thanks General, I could use some."

After they had their tea and shared a bit of small talk, old friends catching up on each other's lives, Kristin spoke up. "General the reason I need to see you is about a strange occurrence I had up in Scotland yesterday. By any chance do you or any of your relatives own property that is vacant with an old dilapidated manor house?"

"Why yes", replied MacArnold, "In fact it's been in the family for generations. Right now it's held in a family trust. We have tried to get rid of it, but every time we thought we had a buyer, they would either come back and ramble on about ghosts, or we would never hear from them at all."

"Can you tell me a bit about its history then?" asked Kristin .

"Sure. Pretty much most of it is boring old sot, about how the clan got together and made their money by farming and shipping. But about two hundred years ago something strange happened. My great great great etc. grandmother was away while with child, but when she returned, everyone was gone. No one saw anyone leave, nor knew of any foul play. When she tried to go into the house she was scared away by the "Evil Spirits" that seemed to inhabit the house. She tried to get the local clergy to exorcise the spirits; she even went as far as recruiting local witches. The story goes, it really wasn't the whole house, just the upstairs parlor that was haunted. It was said you could hear eerie piano music coming from the room, but upon further investigations, the room was always empty. Most of the people who went into the house were never heard of again. Hence the myth of the moor was born."

"I heard the music", said Kristin , "And when I went to investigate the room was empty and all the furniture was rotted. But when I entered the room, I felt like I was transported back into the 18th century!"

I saw a strange figure humped over the piano, and when he looked at me my blood ran cold. I know I've seen him somewhere else, but I couldn't quite place him."

"That's why I need your help General, I'm not sure where else I could turn."

"Well", said the General, "I'm glad you came to see me. I've been meaning to check out the stories myself for years, but always seemed too busy. In fact I almost asked the Steward to help, but I could hear him now, "I don't do house calls General".

"Oh ", replied Kristin , "You know he would have been glad to help, but I understand, you probably felt it was just an old tale that wasn't worth the effort."

"You're probably right Kristin , still why don't we go up and see what we can find." Do you still have that computerized tin man, what did you call him?"

"If you mean t9000, yes General I do, but don't call him a tin man to his face. He doesn't like that. For a computer that claims to have no feelings, he sure does get them hurt a lot."

"Great", said the General, "Let's go ghost hunting".

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CHAPTER 4

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Kristin , the General, and t9000 arrived at the old manor later that evening. It was a pleasant drive, and they spent the time catching up some more on their old adventures.

"How illogical", thought t9000, "Why do humanoids always want to talk about the past? Don't they have more important things to do? At least they're not prattling on about the weather."

The General looked over the countryside in the evening dusk, and thought how beautiful and peaceful the area was. "I should really move up here now I'm retired, and play the country squire", thought the General.

Kristin saw him and said "Enough daydreaming General, plenty of time for that later. We do have a more pressing engagement". "Quite right", said the General, "Lead on Mcduff..".

"Oh General, I know we're in Scotland, but could you lay off the Macbeth?"

"No promises", replied the General. "Did you unpack the torches?"

"Yes here they are, I even brought extra batteries."

As the trio cautiously entered the old manor, they turned on the torches so they could have a better look around. The General realized he never visited this place. He was also amazed at the

desolation and filthiness of the interior.

Kristin showed him the paintings over the mantle. "Relatives of yours?" she asked.

"Ah yes, the lady is the one I told you about earlier, the other is her husband. He was supposed to have been a great pianist and patron of the arts. It was his birthday party that was being held the night they disappeared. She was off seeing to a dying aunt or something, that's why she wasn't present." Of course if she was, I probably wouldn't be here".

"", said Kristin , "That's the man I saw in the room. But I know I've seen him somewhere else before."

"Now that you mention it", replied the General, "He does look very familiar. But how do I, or we know him? Those eyes are so cold and forbidding, it's hard to believe he was so charitable."

As they looked around the rest of the downstairs area, they couldn't find anything that seemed out of place. Just a lot of old cobwebs, dirt and mildew.

"Well I guess we've been avoiding the inevitable, haven't we Kristin " said the General.

"Yes", replied Kristin , "Could you carry t9000? "

When they got to the top of the stairs, the music started again. "There", said Kristin , visibly shaken, "from that room over there". The General went forward and peered in. Nothing, just an old rotting piano and shards of drapery and carpets. But still the haunting music continued. But how? From where?

"Danger" chirped t9000, "There is an unknown energy force coming from that room. I believe there is some sort of barrier."

"Can you identify it t9000?" asked Kristin . "I mean what sort of barrier is it?"

"Insufficient data" replied t9000, "I'll get to work on it immediately".

Kristin could see the General was mesmerized by the room and the music. He seemed drawn to the room as if he was being commanded to enter.

"Look out General", but she was too late as he moved into the room and just vanished!!!!

"Oh well" she thought, "I got him into this, I might as well see if I can get him out".

"t9000, stay here and monitor the situation. See if you can figure out what is causing this anomaly, and hopefully pull us back. I'm going in"

"Unwise", replied t9000, "I think it's some kind of time barrier. There is only a 58.4657% chance that I can bring you back once I find out what's causing it".

"Well", replied Kristin , "I always said I wanted to retire to simpler times". With that she entered the room and vanished, she realized who the woman in the first painting resembled. It was her face she saw in that painting...

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CHAPTER 5

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The General couldn't believe his eyes. At first he felt disoriented and dizzy. The room

was brightly lit with candles. It was then that he saw the dark figure hunched over the piano. It was the same man as in the painting he saw downstairs. The figure looked up at him, gave him a haunting smile. The General felt light headed and everything went blurry. When he regained his vision, he was still in the room, but the figure was gone. He turned to leave, but a wall replaced the doorway.

"Well, what a fine mess you got me into this time", he thought. It was then he heard Kristin call his name.

"Where did you come from?" he asked.

"There" said Kristin pointing to the non-existent doorway, surprised to see the wall.

"Is this what you saw before", he asked.

"Yes" replied Kristin, "Only there were people here, and I was able to get back out."

"Well", said the General, "I only saw once person, or so I thought." They decided to look around. The room was decorated in the height of fashion, for the late 18th century. There was a fire burning in the fireplace, and the floor was finely carpeted, and the piano, which was all rotted out, looked brand new and in good repair.

They looked at the window, but it seemed all blacked out. It was then that they spotted the dolls on the mantle. They inspected them closely. It was a strange collection.

Something was very odd, very odd indeed. That's when it hit them. All the dolls were dressed in different clothing. Not just different in color or style, but them seemed to be from different time periods!

When Kristin saw the one on the end, her blood ran cold. She immediately recognized it as from the police photos of the missing person that brought her here in the first place.

Yes, it was a doll of Angus!!

"I have seen this before", said the General. "It's the calling card of the.."

It was then that he was interrupted by a figure entering the room.

"Ah, so you returned" the figure said to Kristin, "and you brought a friend". "My God, is that the General?" "My, my how you have aged".

"Who are you?" demanded the General and Kristin in unison.

"I am the Eradicator of this household, that's who, and you of course are my guests."

You can simply call me "The Eradicator"..

With that he let out a haunting laugh that was all too familiar to the General.

#

CHAPTER 6

#

Outside the room t9000 worked at the problem diligently. He finally figured out the wavelength of the barrier so at least he could see into the room and saw the General, Kristin, and a strange man dressed in black, stroking his goatee. He immediately sensed the power source as the piano. If only he could break through he could save his mistress and her friend.

"What are you doing here, and how long have you been here?" asked the General realizing the worst of his fears.

"All in good time, my dear General, all in good time." Replied the Eradicator. "I am so glad you could make it to my party." "It gets boring dealing with the same people over and over. What we need is some new blood to liven things up". With that he let out another of his howls. Kristin's and the General's blood ran cold. Could it be, that they are trapped in one of the Eradicator's deadly games? What was his game anyways?

"General", said the Eradicator, "Did you ever wonder why I didn't have you killed in our previous engagements? Yes, I am one of your ancestors. I guess it's fortunate that my so called wife is away, so we could meet later, or in your case, earlier." "No way" barked the General, visibly shaken, "I couldn't have come from such evil stock as you."

"Ah, but it is true" continued the Eradicator, "Why do you think you were so open minded to the strange happenings and creatures you encountered throughout your career?" "Why do you think the Steward was so drawn to you?" "No, he probably didn't know either, or why he was so pulled towards you." "Come now, you must get changed so as to not arouse suspicion in these primitives." "Here's some clothing, change now or else."

Kristin recognized the dress from the painting. "So that's how it got there", she thought. "Well we might as well play along, and give t9000 time to come up with a way to rescue us," she thought hopefully.

The General looked at Kristin and she gave him a slight nod and a wink, indicating to play along. After they changed, the Eradicator returned with a string of guests.

"I think I would like a portrait of this young lady", the Eradicator said to a man obviously a painter. "As you wish sire", replied the painter. He then had Kristin sit down and he went to his task.

"Please, partake in the celebration, my dear General". "I assure you the wine and food are not poisoned or harmful in any way."

The General helped himself to some wine, and confronted the Eradicator.

"What's going on, where are we?" asked the General.

"Where we are is exactly where you were before you entered this room," replied the Eradicator. "Actually you are in my Travel Pod." "You see I was on the run from the Controller when my Travel Pod broke down. I was able to use a trick I learned from another renegade Controller, and hid my presence from them, and was able to set up a time loop for these people. They keep reliving the same day over and over as if it never happened. I couldn't have them going around loose in the countryside, I created this whole myth and they all just disappeared from normal time." "Yes this is the myth of the moor they prater about. Anyone unfortunate enough to wander in, well, how do you like my doll collection?"

"You fiend", shouted the General, "Why do you do it?"

"I have to", said the Eradicator, "I need the energy from their bodies to power my illusion".

"I should kill you now" said the General, and he rushed the Eradicator, only to be stopped in his tracks.

"I don't think so my dear General." "As you can see I can control your mind from here, as he patted the piano". "This is how I lure my victims into my lair." "My Travel Pod is back to full functionality, but I still have the need to remain hidden from the Controller".

"At least for a little more time. So, please relax, or die!"

At that point a women's scream was heard, as a strange metallic being came crashing through the wall.

"t9000", screamed Kristin, "Am I glad to see you."

"Mistress", replied t9000, "I have detected the power source and I am 99.987564% sure I can destroy it."

"NO", shouted the Eradicator, "You cannot defeat me you motorized tin can."

With that the Eradicator pointed his matter compacter at t9000, but in doing so, released the General from his hold. The General was able to deflect the Eradicator's arm, and he dropped his weapon. This allowed t9000 to extend his laser and shot a beam at the piano. As it exploded, the whole room started to whirl about, Kristin and the General rushed towards the hall as the Eradicator disappeared through a doorway. The room was back to the dilapidated condition Kristin and The General first saw it in. The old manor started to shake and shimmy.

"Quick, let's get out of here" shouted the General, as he picked up t9000 and ran down the stairs, followed by Kristin .

They exited the building just as it started to collapse on itself. It seems that the Eradicator's Travel Pod was the reason it was standing over all these years. After the shock wore off, Kristin started giggling.

"My aren't you a sight", she said to the General standing there in his silks.

"Well, I think I have a change of clothes in the boot", said the General, "You're not exactly what I would call with it either."

"Well at least I can remove some of the inner layers, and look somewhat normal", said Kristin .

"I wonder if he got away?" asked Kristin .

"I noticed a fracture in the time-space continuum as we exited the structure," said t9000.

"It had the signature of a Travel Pod."

"How about all those people?" asked Kristin ?

"They were already deceased, " replied t9000, `they were mere projections helping conceal the Eradicator's presence."

"Well General, how does it feel to know you are part Alien?" asked Kristin .

"I refuse to believe a word that man says," replied the General, "No way, no way", he kept muttering obviously upset and shaken at the news of his ancestry. "Never, Never".

"Come on, let's get out of here" said Kristin . "What are you going to do now with the property?"

"Oh I don't know, sell the land, rebuild the house, it is a nice place to settle down" said the General. "Yes, beautiful and peaceful.... and no longer haunted." The General smiled wryly as he and Kristin got in to the car and drove away in silence.

The General was in deep thought as he pondered the news about his lineage, while Kristin dozed off in the passenger seat.

t9000 sulked in the back seat. "At least they could have thanked me", thought t9000. Not that it was, as he always said, necessary, but somewhere deep in his programming he felt it mattered.....

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